

# Unstable Connections

Valor and Doyle Book Three

### Nicky James



**Unstable Connections** 

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Note from the Author

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### CHAPTER 1

#### Aslan



ey, you've reached Quaid Valor. I can't come to the phone right now. Leave a message, and I'll get back to you."

The shrill beep sounded, and I sighed.

"Your voicemail is a big fat freaking lie, Quaid. I've left you four messages, and you have yet to get back to me. Where the hell are you? Not gonna lie. You're starting to worry me. More than twenty-four hours of radio silence isn't like you. Do we still have plans tonight? Have you talked to your dad? Call me."

I smashed the Disconnect button and tossed the phone onto the bed. It bounced and landed screen-side down. Staring at it with a frown, I considered what my missing boyfriend might be up to, yet somehow, I knew the truth.

I'd have bet the house Quaid had forgotten what day it was. He'd no doubt abandoned his phone somewhere random—it was becoming a bad habit—and was drowning in paperwork, completely oblivious to time and space.

Quaid had been so lost in his head since the discovery of his sister's backpack a month ago that we'd barely had time to enjoy the newness of our relationship. When we did get time together, I had to laboriously battle with Quaid's mounting insecurities over my commitment—something he thought he hid from me but was plainly obvious.

He spent most days and nights buried in Juniper's case file, watching and rewatching interviews, reading and rereading the limited information there was from the past and present, and doing all he could to find a missing piece or an overlooked connection that might tell him what had happened to his sister thirty years ago.

It was heartbreaking.

No one, not his boss—Staff Sergeant Edwards—not his partner—Eden Gelekar—nor I would dare tell him it was a lost cause. We didn't have the heart. Despite the new evidence, it was a dead end. There was nothing to be found.

But Quaid wouldn't give up, and it consumed him.

Naked and fresh out of a shower, I dug through dresser drawers, seeking the perfect outfit for the coming evening. It needed to be casual yet decent enough for a nice restaurant—if we were still going—but it also needed to express that I was a worthy enough man to date Quaid since I was supposed to be officially meeting his father tonight—a reunion I wasn't feeling good about.

Retired Detective Abraham Valor hadn't been keen to hear that his son was dating a detective from homicide. The decades-old animosity between our departments was hard to shake. We were supposed to be rivals, not lovers. Plus, Abraham might have dug into my past when he'd first heard about our relationship, and my presobriety track record would not win me any points.

I found a cotton polo in rich burgundy and paired it with dark designer jeans. In the bathroom, I spent time shaving and staring at my reflection, wondering at the nerves that had been stirring in my belly since the moment Quaid had announced he wanted me to meet his dad.

"He already hates me. Is this really a good idea?"

"He can't hate you. He doesn't know you."

"He knows enough."

"It will be fine. I promise. Just... whatever you do, don't mention Juni."

Quaid had kept the discovery of the backpack tight under wraps for a month, informing everyone at the department that he would tell Abraham in his own time. It was a delicate situation, and his old man's health was fragile. Quaid worried what it might do to him.

My phone rang as I was brushing my teeth. I spat and rinsed quickly, anticipating that it was Quaid finally getting back to me.

It wasn't.

The caller's name came up as unknown.

I sat on the edge of the bed in a splash of late-morning sun that sliced through the bedroom window and answered as I pulled on a pair of socks. "Hello?"

"Doyle?" A female voice. Vaguely familiar.

"This is. Who am I talking to?"

A light sigh followed an extensive pause. "It's Gelekar. Eden Gelekar."

Quaid's partner.

Eden and I didn't know each other well, but so far as I understood, Quaid had disclosed our relationship to her a few weeks ago, claiming he couldn't keep secrets from his partner.

Hearing from her was not only surprising, but it put me on alert. Like Abraham, Eden was sketchy about my relationship with Quaid. She was protective of her partner, and my reputation around the office had made her immediately defensive. Quaid hadn't said it directly, but I had a feeling she'd warned him off.

"What's going on?" I tried to keep my tone level while inside, I grew queasy.

"I ran into the office last night to grab something from my desk, and Quaid was there. Working. *Again*. I told him to go home, reminding him he'd taken the weekend off. He said he was on his way out. I didn't believe him, but I'm not his mother. I didn't wait around to be sure he followed through. Well, I just got a call from Bright. He's asleep at his desk. She

said he looks like shit, and if I didn't come and collect him, she was calling Edwards. I think he's been there all night. I told her I'd take care of it, but I have no one to watch my daughter, and... Don't you two have plans for today?"

"We do." We were supposed to. I glanced at the digital clock on the bedside table. It was shortly after ten in the morning.

"Can you—"

"I'll head there now. Don't worry. I've got this."

"Thanks. He's... not doing so great."

"I know. Downward spiral since the backpack. It was a big hit."

Eden stayed silent.

"Thanks for calling."

"He needs to stop, Doyle. I keep trying to steer him away from this, but it's not working. You need to back me up before he gets himself in trouble. He's gone from rational to unreasonable."

"I respect what you're saying, but I don't think I can do that."

An aggravated sound came through the phone line.

"Hey," I snapped. "Don't get pissy with me. Put yourself in his shoes for five seconds. You know as well as I do that the framework for his whole career is based around Juniper."

Eden knew I was right and didn't respond.

"I'll try talking to him, but I won't make promises."

We were dealing with enough challenges as a new couple; the last thing I needed was to take a stance about Juniper. I might as well dig my own grave.

Eden mumbled a thank you and hung up.

Like his father before him, Quaid's entire career was based around solving Juniper's kidnapping. The difference was that Quaid wasn't doing it solely because he wanted justice for Juniper or because he couldn't let go of the sister he'd barely known. He was doing it for his father. More than anything in the world, Quaid wanted to give his dad answers so his old man could finally put the matter to rest and be at peace. With his dad's rocky health, Quaid thought he was running out of time.

And I knew with the same certainty that told me the sun would rise every morning and set every night that Quaid would not stop until he figured out what had happened all those years ago, on a cold November day, when he was only a few weeks from celebrating his sixth birthday.

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The Metropolitan Toronto Police Headquarters building was on College Street. It was a multifaceted, architecturally interesting structure built of coral granite and large glass-block windows. The octagonal twelve-story building had earned many nicknames since its construction, including "The Pink Palace" and "The Pink Whorehouse." It stood out among the other buildings on the block, insistent on being noticed.

For me, headquarters was a second home. It housed several special divisions, including MPU, Quaid's department, and homicide, where I'd worked for the past eight years with my trusty partner, Torin Fox.

Our departments were on opposite sides of the fourth floor, separated by a long corridor with failing fluorescent lights, drab white walls, and worn carpeting. It may as well have been a trench, marking no man's land that divided our two battling continents. We were enemies in an ongoing war that had lasted decades. Most of us hadn't been around when the war had begun, but we did our part to keep it going, ever vigilant of our adversaries on the other side of the building and driving our staff sergeants up the wall with our juvenile animosity and refusal to play nice.

It was rare for anyone to cross through the neutral zone.

Since Quaid and I had started dating, we'd been careful about venturing into each other's domains. Until we were ready to formally announce our relationship, it was easier to keep the wall up between our departments and enjoy what we had behind closed doors.

The Uber dropped me off in front of the building, but instead of heading inside right away, I stuffed my hands into the pockets of my leather jacket and hustled down the street through the brisk November day to a fancy little health-food joint on the next block. The cold bit at my cheeks and made

my eyes water. A howling wind rattled the bare branches of a few nearby trees and sent the hanging streetlight at the intersection swaying. The birds had long ago migrated south, instinctively aware of the imminent snow around the corner. In the distance, the rough waters of Lake Ontario roiled and stirred.

Quaid frequented Organic Life often, boasting about their *delicious*—a highly debatable point—smoothies, birdseed snack cakes, and muffins that tasted like sandpaper and sadness. I preferred the bakery where treats were made with a pound of butter and icing sugar.

If Quaid had been at the office all night like Eden had suggested, I'd have bet the house he hadn't eaten since the previous day. Knowing his habits, he likely hadn't eaten since I'd force-fed him a wholesome breakfast of frozen chocolate-chip waffles the previous morning—a breakfast he'd scowled at and shamed me for. He'd raced out the door afterward, claiming he had some running around to do. I should have known "running around" was a euphemism for "going to the office to work."

Leave it to Quaid to disregard the time off he'd specifically booked so we could celebrate his thirty-sixth birthday without interruptions.

By the time I reached the little health-food shop, the shells of my ears were numb with cold, and my nose ran. The sky was a permanent granite gray with low-hanging clouds threatening snow. Our nice days were fewer and farther between. Not for the first time, I considered heading to a used-car lot and getting myself an old beater for the winter. It was time to stop my self-induced punishment. It had been almost a year since the accident. Maybe it was time to reward myself for the accomplishment of having gone so long without a drink.

A bell chimed when I entered the store. I was hit with a multitude of scents I wasn't familiar with. Natural scents of grains, flowers, herbs, and spices. A pungent, earthy aroma that made no promises of tantalizing my tastebuds any time soon. Quaid grew oddly giddy every time we came in here.

A petite Asian woman owned and operated Organic Life. Her teenage daughters helped run the store in the evenings and on weekends. They weren't around this morning. Li Mei, their mother, was behind the counter, and she greeted me with an enthusiastic smile. She wore her pin-straight black hair in a bob that brushed her chin. The faint streaks of silver laced throughout gave away her age. Otherwise, she looked as young as her adolescent girls. When I'd told her that once, she'd tittered and covered her mouth, abjectly denying my claim.

Quaid had admonished me for being a flirt. I'd called it being polite. He'd sneered. I'd laughed. He'd punched me in the shoulder.

"How are you, Li Mei?"

"Tired of the cold."

"Already? It's only just begun."

She *tsk*ed. "Let's hope we have a mild winter. Where is your male friend?"

I grinned. *Male friend* was Li Mei's way of acknowledging that she recognized and accepted our relationship. We may tread carefully at work, but we were open about it in public.

"Quaid's working himself into the ground right now." I studied the long list of smoothie concoctions on the menu board, trying to remember which one he liked best. "I'm on my way to drag him away from his desk and thought I'd bring him a treat. I doubt he's eaten in more than a day, and this is his favorite place in the world."

Li Mei clapped her hands and rubbed them together as she followed my gaze to the menu board. "We must feed him. Can I help you choose something?"

"Um... sure. You know what he likes. I need something healthy, but not..." I stopped myself in time before I said disgusting. I didn't want to insult Li Mei or her business. Frowning, I puzzled the selections. "People actually drink kale?"

"It's one of our best sellers. Mr. Quaid enjoys it too."

I shuddered. "Not today he doesn't." It sounded horrid. "Let's find something a little more... dessert-ish."

Li Mei chuckled. Perhaps my revulsion wasn't cleverly hidden after all.

There were many types of smoothies. Some with berries, some with a salad's worth of vegetables—there was no way

they could taste good—and a few tropical flavors. My gaze landed on one that piqued my interest. "Oh. How about the one with peanut butter? That sounds… good."

Quaid liked peanut butter. I'd seen him eat it several times. Plus, the smoothie had banana, almond milk, and yogurt. All healthy things he enjoyed.

"A good choice."

"Could I get a scoop of protein in it too?" He needed the added hit of calories.

"Yes, yes," Li Mei said, nodding as she adjusted her apron and gathered ingredients by the industrial blender. "Many people find the chocolate protein powder blends nicely with this flavor. Do you want that one?"

"Heck yeah. Let's do it."

While Li Mei worked, I scanned the baked goods lining a display case, deciding on a suitable muffin for my health-nut boyfriend.

As the blender whirred, Li Mei helped me select a Quaid-approved treat and slipped it into a small paper bag. She finished with the smoothie and passed it over the counter. Curious, I gave it a tentative sip, and my eyebrows winged up at the rich peanut butter and chocolatey goodness that tickled my tastebuds.

It wasn't terrible. In fact, it was borderline orgasmic, and I almost ordered a second one for myself.

"Are you sure this is healthy? I'm not going to get yelled at, am I?"

"I promise. He will not complain."

"But it tastes good."

Li Mei simply smiled, and I was pretty sure the expression said, *of course it does, you imbecile*.

As I tugged out my wallet, I glanced at the menu board again, weirdly certain I'd made the wrong choice since Quaid usually ate things that tasted like dirt. Knowing him, he would have enjoyed the one with kale, spinach, beets, and carrots. I couldn't imagine.

After paying, I thanked Li Mei and headed toward headquarters and the fourth floor on MPU's side of the building, hoping it wasn't too busy in their bullpen on a Saturday morning. We didn't need the whole department knowing I'd come to rescue Quaid. They'd ask questions, and rumors would spread.

I wouldn't have cared. Honestly, I was over it, but Quaid had insisted we take it slow. He was more private than me, and I respected his wishes.

As it turned out, Allison Bright and Erik Travolta were the only other people present, apart from one of the cleaners who was dusting and humming to himself on the other side of the glass wall separating the bullpen from Staff Sergeant Edwards's office.

Allison and Erik were huddled together at the opposite side of the room, clicking through something on a computer while chatting quietly.

Seeing as my partner, Torin, had been making sloth-like progress in his attempt to woo the gorgeous Allison Bright into going on a date, we were on familiar terms. Mostly because I'd rescued her from Torin and his sad attempt at flirting on more than one occasion. Most days, my partner was vibrant and outgoing. In front of Allison, he was a tongue-tied twelve-year-old boy who had met a favorite movie-star crush and was ten seconds from jizzing in his pants.

Allison glanced up at my entrance and flinched, tilting her head with an inquisitive smile, silently asking, *What are you doing here?* 

Allison was in her mid to late twenties, tall and slender with smooth, ebony skin and soulful bedroom eyes. It was no wonder she'd turned my partner stupid. I'd experienced secondhand embarrassment on more than one occasion when we'd accidentally—on purpose—run into her in no man's land.

She was significantly younger than Torin—one of the youngest detectives in the department—so I understood his insecurity and why he was so self-conscious about asking her out. We were both in our early forties, and he didn't think a young woman like Allison would ever give him the time of day.

I thought he was wrong and should take the plunge. She had a special smile she shared only with him.

Answering Allison's unasked question, I angled my head at Quaid, who was awake but oblivious to my arrival, surrounded by a mess of paperwork and far too many takeout coffee cups from Casey's Diner down the road. The man had been living off caffeine and no sleep for the better part of a month.

He stared zombie-like at the computer screen, earbuds planted in his ears, his lips parted and eyes glazed. I wasn't sure he was blinking... or breathing.

If Allison—or her partner, Erik Travolta—thought my presence in MPU was unusual, it didn't show. Allison gave me a subtle smile and nod—a thank you—and returned to her work, likely happy someone else was dealing with Quaid.

Knowing my boyfriend, he'd probably been harassing them again about their case.

The little girl, Lily Vaccari, who'd been found wandering alone in Crothers Woods in the Lower Don Parklands area back in October, had been wearing Quaid's missing sister's backpack. Lily had been a missing child for four months before she'd miraculously reappeared. No one knew where she'd been, who she'd been with, or how she'd ended up in possession of Juniper's backpack.

Allison and Erik were working tirelessly to find answers. Lily's trauma had made it difficult, and the only time they'd tried interviewing her, she'd been unable—or unwilling—to share anything helpful.

Since Lily's case directly overlapped Quaid's missing sister's, and he and Eden had taken over the cold case files, Quaid had been relentless when it came to getting involved—to the point he'd been pulled into Edwards's office on more than one occasion with firm instructions that he needed to take a step back and stop being so aggressive. Edwards acknowledged that a connection between the two cases existed but warned Quaid that if he couldn't keep his head about him and work cooperatively with other team members, he'd be removed from the case altogether.

Eden didn't know what to do with him.

I didn't know what to do with him.

I crossed to Quaid's desk, snagged a vacant chair from another workspace on my way over, and pulled it up beside him. Only when I dropped down onto the chair did Quaid startle out of his daze and glance away from the computer. Allison and Erik's interview with Lily Vaccari played on the screen. It was the hundredth time he'd watched it.

Quaid paused the video and yanked the earbuds from his ears as he swiveled toward me, eyes bloodshot and strained. "Hey. What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same question."

For about ten seconds, he looked like he was about to go on the defensive, but the fight died off when he realized it wasn't going to fly. In the end, he tossed the earbuds onto the desk and closed the file that was open beside the keyboard. Surveying the mess in front of him, his shoulders slumped. "It's... not how it looks."

I said nothing and kept right on staring.

Quaid was dressed for the office, trousers, a dress shirt—no tie today, which was Quaid's idea of a casual day—but his clothing was wrinkled, which was out of the ordinary. Quaid was meticulous about how he presented himself at work and at home. His skin was paler than usual, and the accumulation of sleepless nights he'd accrued was painted in deep bruises under his eyes.

When he peeked up shamefully from the mess on his desk, I noticed the vibrant shine he'd once carried in his baby blues had dimmed.

"Okay, fine," he grumbled. "It's exactly how it looks. I came in to go over a few things. I wasn't *working* working. I wanted to check some notes, and—"

"You came in last night."

Quaid pressed his lips together and stared at the still frame of Lily on the computer screen. When his gaze drifted to Allison and Erik on the other side of the bullpen, he frowned. "You shouldn't be over here. People will ask questions, and we—"

"Don't change the subject. And honestly, we're filing that concern under I don't give a fuck anymore. When your partner calls to tell me you're asleep at your desk and look like shit, you leave me no choice, Quaid." "I wasn't—"

"Save it. It's written all over your face, and you are not a liar. Don't start now. Allison called Eden, then Eden called me because she couldn't leave her daughter to come and deal with you, and someone had to, or else Allison was calling Edwards. So here I am, and I don't give a shit what people say or if people find out about us. You gave me no choice." I stabbed a finger on the desk.

"You could have called."

"Oh. I could have called? Well, damn. Why didn't I think of that? Where's your phone, Quaid?"

"My phone?" He patted the pockets of his trousers, then shuffled through the debris on the desk for a solid minute before opening and closing drawers. His eyebrows drew together. "I... don't know. Maybe I left it in the car."

I soften my tone. "I have been calling you."

"Oh."

"Repeatedly."

Quaid's chin dropped. "I'm sorry."

"I also left several messages."

The distress on his face deepened, and he tugged fingers through his hair, mussing it up. Instantly, I saw the shift from strong, confident detective to meek and insecure boyfriend. It made me want to hunt his motherfucking ex down and beat him to a pulp.

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"Az, I'm really sorry. I was just—"
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"Quaid, stop. I'm not angry. I'm worried about you. There's a difference. Here." I set the large smoothie cup with the Organic Life logo on the desk and placed the paper bag with his birdseed muffin beside it. "See these? Let's play a game. Final *Jeopardy*. These wonderful items can be yours *if* you tell me what day of the week it is."

The corner of Quaid's lips twitched into the shadow of a smile. "You went to Organic Life? Willingly?"

"I wouldn't say willingly. I went because I have a strong suspicion that my *boyfriend*"—his smile grew at the emphasis I put on the word. He loved it when I used the title boyfriend—"hasn't eaten since he left my house yesterday morning. Although, I have to say. I reluctantly—it may be a fluke—approve of this smoothie. I stole a sip, and it was a pleasant surprise."

The cup was opaque, giving no hint of its contents. Quaid grinned as he removed the lid. "I'm guessing you didn't get the one with vegetables."

"Kale, Quaid? And beets? Who the fuck puts that in a smoothie?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Never mind."

<sup>&</sup>quot;You're angry."

<sup>&</sup>quot;I'm not angry."

<sup>&</sup>quot;I wasn't ignoring you. I was—"

"It's good. They add honey."

"I don't care if they add thirty pounds of sugar and sprinkles. That's disgusting."

He dipped his pinky into the creamy brown concoction inside the cup and stuck it into his mouth. "Mm... Chunky Monkey. This is a good one. It's like dessert."

"There's a shot of protein in there too since you have this thing about starving yourself. I figured you could do with the added calories and vitamins."

Quaid adopted a playful expression, but it didn't erase the exhaustion that clung to his face or tinted the sclera of his eyes. "You added a shot of protein, did you? I feel like there's a joke in there somewhere, except I'm too tired to make it."

I wiggled my brows. "I like when you attempt dirty talk."

Quaid chuckled, shaking his head as he replaced the lid on the smoothie cup and took a long sip from the straw, hollowing his cheeks and side-eyeing me.

"Oh yeah, baby. Nice suction." I grabbed myself. "Are you busy later?"

He popped off, licking his lips and humming his approval. "Depends. What did you have in mind?" He took another sip. "This is absolutely delicious by the way."

"You're a tease."

He nodded at the paper bag. "Is that for me too?"

"Yes, but I make no promises it's edible."

When Quaid peeked inside, his face brightened. "A muffin. What kind is it?"

"I don't freaking know. Li Mei picked it. Some sort of hemp seed, flax and almond, walnut juice, omega, gluten-free, bullshit paleo, sawdust, hippie date bran, banana, carrot, avocado grass, and dirt disgustingness."

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"You're making that up."
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"I'm not."

"It sounds amazing."

"You need therapy."

I earned a full-wattage smile right before he took a huge bite, crumbs raining down on his shirt front.

"Seriously, how do you eat that crap? Look how dry it is." I reached out and brushed the crumbs off his lap.

He didn't respond, but he *mm*ed through three more giant mouthfuls until it was gone. I knew he would be hungry. He crumpled the bag and discarded it into a pail beside his desk.

"So good. Thank you."

"That was nasty."

"It was delicious."

"We'll have to agree to disagree." I glanced at his desk and back. "Now, tell me, hot stuff. Do you have any recollection of what day it is?"

"Yes."

I hitched a brow, waiting.

"It's... Fri—" He glanced at the window and back. "Saturday?"

"Uh-huh. Good start. And?"

He frowned. "And what?"

I peered across the room to Allison and Erik, but they turned their backs and were preoccupied with whatever they were working on.

I snagged the arm of Quaid's chair, spinning him so he faced me head-on and dragged him close enough that our legs wove together. I smoothed a hand along his thigh, stopping at the crease beside his groin as I leaned in, close enough to be conspicuous if the two detectives turned around.

I was beyond caring if people found out about us, and Quaid didn't put up a fight.

I grazed my knuckles over his unshaven jaw, cupping his face and breathing him in.

"Happy birthday, beautiful," I whispered.

"Oh. Saturday. I get it now. Thank you."

"How does it feel to be thirty-six?"

"Like my life's getting away from me, and I haven't done half the things I had planned."

"Sounds about right. Maybe stop trying to plan the future and let it happen. Can you do me a favor?"

Quaid waited, gaze skipping between my eyes before stealing a lingering look at my mouth.

"Shut this shit down and let me drive you home so you can get a few proper hours of sleep. We still have plans tonight, right?"

He nodded, a faint smile appearing. "We do."

"Did you talk to your dad?"

"He's coming."

"Great. Should I arm myself?"

That earned a laugh. "No. He doesn't hate you."

"He doesn't like me much either."

"He's going to be open-minded. He promised."

"Good." I glanced at Allison and Erik again to ensure they were none the wiser. The custodian had the vacuum running, and even though he'd closed Edwards's door, it was enough noise to blanket our conversation.

I stroked Quaid's bristly jaw and admired the sharp angles of his face and the way his lashes curved, framing his pale blue eyes. Even tired, he was gorgeous.

My intent was to steal a quick kiss, but Quaid got us there first, grabbing a fistful of my shirt and dragging me against his mouth.

It wasn't a short kiss, and it wasn't clean. We lingered, enjoying the slow rhythm of exploring. Since we'd made our relationship official, everything between us had slowed down.

We were no longer in a race to an invisible finish line but were taking time to enjoy the view, discovering, savoring, and learning each other properly. When Quaid wasn't lost in his head or dancing on eggshells, worried about driving me away, it was the most fabulous thing I'd ever experienced.

When we came apart, Quaid's tired eyes had a hint of sparkle to them. His lips were rosier and wet.

"I love kissing you," he said dreamily.

"I would say the same, but you taste like those shitty-ass muffins, and I'm questioning my life choices."

Quaid burst out laughing and shoved me hard enough the chair rolled away. Allison and Erik glanced across the room at Quaid's outburst.

I held up my hands like I had no clue what was going on, and when they turned back to their work, I glanced at Quaid, who was still laughing. "Tidy up, and let's get out of here."

# CHAPTER 2

### Quaid



onsciously making an effort not to strangle the life out of the steering wheel, I glanced at Dad, who stared out the passenger window. His expression may have been impassive, but his gray eyes were as cold and stormy as the weather, a sure sign he was pondering something unpleasant. I could imagine the things he was thinking. I'd been excited when I'd first shared about Aslan and me dating, but he'd taken the wind out of my sails with his misplaced parental concern.

I understood, to a point. Dad had witnessed the train wreck that was Jack and me—over and over and over again. But I was thirty-six. I could make my own choices, even if those choices ended in disaster.

"Be nice to him."

Dad's gnarled fingers, swollen at the knuckle joints, massaged his leg above his bum knee. "I have no intention of being anything less than civil."

"I know you, Dad. You're going to ask a hundred invasive questions, doing all you can to make him uncomfortable. Don't. It's not an interrogation. He's not a criminal. Like it or not, he's my boyfriend."

"So I'm not to ask him questions?"

"You know what I mean."

"No, I don't know what you mean." Dad grunted and shifted in his seat. The turning weather had made all his joints achy. "When you don't know someone, every question is invasive. How do you expect me to make friendly chitchat with this man you've decided to date if I can't ask questions? Are we to sit in silence so I don't offend you?"

"His name is Aslan, and don't be coy. You know exactly what I'm talking about."

Dad harrumphed. "I hear Summerfield's had problems with him in the past."

"I'm aware, Dad. The keywords are in the past."

"He's been disciplined more than a few times for insubordination."

"In. The. Past."

"He has a distasteful sexual reputation, and it doesn't seem to matter who I talk to in that regard, everyone knows about it, and everyone agrees. Is that the kind of person you want to date?"

"You shouldn't be talking to anyone in the department about him. First, it's unfair and rude, and second, we haven't told anyone we're dating yet."

"He's just like Jack."

"He's nothing like Jack." I squeezed the wheel tighter, regulating my tone since I was almost shouting.

Dad grunted and repositioned himself. The seatbelt pulled tight across his soft midsection, a midsection that was rounder and larger than it had been when he was an active detective.

"I don't know why you have to be so combative. Why can't you be happy for me?"

The heat of Dad's gaze burned the side of my face. "Happy for you? Ever since you started dating this man, you've changed. You don't think I see it? I know my son. You're withdrawn. You're distracted. Dare I say, you're borderline depressed. You don't sleep. You barely eat, and I can hardly have a conversation with you without you becoming lost in your head. These are not signs of a healthy relationship, yet you want me to ignore them?"

I pressed my lips together and stared intently at the road ahead. If Dad knew that the start of Aslan's and my relationship coincided with the discovery of Juniper's backpack, he would understand. My moodiness was not a reflection of my happiness with Aslan but a testament to the burden on my shoulders from an unexpected discovery that had the potential to change everything.

But Dad *didn't* know because I hadn't told him.

Every day the words sat ripe on my tongue, throwing themselves against the barrier in my mind and wanting out, but when I looked at the frail old man who'd taken over my once formidable father's body, and when I calculated all the ways he'd deteriorated since his stroke the previous year, I couldn't do it.

It would be the equivalent of punching him in the face.

It would be cruel and unfair.

Unless I had answers, forcing him to revisit the pain of losing his daughter seemed pointless. It was an event that thirty years ago had altered the course of our lives. My family had been shattered beyond repair. My mother had left us both, and Dad blamed himself for everything. He was the one who'd had Juniper in his care. He was the one who had turned his back for the fraction of a second required for a stranger to take her away.

He had never forgiven himself.

Juniper's disappearance was an infection in my father's core that had never healed. We didn't talk about her—*ever*—but neither of us had given up on her.

However, the more time that passed, the more I realized I could do with Dad's help and insight. New information had surfaced after thirty years of nothing, and who better to collaborate with than my father who had spent his career

searching for answers. The other people involved in Juniper's case had long ago retired. My resources were thin.

I knew I should talk to him soon, but it was a hard topic to broach.

The longer I held off, however, the more I risked him hearing about it from someone else. Especially since he'd been nosing around the department, asking about Aslan.

"It's work that has me acting off, not Aslan."

"Mm-hm."

"I'm not depressed, Dad."

He didn't believe me.

"And he's not like Jack. I resent that. How stupid do you think I am?"

Nothing. No response.

Sighing, I changed lanes and indicated to turn into the steak house where I'd made reservations for dinner. Aslan was meeting us there at six. We were ten minutes early, so I found parking and killed the engine.

I didn't get out and shuffled to face my father. "Promise you'll be civil."

"I'll be civil."

"Thank you." I hesitated, then added, "One more thing."

Dad waited, his familiar Old Spice scent filling the car. Were his wrinkles deeper today? Were his eyes dimmer? Was his pain worse? He seemed so guarded. Did he know? Had someone told him?

No, he'd have brought it up.

"What, Quaid?"

"I know you like the extensive wine list here, but... no drinking. Not tonight, okay?"

His bushy brows came together. It irked me that this would be one more unfair tick against Aslan. One more thing for Dad to dislike about him.

"Why?"

"Aslan is eleven months sober. Out of respect, I'm asking you not to order wine. I know you like it with your steak"—a concession I'd begrudgingly agreed to this evening since we were celebrating my birthday but one that didn't please me since I didn't like him eating red meat—"but I'd prefer if we avoided it tonight. Please."

Dad spent a long time staring, his jaw working. He'd done his own investigating into Aslan, and now I'd added alcoholic to the top of the list. Dad wasn't usually one to judge people so harshly, but he was protective and worried about me since my mental health had been so compromised in my last relationship. I couldn't blame him, but I needed him to give Aslan a chance.

"You tell me he's a good person."

"He is."

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"Then I trust your judgment."

"Do you?"

"Yes."

"Thank you."
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"But god help him if he hurts you, Quaid." Dad grabbed my hand and squeezed. His strength wasn't what it once was, and it was unnerving how easily I felt the bones under his papery skin move with the action. "I want you to be happy. It's all I've ever wanted. If he makes you happy, then I'll shut up and keep my opinions to myself. Let's have a nice dinner with your new man, shall we?"

Barberian's Steak House had classic, old-school décor and atmosphere. It was elegant without being black-tie. The ambiance was warm and inviting, the music soft and harmonious, and the menu was superb, a tantalizing opera of flavors that came together into something that made your mouth come alive. Even I was willing to break the rules for a Barberian steak.

Dad and I had eaten there a few times in the past—before I'd become obsessed over him following a proper diet low in saturated fats, sodium, and cholesterol. One of Dad's favorite features at Barberian was the restaurant's boasted-about wine cellar and diverse drink menu, something I'd begged him to ignore for the evening.

A silky white cloth draped our table. Mock candles flickered in the centerpiece. The extensive silverware

collection was arranged in a fashion that assumed we were about to engage in a twelve-course meal. The waiter, a young man dressed in formalwear, poured ice water into wine glasses before excusing himself when he learned we were waiting for one more. He left the wine list in the center of the table for us to browse.

Dad grabbed it, fit his reading glasses on the end of his nose, and flipped through the countless pages. Barberian's had hundreds of vintages to choose from.

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"No wine," I said again.
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"I know."

"I'm serious, Dad."

"I can look, can't I? We haven't been here in ages. I want to see what's new."

"Fine, but you aren't ordering any."

"If your dad wants to drink wine, let the man drink wine."

I startled and swung around on my seat at the husky, deep thrum of a voice behind me. Aslan grinned from above, clasped my shoulder, and ducked to brush a kiss on my cheek. There was no pause or second-guessing. He did it unashamedly right there in front of my father, and it made me smile.

"Hi. You made it."

"Of course I made it. Happy birthday." He set a small gift bag on the table in front of me, winked, then stood straighter, extending a hand to my father. "You must be Abraham."

Dad got to his feet with hardly a grunt and took hold of Aslan's hand, shaking with a firm, no-nonsense grip that reflected his forty years as a person in authority. "And you must be Aslan. Nice to meet you, son. Have a seat. Join us."

Aslan grabbed the chair beside me. Once seated, he grabbed the wine menu Dad had replaced in the center of the table and handed it back. "Don't let Quaid tell you you can't drink in front of me. It's perfectly fine. You can't have a nice steak dinner without a glass of red. I'll be abstaining this evening for personal reasons, but someone has to tell me how amazing it is."

I opened my mouth to apologize for overstepping or assuming, but Aslan's hand landed on my knee under the table. He gave it a squeeze, a silent means of telling me not to worry.

"Well, thank you." To me, Dad said, "Perhaps next time you should ask him before lecturing me."

I frowned. "I didn't lecture you. I simply asked you to respect—"

"Hey," Aslan said, squeezing my leg again. "No scowling on your birthday."

"I'm not scowling," I said, scowling harder.

"It's permanent," Dad said as he browsed the drink menu.

"It never goes away. Might as well get used to it."

"I resent that. Besides, it's my birthday. I'll make whatever face I want."

"Miserable child," Dad muttered.

Aslan chuckled and nudged the gift bag toward me. "Here. This might help. Open your present. Presents make everyone happy."

I stared at the plain brown gift bag. A collection of curly, purple and silver ribbons held the handles together at the top. "You didn't have to get me anything."

"Of course I did. It's your birthday. That's how these things work. Now open it."

"In front of my dad? Is it safe?"

"Yes, in front of your dad. What the hell do you think it is? Something naughty?"

"I wouldn't put it past you."

Dad smirked and shook his head, watching our exchange.

Before I could open it, our waiter returned, giving us a full rundown of the night's specials and asking if we wanted to start with drinks and appetizers.

Dad ordered wine—of course—and the lobster cocktail starter. I worked hard to keep my features passive, biting my tongue and reminding myself I'd given him a free pass tonight and wouldn't harass him about cholesterol.

Aslan protested when I didn't follow suit and order a glass of wine to go with my dinner as well, but I was happy with sparkling water and didn't want the lingering essence of alcohol on my tongue later when I kissed him—and I planned on there being a lot of kissing among other things. It was my birthday after all.

Aslan asked for the same—sparkling water—and we ordered the jumbo shrimp cocktail to share.

Once we were alone again, Aslan nudged the gift bag closer, a wide grin plastered to his face. "Open it before I start singing and embarrass you."

No longer having the drink menu to distract him, Dad seemed as eager as Aslan for me to open the gift.

Self-conscious under all the attention, I carefully undid the bow and peeked inside. A bunch of crumpled tissue paper blocked my view, so I picked them out one piece at a time, carefully folding them and setting them aside until I found an envelope. It was unmarked. White. I glanced at Aslan, whose anticipation was palpable.

I opened it with no clue what to expect. "What is this?" I pulled out the two tickets that were nestled in the envelope. My cheeks grew hot when I realized what I was holding.

They were theater tickets to the musical production of *Singin' in the Rain*, a show based on the iconic Gene Kelly and Debbie Reynolds movie. It was playing this coming winter at the Princess of Wales Theatre.

"Oh my god." I gaped, staring from them to Aslan and back, confused, utterly embarrassed, and slightly giddy at the same time because it had been years since I'd been to the theater to see a proper show. "How did you... No one knows about my love for musicals. This is..." I waved the tickets in the air. "How... Az..." Unable to find the words, I rattled my head. "Wow. Um... Thank you. This is amazing, but I have so many questions."

"Oh, come off it. Give me some credit. I'm a good detective when I want to be. I've been to your house a few times, and let's be honest, your secret stash of musical DVDs aren't well hidden."

"They are so well hidden. They are stored *behind* the action movies for a reason. You have to move the action movies out of the way to find them. You snooped."

"I investigated. There's a difference."

"You snooped."

Dad chuckled.

"You also have romance novels behind your collection of thriller books." Aslan winked. "Very sneaky."

"They aren't romance novels."

"You think I don't know who Nora Roberts is? I have a romance-novel-obsessed sister."

"She writes diverse stories with rich plotlines and characterization. I... Dad! Stop laughing and defend me."

Dad didn't stop and kept right on grinning and snickering. "Not a chance. This is the most fun I've had all week."

I glared between my boyfriend and father. "It's my birthday. Why am I being humiliated?"

"Do you like it?" Aslan asked, tapping the envelope, not deterred.

I glanced at the tickets, a different warmth spreading through my chest. This time it wasn't embarrassment. "I do. I love it. There are two tickets. Should I assume you're planning to come with me?"

"That was the idea."

"To a musical?"

Aslan shrugged. "Why not? I'll expand my horizons."

For the second time in five minutes, I was rendered speechless. Several days in the past month, I'd questioned what Aslan saw in me. I questioned our compatibility. I questioned our future as a couple because I was sure to drive him away somehow, and it would all end in heartache. We were different in many ways. My appealing characteristics were few and far between, yet when he looked at me the way he was doing right then, I felt lucky, wholly undeserving, and more than a little scared.

There were better people out there, yet he'd picked me.

How long until he decided my insecurities were too much?

How long until he got bored and moved on?

Would he tell me, or would I find out the hard way like I'd done with Jack time and time again?

"Thank you. This"—I held up the tickets—"is unexpected and amazing. But if you tell anyone about my love for musicals or romance novels—"

"Or Bridgerton—"

"—they will never find your body."

Aslan laughed and leaned in, stealing a kiss. "Understood."

The waiter showed up and served our drinks and appetizers. Dinner progressed from there.

Dad behaved—he was more amicable since Aslan had allowed him wine—and the two talked through dinner about Dad's time in the department and Aslan's work in homicide.

They discussed Aslan's Harley. I had no idea my father was interested in motorcycles. They talked about Aslan's family, including his parents who were at their winter home in Florida, his sister—and the brother-in-law who was military and overseas—and her kids. Aslan talked extensively about his relationship with his niece and nephew, and his love for them won him many points.

The entire meal, Aslan was careful not to ask Dad about our family or tread too closely into topics I'd deemed out-of-bounds.

Then, during dessert—Dad, taking advantage of the loose rules, ordered cheesecake—my father shifted the whole conversation, looked up from his plate directly at me, and asked, "So, what's this case you're working on that has you in such a kerfuffle?"

Despite my objection, Aslan ordered me a slice of cake for dessert, insisting it was required to celebrate a birthday. I'd been picking at it, sharing it with Aslan. With Dad's question, I paused, fork in midair, chocolate icing coating the tines.

"What case?"

"In the car, I told you you'd been acting strange for a month. You said it was work. I assume you have a case you haven't told me about." Dad glanced between Aslan and me. "So what are you working on? I thought you and Gelekar were doing all those cold cases. Did something come up?"

I'd never kept secrets from Dad. We talked about all my cases, and he was right. I'd been unusually—and suspiciously—silent this past month, evading the topic, knowing what the truth might do to him.

"It's... nothing. We aren't working on anything special."

I stared at the remains of the chocolate cake, no longer hungry. I slid the plate toward Aslan and passed him the fork. The heat of Dad's gaze hit one side of my face, and the concern emanating from Aslan covered the other. I couldn't keep this to myself much longer, but I didn't know how or when to tell my father. There was no delicate way of saying I found a piece of the past. I found Juniper's backpack. It would upend everything.

Luckily, I was saved by the ringing of my phone.

## CHAPTER 3

## Quaid



I tugged the phone from my pocket.

"Who is it?" Dad asked.

"It's Allison." I frowned, glanced at Aslan, then down to the phone again. "I should take this. I'll be back."

I had no idea why Allison Bright would be calling me at close to seven o'clock at night on a day I'd booked off work, but something told me it wasn't good news. Especially since I'd invaded every aspect of the Lily Vaccari case and knew she and her partner were frustrated with me.

I exited the long hallway to the bathrooms and connected the call. "Valor."

"I'm sorry to interrupt your weekend off, especially after yelling at your partner this morning about you sleeping at your desk."

"What's going on?"

An intercom on the other end of the line sounded. A sharp, tinny voice paged a Dr. Roberts to come to... somewhere. It cut off when a heavy door slammed. I knew those noises.

"Are you at the hospital?"

"I called Gelekar first. She's on her way and told me specifically *not* to call you." Allison sighed. "But it didn't seem fair. She said it was your birthday. Happy birthday, by the way. She said you've been working too hard and need time off, but..." Allison paused. Hesitated.

The hairs on the back of my neck prickled. "Allison, spit it out."

"Another little girl was found this afternoon wandering alone outside Crothers Woods. We've identified her as tenyear-old Evelyn Rice from Markham who went missing three and a half months ago."

I couldn't breathe. It took an effort to croak "And?" because there was more. I *knew* there was more. I felt it in my bones. The rarity of missing children turning up alive after having been gone more than a few days was something every detective in MPU understood. Yet it had happened again.

"And... despite what your partner said about contacting you this weekend, I thought you might want to come down here and be part of this."

"Crothers Woods."

"Yes. Where Lily was found."

"Two girls in the span of a month."

"Yes."

"There's more, isn't there?"

"There's more."

It was warm in the restaurant, but goose bumps rose along my arms. I shivered, gripping the phone tighter, leaning a shoulder against the wall for stability. "I'm on my way. Where are you?"

Allison shared her location, informing me she was at Toronto General, then we disconnected. I needed a minute. Finding the little boys' room, I splashed cold water on my face as my heart pumped out of control, whooshing blood through my system and sending it pulsing through my ears. The food I'd eaten churned in my stomach, but I took a few steadying breaths and found balance.

When I returned to the table, I knew by the look on Aslan's face that I wasn't hiding my emotions well enough.

"Everything okay?"

"No. I have to go. Something important has come up... for the case I'm working on."

Aslan's eyes grew a fraction larger, and Dad frowned. I could read his irritation since I'd dodged the question about the case not five minutes before, calling it unimportant.

"It's your birthday dinner," Dad said instead. "Can't Gelekar handle it until we finish dessert?"

"I'm sorry, Dad, but no. I have to go. It's important."

Aslan rose and took my arm, angling me away from the table and lowering his voice. "Go. I'll make sure your dad gets home. Where are you heading?"

"Toronto General. They found another girl. The same place they found Lily. There's... more, but Allison didn't say over the phone."

Aslan studied my face a moment before pecking my cheek. "I'll meet you there."

"You shouldn't. People will get suspicious, and—"

"I don't give a shit. It's not up for debate."

I didn't have the energy to argue. I was getting to the point where I didn't care either. Sooner or later, we would have to face the firing squad and announce our relationship.

"Here." I handed him the keys to my SUV. "Take my car. Are you sure you don't mind bringing my dad home?"

"Not at all."

I glanced at my father, who looked unimpressed at being left out of the conversation. "If this is... Shit." I scrubbed a hand over my face. My eyes stung, dry and gritty from lack of sleep. Even the nap I'd taken after Aslan had dragged me home from the office earlier hadn't helped. "I'm going to have to tell him soon, aren't I?"

"It would be wise. If you don't, he'll find out from someone else. But one step at a time. Go see what's happening. Assess it and decide later. I'll meet you at the hospital in a bit."

"It will be the children's ward. Thank you. I'm sorry I ruined dinner."

"You didn't ruin anything. We had a great time. It was over anyhow." He cupped my face between his warm palms and kissed me properly before urging me out the door.

I said goodbye to Dad and told him I'd explain it later. A small part of me thought it wasn't wise to leave Dad and Aslan alone, but they seemed to have gotten along well enough at dinner, so maybe Dad had changed his mind. Either way, I pushed the concern aside. I had bigger things to worry about.

Toronto General was about five blocks from the steak house, which was why I'd given Aslan the keys to my SUV. It was close enough to walk, so I hustled the few blocks in the cold, keeping my shoulders tucked over my ears and hands stuffed into the pockets of my wool coat.

The city lights and steady hum of traffic surrounded me. Bright headlight beams made me squint as they zoomed down the road. The scent of exhaust and overcrowded city life hung in the air.

At the hospital, I passed two men on the street shouting at each other in another language. Their vibe warned that they were close to getting physical, but I dodged them without intervening and aimed for the hospital's front entrance.

I took the bank of elevators on my right to the children's ward and stared at the slow tick of glowing numbers as it ascended, bouncing on my toes, trying to expel the nervous tremors vibrating through my system. My mind raced with

innumerable possibilities, branching in a hundred different directions at once.

Two girls found in the same park. Lily had been carrying Juniper's backpack. Was this Evelyn girl in possession of something belonging to Juniper too?

Allison had implied a connection. But what was it?

The metal doors opened and delivered me to the children's ward. It didn't take long to find Allison and Erik. Eden wasn't with them, so I assumed I'd gotten there faster.

Erik noticed me first. He was tall, bulky without being overweight, had a square head, graying dark hair, and a flat expression he wore everywhere he went that made it hard to tell if he liked you or hated you. His manner of speaking was similar, monotone and with only a rare use of inflection.

No one would call Erik an asshole, but he wouldn't win awards for his friendly personality either. He was different with Allison. I'd watched them as they worked together over the past month. Erik was more attuned to Allison than anyone else. It wasn't flirty nor did I think there was anything more than a professional relationship between them, but Allison brought out a side of Erik I'd never seen before. He watched her when she talked, *really* watched. It was like he could hear all the things she didn't say, interpret all the working mechanics in her brain, and understand her on a different level. She softened his hard edges.

It made me wonder. Did Eden do the same for me? I'd been accused of being emotionally flat and unapproachable before

as well. But unlike Erik, who still managed to have a lot of friends in the department, I didn't.

I approached the pair of detectives, interrupting their conversation.

"Valor." Erik tipped his head in a nod.

"What's happening?"

Erik deferred to Allison, who offered a gentle smile. "I hope we didn't interrupt any special birthday plans."

"It's fine. I'm getting too old to celebrate anyhow. Evelyn?" I prompted.

"She's in much better emotional condition than Lily was. She's in with Dr. Benoit and her parents right now."

"Benoit. She's a child psychologist, right?"

"Yes."

"When was she found?"

"Late this afternoon. She ran out of the park and into the street until she found a young couple and asked them for help. They called it in. When first responders realized what they had on their hands, they called us."

"Have you talked to her?"

"Briefly. We haven't conducted a proper interview yet, but we will once Benoit gives us the green light."

I wanted to scream, What's the connection? Why did you call me here? Quit dancing around it! But I knew if I didn't

keep my cool, Erik would run to Edwards, and I was on thin ice. So I let Allison explain at her own pace.

"Evelyn was able to tell us her name and address and who her parents were. When we told her they were on their way to the hospital, she broke down and cried. My guess is she's been holding herself together for a long time. She's brave, but she's home now, so I think she's given herself permission to fall apart. I think we might be able to get a lot more information from her once she's settled down a bit."

"I hope it's enough," Erik stated plainly as he glanced over my shoulder where the clang of the elevator doors announced someone else's arrival on the floor.

My partner's reprimand filled the hall. "Jesus Christ, Allison. I told you not to call him." By the time I turned, a finger was aimed at my face. "Don't you dare scowl at me, Quaid Valor. You *never* take time off. I finally convinced you to take a long weekend to celebrate your birthday with your goddamn—"

"Eden," I snapped before she could fill that sentence in with the wrong word.

"Family," she emphasized, "and now this." She glared at Allison and Erik. "Two more days wouldn't have changed anything. You thought he was insufferable before? I don't want to hear either one of you griping at me from now on."

"I'm not insufferable."

"You are." There was no arguing with Eden's tone, so I scowled.

My partner could be a beast when she wanted to be. When it came to her daughter, her parents, or anyone else she loved—I fell under that umbrella—she was savagely protective.

Erik held up a hand, and Eden simmered.

"There would have been hell to pay if he'd found out after the fact," Erik said, and despite his lack of expression, I was shocked he was standing up for me. "Valor, there's a direct connection between Lily Vaccari and Evelyn Rice, which means—"

"There's a direct connection to Juniper."

"Indeed. Would you have preferred we allowed you to finish your dinner with your"—he dashed a quick glance at Eden, then back—"family first?"

"No."

"Then the issue is resolved. Do we agree?" Erik peered among our small group.

Allison offered a sympathetic smile. "Come on. They're talking in a playroom with an observation window. We won't be able to hear their conversation, but I'd like to see if you pick up on what we did."

Unnerved and jittery, I followed Allison and Erik down the hall, Eden at my side. I knew she wasn't happy with my presence, but she bumped my arm as we went and lowered her voice to ask, "Did you at least make it through dinner?"

"We were at dessert."

"Aw, your least favorite part of every meal."

"I was, in fact, eating chocolate cake."

"Willingly?"

"No. Not really. Despite my protests, Aslan ordered it for me and kept shoving it in my face, insisting I eat it."

"And did you?"

"A few bites. It was good."

As Allison and Erik ducked into a room, Eden drew me to a stop. "Are you okay?"

"I need answers."

"But are you okay? You've been on edge lately."

"It's my job, Eden. Give me some credit."

She didn't roll her eyes. She didn't have to. Her exasperated expression said it all. I hadn't answered her question, and she knew I wasn't okay.

At the viewing window, I watched as a ten-year-old girl sat between her mother and father and spoke with Dr. Benoit. Everything about her appearance was a reflection of the day I'd seen Lily in this very room. It was uncanny.

Evelyn was filthy like Lily had been. Her clothing was frayed and worn like she'd been wearing it since she'd vanished. Lily's had been the same. Her blonde hair was matted and oily. Again, a reflection of how we'd found Lily. Her eyes, however, although filled with uncertainty, were

brighter and bluer than Lily's. She was more receptive, and as I watched her respond to the doctor's questions, talking and gesturing, it gave me hope that we might get somewhere.

Then I saw it. The thing Erik and Allison had noticed. The reason they'd called me in despite Eden's objection.

My breath caught on a gasp, and I placed a hand on the glass, inching closer, staring.

"Her shoes."

## CHAPTER 4

## Aslan



The easy camaraderie Abraham and I had shared over dinner died in Quaid's absence. I knew beforehand that his old man was skeptical about our relationship. The car ride was eerily quiet, the slap of tires on pavement the only sound. I wanted to turn on the radio, but it felt too obvious. Instead of drilling me with questions now that Quaid wasn't there to stop him, Abraham sat in silence, which was worse.

I wasn't someone who was ever lost for words or gave a shit what other people thought of me, but this was different. I wanted Quaid's dad to like me, and I didn't know how to make it happen.

I was a smartass around the office, often outspoken and crass, but those weren't always winning qualities with someone who didn't know me.

"What's this case he's working on?" Abraham asked out of the blue as I turned into his neighborhood. "I..." Didn't know what to tell him. "I don't think it's my place to share. You should ask Quaid."

"I'm asking you."

"With all due respect, sir, I don't work in MPU."

"No, you don't." Abraham shifted and stared out the passenger window. "Quaid's been acting strange lately. He's not himself. He claims this shift in attitude has to do with some case. When I asked him to elaborate, he got cagey."

"He's under a lot of stress."

"I think that's bullshit. I know my son, and if it was a case bothering him, I would be the first person he'd talk to. That's how it is with us. How it's always been. Do you know what I think? I think it's you. His behavior changed when the two of you started dating. It's not a coincidence. Care to explain, Doyle?" I guess I was no longer Aslan.

Nothing like being cornered. I'd be damned if I broke Quaid's confidence and shared about Juniper's backpack, but the consolation prize was Abraham seeing me in a bad light.

"I think you should talk to Quaid about it. I know you've heard rumors about me, but—"

"They aren't rumors if they're true, and I happen to have a solid relationship with Summerfield. Your boss doesn't paint you in a positive light."

"No, sir, I'm sure she doesn't."

"She did say you're a good detective."

I didn't respond.

"She also said you've pulled your socks up this past year. However, she claims you need to settle down and grow up. She mentioned a revolving door of sexual partners."

I cringed.

"How old are you, Doyle?"

I tried not to let the blunt accusation get to me. I deserved it. Abraham wasn't saying anything that wasn't true. My sexual history, combined with Jack's abuse, was the root cause of Quaid's constant doubt about our relationship. I might spend years making up for my past. Summerfield might never sing my praises when asked for a character reference, but she knew damn well I was good at my job. She'd have shown me the door years ago if I wasn't.

"I'm forty-two, sir."

"Uh-huh. Forty-two. 'Bout time you grow up. What are your intentions with my son?"

I almost snorted. I hadn't had a father ask me that question since I was eighteen and picking up Monica Burton for prom. And I'd lied to that man's face twenty-four years ago before taking his daughter's virginity in the back seat of my Camaro at one in the morning after the pair of us had gotten drunk on vodka coolers that I'd paid a homeless guy to buy for me earlier in the day.

How was I supposed to answer Abraham's question?

We arrived at his house—Quaid's childhood home—and I pulled into the driveway and parked before shifting to face him. He was waiting.

"I'll be honest, sir. It's early yet. We're taking it one step at a time. I know I have an unsavory past, and you have every right to be leery. I know Quaid's last relationship left him with a bad taste in his mouth—and yours too, but I like your son, and he likes me. He knows who I was and who I want to be going forward. Believe me, I have no intention of hurting him or being unfaithful like Jack. I value Quaid. I hope I can prove to you as much as I can prove to him that I am a worthy partner. I can't magically erase my past, and I'm not proud of the things I've done, but I can assure you, I'm not that person anymore. I hope you'll give me a chance to prove myself."

Abraham stared across the console. The night was dark and overcast. The streetlights didn't reach inside the cab of the SUV. He might have been in his sixties and retired, but he hadn't lost his edge. His gaze was intense and assessing, and I saw him for the detective he'd once been. Abraham Valor was not a frail old man like Quaid sometimes described him. He was fierce and protective of his son. He'd go to war for him if he had to. He'd fight to his last breath.

I respected that.

How he'd sat on the sidelines as Quaid had maneuvered through his last relationship was beyond me. It was no wonder I was getting the third degree.

"It was a very thoughtful gift you bought him."

I cautiously smiled. "Yeah? I thought he was going to hit me."

"Nah. Here's something you should know about Quaid. He's afraid to let himself be vulnerable. He thinks he needs to act a certain way or people won't respect him, which means he isn't always forthcoming about the things he likes. He hides his true feelings behind thick walls. He's got this warped idea that people in the department can't see past his sexuality, so he's afraid to let anyone see the parts of himself he thinks are cliché and make him stand out as a gay man, like his musicals and love for romance novels. He puts on a front and hides things he sees as weaknesses even when they're not. He needs a man who will let him be his true self. You gave him a tiny taste of that freedom tonight with those tickets. It's a good start."

Was that a compliment?

I nodded. "Thank you, sir."

"Now, if it truly isn't you and it's some case getting under his skin, what will it take for me to convince you to tell me what's going on?"

"Like I said, it's not my place to say, but I will encourage him to talk to you soon."

Abraham narrowed his eyes, then nodded. "All right. Thank you for driving me home."

"It was nice to meet you." I wasn't sure if I should offer a hand to shake or not. In the end, I didn't.

Abraham hummed in agreement and got out of the vehicle. I waited as he hobbled with a heavy limp to the front door, unlocked it, and shuffled inside.

Dinner hadn't gone as horribly as I'd feared. Although cautious and stern, Abraham didn't seem to hate me outright. I had work to do, but I had been prepared for that. My history didn't paint me as a loveable character, but I was confident I could change Abraham's mind in time.

It was nearing eight when I made it to the hospital and the children's ward. I wandered toward the nurses' station, unsure where Quaid had wound up. As I rounded a corner, I caught sight of Allison and Erik chatting in harsh whispers outside the door to a room.

They didn't notice my approach until I was on top of them. Erik saw me first and turned his stolid expression in my direction, scanning me head to toe. "Doyle. Twice in one day. What are you doing here?"

Allison's expression turned smug and knowing.

"I hear there's been some excitement. Didn't want to miss out."

"It doesn't concern homicide." Erik tipped his chin up, crossed his arms over his bulky chest, and squared off with me. Ah, the age-old interdepartmental animosity. It never got old. I should have brought my sword so we could duel it out.

Allison touched her partner's arm. "Relax, Erik." To me, she said, "I assume you're looking for Quaid?" The corner of

her mouth curled into a mischievous smirk as she glanced over my shoulder. "You don't seem to have your tagalong with you, so I'm guessing you're off duty."

"Torin's probably at home working on his next epic speech for when he catches you wandering alone in no man's land."

"No doubt. Can't wait."

I chuckled, and her grin grew.

"Yes, I'm looking for Quaid. Has he been restrained yet?"

Erik huffed, confirming my suspicion. "Gelekar is keeping him in line. But seriously, why are you here?" The deadpan expression and lazy stare gave no hint as to whether or not Erik suspected anything or was merely curious.

But Allison wasn't fooled. She swatted Erik's arm. "It's not our business."

Erik's eyeballs were the only thing that moved. They shifted and glanced at Allison, reading something on her face only a close partner could understand before they rolled back in my direction.

Erik's eyes narrowed.

Before he could respond, the door to the room beside us opened, and Quaid came into the hallway with Eden. His face morphed from surprise at finding me there chatting with the other MPU detectives to mild concern.

"Hey." He offered a quick, forced smile before turning to Allison and Erik. "If I can't directly participate, I want to observe the interview. It's only fair. This is as much my case as it is yours. Edwards would agree. I want the ability to inject opinions and offer alternate questions if they arise."

Eden stood shoulder to shoulder with Quaid. They'd joined forces, and Eden clearly agreed with Quaid's statement. She held her chin high and addressed Allison. "Quaid's right. I think it's fair. I agree that too many people in the room will feel overwhelming to that little girl. However, these cases are undeniably linked, and we shouldn't be denied participation in some form."

Allison glanced at Erik, and they had a silent conversation. "All right," she said once they'd decided. "But this—"

"I also want Lily interviewed again," Quaid interrupted.

It was Erik who responded. "Don't hold your breath."

"Her mother can be present again if she wants, but now that she's had a month to settle, we might get more out of her."

"Or we push too hard and she starts filling in the blanks with misremembered facts or fictional excess because she wants to please us and give us answers she doesn't have."

I stood a few feet back, observing. Erik had a point. That was especially possible with a young child trying to please adults.

Quaid wouldn't let up. "I don't care. It's a necessary risk. If these two girls were held by the same person—"

Allison held up a hand, stopping Quaid, and Eden touched his arm.

His nostrils flared, and he pressed his lips together. "I'm just saying that—"

"One step at a time," Allison said. "We'll interview Evelyn\_"

"Tonight," Quaid snapped.

"Not tonight. It's late. She's been through hell, and she's exhausted. The likelihood is our interview will take hours. She needs to rest and be fresh and ready to go. Tomorrow. We will inform you of a time and place."

No one spoke.

I was a fly on the wall. Everyone seemed to have forgotten I was there, but I could sense the tension vibrating in the air. Quaid was strung tight, and I would have bet he was vibrating on the inside. He looked ten seconds away from snapping more demands.

"Quaid." I used a soft tone, hoping he would respond.

He glanced over, making eye contact.

I gave a subtle shake of the head.

His petulance glowed. His scowl deepened.

I hardened my eyes and hitched a brow.

We were not pros at nonverbal communication, but he knew exactly what I wasn't saying.

"Fine." Quaid shook off Eden's hold on his arm and stepped forward, aiming his next words at Erik. "If you do this interview without us, believe me when I say I will take this to Edwards and raise hell. If he doesn't listen, I'll take it to Lassaline. Try me. This is as much my case as it is yours, and I will tear up the whole fucking department until I'm involved."

Erik was unaffected.

Eden spoke next. "Quaid, how about you go with Aslan and finish celebrating your birthday."

Quaid's gaze flicked to me and then to the two other detectives. Allison brushed a hand over his arm and smirked. "Happy birthday, Quaid."

His whole body deflated. The tension leeched out of him. "Thank you."

"Go enjoy your night. I promise we'll call."

He nodded as Allison turned to me. "Do me a favor, Doyle?"

I lifted my chin. "What's up?"

"Next time you see Fox, tell him to pull his shit together. The whole song and dance is cute, but I'm getting impatient. I'm not going to wait forever."

I cocked my head to the side. "Why don't you ask him?"

"Where's the fun in that?" Allison gave me a knowing wink.
"Now take your boyfriend home and find a way to keep him there so he doesn't come back and get in my hair."

Quaid's eyes widened, and Eden folded her lips over her teeth, biting back a grin.

The cat was out of the bag.

I gave Allison a salute. "I'll do my best."

Allison steered Erik into the room beside us, and Eden followed. When the door closed, Quaid tugged fingers through his once perfectly styled hair and groaned. "Well, I guess we aren't fooling anyone."

I offered him a hand. He stared at it a long time before taking it and letting me pull him into my arms. I squeezed him tight as he rested his forehead on my shoulder and clung to my waist. He was still tense, still jittery with too much energy.

"Does it matter anymore?" I gently rocked us side to side. "You know I don't care."

"It's fine. I just... like to keep my private life private."

"I know."

"People can be opinionated, and it's none of their business."

I kissed his temple and inhaled the lingering hints of his cologne. "Wanna talk about the case?"

"Yes, but not here."

"Let me take you home."

"Will you stay?"

I chuckled. "Are you kidding? Do you think your birthday ends with dinner? Theater tickets were the publicly acceptable gift that wouldn't make me look bad in front of your dad. I have a whole pile of X-rated ideas up my sleeve to finish off the night."

"Mm... I'm listening."

I pulled back, still clinging to his hand. He was almost smiling. It teased the corner of his mouth.

"I'd rather show you."

He glanced at the door where the others had gone, then back.

"Unless you'd rather stay here and irritate people right into a disciplinary meeting with Edwards."

And that comment earned me a trademark sneer, exactly as I suspected it might. "I'm not being unreasonable."

"You're going to tear up the whole department until you get your way?" I snorted. "I'd almost like to see that."

His sneer deepened. "You're supposed to be on my side."

"Is that in the boyfriend contract?"

"Yes."

"Noted." I laughed and gave his hand a tug. "Come on, grump. It's still your birthday for a few more hours, and there are other things in the boyfriend contract that interest me more. First and foremost, I want you naked."

There was no fight as I dragged him to the elevator. He went willingly, a smile fighting for dominance over the sneer and winning.

## CHAPTER 5

### Quaid



**Can't** move. Any chance a full body massage is included as a wrap-up to a birthday sex marathon? I'm not as limber as I used to be. Thirty-six is a bitch. I think I pulled a muscle."

Aslan rolled to his side, laughing as he lazily ran a hand over my upper thigh. I lay on my back, staring at the ceiling, chest heaving and muscles jelly.

"I thought you were plenty limber."

"I have a twinge in my leg. If I'm limping tomorrow, you can explain to everyone why." My eyelids drooped, and letting them fall closed was easier than keeping them open. A thin sheet of sweat coated our bodies, and Aslan had gotten up a few minutes ago to crack a window, despite the near-freezing temperatures outside.

A chilly breeze blew in, caressing my overheated skin and carrying the nighttime noises of the city. An airplane flew along the flight path overhead, dampening the drone of traffic from the expressway. Far off in the distance, a siren wailed.

"So does this mean I don't get a round two tonight?" Aslan's lazy exploration had moved to my abdomen. He tickled his fingers through the patch of hair beneath my navel, then glanced them over my ribs on his upward journey.

I snorted. "I'll tell you what. If you can get it up again, I'll give you round two."

Aslan, laughing, dropped his head on the pillow beside me, tugging me against him and nuzzling my jaw. "Recovery time in your forties is a pain in the ass. Check back with me in an hour or so."

"I think I might be asleep by then."

"I hear morning sex is all the rage."

"Oh, let's do that. Sign me up."

"Deal."

It took effort, but I got a fist up, and Aslan gave it a solid bump. We both erupted into tired laughter.

"We are so sad. I really thought my stamina was better," I said.

"It helps if you get proper sleep at night. Your tank's empty."

I groaned. That was fair. It felt like I hadn't slept in a month. Between the case and the new relationship, my stress level was through the roof.

We lay snuggled together, cooling off and letting our racing hearts slow. Aslan wove his leg with mine, the bristly hairs on his calves rubbing against me when he squirmed closer. His scruffy chin grazed my skin as he peppered random kisses along my collarbone.

When he inhaled, he held the breath in his lungs for a long time before exhaling with a sigh. "You smell good."

"I probably smell like sweat and cum."

"Mm... Like I said. You smell good. Did you have a good time at dinner tonight?"

"I did. Was Dad nice to you when you drove him home?"

"Define nice."

I cracked my eyes and lifted my head, frowning. "Please tell me he didn't give you the third degree."

"Define the third degree."

"For Pete's sake. I'll talk to him."

"Don't give him a hard time. He cares about you. He expressed concerns, and I listened. He made valid points, and I told him I had no intention of hurting you."

I groaned, dropping my head back on the pillow. "You'd think I was sixteen."

"He loves you."

"But he doesn't get to dictate who I date."

"He means well. However, it sucks that he's convinced I'm the reason you've been acting strange this past month."

"I know. I told him it was related to a case, but he didn't believe me. I need to tell him. I just don't know how. I wanted more answers first."

"I'm not telling you what to do, but the longer you wait, the worse it will be."

"I know." I paused. "The thing is, we don't talk about Juni. I can't remember the last time she came up in conversation. I don't know how he'll react, and his health..."

"I know."

"I'll tell him."

"When you're ready. Wanna tell me about this little girl who turned up?"

I did. For as tired as I was, I knew if I didn't get it off my chest, I wouldn't be able to sleep.

"She was found in the same park where Lily was found. The parallels are uncanny. Like Lily, she was filthy, but she wasn't malnourished. She's more vocal and alert. Allison feels confident we might get some solid answers from her. She seems far more capable and prepared to communicate with us."

"There was another connecting factor, wasn't there? It wasn't solely the location where they were found."

"No, it wasn't. When Lily was found, she was wearing a dress, tights, and mismatched shoes on her feet. Buckled dress shoes, one red and one white. Evelyn was found in a dress and tights as well. Not unusual. Lots of little girls wear dresses and

tights, but she was also wearing mismatched dress shoes. One red and one white, both with buckles. The outfits were not what the girls were wearing when they went missing. And the mismatched shoes were a match for one another."

Aslan lifted his head and rested his chin on my chest, peering up at me, brows high. "Wow. Okay, so that's an undeniable connection."

I shivered, suddenly too cold with the window open. "It is. Az, why did Lily have Juni's backpack?"

"I don't know."

"It's been thirty years. I can't make sense of this, and I've been over it a thousand times. Is it him? Is it the same person who took her? Am I completely crazy to think that? He'd be, what? Fifty at the absolute youngest. More likely in his sixties or older. The average age for an abductor is twenty-seven."

"I think it's a strong possibility."

"But why are these girls reappearing?"

"I don't know."

"How am I ever going to tell my dad?" I shivered again, my teeth knocking together.

"Come here." Aslan forced me to roll to my side and snuggle against him as he pulled the covers over us. "Try to sleep. We'll figure it out in the morning."

"I don't think I can sleep."

But the stress of the past month must have caught up with me. Aslan stroked his fingers through my hair and told me to close my eyes. Before I knew it, it was morning, and my phone was ringing.

The bed beside me was empty. The hazy morning sun shone through the window. It was closed. Aslan must have shut it during the night. I rolled closer to the bedside table to retrieve the device and squinted at the screen.

Edwards.

Why was my boss calling?

I connected the call and collapsed back on the bed, draping an arm over my eyes. "Valor."

"Morning."

"You know, everyone keeps reminding me I took this weekend off, yet you're calling me..." I cracked an eye and glanced at the clock. "Holy shit. How the hell is it almost ten in the morning?"

Edwards chuckled. "I didn't mean to disturb your slumber, and I recognize you've taken some vacation days, but we need to have a chat, and it can't wait until tomorrow."

Aslan came into the bedroom with a steaming mug of coffee. He set it on the bedside table and hitched a brow, silently asking who I was talking to. I held up a finger. "Why can't it wait?"

"It just can't. Can you come to the office sometime this afternoon?"

"I..." I wanted to ask why again, but if Edwards had wanted to tell me on the phone, he would have by now. "Sure. I can be there at noon."

"All right. I'll see you then."

I disconnected and stared at my phone for a beat. "It was Edwards. He wants to see me in his office at noon today. It can't wait until Monday." I glanced at Aslan. "I wasn't unreasonable yesterday, was I?"

"I wasn't there the whole time, but if you're referring to your request to be part of the interview with Evelyn, I don't think you were being unreasonable. If you're referring to your remark about tearing up the department..." He shrugged.

"Why do I feel like I stepped in shit again?"

"Don't fret about it until you know." He picked up the coffee he'd brought and handed it to me. "Here, this will help."

I sat up, letting the blankets pool around me and accepted the mug. Closing my eyes, I inhaled before taking a cautious sip. "Mm... it's good. Thank you. I thought you left."

"Nah. I was up early, though. You were out cold, and I didn't want to wake you, so I borrowed some joggers, went for a run, came back, showered, then made coffee."

"You went running without me?"

It had become a ritual whenever we stayed at each other's houses, which wasn't often since work tended to keep us busy and on separate schedules half the time. I'd been determined not to take things too fast with Aslan like I was prone to do. Letting my emotions and feelings run wild had disaster written all over it. On the mornings we did manage to wake up beside one another, we shared early runs.

I was sad I'd missed it. Did he not want to do that anymore?

"You needed sleep, Quaid. Don't make it into something it isn't."

I scowled playfully, knowing my uncertainties were showing. "I believe I was promised morning sex, and here you are dressed and showered. What a rip-off."

Chuckling, Aslan leaned in and pecked me on the lips. "Rain check. I told Amelia I'd watch the kids at eleven."

A stone of disappointment sank to the bottom of my stomach. I tried not to let it show on my face, refusing to play the needy boyfriend card with Aslan. It was unappealing and pathetic, but I'd been hoping for a lazy Sunday together, and it had all gone sideways.

Edwards wanted to talk, and I had an interview with Evelyn to observe later. I shouldn't have felt sad that Aslan had made other plans.

"So you're taking off then?"

"Yeah. I have to run home and change."

"Okay." I checked my phone to see if Allison, Erik, or my partner had texted with a time for that interview, but there were no messages. "Let me know how it goes with Edwards?"

"Sure." I debated texting in case they thought of conveniently forgetting about me.

"Hey." Aslan knocked a finger under my chin, forcing my gaze away from my phone. "Why are you sulking?"

"I'm not sulking. I'm thinking."

"You're sulking."

"It's nothing," I mumbled.

I felt the heat of his gaze as he studied me.

"Do you want to swing by Amelia's when you're done with this meeting with Edwards? I'm sure Graham would love to play some chess with the master."

I tried to smile, but it was weak. "Nah, it's fine."

"Okay. Try not to stay at the office all day. I can see your head buzzing around with work already. You're supposed to be off this weekend. Take advantage."

"That's not happening anymore. I need to find out when they're interviewing Evelyn. I'm not missing that. Besides, if you're busy, I may as well get work done. No point being home by myself with nothing to do."

Aslan didn't say anything. When I glanced up, I couldn't read the expression on his face. Before I could redirect the conversation, he leaned in and kissed me, lingering. When our lips parted, he said, "Will you call me later?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Sure."

He stood, brushed a knuckle over my bare shoulder, then headed for the door. Before exiting, he swung back around. "Oh, and your little trick of putting orange juice in my Sunny D container was not funny."

I sipped my coffee, grinning. "I don't know what you're talking about. I wouldn't do that."

"Quaid, they taste nothing alike."

"To be fair, they look nothing alike, so if you couldn't tell the difference when you poured it into the glass, that's not my fault."

He narrowed his eyes. I narrowed mine back.

He broke first, shaking his head and laughing as he disappeared out the door. "You'll get yours, Valor."

"I was hoping I'd get it this morning. You're nothing but a tease."

I listened to his laughter fade as he clomped down the stairs. A few minutes later, the front door closed.

# CHAPTER 6

### Quaid



ome in. Close the door behind you," Edwards said when I poked my head into his office a few minutes shy of noon.

The bullpen was quiet—typical for a Sunday. I'd arrived early, hoping to run into Allison and Erik so I could inquire about the interview with Evelyn, but they weren't around.

My texts to Eden had gone unanswered.

If they were ignoring me, I would raise hell. I was *not* being unreasonable.

Edwards's office was separated from the bullpen by an open concept glass wall so he could watch us work from behind his desk. The horizontal blinds could be lowered for privacy, but since no one was around today, they were wide open.

Edwards waved to the seat in front of his desk, encouraging me to take it. In all my years as a detective, I'd never been called into his office for a reprimand—until this past month. Aslan had argued it wasn't a reprimand nor was it anything resembling a disciplinary meeting. He'd called it a gentle reminder that I was getting too worked up.

Well, if this was *gentle reminder* number two that I was getting under people's skin with my approach to the case, it could mean reassignment. I didn't know what I'd do. My whole career was based around Juniper. I'd let my personal connection affect my attitude, and I knew better. Eden had warned me.

I lowered myself into the chair, my body wound tight, muscles aching. Since I didn't spend much time in Edwards's office, I'd rarely taken note of the handful of personal touches. Awards and certificates decorated the walls. Family photographs filled the shelves—Edwards's grown children but mostly his grandchildren. School photographs, pictures of them playing soccer, day trips to Canada's Wonderland, the zoo, and Ripley's Aquarium. Child-drawn artwork was pinned up at random, colorful crayon sketches of stick people and animals.

It was hard to see Edwards as anything more than my sergeant, but outside the office, he was a loving, happy grandfather.

He was not happy today.

Edwards's face was grim. Not a good sign. He didn't say anything for a long time, simply staring as though he could see beneath my skin to all that lived underneath.

My knee-jerk reaction was to apologize, but I didn't know why I was there, so I kept my mouth shut.

I didn't bounce a knee. I didn't clench my fists. I didn't urge him to speak up already because the silence was making me crazy. With as much patience as I could muster, I waited him out.

"Quaid..."

My stomach dropped. My sergeant *never* called me by my first name. *Ever*.

"Have you talked to your father about our discovery last month?"

My throat tightened. "No, sir. I haven't found a good opportunity. Truthfully, I was hoping we'd find more information so that—"

He held up a hand. "So Abraham doesn't know about the backpack?"

"No, sir."

Edwards nodded. He inhaled then exhaled through his nose, suggesting he'd assumed as much, and it wasn't the answer he was hoping for. Leaning forward, he folded his hands and propped his elbows on the desk.

"Son..."

I groaned, unable to keep it inside.

The pity on Edwards's face deepened.

I opened my mouth to interject, but Edwards shook his head.

"Listen. I respect this is a difficult situation, and I understand your reticence to share this new information with your father. I know you would prefer to do it on your own time. However, that time is up."

"Sir?" My voice croaked. Ice water flooded my veins.

"Tomorrow morning at nine, Bright and Travolta will be part of a press conference. News about these missing girls and their sudden reappearance has hit the media. We can't stop the parents from talking. Speculation has risen, and connections are being made, which also means rumors are spreading like wildfire. We need to jump on this immediately and control the narrative before it gets out of hand. I know you understand this. The link between these two young girls and Juniper is undeniable, and I'm sorry, Quaid, but we can't do a press conference and leave her out. Not when it's something like this. We have an obligation to talk about it."

Juniper. He was going to talk about Juniper. On the news.

I couldn't breathe.

"I'm sure I'm not telling you anything you haven't already been thinking, but we're in the middle of something big here. Whoever took these girls is speaking to us however indirectly. I don't know what the message is or why they've decided to open this line of communication now, but I know ignoring it would be risky."

A press conference. Juniper on the news. Her backpack.

The moment it went live, my father would know everything.

I couldn't protect him anymore.

"I'm giving you a heads-up. I think this type of news should come from you. I don't want Abraham to learn it from watching a report on the television."

I nodded, the thick lump in my throat preventing me from speaking.

"Also..." Edwards sighed and refolded his fingers. "Considering the nature of the case—"

My pulse spiked, and I pitched forward on the chair, hands landing on the edge of his desk. "Sir, no. Please don't take me off it. I know it's of a personal nature, but I can handle it. I have been handling it. I know I get worked up, but—"

Edwards held up a hand. "Stop. I'm not taking you off the case, Valor. Listen to me. Considering its nature, I want you and Gelekar to combine resources with Bright and Travolta. I know you've been sharing information back and forth, but I think it's time we join these cases together properly and stop addressing them as two separate entities. I would like the four of you to work together on this as though it was one case and you were one unit. Understand?"

"Yes, sir. Thank you." It was what I'd wanted for a month. Arguing with Erik—Allison was more agreeable—every time I turned around was exhausting.

"Last thing," Edwards said. "The interview with Evelyn Rice has been pushed to tomorrow after the press conference."

I flinched. "Tomorrow?"

"Yes. The child isn't ready yet. Her doctor insisted on another day."

"But... wouldn't it be more beneficial to conduct the interview before the press conference, sir? We might have more information to share with the public."

Edwards scrubbed a hand down his face. "Ideally, yes. But I've already organized it, and I'm not changing things now."

"But—"

"That's final, Valor. If we learn anything the public needs to know, I will make a statement after the fact. You worry about your job, and I'll worry about mine."

The whole thing felt backward, but Edwards gave me a look that warned me I shouldn't fight him on it. What did I know?

"Today, I want you to go speak with your father."

"Yes, sir."

"Tomorrow, after the press conference, Bright and Travolta will conduct Evelyn's interview, then I want the four of you to brief me on where we stand. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir. Thank you."

"Good luck, Valor. I know this isn't an easy thing."

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The clock on the dash changed from 1:41 to 1:42, then to 1:43. I alternated drumming on the steering wheel and squeezing the life out of it as the glowing numbers marked the passage of

time. I'd been sitting in Dad's driveway for the past twenty minutes, trying to figure out how to have a conversation I didn't want to have. It wasn't fair. Talking about Juniper meant revisiting the past. It meant unearthing feelings and emotions that had been vaulted away long ago.

Abraham was a good man and a great father. He'd done the best he could in the face of tragedy. It might have taken nearly a decade for us to find common ground, but we had found it. His grief and guilt had been a hard thing to shake. Add in my mother abandoning us, and it was the perfect recipe for an unstable childhood. Conversations surrounding Juniper were uncomfortable, so we avoided them at all costs. Anniversaries were no longer recognized. Her absence had stained both our lives in different ways. We'd both suffered. But we'd gotten by. We'd come out the other end and were closer now than ever.

I hated the idea of rocking our now stable boat by unearthing the past before I had all the answers.

A month of preparing for this exact moment hadn't made a difference.

I picked up my phone from the cup holder and debated calling or texting Aslan to tell him what was up, needing reassurance or a comforting voice. But I put the device down again, reminding myself for the hundredth time that smothering Aslan or being too needy and insecure would only drive him away. It had with Jack. Weakness was not sexy, and this past month had been a test of self-restraint. Between the

sudden discovery of Juniper's backpack and treading carefully into a new relationship, I was stressed and overly aware of how my actions and words made me look or sound. Portraying myself as the perfect boyfriend when I was, in fact, the most imperfect man on the planet was draining.

The sixties-style, single-story bungalow where Dad lived was my childhood home. Too many memories lived within her walls, and many of them were ones I'd rather forget. Visiting Dad usually brought comfort, but today it knotted my insides. The beige siding was dingy under the low fall sky. The aluminum awning over the front stoop was rusted along the edges. The stone path leading to the front door was cracked, weeds poking through where they didn't belong. The house was as old and dated as the man who lived inside her.

I shoved the SUV's door open with a heavy sigh and got out. Wandering up the path to the front door, I rolled the conversation I had to have around in my head, testing new ways of saying things, wondering if it mattered.

I knocked and let myself in, calling out as I did. "Hello? Dad? It's me. Are you home?" I knew he was home. He didn't go far these days, and when he did, I usually knew about it.

"In the den."

It was stuffy and a little too warm inside for my taste. The menthol scent of Bengay hung in the air, a clear sign Dad's muscles and joints were bothering him. I kicked off my shoes and crossed the worn shag carpeting to the den, where I found Dad in his recliner, feet propped up, book on his lap, and TV

on. His rarely used cane leaned against the small table beside him. He'd been pulling it out more frequently whenever his knee gave him trouble.

A quick glance told me he was engaged in *Three's Company*. Dad subscribed to a TV station that played retro sitcoms from the sixties and seventies. It was hit or miss if it was going to be a show I could tolerate or not. He liked some questionable programs. *Three's Company* I could handle.

Dad glanced over at my entrance, his chin and jaw scruffier than usual, his gray eyes distant and tired. "What are you doing here? I thought you'd be spending the day with your man."

"He had prior engagements, and I had to run to the office to see Edwards."

Dad's attention drifted to the TV, but then he turned back with a frown. "Edwards? On a Sunday? Why's that?"

"It was to do with that case I'm working. He wanted to talk to me."

"Uh-huh. The case I'm not privy to hear about, I assume." The snap in his tone emphasized how he felt about that.

"Yeah. That one."

I found the remote on the coffee table and turned off the TV as I sat on the old gold-colored wool couch my grandparents had given my parents as a wedding gift long before I was born. It had dark wood trim and solid wooden legs. It was ugly as sin but in better shape than the furniture I'd bought less than

five years ago. A lot could be said about the quality of today's products compared to those bought several decades ago.

"Why're you turning off my shows? That's not one of the ones that offends you, is it?"

"We need to talk."

Dad shifted on his recliner, adjusting with a grunt as he pulled himself more upright. Pain radiated through his face, and he leaned heavily on his right side, bringing his opposite hand up to rub his neck.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"The usual aches and pains. Slept funny. Are you here to tell me about this case? I told that man of yours to talk some sense into you."

I studied my dad, noting all the changes in him that had taken place over the past five years since he'd retired. Five years wasn't a long time, but sitting around the house all day hadn't done him any favors.

I shifted my focus to a spot on the carpet, an old stain that had been there for as long as I could remember. Had it been there when Juniper was around, or was it newer? It didn't matter.

Leaning forward, elbows on my knees and chin propped on my folded fists, I searched for the right words. Did I rip the Band-Aid off or ease into it?

"Spit it out, kiddo," Dad said. "I'm an old man. I don't have that many years left."

Don't remind me.

I glanced at my father, counting each wrinkle. Had he always looked so tired? Had there always been a distant pain behind his eyes? He carried a scar on his soul that could never be erased. What might our lives have been like had Juniper never been taken?

Would Dad have aged the same?

Would he have smiled more?

Would I have gone into policing or chosen something different?

My voice penetrated the quiet room before I registered I was talking. "A little girl was found last month wandering alone in Crothers Woods in the Lower Don Parklands area. She was one of our missing person cases. Disappeared back in June. No one had seen or heard from her in four months before she reappeared out of the blue. Her name is Lily Vaccari. She's eight years old and suffering from some significant emotional trauma. Luckily, she didn't seem to suffer physical or sexual abuse while held captive. Unfortunately, we haven't been able to get much information from her."

Dad's face was blank. Apart from his chest heaving up and down with his labored breathing, he didn't move. He knew there was more.

I buried my face in my palms and scrubbed. My stomach clenched, and my eyes burned, but I regained control and

lifted my head. "When Lily was found..." I couldn't do it. I almost jumped off the couch and ran out the front door.

Shifting, I blew out a shaky breath and pushed onward. "When she was found... she was carrying an old backpack." A vise clamped around my throat. I swallowed several times to no avail. "Dad... it... it was Juni's backpack. Her name was on the inside label. I've since gone through her old file and matched it to the description you gave from the day Juni vanished. I don't know how or why, but... this little girl had it with her."

#### I stopped talking.

A black hole opened up in the middle of the den, sucking all the sound from the room and leaving a thick nothingness to throb and pulse in my ears. The war drum of my heart echoed like a death march, loud and fast.

Dad hadn't moved or spoken. It was like someone had hit Pause on a movie, and the still frame image of the old man before me was stuck in a perpetual state of non-emotion as he sat in his ratty recliner.

Several seconds passed. Then several minutes. Time blurred. Dad's face tried to crumple, but he wrenched his features back into their stolid form. His jaw quivered. He clenched his teeth.

#### It quivered again.

His gray eyes took on a sheen, glistening in the low light of the room. The room jolted back to life as quickly as it had stopped. Dad pushed out of the recliner with a grunt. His knee tried to buckle, and I moved to help, but he swatted at me and caught his balance on the arm of the recliner. His hands shook. His body trembled. A haunted look bloomed behind his eyes. His breathing changed, turning to short gasps like there wasn't enough oxygen.

"Dad..."

Then he was gone, hobbling and tripping down the hall as fast as his feet would take him.

"Dad!" I was on my feet, following after him a minute too late.

A door slammed as I rounded the corner.

At the closed bathroom door, I knocked. "Dad?"

"Is this what you've been keeping from me for a month?" His voice was raw, the perfect mix of anger, hurt, and devastation.

"I'm sorry. I... Yes. I was hoping to find answers first. I didn't want to tell you about it until I knew more."

He didn't respond.

Water ran, and I suspected it was to drown out the sound of things Dad didn't want me to hear. Like crying. The last time I'd seen my dad cry, I was six years old.

"Dad?"

"Get outta here."

"You can't seriously be mad at me. Dad, I—"

"Don't you tell me how to feel. I will be however I damn well feel like being with you. Now get outta here."

"No. Would you come out and talk to me?"

Nothing.

I pounded on the door. "Dad. Don't be like this. I know you're upset. It doesn't mean you have to hide in the bathroom. I'm upset too, okay? I've been desperate to tell you about this. Don't you think I wanted to? Put yourself in my shoes. We've never talked about her. Her name is taboo in this house and has been for decades. I've been making myself sick over this. I wanted to tell you so many times, but I didn't know how."

Nothing.

I kicked the door, blinking hard to cool the burn in my eyes. "Goddammit, Dad. Don't do this."

Nothing.

"Dad!"

I slapped a hand on the door and dropped my forehead to the hard wooden surface. "It's not fair. You can't even say her name. You act like she wasn't real. She was my sister, and I've never been allowed to talk about her. Do you think I didn't grieve too because I was a little kid? Do you think it didn't slay me? Do you know how hard it was for me growing up in Juni's shadow? Then Mom left, and all I had was you. But you were always so distant. I walked on eggshells my whole life,

knowing how sensitive this topic was. Knowing it hurt you to talk about it. You can't blame me for not bringing this to you sooner. Dad? Dad, come on. Open the door."

Nothing.

"Dad, please." My voice wobbled, and the glands under my chin tightened. My vision blurred. No amount of blinking helped, and tears streamed down my cheeks.

Growing up, there had always been a wall between us when it came to Juniper. Now there was a literal wall, and Dad didn't want to take it down.

"I need your help, Dad." I cleared my throat, doing all I could to shed the raw emotion straining my voice. "I want your help. You want answers as much as I do. This could be our chance to get them. More things have come to light. Dad, please open the door."

"I can't do this, Quaid. Not right now. Not this minute."

"Please don't shut me out. Not this time. Not now."

"Go home."

"Dad..."

"Let me absorb this, kiddo. I need to... let it soak in."

It was like I'd assumed. The blow of information was a right hook out of nowhere. I may as well have punched my old man in the face. Guilt was a tidal wave trying to drown me. I wanted to object. I wanted to tell him I didn't care if he cried. I expected him to. I wanted him to, but Abraham Valor had

never been one to show weakness. He was stoic and unshakable

"Are you angry?"

"No."

I batted at the tears running down my face and dripping off my chin. Staring at the closed door, I considered my options.

"Will you please come out? I need to look at you and know you're okay before I leave."

I need you to hug me and hold the pieces together because they're scattering into the wind.

"I'm fine. I need time, Quaid."

I nodded even though he couldn't see me. "Okay. I... understand, I guess. There's going to be a press conference tomorrow morning."

Nothing.

"I'm sorry, Dad. I didn't mean to upset you."

Nothing.

I pressed a hand to the door. "Okay, I'm going. I love you."

Nothing.

I knew my father loved me fiercely, but not having the sentiment returned was enough to cause new tears to flood my eyes.

I didn't want to go, but I knew how stubborn he could be. I wouldn't get anywhere. Not today.

### CHAPTER 7

### Aslan



ey, you've reached Quaid Valor. I can't come to the phone right now. Leave a message, and I'll get back to you."

I disconnected the call as the elevator doors slid open and delivered me into homicide's bullpen at eight o'clock on Monday morning. Once again, my texts and phone calls were going unanswered. I didn't know how Quaid's meeting had gone with Edwards the previous day or if they'd gotten anywhere with Evelyn Rice during the interview. At this rate, I'd never know.

Torin was already deeply engrossed in work, and if I knew my partner, he'd been there for hours, picking over the cases we were currently working on and organizing our whole day.

I dropped into the seat across from him and kicked my feet up on the desk, hugging a takeout coffee between my hands to warm them. "Don't get comfortable," Torin said, flipping through a booklet of papers and frowning as he scanned them. "Call just came in. We have a stabbing victim found twenty minutes ago behind the Woodbine Mall. Summerfield put us on it. We need to head over there and check it out." Torin turned to his computer as he shoved the booklet he'd been studying toward me. "And read these. I need your John Hancock on the bottom of pages five and eight. That will officially close the Prescott case."

I swiped the papers into my lap and skimmed them as I drank my coffee. "What about those interviews we were doing today for the Maddy Rio case?"

"I moved them to tomorrow. We've got front-row seats to a postmortem once Thornlow gets the mall guy to her office. It takes precedence. How's lover boy? Did you two have a good birthday weekend together?"

"Honestly, I'm having a more intimate relationship with his voicemail lately."

Torin glanced across our joined desks. "Oh no. Trouble in paradise already?"

I dropped my feet to the ground, found a pen, and scratched my name in the right places before shoving the paperwork for the Prescott case back at Torin. "I don't know. I mean, we seem to be all right. His birthday dinner was fine. The private celebration afterward was excellent—"

Torin held up a hand. "Spare me the details. I have a hard enough time looking at him and not thinking about Oscar the Grouch, and I don't need an image in my brain of what it looks like when Oscar gets fucked."

"You're such a dick."

"And yet you still come to work every day and put up with me."

"Reluctantly."

"So what's the problem then? Good dinner, good sex..."

Torin shrugged. "That's not enough?"

"I don't know. I had to help Amelia out Sunday morning, so I couldn't stick around. He seemed... disappointed. I haven't heard from him since. It's probably not personal, but he's a bit... I don't know. He gets these ideas in his head. Jack fucked him up."

"That's not a shocker. You knew that going in."

"I know. He's hard to read sometimes. It's probably nothing. He had his own shit going on. They found another kid on Saturday night. He got a call while we were at dinner. She's tied to the other girl they found last month, the one who had Quaid's sister's backpack. Then, Sunday morning, Edwards called him into the office for a chat. That's all I know."

"So you haven't heard about the big press conference this morning?"

"Is that why the street is swamped with media vans? Uber driver had to drop me off a block down the road."

"Yes, genius. Usually, when the media takes our building hostage, it's because of a press conference. I question your detective skills sometimes."

"I'm still caffeinating. Cut me some slack." I raised my cup, demonstrating, then downed the remaining mouthful before tossing it into the trash bin. "This press conference is related to the little girl?"

"It's related to the whole damn thing so far as I understand."

"Shit. Are we heading out this instant, or can I take five?"

"Be fast. If we don't get down to Woodbine Mall pronto, it will be a circus, and we'll be fighting with CSIs to view the scene. And before you ask, I don't know who's been called in."

I popped out of my seat and aimed for the elevator. The room used for press conferences was in a different part of the building. As I stabbed the button, I turned to Torin and shouted. "Oh, PS, I've been informed that you better shit or get off the pot. Your beauty queen isn't going to wait much longer for you to grow balls and ask her out."

Torin, who'd resumed working, whipped his head up as the elevator doors opened, and I got in. "Wait. What does that mean? Are you serious? You talked to her?"

I chuckled and punched the button for the sixth floor, wiggling my eyebrows at my partner.

"You ass," Torin shouted as the doors clicked shut and the elevator started to move.

It was crowded outside the large conference room where press conferences were typically held. Dozens of men and women from various TV stations and newspapers were filing into the room, filling the empty chairs arranged in neat rows in front of a podium. A wall of windows at the back of the room let in natural light and gave a bird's eye view of College Street and the low clouds of the November skyline. It was trying to snow. Nearly invisible flakes swirled and danced in the air as they made their soft descent, melting the minute they landed on a hard surface.

Staff Sergeant Edwards was behind the podium, chatting quietly with Inspector Lassaline.

I scanned the crowd, looking for Quaid, Eden, Allison, or Erik. I found the latter two tucked away in a corner, huddled close and chatting with the same serious expression worn by their superiors, but there was no Quaid or Eden. I was about to head toward Allison and Erik when someone else in the crowd caught my attention.

Abraham Valor was seated in a chair up front, face a stony mask, arms crossed over his chest.

No Quaid.

I stalled.

What was happening?

Abraham was here. Did he know?

Had Quaid told his father?

I backtracked and left the room, squeezing out the door as waves of people tried to come in. When I dodged a swell of bodies, I jostled a man with a camera. I turned back to apologize, only to have my ear raped and told to watch where I was going. Didn't I know how expensive his equipment was?

"Jackass," I muttered.

When I spun back, intent on carrying on, I collided with a sharply dressed woman in fitted black slacks and a white blouse. In heels, she was scarcely an inch shorter than me. She grabbed my arm when we crashed into one another and fumbled backward a step, wobbling.

I snagged her forearm and righted her on her feet.

"I'm so sorry. Didn't see you there. Are you all right?"

"No harm done," she said, fixing her hair from where it had fallen in her face.

I went to dodge around her, but she didn't release my arm and stepped into my path.

"Excuse me," I said. "I really have to run."

Eden appeared at the end of the hallway, aiming in the direction of the conference room, head down as she read something on her phone. "Eden," I called, catching her attention and trying to move around the woman I'd bumped into. "Where's Quaid?"

Eden glanced up, searching the crowd until she found me. Her gaze shifted to the woman still in my path, then back. "Quaid?" I shouted again, holding my hands out in a gesture that said I was looking for him.

She pointed at the floor, indicating he was down in MPU.

Again, I tried to move around the woman, but she stepped to the side with me, not letting me pass.

"What are you doing?" I snapped.

"You're a detective, aren't you? Are you one of the ones on this case?" She pointed to the conference room.

"What? Um, no. Excuse me."

Again she blocked my way.

"That's right. I recognize you now. You're Aslan Doyle from homicide."

"I'm sorry. Do I know you?"

I frowned, noticing the woman's stunning features for the first time. She had long dark brown hair with silky waves that hung over her shoulders and framed her face like a piece of art. If I had to guess, I'd have tagged her as being in her late thirties. Her arresting amber eyes took me in in a familiar way. I'd scanned more than my fair share of men and women in the same way before making commitments to Quaid, and I wasn't sure how I felt about being openly examined in the same fashion. The woman's full mouth quirked with a mischievous smile, coral lipstick glistening under the fluorescent overhead lighting.

She was attractive. I'd give her that. The old me would have been thrilled to be garnering her attention. But I was on a mission, and she was a roadblock in my way.

The woman held out a hand to shake. "Daniella Kismet. I write for *Upfront and Center* magazine."

I accepted the handshake and tipped my head to the side. "I'm sorry. Your last name is Kismet?"

Her smile turned flirtatious. "Incredible, isn't it? And here we are, literally running into each other in the hall."

"Yeah... Excuse me. I really have to—"

"You don't believe me, do you?"

"I didn't say that."

"You wouldn't be the first. You can call me Dani."

"Right. Um... nice to meet you, Dani, but I have to run."

"You're not staying for the press conference? I hear big things are brewing, but I'm sure you already know everything, being a detective."

"Not my department. See you later."

That time, I physically moved her out of my way, sensing I might not get out of there otherwise, and hustled to the nearest elevator.

MPUs bullpen was bustling. Teams of detectives were gathered at desks or moving from place to place, working and chatting. Photocopiers hummed, a phone rang, and someone sneezed. Despite the chaos, my presence did not go unnoticed.

When I stepped off the elevator, a few curious heads turned in my direction. Others spared me no more than a quick glance before returning to their work. The rumors had begun, and my walking into MPU on a busy Monday morning only confirmed what a lot of people already suspected.

Uncaring of the attention I'd garnered, I scanned the room until I found Quaid, sitting at his desk, elbows braced on its surface and head buried in his hands. He was a picture of despair. His body language screamed *Do Not Approach*, and everyone seemed to abide by the warning. How many people had he snapped at that morning? I didn't pause and headed toward him, brushing off the numerous sets of eyes following my advance.

At his desk, the first thing I noticed was the video open on his computer. It was the interview with Lily Vaccari. *Again*. How many times had he watched it? A dozen? Two dozen? More? He had to have it memorized by now. The pad of paper in front of him was filled with notes.

Quaid hadn't registered my arrival, so I crouched and touched his shoulder. "Hey."

He startled and sat upright, darting his attention around the room until he found me squatting at his side.

I flinched. "Jesus. You look like shit." His eyes were puffy and raw, his skin paler than when I'd found him at his desk on Saturday.

"Thanks." He glanced around, straightened his tie, then finger-combed his hair to be sure it wasn't sticking up. "I'm fine." His new mantra. "Why are you here?"

Noticing his phone sitting on top of a folder, I picked it up. "I came to check something. Hang on."

I pulled out my phone and hit his number. Quaid's phone lit up and vibrated in my hand.

"Huh. Look at that." I showed him the screen where my name flashed with the incoming call. "It does work. I was starting to wonder."

He removed his phone from my hand and set it aside without an explanation.

"What's going on?" I asked, repocketing my phone.

He started to shake his head, but I held up a finger.

"Nope. No way. Don't give me your bullshit *I'm fine* excuse. You aren't fine. Everyone in here knows you aren't fine. Are you screening all your calls or just mine?"

"I'm not—"

"I had to learn from Torin there was a press conference happening this morning that pertains to your case. And not a small press conference but a big-ass, blow-everything-up press conference. Every news channel and paper in the city is here. Then, when I went down there to find you, you weren't there, but guess who I saw? Your dad."

Quaid grimaced and closed his eyes, scrubbing a hand over his face. "He came? He's down there?"

"Front row. He knows?"

A nod.

When Quaid didn't remove the hand from his face, I peeled it away and held it, stroking my thumb over the delicate spot on the inside of his wrist.

His chin quivered, but he tightened his jaw, controlling the tremor as he looked everywhere but at me.

"Talk to me. Your dad knows about Juniper's backpack?"

Quaid stared at our connection. "When Edwards called me in yesterday, it was to tell me about the press conference. He said they were informing the media about the two girls and the connection to Juniper's case. He told me I had better tell my father before he found out on TV."

"So you told him?"

Another nod. "Went there right away."

"And?"

His jaw ticked, and his Adam's apple rose and fell. When he tried to pull his hand away, I held it tighter.

"It didn't go well."

He wouldn't look at me and kept staring at my thumb as I traced the tiny blue veins on the inside of his wrist. They'd always fascinated me. He was pale enough that they showed through his skin. I wanted to undo the button at his cuff and push the sleeve up. I wanted to trail my fingers over the downy soft blond hairs on his forearm and kiss the inside of his elbow—another one of my favorite places to touch him. I wanted to

drag him into my arms and hold him because he was fraying at the seams, and it was so unlike him to fall apart.

I didn't do any of those things. Quaid hated anyone seeing him as vulnerable. Plus, we were in the office, and it wasn't the time or place for affection.

When Quaid peeked up, his baby blues poured anguish.

"I'm fine, Az. Bump in the road. Nothing I can't handle. I knew he wouldn't take it well, and I was right."

"Why didn't you call? Bump in the fucking road, my ass. Jesus, Quaid, you've been stressing about talking to him for a month. It was making you sick. I'd have come over."

"I don't need you to rescue me. I'm not falling apart. I'm a big boy and can stand on my own two feet. I'm fine."

"You're fine? Why are your eyes red and puffy?"

He didn't have an answer for that, but I wasn't stupid.

I checked the time on my phone and cursed under my breath. Torin was going to kill me. I'd told him five minutes, and it had already been close to fifteen. "Come with me for a minute." I tugged his hand, forcing Quaid to his feet. I'd be damned if I was taking off for a busy day of work without offering him some proper reassurance, and I couldn't do it in the middle of the MPU bullpen. Regardless of who knew about our relationship, hugging him and kissing his perpetual frown was unprofessional, and the last thing I needed was a disciplinary meeting.

I released my hold, glancing around to judge the attention we were getting—way more than Quaid would be comfortable with—then headed to the hallway of no man's land.

Halfway down the hall, I slipped into a supply room, and Quaid joined me. Once the door was shut and he'd engaged the lock, I tugged him into my arms. He resisted at first, bullheaded and stubborn, but when I refused to let him pull away, he gave in and melted against me. His arms went around my waist, and his head landed on my shoulder. If I wasn't mistaken, a quiet whimper rose up his throat and tried to come out, but he pressed his face against my neck, smothering it.

"You're not okay."

He shook his head, agreeing for once.

"What happened with your dad?"

Another head shake. He squeezed me tighter.

I didn't know Abraham all that well, but I got the sense the topic of his missing daughter was not something he readily discussed, even with his son. Unfortunately, men in the department were notorious for shielding their emotions from the world, and Abraham had likely been doing it for thirty years. Despite wanting to admit it, Quaid was an emotional being deep, deep inside where he thought no one could see.

"How come you aren't downstairs with him?"

A long pause before, "Not sure he wants me there."

I didn't believe that, but I didn't have enough time to encourage him to go down and mend whatever bridges had been broken the previous day.

"How did the interview with Evelyn go?"

"Haven't had it yet," he mumbled. "Edwards put it off until today. *After* the press conference."

"After? Doesn't that defeat the purpose?"

"Yes, but what do I know? Not my call. I do as I'm told." A pause. "Mostly."

"Will you let me know how it goes?"

A nod.

I encouraged Quaid to lift his head and held him back by the shoulders as I tried to catch his eye. Quaid adamantly refused to look at me. "I'm serious, Quaid. When I say let me know how it goes, I mean it. Stop avoiding my calls and ignoring my texts. Stop pretending you're fine when you aren't. You know, the benefit of having a boyfriend means you can lean on me if you need to. This is a heavy weight. I can't put myself in your shoes and know how it feels, but I can be there for you if you let me."

"You've got your own cases to worry about. You don't need my problems too. I've been a mess since we started this... relationship." He swung a finger between us. "This is not what you signed up for. You don't need me whining and complaining constantly. It's unattractive. I can handle it."

But you aren't handling it. I couldn't say it out loud because Quaid would get defensive and we'd end up arguing, but it was true. The only reason he was shutting me out was that he was convinced I would be disgusted by his weakness and change my mind about being with him.

It was aggravating some days.

"This isn't a normal case. This is far more personal than anything you've worked on before. I don't expect you to be perfectly okay with all that's unraveling. God knows I wouldn't be if it was my sister. It's a lot to take in. Cut yourself some slack."

Quaid finally met my eyes, and the sorrow and heartache staring back at me cut deep.

"Quaid," I took his face between my palms, stroking his cheeks. He'd shaved that morning, and his skin was still smooth. "You're killing me. Maybe it's too much for you. Too personal. Maybe you should let someone else—"

He scowled and pulled from my hold, slamming a door on his emotions and adopting the stone-cold expression I used to see on him all the time. The wall had been erected. Before he could speak out, my phone rang.

"Shit." I slipped it out of my pocket and read Torin's name on the screen. "Dammit. I have to go, or Torin's going to kill me. We have a stabbing at Woodbine Mall, and I told him I'd be five minutes."

"Go."

"Tonight. I'm coming to your place. You'll tell me about the interview and what happened with your dad yesterday. All of it."

He opened his mouth to protest, but I took his face in my palms again and kissed him before he could tell me no.

For a moment, he was stiff, unyielding, then he let go, kissing me back.

When we came apart, he narrowed his eyes. "I know you did that to shut me up."

"You see right through me, and I'll do it again if you try to protest. I'm coming over tonight. End of story."

"You don't need to hold my hand."

"You can be a real pain in the ass, Valor."

"You're not always as charming as you think."

I smirked. "I'd love to volley playful insults back and forth right now because it's a huge turn-on, but I don't have the time. Can we save it for tonight?"

I kissed him again, and he chuckled against my mouth. "I hate you," he mumbled.

"You know what I like about us?" I asked as I pulled away, fixing his shirt collar and adjusting his tie so it sat straight. "We've done well at keeping the lines of communication open. When I'm being an ass, you tell me I'm being an ass. When you're grumpy, I tell you you're grumpy. We don't sugarcoat it. We never have. Let's not lose that. When you aren't fine, tell me you aren't fine. I don't expect you to always be fine, and there will be many days in the future when I'm the one

who's not fine, and I'll need you to hold me up. It's called compromise, Quaid. You don't need to be a hero. You don't need to take this all on yourself. Most importantly, I will not fly out the door the minute things between us aren't perfect."

His baby blues were all over my face. His tongue abused his upper lip, back and forth. The sadness hadn't left his eyes, but he nodded. "You're better at this relationship thing than you give yourself credit for. I'm the one faltering."

"No one's faltering. We're learning this dance together."

My phone rang again.

"Shit. My partner is a real pain in the ass."

"With reason. You'd better go."

I kissed him again, keeping it as short and sweet as possible. "Tonight."

"Okay."

"I'm serious. Do not think you're sleeping at your desk again. I will find you, and I'm not opposed to tossing your miserable ass over my shoulder, taking you home, and tying you to the bed."

"Kinky." I earned a small smile, and before I could scoot out the door, Quaid drew me in for one last kiss. "I'll make dinner for seven. Call me if you're going to be later."

## CHAPTER 8

## Quaid



I stayed out of Costa Ruiz's way as he ran a few cords, hooking them up to the laptop he'd brought into the small office adjacent to where the interview with Evelyn Rice was about to take place. He worked in silence, and I didn't interrupt, my head buzzing with too many things at once.

Evelyn had been discharged from the hospital that morning, and her parents had brought her into headquarters for the interview once they'd received the all-clear that the media had been contained and wouldn't hound them.

On the advice of Dr. Benoit, the child psychologist, we'd decided not to use the standard interview rooms we typically used when interrogating adult suspects since the setting was less than welcoming and might frighten a young child. Benoit feared it could induce panic or anxiety. It could feel claustrophobic and too reminiscent of her time in captivity. Seeing as Lily Vaccari's interview hadn't given us much to

work with, we were counting on Evelyn, so we ensured she had all the comfort available.

Evelyn and her parents waited in one of MPUs cozier lounges as Ruiz, our department's head IT guy, set up a video camera that would not only record the interview but that would play on the laptop in real-time so those of us not directly present could watch everything that was going on.

"That should do it." Ruiz clicked around with a mouse, bringing up the feed from the lounge and flipping it to full-screen mode.

Ten-year-old Evelyn sat on a couch between her parents. Her mother finger-combed Evelyn's hair behind her ear, over and over again, while the father bounced a knee and chewed a thumbnail. He was far more disheveled than his wife. The camera was solely focused on the child and her parents since it was Evelyn's reactions and dialogue we were most interested in.

"You'll need to adjust the volume when you're ready," Ruiz said. "I have it muted right now. Bottom corner. Here."

"Perfect. Thank you."

I waited as Ruiz tidied a few extra cords into a tote bag. He wasn't my favorite person in the department, so I didn't feel inclined to initiate friendly chitchat. We were close to the same age, but he gave off a presence not unlike the bullies I'd encountered in high school. He had a bit of a superiority complex.

I stared at his arms while he worked, trying to make out the collage of tattoos decorating his forearms. The man was a walking canvas. More tattoos poked out the collar of his shirt, climbing his neck. He dispelled all the clichés when it came to computer nerds. Ruiz would have been more suited behind the bar at a motorcycle club, not tinkering with code all day in a stuffy basement office.

The door to the room opened, and Erik Travolta slipped in, expression flat and unreadable as always. His gaze slipped from me to Ruiz and back before he spoke. "Dr. Benoit suggested Allison and Eden conduct the interview, so I'll be joining you here if that's all right."

"Of course. Why the sudden change?"

"She felt that imposing male figures might make the child reluctant to share. Communication being our goal, Benoit felt she would respond better to a female influence."

Ruiz snorted as he grabbed the last of his gear, shrugging the tote over a shoulder and straightening. He tipped his head in my direction but spoke to Erik. "Not exactly an imposing male figure, am I right?"

I gnashed my teeth, flicking my gaze to Erik, half expecting a smirk or to see a general sense of camaraderie shared between the two, but I saw neither. Although Erik's facial expression didn't change, his next comment surprised me.

"If you're finished here, this doesn't concern you."

Ruiz, who'd been munching obnoxiously on a piece of gum, popped a bubble and shook his head as he slipped from the room. I could imagine the comments and slurs he was uttering under his breath.

The door closed in his wake, and Erik muttered, "He's an ass. Ignore him." He turned his attention to the laptop. "The ladies should be ready to go soon. They were going over a few notes and deciding the best approach."

If Erik was put out at having been shifted aside on this interview, I couldn't tell.

"How did the press conference go?" I asked.

"You weren't there?"

"No."

Erik nodded as though he understood. "Probably for the best. Those vultures would have attacked you. It was intense. No one expected us to confirm there was a connection with the old case—your sister's case. When we did, all hell broke loose." Erik flicked his attention to me and back to the laptop screen. "People asked about you. Edwards fielded most of the questions. They bombarded him. There wasn't much to share since we've barely made a dent in this mess. Not sure why Edwards jumped the gun before we'd had the chance to talk to this kid. She might give us something, and we would have been better prepared. Be glad you missed it. Let's just say there was an uproar."

Great. I hadn't suspected anything less, but the idea that my father had witnessed it or might have been caught in the storm worried me. Had he been overwhelmed by reporters after the press conference was over? I hoped Edwards had gotten him out of there in one piece.

"If we have additional questions during the interview, Allison has requested we text them to her, and she will address them as she sees fit."

"Sounds good."

Erik shuffled and stuffed his hands into his pockets, rocking on his feet once before glancing at me. "Are you...um... doing okay, Valor? This whole thing is kinda nuts."

It was hard to tell, but I almost thought there was a thread of concern in his monotone. "I'm fine. You don't have to worry about me."

I wasn't sure he believed me any more than Aslan had, but he didn't press.

The door to the office opened, drawing our attention. I half expected Edwards or Evelyn's doctor to come waltzing in, prepared to view the interview with us, but the person on the other side of the door was neither.

"Dad?"

My father shuffled in, leaning heavily on his cane, a pinched expression of pain on his face. He paused inside the door, steely gray eyes sweeping the room. "I'm watching the interview with you. Get me a chair."

He was huffing and puffing more than usual. I jumped into action, snagging a chair and guiding him to sit. He groaned as his ass landed hard on the plastic seat. Stretching a leg out, he rubbed his knee and glanced up at Erik, a deep frown bringing his brows to meet in the middle. "I saw you upstairs earlier."

Without pause, Erik held out a hand. "Yes, sir. Erik Travolta. My partner and I have been assigned to the Rice and Vaccari cases. It's nice to meet you... officially."

"Uh-huh." Dad shook Erik's hand, jaw tight. "I wanna see all the files. I want to see everything you have."

Erik gave a clipped, expressionless nod. "Absolutely."

So I guessed Dad was getting involved. I'd expected it, but I wasn't sure I liked it.

It didn't go unnoticed that Dad had yet to look me in the eye or acknowledge my presence. If Aslan's earlier assessment was accurate, and if my eyes were truly red and puffy, I wasn't sure I wanted him to pay me too much attention. I'd never liked that I was far more emotional than my father. He never faulted me for it, and I'd learned to wall it off over the years while on duty, but it never failed to escape when I was alone. It was a weakness I loathed. My father's ability to pack away his feelings was unmatched. Sometimes I envied him.

He may have been purposefully ignoring me, but it didn't stop me from evaluating him, trying to decode his facial expression as I looked beyond the mask, seeking to understand how he felt and what he was thinking. Was he okay? How damaging had the news been? What kind of night had he

endured after I'd dropped an atomic bomb on his life? Had the press conference made it worse?

I wished we were alone. I wished he wasn't so damn stubborn.

Dad narrowed his eyes at the laptop screen. "Is that the little girl?"

Erik grabbed another chair and sat, angling the computer screen to ensure Dad had a good view. "It is. This is Evelyn Rice and her parents, Tanya and Drake. We're hoping she can tell us more than Lily, whose interview was less than helpful. Thus far, Evelyn's been more communicative, which is a good sign." As Erik explained, Eden and Allison entered the lounge and took seats across from Evelyn and her parents. With the camera's angle, all we got was the back of their heads.

I stood behind Dad, not bothering to find a chair. Erik unmuted the video and turned the volume up.

None of us said a word as the interview began.

It started simple. Allison took the lead, which didn't surprise me, and she treaded carefully. After watching Lily Vaccari's interview a few dozen times and seeing Allison in action, I had profound respect for the young detective. She had a gentle air about her that was welcoming and comforting. It put people at ease.

Allison asked Evelyn several simple questions, building trust and encouraging her to openly share. A few remarks made Evelyn giggle and smile, which made her mother's eyes glisten and her father's stiff shoulders come down a few inches. The joy those parents must feel at having their daughter back was beyond measure. Three and a half months gone made everyone involved convinced that if Evelyn Rice ever turned up, it would have been as a corpse.

It took fifteen minutes before Allison veered the questions toward Evelyn's abduction and detainment.

"Evelyn." Allison's soft, level tone was clear through the video feed. "I want to talk about what happened. Is that okay?"

Evelyn's expression shifted from happy to wary. She glanced at Eden, who acted as a silent sentinel at the side of the room, observing and taking notes, then to her parents, who sat crushed to her sides. Her father nodded, and Evelyn chewed her lip before addressing Allison. "Okay."

"You're safe here, Evelyn. I want you to remember that."

"I'm not scared. Not anymore."

"What a brave kid," Erik muttered, a fisted hand covering his mouth and muffling his words.

"If you get scared while we're talking or need a break, tell me."

"Okay."

"If there is something you can't or don't want to answer, that's okay too. No one's going to get mad."

Evelyn fussed with the cuffs on her oversized hoodie. It was pink with a fluffy poodle on the front and a hood with dog ears. She wore it up over her blonde locks.

"I want you to start at the beginning. Tell me as much as you remember about the day you were taken away. Can you remember that day?"

"Yeah... kinda." Evelyn tucked her feet under her butt and peered into space, her pale blue eyes squinting like she was trying to make it clear in her head. "I was at a soccer tournament at the big park with all the fields. I can't remember the name. We play there a lot. Dad had to work that weekend, so Mom took me. It was really hot, and I was so, so sweaty. Mom bought us ice cream cones to cool down after one of my games, but mine tipped over when I licked it because the guy who made it didn't push the scoops together good enough. I was... upset. Mom said she'd get me a new one and told me to sit tight."

Evelyn's mother's chin wobbled, and she blinked several times as her eyes misted. I glanced at my father, wondering if he would share a connection with the woman since he too had been the parent present when Juniper had been taken.

Dad's expression was as blank and unreadable as Erik's.

"When Mom was gone, I watched some boys playing with balloon swords. They were having a battle. One girl had a balloon dog with a tail and everything. It looked like a poodle, and they're my favorite dog. I don't have a dog, but when I'm a grown-up, I'm getting a poodle. Did you know they can make the long balloons into stuff like that? It was so cool."

"I've seen it before, yes," Allison said. "Pretty neat."

Evelyn nodded, shaking her arms so the cuffs of the hoodie covered her hands. She squirmed again, moving her legs out from underneath her and propping them on the small table in front of the couch.

"Ev, don't put your feet up there," her dad admonished.

"She's okay," Allison said. "Tell me about the balloons, Evelyn."

"I didn't know where they got them from, but then Kader told me he knew where. I told him I had to wait for my mom to get back with new ice cream, but he said the balloons were almost gone, and if I didn't hurry, I'd be out of luck. So I raced over there as fast as I could, but..." Her face bunched up. "Then I don't remember."

"Kader?" Allison asked.

Evelyn nodded. The hood fell back on her shoulders, and her blonde hair came untucked from behind her ear. Evelyn's mother fixed it right away until Evelyn shooed her off.

"Is Kader a boy you played soccer with?"

"No. He was at the park that day with his sister. She plays soccer, I guess."

"Do you go to school with Kader or his sister?"

Evelyn shook her head.

"So Kader took you to find the person making balloon swords?"

"No. He told me it was behind the snack bar. I went by myself, but I was too late. There wasn't a man making them anymore, and I looked everywhere. Then, I was going to go back to the field because I didn't want my mom to get worried, but..." Evelyn shrugged, her eyes comically wide as she held her hands out, sleeves flopping. "That's it. My brain is empty after that. I keep trying to remember, but it's gone."

She was a precocious girl, and based on her facial expressions and animation, I thought she was trying hard to fill in the blanks.

"What do you remember next?" Allison asked.

"The upstairs room."

"Can you tell me about it?"

It took over an hour for Evelyn to describe the place where she'd been held. Her good nature wilted as the memories surfaced, and Eden suggested small breaks, bringing Evelyn snacks and juice to keep her mood elevated.

Gnawing the edge of an animal cracker, gaze distant, Evelyn talked about two different places where she'd been held captive. An upstairs room and a downstairs room.

"I was in the upstairs room a long time. I liked it better. There was a window, and I could look outside. The downstairs room was cold and didn't have a window."

"Tell me about the upstairs room. What did it look like?"

Evelyn shrugged. "Like a bedroom with nothing in it but a bed. The door was always locked, so I was stuck in there. And the window was glued shut, but I was too high up. Even if I wanted to try and get away and jump down, I couldn't."

She described the downstairs room as a small concrete space with bare walls, an overhead light fixture, one locked door, and no windows.

"The cot in the corner didn't move because it was screwed into the ground. The scratchy wool blanket made my skin itchy, and the pillow was flat and lumpy and smelled like my dad's stinky feet. There was a loud noise too." She imitated it. A flat hum. "It went on and on and gave me headaches. I hated it. It only stopped sometimes."

Evelyn talked about the trays of food that arrived whenever she slept and the bucket she said she had to use as a toilet since there was no bathroom in either room.

"Was there a camera?" Allison asked.

It seemed an obvious conclusion if her food only arrived while she slept, but Evelyn didn't know, shrugging with the exaggerated theatrics of a ten-year-old.

When asked about the view out her window in the upstairs room, Evelyn put her crackers aside and hopped off the couch. "I was super high up. Not like in an apartment, but a tall house. Maybe on the third floor? Or like an attic? Mostly I saw the sky and trees and fields. It wasn't in the city. When I first got there, I saw the leaves on the trees were green." Evelyn's body language shifted and sagged. "Then I saw them changing and fall to the ground, then they were gone, so I knew I'd been

there a long time. That's when I had to go to the downstairs room."

Apart from understanding she was in a house in the country, she couldn't give us a location or a better description of her surroundings. She hadn't been able to see other buildings. She didn't know if there was a garage or a shed or what color car her abductor drove.

"I think it was a big house, though. There were other people."

Eden glanced at the video camera, and it was like she was staring through it, asking, *Are you hearing this?* 

"More people," I whispered, more to myself than anyone else.

"Do you mean more children?" Allison asked.

"Um... Yes. There was a boy next door."

"In the house next door? Did you see him out the window?"

"No. Beside my room. When I was in the downstairs room, he was next door."

Goose bumps radiated down my arms and up my neck. Erik shifted, and I knew he was having the same visceral reaction.

"Tell me about the boy," Allison said.

"He was... I don't know. My friend in the wall. He wasn't always nice."

"In the wall?"

"Not inside it. That's silly. But that's where I heard him. We talked through the wall. There was a..." Evelyn clucked her tongue and motioned the shape of a small rectangle with her hands. "I don't know what it's called. A thing in the wall where the warm air comes out when the heat comes on."

"A vent?" her dad asked, immediately grimacing and offering Allison an apologetic smile. The parents had been asked not to feed Evelyn answers. She needed to come up with them on her own. However, in this case, it was forgivable.

"Yes. That's what it was. A vent. But there wasn't heat. It was so cold down there, and no warm air ever came from it. I think it was broken."

"And you heard the boy in the vent?" Allison asked.

"Yes. Sometimes."

"What was his name?"

"I don't know. He said he wasn't allowed to tell me or he'd be in trouble. I had to pass a test first."

A test?

"What did you talk about?" Allison asked.

Evelyn shrugged. "Not much. TV shows and stuff. I asked if someone had kidnapped him too, but he said no. He said he lived there."

Not a single adult listening to Evelyn didn't react to that comment. Expressionless, Erik flinched and cursed under his breath. Dad reached out and gripped the edge of the table like he needed something to hold onto as the shock rocked through his system. I snagged the back of Dad's chair, wishing I'd taken a seat.

Allison, Eden, and Evelyn's parents exchanged meaningful looks.

"Did this boy tell you about his house or where you were?"

"No. He wasn't allowed."

"Did he talk about his mom or dad?"

Evelyn shook her head. "He got mad at me when I asked too many questions. He said I wasn't allowed, so I stopped. If I didn't listen, he said he wouldn't visit anymore, and it was lonely, so I listened."

Allison asked several follow-up questions about the boy, but Evelyn didn't have much to share. She'd never seen him. She didn't know his age or what he looked like.

"But sometimes he was sad, and he cried."

"Did he tell you why he was sad?"

"No."

The interview fell apart when Allison veered the conversation to the topic of her captor. Evelyn had willingly shared her experience up until that point, but at the mention of the person who'd taken her, she clammed up. Fear blossomed in her pale blue eyes.

"Did you see the person who took you? Did they ever come into the room with you?"

Evelyn shook her head and curled up against her mother's side. "Someone came in the room at night, but the lights were off, and I couldn't see. They left me food on a tray."

"Did the person talk to you?"

"No."

"Did the person touch you?"

The physician had claimed there was no evidence of sexual assault, but I held my breath regardless until Evelyn said, "No. They put the food out and cleaned the bucket where I peed. That's it. I pretended I was asleep because I was scared."

The interview continued for another solid hour before it became clear that Evelyn was shutting down. Her answers became fewer and farther between. We didn't learn much more. The unknown abductor visited her once a day while she slept, delivering enough food and drink she hadn't gone hungry. The person brought her the dress and tights early on, which Evelyn had refused to wear at first until she'd had an accident one day and had no choice.

On the day Evelyn was released, she'd been drugged, then blindfolded. "I was extra sleepy and had trouble making my legs work."

She couldn't tell us how long the car ride had taken, but at Crothers Woods, she'd been propped against a tree, the blindfold removed. Sometime later, when the drug had worn off, she'd run from the park for help, reappearing after three and a half months of being gone.

"Why do you think they let you go, Evelyn?" Allison asked.

"The boy said he didn't like me anymore. He said I wasn't like Juniper, and he didn't want me to stay. I don't know what that means."

## CHAPTER 9

## Aslan



I t was close to six when Torin and I called it a day. We'd spent over an hour at the crime scene that morning, several more hours at the autopsy of our nineteen-year-old victim, then interviewing the family before accruing the CCTV footage that covered the alcove behind the Woodbine Mall where the stabbing had taken place. We planned to review it the following day.

All in a day's work. The entire time, my mind was on Quaid and his interview with the young girl who had turned up out of the blue over the weekend. I'd never taken an interest in MPU before, but the personal nature of the case had me wishing I had extra time so I could lend a hand, but Torin and I were swamped.

On our way back to headquarters, Torin drummed a beat on the steering wheel, his bottled nervous energy leaking to the surface. I'd worked with him long enough to recognize his small tells. He'd gone all day without addressing my comment about Allison from that morning, but since we'd decided to call it a night, his thoughts were spinning on other issues besides our case.

"I don't really get why you're so nervous," I said without elaborating. I didn't have to. Torin and I were on the same wavelength.

"Did she really say that to you?"

I grinned, staring out the window at the rush hour traffic zipping by in the opposite direction. "Why would I lie about that?"

"She actually said I needed to shit or get off the pot? Those were her words?"

"I was paraphrasing."

"Goddammit. I was ready to do it, but now there's pressure. I hate pressure."

"You love pressure."

"I'm freaking out."

I snorted. "Tor, you've been gearing up to do this since May. Seriously, just ask her out. Why is this such a big deal?"

"I'm forty years old. She's twenty... something. I'm not exactly the prize candidate. I'm more of a runner-up type."

"You're forty-one now, buddy. Hate to break it to you."

"Not helping, man. And fuck you. No I'm not. I have one month and three days before I'm officially forty-one. Every

second counts when you're this old." He groaned. "Oh god. I'm ancient compared to her."

"Would you stop."

"What if I fuck this up?"

"You're not going to fuck it up. She's basically said yes. For some strange reason, she finds your ineptness riveting. You just need to ask her."

More drumming. More fidgeting. "What am I going to say? Be precise. Help a bro out here."

"Good grief. It's a wonder you ever get laid. Try this. 'Allison, you are the sexiest woman I've ever laid eyes on. I jerk off to your beauty nightly. Please go out with me before I grow any more calluses.""

Torin deadpanned, but it didn't last, and we both burst out laughing.

"You're such an ass. How does Valor put up with you?"

"I have a charming personality, and I'm a good lay."

Torin shook his head. "Has he not noticed the sheer size of your ego?"

"He mentions it at least three times a week. Then I toss him in bed and remind him what an overinflated ego can do for a person. It's kind of a win-win situation."

"TML"

"I didn't go into detail."

"For which I am exceedingly grateful. Your self-restraint this past month has not gone unnoticed."

"You're welcome. You wouldn't know it to look at him, but when Quaid lets go, he really lets go. I mean—"

"Stop, stop, stop. I was just praising your self-restraint. Don't ruin it."

I chuckled. "All right. In all seriousness, are you going to ask her out, or are you going to let this opportunity slide because you're too scared your old-man ass won't be able to keep up with the young goddess who is Allison Bright?"

Torin stewed for several kilometers, leather whining as the steering wheel took more abuse. "Fine. I'll ask her out."

"Good."

The rumble of traffic and the slap of tires on the pavement filled the cab. "But not today. Tomorrow. I'm not ready yet, but I will be, I swear. In the morning. I want to... smell fresh, not like I've been hovering over a dead body all day. I smell like the morgue."

"That's fair. I'll hold you to it."

"I hate you."

"Don't envy my confidence."

"You exhaust me." But a smile broke out on my partner's face as we continued down the freeway.

The minute we were back at headquarters, I left Torin and wandered to MPU's side of the building, unsure if Quaid

would still be around or if he'd managed to get away already.

It didn't take long to sense that something was amiss. It wasn't anything visible, but there was tension in the air. The bullpen was almost empty, so the sensation was residual, leftover from earlier in the day but still thick and palpable.

Eden and Quaid weren't at their desks, and Allison was nowhere to be seen, but Erik was present. His tie was pulled loose, and the top button on his shirt was undone. His sleeves were rolled to the elbow, and he was sitting on the edge of his desk, phone in hand. His expression may not have given much away, but his state of undress did. The man looked like he'd been fighting a decade-long war and had barely crawled away with his life. His desk was littered with a mess of paperwork that I suspected was not typically his style.

Edwards was in his fishbowl of an office, also on the phone, also looking frazzled. Whoever he was talking to was getting an earful. His elevated tone leaked through the closed door as he barked indignation into the receiver. He noted my arrival, and the heat of his attention burned the back of my neck as I crossed the room toward Erik.

Why was I getting scowled at?

I hovered close to Erik's desk, waiting for him to end his phone conversation. He acknowledged my arrival with a strained attempt at a smile, but it fell away when he spoke to whoever was on the other end of the line.

"No, I understand your side of things, but I'm afraid it's crucial at this point. We're aware of the challenges it could

present and the possible setbacks, but I wouldn't ask if it wasn't necessary." A pause. "The sooner, the better." Erik scrubbed a hand over his face. "With all due respect, that attitude is self-serving. I'm not asking anymore. I'm telling you. Change her mind. It's important." Another pause. "Thank you."

He hung up, rubbed at the deep crease between his brows, and dropped his hand, grasping hold of the desk like he might collapse otherwise. "Doyle."

"Travolta."

"You're wandering into MPU an awful lot lately. Looking for a transfer?"

"Not particularly."

"Too bad. We could do with extra hands." He crossed his arms over his chest. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm looking for Valor." No sense in asking Erik how the interview with Evelyn had gone. I suspected he wouldn't be too keen on sharing. Based on the partial phone conversation I'd overheard, I was guessing it hadn't gone well.

"He went home."

"Willingly?"

The corner of Erik's mouth hitched into a vague impression of a rare smirk. "You're awfully intuitive. No, not willingly. Your boyfriend... Is that what we're calling him?"

"You're awfully intuitive," I parroted. "We can call him that."

"I thought so. He needed a breather."

"The interview?"

Erik nodded but didn't elaborate.

"When did he leave?"

Erik glanced at Edwards's office and back. "About an hour after we finished. Edwards told him to take his father home. Emotions were high, and we had a handful of reporters hanging around, waiting for Edwards to make a statement about the interview. They were harassing Valor. It got ugly. He was ten seconds from blowing a gasket before Edwards sent him packing."

"Thanks." I was about to head out when Erik called after me.

"Hey, Doyle?"

I spun.

"For the record, I don't have anything against you two being... an item, or whatever you're calling it. The whole homicide-MPU bullshit is stale."

"Good. I agree. Thank you."

"Question."

I waited.

"Your partner. Fox. I have to ask... You know, since he's got this thing for Allison."

"Torin's a good guy. Loyal. Trusting. Hard-working. A bit of a fumbling dork sometimes."

Erik nodded. "Is he ever going to get his head out of his ass?"

"I'm told tomorrow morning first thing."

"Allison's a good girl. Woman," he corrected with a shake of his head. "I will incur her wrath calling her a girl. I should know better." He held my stare for a long time. "I have profound respect for her. She's smart as a whip and is going to go far here. I know it."

What he didn't say was that Torin had better not fuck this up, but his message was loud and clear.

"I think it's about time we break down the barriers between our departments, huh?"

"Exactly. Speaking of Valor." Erik pushed off his desk and stood upright, making a failed effort at fixing his tie before giving up. "I want you to know that I understand this case is paramount for him. I'm trying to put myself in his shoes and give him the benefit of the doubt, but he needs to dial it back. Edwards is watching, and he's about ten seconds from being reassigned."

I nodded, absorbing Erik's warning. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do about it. Quaid was his own person and a bit of a control freak when it came to working a case. His defense when confronted was to adorn a prickly coat of arms.

Instead of showing vulnerability or getting emotional, he razed the ground under anyone who stood in his way.

"I hear you. I'll see what I can do."

\*\*\*

It was seven when the Uber dropped me off at Quaid's. He'd taken a Charger home, but it was parked in front of his rarely used personal vehicle, a newer model SUV, which told me his father was likely visiting. Abraham used Quaid's vehicle with enough frequency Quaid nearly always signed out and drove a department vehicle home at night. Something I refused to do for myself.

I knocked but let myself in after a full minute of listening to rampant shouting bleeding through the front door. No one had heard me. Closing the door behind me, I kicked off my shoes and followed the yelling toward the kitchen.

"It seems clear that you need to get this girl into an interview room again. There is a whole lot more we need to ask her, and—"

"I know, Dad. *I know!* You act like we're a bunch of imbeciles. We're working on it. It's a delicate situation. These are children, and in case you haven't noticed, I've pushed as many limits as I can. I will earn a mandatory holiday soon if I'm not careful. Also, for the record, you aren't part of the *we* in this case. I won't—"

"Bullshit I'm not. This revolves around *my* daughter, and I'll be damned if—"

"I don't care, Dad. You're going to put yourself into the ground. Look at you." Quaid threw his arms up in frustration. "You've been shaking, sweating, and breathing heavily since we sat in that goddamn office. You can't take this kind of stress. I'm perfectly capable of—"

"I'll tell you what kind of stress I can take," Abraham roared. "For twenty-five years, this was *my* case, kiddo. Not yours. Mine."

"And you're retired now. You had a stroke less than a year ago. I'm not—"

"I swear to god if you bring that up one more—"

"Hey!" My shout silenced the room with the efficiency of a crack of thunder on a sunny day. Quaid and Abraham whipped their heads in my direction, scowls turned to full intensity.

And it was eerie how similar they looked in that moment. Quaid was not the spitting image of Abraham Valor, and they did not share similar features, but the scowl was uncanny.

My cheeks twitched as I fought to hold back a laugh. "Wow. That's... wow." I pointed at Abraham but spoke to Quaid. "Now I see where you get it from. Mirror image. It's buried deep in your genes. I'm not sure who does it better, so let's call it a tie." Neither man looked impressed at my attempt to dissolve the tension in the room, but before they could unleash their fury on me, I made a *T* with my hands. "I think we need a time-out. Everyone take a breath. I'm sorry for interrupting, but—"

"You're not interrupting. Dad was leaving."

"I was not." Abraham crossed his arms.

"You are so. I'm not talking about this anymore. All you've done is shout since we got here, and I'm tired."

"We need to set up a second interview with the first girl. What's her name? Lily?"

"Dad." Quaid pinched the bridge of his nose. "We're working on it. It's priority number one. When Erik has it sorted, he will let me know. When *I* know, I'll let *you* know. I promise."

"I want to be there."

"No. Edwards said—"

"I don't give a rat's ass what he said. I'll be in that room or so help me god."

Quaid looked like he was ready to spit nails. Like Erik, his state of dress was a perfect reflection of his state of mind. He'd lost his tie. His collar was open enough to show the T-shirt he wore underneath. His shirt was untucked and rumpled. The rolled sleeves displayed the fine hairs on his forearms, and his usually meticulously styled hair had been run through with fingers so many times it stood up in places it shouldn't.

With his hands propped on his hips, Quaid sighed and dropped his chin. "I'm on your side, Dad. You don't need to be belligerent. I'll talk to Edwards, but I can't make promises. I'm already in hot water. Press is crawling all over that building now, wanting to talk to me and know my feelings

about the situation and what is being done. I'm overwhelmed. I don't want to have to worry about you too. I swear, I will call you the minute I know anything."

"With the same speed you ran to me when you found Juni's backpack?"

"That's not fair. I... You know what? Never mind. I don't want to fight anymore. I invited Aslan for dinner. I told him I'd cook, and I haven't started anything, so I'm curbing this conversation right now." He pressed his lips into a thin line, then added, "And you aren't invited for dinner, so go home."

They held each other's gazes for a long time.

The tension I'd sensed back in MPU's bullpen was ripe in the air, vibrating through the kitchen. Abraham scowled at his son and huffed before pulling himself out of the chair and using his cane to leave the room, muttering as he went. "Miserable goddamn child."

"Like father like son," Quaid snapped.

I held up a hand, warding off any further comments as we listened to Abraham get his shoes on and slam the door behind him.

Quaid listed until his back hit the counter, then he sagged, his chin falling to his chest. He pressed fingers into his eyes. "I'm sorry you had to witness that. He's mad at me."

I moved into the kitchen, positioning myself in front of Quaid, drawing the hand from his face and bumping his chin up with two fingers until he looked at me. "You're two peas in a pod."

The corners of his mouth lifted into a thin smile. "That's hardly a compliment. I haven't started dinner yet. I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it. We can order something."

Quaid cringed. "Must we? You know my thoughts on takeout."

"Oh, do I ever. It's such a travesty. I think you secretly love living on the edge and eating unhealthy food sometimes."

The smile gained more life as he reached out and snagged a belt loop on my pants, drawing me closer. "I don't see the appeal of overprocessed foods and superfluous salt."

"That's a mighty big word, smarty pants."

"Need I define it?"

"No. I went to college."

"PS, when you coat a vegetable in batter and boil it in saturated fat to make it crunchy, it loses all healthy qualities."

"God, I love it when you talk sexy. Say saturated fat again. Slowly."

"Don't even get me started on deep-fried pickles."

"I'm getting hard thinking about them. If I order some, will you feed them to me?"

And I won, earning a laugh and a shove. "You're such a pig."

"You love it."

"God knows I agreed to date you."

"Changing your mind?"

"Not yet. Depends on what you're planning to order for dinner, and no, I don't want deep-fried pickles. On that note, if you offer me sausage of any kind, you can go home too."

"Damn. Why do you have to be so difficult?"

"I've had a long day. I'm feeling testy. Deal with it." I earned a playful sneer, not one of the serious ones, and I laughed.

"Would you like to offer your input on dinner?"

Quaid sighed. "No. It's not worth the battle. You have far more stamina than me." He scratched his fingers up and down my chest through the fabric of my dress shirt. There was a softness in his eyes. A wanting. A desperation. "Will you kiss me?" he breathed. "I'm stressed."

"Nothing sounds better."

I leaned in and connected us, savoring his flavor and relishing the gentle glide of his tongue against mine. His other hand landed on my hip, and together with the first, he slowly circled my waist and drew our bodies flush. I cradled his face, burying my fingers in the soft hair at his nape and holding him in place. His taste and scent surrounded me, and time slowed until it was just us and the shared blissful moment of one simple kiss.

It was enough to obliterate all the stumbling blocks that had been in our way lately, and I took that moment to simply absorb everything Quaid.

I wasn't sure when the act of kissing had ever been this good, but with Quaid, I couldn't seem to get enough. It was perfect.

When he sighed against my mouth, I pulled away, peppering one last kiss on his lips before resting our foreheads together. My thumbs stroked the rough stubble on his cheeks. His flavor sat rich on my tongue.

"Are you hungry?" I asked.

"I don't know. Probably. I haven't really thought about it."

"When did you eat last?"

"Um..." He huffed a small laugh, his fingers tracing a mindless pattern on my lower back. "I don't honestly know."

"I figured. This thing about forgetting to eat when stressed isn't attractive."

"Is that why there's a steel rod pressed against my leg from just one kiss?"

"Hey, we're talking about your appetite right now, not mine."

I pinched his sides, making him squawk and squirm and laugh. It was such a beautiful sound, especially knowing he was under a lot of pressure. One thing I'd learned about Quaid

over the month we'd been dating, he didn't laugh or smile enough.

"You're such a sex fiend."

"If you're expecting an apology, it's not coming. And as far as I remember, you've never complained."

His good humor faded, and instead of his eyes glinting with joy, they glistened with a day's worth of exhaustion. "My dad's pissed I kept Juni's backpack from him."

"I gathered. You had good reason. Don't second-guess yourself."

"He doesn't think so. And then today in the interview... God, you won't believe this."

"Wait." I stepped back, forcing him to unwrap his arms from my waist. They fell to his sides, but I took him by the shoulders, squeezing the coiled muscles making him tense. "Hold that thought. Not yet. I want to hear all about the interview, but food first. If we start talking now, it's never going to happen."

With as much dramatics as he could muster, he dropped his head back and rolled his eyes like he was sixteen not thirty-six. "Ugh. If we must."

"We must."

"I had no idea you were such a drill sergeant with meals when I agreed to date you."

I chuckled as I dug my phone out and opened the DoorDash app. "And I didn't know you were so averse to eating anything that didn't taste like cardboard when I agreed to date you, so we're even. What are you hungry for? And don't say cardboard. That wasn't a suggestion."

"Fine." Without pause, Quaid moved his leg between mine, applying pressure with his upper thigh to my interested groin. "How about this for dinner?" The fucker wiggled his eyebrows.

I laughed and pushed his knee down. "Not on the menu... *yet*."

"How many times have you offered me your Italian sausage? And now it's not on the menu?"

"You can have it for dessert. Maybe. If you behave. Food, Quaid. Real food. Focus."

He growled under his breath, his nose wrinkling with indignation. "I don't care. Get whatever you like. I'll suffer."

"Oh, the drama. You'd think I was forcing you to have a root canal, not offering to buy you dinner."

I skimmed the app, searching for a compromise that would satisfy his health-nut eating habits and my demand for tasty food. I ordered fresh pasta and salads from a little Italian joint I'd discovered a few months ago. It wasn't anything like my mama's authentic home cooking, but it was a close second. The sauce was rich and savory, and the pasta was made right in the restaurant. The only thing it lacked was the familial

touch that came with enjoying a feast with my rambunctious Italian relatives on my mother's side.

Quaid didn't ask what I ordered when I repocketed my phone. I scanned him head to toe, noting how gravity combined with a heavy case's weight made his body droop. I reached out and unbuttoned the remaining buttons on his dress shirt, taking my time as I moved from top to bottom.

His baby blues took me in as I worked. I still couldn't quite read his mind—there was a learning curve to this dating thing—but the sheer volume of affection that stared back at me pooled warmth in my belly and made my skin tingle. These feelings were so new and invigorating that they caught me off guard at random moments, and I wasn't sure how to process them all.

I'd never been so drawn to another person before. Quaid had always been a complex puzzle, and I was excited at the new discoveries we made every day as we got to know each other better.

Once I had him undone, I drew the rolled cuffs down from above his elbows until they slipped over his hands and off. I draped the shirt over a nearby chair. His undershirt clung to his chest, showing off his taut body. His trousers hugged his thighs in all the right places. He was rangy but not overly muscular. Naturally slim and toned. His blond hair was losing the sun-kissed highlights from the summer months. Fall had brought out its natural golden undertones, and I liked it.

I feathered my fingers over the soft hairs covering his forearms—a lighter blond—and brushed my thumb over the sensitive skin inside his elbow, a place I liked to lavish attention when we were intimate. He seemed to enjoy those softer, tenderer moments of exploration in bed.

My gaze roamed his chest, pausing on the gentle shelf of his collarbones and the deep divot at the base of his throat. I wanted to kiss the pale skin over his shoulders and dip my tongue into that small pool at the top of his chest. I wanted to trace the curve of his neck with the tip of my nose as I inhaled his intoxicating essence and moved to his ear to speak my desire for him and him alone. I wanted to rake my teeth over the faint scruff covering his jaw and lose myself in his kiss until I was drowning in him once again.

One thing I hadn't expected going into a relationship after decades of going without was how every encounter was more amplified than the last. How the burning hunger inside me could never be satiated. I was constantly starving, wanting more and more and more. Not just sex. I wanted to know every deep cavern of Quaid's brain and explore the depth of his heart and soul. The fire within roared hotter and higher every day, fueled by everything Quaid.

"I thought you said sex was dessert," Quaid said, breaking into my wandering thoughts. "If you keep looking at me like that, it will be the appetizer too."

"Give me some credit, Valor. I have self-restraint."

Quaid snorted. "Since when? If I remember correctly—forgive me, I'm tired—but wasn't it your lack of self-restraint that landed us in bed together over and over again while we worked those last two cases?"

"Don't pretend you didn't play a part in that. You wanted it just as badly."

"My self-restraint isn't in question. I fully admit to caving to your raw sexuality on more than one occasion, but it can't be helped." He waved a hand, encompassing my body. "Look at you. You could have anyone you want."

"You're utterly blind if you don't see how incredibly gorgeous you are. But, contrary to what you believe, I do have some element of self-restraint, and I'll prove it. Come on." I took his hand and guided him through the house to the stairs. He followed without question or comment right until we got to the bedroom.

"Um... you'll forgive me if I'm skeptical, but how is taking me to the bedroom proving your self-restraint?"

I pinned him with a flirty smile and wordlessly helped him undress, skimming my fingers over his abdomen and sparse chest hair when I unveiled it. Then I ran a knuckle over his ribs, making him tense since he was ticklish. I glanced the pad of my thumb over his pebbled nipple, making him suck in a breath as I buried my face in his neck, inhaling.

"Shh." I tongued over his fluttering pulse before lifting my head, staring with half-lidded eyes at his mouth and wanting nothing more than to devour him. I ghosted the lightest touch imaginable through the patch of downy hair that ran from his navel south. When I reached his pants, I unbuttoned them slowly, pushing them, along with his underwear, down and off. When he was naked, I stepped back, appraising him head to toe, humming approval.

"Incredible. Utter perfection."

He reached for me, and I allowed him to pull me in for a kiss, but before I lost it completely, I turned him in my arms and guided him by the waist to the bathroom.

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"Shower time."
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"You're joining me."

"Nope."

"You're kidding, right?" He angled his head to look over his shoulder.

I planted kisses up his neck, stopping by his ear and whispering, "Completely in control."

"Your dick is granite."

"Doesn't matter."

"I bet it hurts."

More than he knew.

In the bathroom, Quaid spun and tried to unbutton my pants. I tutted and dodged. It was true. I was achingly hard and would have liked nothing more than to toss him on the bed and wreck him. Forget the world and all its responsibilities for once. But not yet.

I turned the water on and adjusted the temperature, catching his wrist when he made another attempt to get at me. "Behave."

"No."

When the water was set, I took both his hands so he couldn't make a move and kissed him, nice and slow and gentle.

He growled and sneered.

I laughed. "Have a nice hot shower, then find something comfortable to wear. By the time you're done, dinner will be here, and we can chat."

"I don't want to chat. I want to fuck. Shower with me. Please." It was almost a whine.

"So, so tempting."

"Az—"

"No. This is me proving I have self-restraint."

"This is a stupid game. I hate it. I quit. Please take me to bed."

I chuckled. "You can't quit, and I promise I will take care of this"—I released one of his hands and brushed a thumb over his erection—"later."

His eyes fluttered closed. "Not if I take care of it first."

"Go ahead. Jerk off in the shower. I know you can go twice... or three times if there's enough incentive."

"You're a tease. I hate you."

I managed to peel away, but Quaid caught my arm before I was out the door. "Will you stay the night?" The note of pleading was almost hidden, but it snuck through.

"Not tonight. I have to be up early. I told Torin I'd be at the office by seven, and I don't have extra clothes here."

"I don't care. Stay. Please. I want you here. I..." His cheeks colored, and he flicked his gaze away and back.

"You what?"

"I hate sleeping alone."

The pull inside my chest drew me toward him again. I kissed him once more. I couldn't help it. The raw honesty almost made me say fuck it to dinner and self-restraint. "I'd rather you get some sleep, and we both know me being here is not conducive to a good night's rest."

"I don't care."

"I do."

"Az..."

I couldn't do it. I couldn't say no. "Okay. All right, I'll stay."

## CHAPTER 10

## Aslan



Thirty minutes later, dinner was ready and waiting. I'd plated the spinach and ricotta ravioli and added a large helping of Greek salad to the side of each plate. After some deep digging in a junk drawer, I'd come up with a few tealight candles and added them to the center of the table. There was no tablecloth or fancy dinnerware, but it didn't matter. To drink, there was nothing but cold tap water, which I'd poured over ice into wine glasses like they'd done at the restaurant.

Guilt niggled at the corner of my mind while I went through Quaid's cupboards, hoping to find beer or wine or something Quaid might enjoy better than water. Just because I had issues with alcohol didn't mean he should suffer, and I was at a place in my life where I thought I could handle being in its presence without my addiction rearing its ugly head. With the stress of the past month, I thought Quaid could do with a drink. When I didn't find anything, I knew it was because of me.

Even at his birthday dinner, he'd declined a glass of wine because he didn't want the lingering essence of alcohol on his tongue, knowing it had been a crippling experience the first time anything had happened between us.

We needed to discuss it at some point, but not tonight.

A few minutes later, Quaid wandered into the kitchen, freshly showered and looking more rejuvenated. He'd found joggers and a worn department T-shirt that had seen better days. His hair was towel-dried and mussed, and his cheeks had more color. He paused when he saw the dinner setup, scanning the plated food, the water in wine glasses, and the candles. A soft smile touched his lips as he eyed me.

"This is... almost romantic."

"Almost? Almost? Fuck you, Valor. This is romantic as hell. Admit it. You swooned."

I adored the playful smirk that touched his mouth. "I don't swoon." He scanned the table again, his grin widening. "But... it's really nice." He caught my eye. "Unexpected. Thank you."

And that right there made my clumsy effort worthwhile. Truthfully, what the fuck did I know about romancing someone? I'd been playing the field for years, tossing guys and girls out of my bed before dawn, never thinking twice about sharing meals or lives with them. If this simple gesture had caused Quaid's eyes to soften and sparkle with joy, I wondered at all the men he'd dated before and how drastically they'd failed him. Takeout food and dusty tealights I'd found

forgotten in a junk drawer were merely a spontaneous attempt at making the best out of a hectic day.

"Did you expect McDonald's?" I asked.

"I figured you'd have more class than that. Wendy's, maybe. French fries for sure."

I laughed and went to smack him on the shoulder, but he dodged.

"Sit down, you shit, or next time I'll boil you hot dogs. Not the fancy name-brand ones either. Then I'll serve them with a box of Kraft Dinner."

"Gross."

"Uh-huh. And here I bought you your coveted rabbit food, and this is what I get. Unbelievable."

Quaid joined me at the table, still admiring the spread. He picked up his wine glass of water and sipped, studying me over the top.

The guilt returned, and I looked down at my plate. "You know, for the record, you don't need to live a dry lifestyle for me. If you want to drink wine or have a beer occasionally, you should."

"Water's fine."

"Quaid—"

His foot came to rest against mine under the table, and it nuzzled my ankle. "It's fine, Az. Truly."

I didn't push, but I wasn't sure I agreed.

I watched him eat. It was a thing I did when we shared meals, partly because the man had a sneaky habit of pushing food around his plate and consuming less than half of what he should. But also, I found it hard to take my eyes off him for more than a few minutes when I was in his presence.

The more I looked, the more I saw. The more I saw, the more I craved

I was adrift in this new world of constant yearning entwined with the perpetual fear that I'd wake up one morning and it would have all been a dream. I wished I could tell Quaid how this felt. Maybe he wouldn't worry so much that I had one foot out the door.

But it was overwhelming and scary. I didn't have the words to articulate my emotions.

"How's your case?" Quaid asked, drawing me from my inner thoughts. "You mentioned a stabbing at Woodbine this morning."

I cleared my throat, unsure when it had gotten clogged, and studied the food on my plate, refocusing on eating. "We haven't gotten far yet. Spent a good part of the day at the scene, then viewed the autopsy. We have a decent amount of CCTV footage but haven't gone through any of it yet. It's a matter of breaking it down."

"Was the incident caught on video?"

"Don't know. There's a good chance. I don't think the encounter was meant to end in violence and death. Guilt might

drive this person to come forward. It's happened before."

Quaid stabbed at his salad, collecting lettuce and tomatoes on his fork.

"Should we finish eating before I ask about the interview with Evelyn?" It was the wrong thing to say. I knew better than to bring up stressful subjects while he was eating. It tended to put an immediate end to mealtime.

A shadow crossed Quaid's face, and instead of eating the forkful of salad he'd collected, he scraped it off and toyed with a square of ravioli before putting his fork down altogether. I cursed my stupidity.

He looked like he was about to speak, but I reached out and touched his hand, halting him. "Wait. Never mind. I shouldn't have asked yet. Let's finish dinner first. Please. Then you can unload all of it. I promise."

"I'm not that hungry."

"Quaid." I pushed the fork back into his hand. "Eat."

I wasn't sure what he saw on my face, but he relented, cutting into a piece of ravioli and dragging it through the sauce with little enthusiasm before popping the small bite into his mouth.

Taking a sip of water, I scrambled for a different topic, something to distract him. "Tell me the most romantic thing a man has ever done for you."

Quaid smiled but shook his head as he ate another ravioli. "What kind of question is that? I don't know. Why?"

"Call me curious? You've dated more than me. There has to be something."

"Um..." He shrugged and shook his head again, gazing at his plate.

The pause went on for too long.

Was there not a single moment he was willing to share? Or was there no moment at all worthy of being labeled romantic?

I waited him out. Quaid ate, then dashed a glance from his food, partly hiding behind his lowered lashes.

"Yes, I'm still waiting."

"Oh. Um... Well, there was this one time." He poked at his salad again. "A very thoughtful guy I was dating snooped around my house and discovered my secret passion for musical theater. He bought me tickets to a show for my birthday. He even said he'd go with me, and no one's ever done that before. It was... really touching. More than he knows."

My heart should have rejoiced, but instead, the bottom fell out of my stomach. There was nothing. No one had swept him off his feet. No one had done anything to make him feel special. It was... wrong on so many levels.

Quaid's discomfort showed, so I smirked. "He sounds like a keeper."

"Yeah. I hope so. If I don't drive him away first." The comment was made under his breath, wistful yet tainted with a hint of despair.

He didn't want me to draw attention to it, so I didn't.

He ate his food without looking up, and I stared. Quaid had no faith in our relationship lasting. Thanks to his ex, he struggled with trust and self-worth—among a slew of other things. He was afraid to hope, and it was frustrating and sad. No amount of telling him I was in for the long haul would make him believe me. Time would be the only thing to cure his wounds.

It didn't mean I didn't have the sudden urge to shake some sense into him and remind him I wasn't Jack.

Dinner ended, and despite my urging, I couldn't convince Quaid to eat more than half a plateful of food—of which he ate mostly salad. We collected the dishes, rinsed them, and filled the dishwasher.

All in silence.

He was lost in his head, and once again, I couldn't reach him.

I touched his shoulder as he wiped the counter, kissing his temple. "I'm going to shower and steal a pair of your running shorts." His loose gym shorts were about the only thing of his I could squeeze into. "How about you get cozy on the couch, and when I'm done, you can tell me about your day. Sound good?"

"Sure." He kept scrubbing the same spot on the counter without looking up.

I brushed knuckles over his cheek, turned him, and cupped his face. Only then did he stop neurotically cleaning. I leaned in and kissed him, and his eyelids fluttered closed. I lingered a minute, a thousand things on the tip of my tongue. I said none of them and pulled away before heading upstairs.

By the time I wandered back to the living room wearing a pair of Quaid's basketball shorts that fit a little snug, he'd found his laptop and had it set up on the coffee table among a mess of papers and a few files. He glanced up when I entered the room, his gaze skipping over my bare chest once before he managed to drag his attention to my face.

"Watch this again with me?"

I sat beside him, close enough that our thighs touched. "Is it the interview with Evelyn?"

"Yes. I could explain all we discovered, or you can see it yourself. It might give you insight into my fight with Dad."

So I watched the interview they'd conducted with ten-yearold Evelyn earlier that day. Quaid sat tense beside me, gnawing a thumbnail as he flicked his gaze from the screen to me and back.

I refrained from commenting and interrupting the flow, but at the end of the interview, when asked why Evelyn thought her abductor had let her go and Evelyn responded, "The boy said he didn't like me anymore. He said I wasn't like Juniper, and he didn't want me to stay." I flinched.

"What the fuck?"

Quaid paused the video and faced me, the strain of it all pulling at the sides of his eyes. "I know. Thoughts?"

"I... Wow. Holy shit." I stared at the still frame for a long time, processing, mind swirling. "This leaves no doubt anymore that it's all entwined. She said Juniper's name."

"Exactly. But why now? Why these little girls? How does this connect to Juniper, who disappeared thirty years ago? I don't understand."

I rubbed a hand over my unshaven jaw. "You said the average age for an abductor is twenty-seven?"

"Yes. Male. Twenty-seven to thirty."

"So... if this is the same person—which we obviously can't discount—then we're looking for a guy between, let's say, fifty-seven and sixty?"

"Best make it broader. Fifty-five and seventy. It's just..."

Quaid pushed out a frustrated breath.

"Talk it out. Ramble if you have to."

"Like you said, it seems to leave little doubt we're looking at the same person, but there are things that don't make sense. Juniper was taken thirty years ago. That's not a small gap in time. What has this person been doing for thirty years? Where have they been? Is this person responsible for other missing children who have never turned up? It's frighteningly possible. It happens every goddamn day. And we may never connect disappearances to a serial kidnapper if we don't have anything to go on. We know next to nothing about Juniper's abductor or

the one who took these girls. So is it possible this person has been active for thirty years? Yes. But why the sudden shift in MO if that's the case? Why give these girls back? And why is Juni's name coming up at all?" Quaid rattled his head and squinted at the frozen image on the screen. "It's giving me a headache."

"Do you have Allison and Erik's interview with Lily?"

Quaid rubbed the back of his neck like the muscles were sore and nodded. "Yeah. There's not much to go on. She was too traumatized when they talked to her. We're trying to get her mother and doctor to agree to a second interview since Evelyn has given us a lot more to go on. We can gear the questions to what she told us and see if Lily can corroborate things."

"Can I watch it?"

Quaid cued it up and leaned back on the couch, letting it run. He was right. The whole thing was unbearably frustrating. Unlike the interview with Evelyn, who'd been expressive and articulate, Lily kept her face buried in her mother's side the entire time, answering questions with nothing more than nods or shakes. Sometimes, she didn't gesture at all. It was heartbreaking and infuriating when the information she had could be pivotal to the case.

No wonder Quaid had watched it several dozen times. The video gave off a disturbing sense of anticipation. Like you were on the verge of making a breakthrough. Like if you waited long enough or watched it one more time, Allison's soft

tone would be convincing enough for Lily to lift her head and answer properly.

But it never happened.

"Is there a father in the picture?" I asked, noting Lily's mother was the only one present.

"No. And Allison said he was their primary suspect for a long time. He's had no involvement in his daughter's life and fought tooth and nail in court so he wouldn't have to pay child support. The judge enforced it regardless, which pissed him off. Apparently, he's a walking sperm donor and has impregnated many women over the years and doesn't like to take responsibility for his kids. He had a solid alibi for when Lily was taken, and no amount of digging got them anywhere. He was eventually cleared."

"Sounds like a winner."

I continued watching the interview. Allison was regurgitating questions by this point, tossing them randomly, hoping one might get answered.

Allison: "Lily, did you ever see the person who took you?" Lily shook her head.

Allison: "You said you were in a room. Can you describe the room?"

Lily shook her head.

Allison: "Can you tell me about your end-of-the-schoolyear party and what happened?" Lily cried. Dr. Benoit requested another break, the fifth they'd taken in under thirty minutes.

"What do we know about her abduction?" I asked, pausing the video.

"Her school, in conjunction with a neighboring school, always has a large gathering at..." Quaid checked his notes. "Carlton Park for an end-of-the-school-year party. That's in Markham. We're talking over a hundred kids, a bunch of teachers, and plenty of parent volunteers, all celebrating together in a wide-open space accessible to the public. According to the school principal, parents and teachers were assigned small groups of seven to ten kids, depending on their age. Lily was with a parent volunteer who claims she was helping to mend a scraped knee when Lily vanished."

"And no one saw anything?"

"Nope. All those people and not a thing."

I pushed Play, letting the video run to the end.

Only as the interview with Lily came to a close and Allison told her they were finished did the little girl lift her head from under her mother's arm. It was then that I saw her face and eyes for the first time. In the month since she'd been found, I hadn't paid much attention to the news about her return, getting more accurate information from Quaid. In those four weeks, I hadn't seen a single picture of Lily. I didn't know what she looked like until now.

"Quaid?" I rewound the video, pausing when she lifted her head and peered directly at the camera.

"What?"

"Hang on." I shrank the screen and flipped back to the interview with Evelyn, stopping it a few seconds in when her face was clear. I adjusted the videos until they were displayed side by side. "What do you see?"

He glanced at me, then at the laptop, a deep frown marking a groove between his brows. "They look alike. I know. We've noted that. Blonde hair, blue eyes. Close to the same age. They were dressed the same, right down to the shoes. It was how we connected them."

"Quaid... Tie it in with what Evelyn said at the end of her interview." I bounced off the couch and retrieved the photograph he kept on a bookshelf of his sister. It was old and dated. The young girl on the glossy print would be almost forty if she were here today. The colors were washed out and faded from sitting in a sun-filled room for years. Nine-year-old Juniper stared out from the five-by-seven frame, a shy smile on her face—one that was strikingly similar to the one I'd seen on Quaid numerous times.

I sat again and held the photo beside the laptop. "Blonde hair. Blue eyes. Same age range."

"Our perp has a type."

"Maybe, but what if they were specifically selected because they looked like Juniper. Evelyn said she was let go because she wasn't like Juniper. What if she was meant to be a sort of replacement? What if this psycho is finding some nostalgia in taking girls who are like Juniper? Maybe he's trying to recreate the past."

Quaid took the framed photograph from my hands. It had been a long, stressful day, and it didn't surprise me that such a simple, obvious fact had gone overlooked. I had faith that with a good night's sleep, Quaid would have seen it himself.

When he spoke, it wasn't to me. It was subtext. It was Quaid thinking out loud. "Not like Juniper.' Fuck me. When Juniper vanished, she was wearing a dress with tights and dress shoes, the same type of outfit these girls had on when they reappeared."

Quaid pressed the heel of his palm to his forehead and leaned forward, balancing the elbow on his knee. His face pinched and scrunched as the gears of his brain whirred. "Thirty years. Thirty years. You're right. He's revisiting the thrill of what he did. Is he trying to recreate it? Recreate her?" He shook the picture frame. "The boy. Evelyn talked about a boy in the vent. How... Is he..." Quaid tipped his head to the side to face me. The faraway look cleared as he refocused. "He's a big fat question mark. Allison and Eden worked on that piece of information all afternoon. They planned to go through every case that has crossed into MPU in the last year involving young boys between seven and ten who've gone missing and were never found."

"He could be a relative. Evelyn claimed the boy said he lived there."

"He's still a victim, and we don't know anything about him. Not a name or a physical description or anything. He knew Juniper's name. 'Not like Juniper,' he said. But how would a kid today know anything about my sister? What does it mean, Az?"

I didn't have an answer. It could mean any number of things, but it seemed clear that the little girls were somehow meant to represent Quaid's long-lost sister. And if Lily and Evelyn didn't fit the mold and they were given back...

My stomach clenched. "Oh shit."

"What?"

"What's the time frame between Evelyn's and Lily's abductions?" I asked.

"Um..." Quaid flipped through several handwritten notes that were scattered on the coffee table. His tongue drew a fast path across his upper lip when he found what he was looking for. It was a subconscious action Quaid often performed when deep in thought. "Fifty..." His fingers fluttered as though adding numbers. "Fifty-two days. About a month and a half. Lily was taken at the end of June and released about mid-October. Evelyn was taken in August."

"So there was an overlap, but so far as we know, the two girls didn't know about each other?"

"No. I mean, Evelyn didn't know about Lily. We don't know what Lily knows, which is why we need to talk to her again."

"But Evelyn did talk about moving rooms in the house. She said the leaves had started falling off the trees. Could that be the end of October?"

"Shit. Yes."

I shuffled, unsure how to say what I wanted to say. "Okay, so Allison and Eden are scouring files, looking for a boy who fits an age bracket, right?"

"Yes?" There was inflection on the end of the word. A subtle hint at questioning. Quaid was entirely focused on me, sensing there was more.

"They need to look for blonde-haired, blue-eyed girls between seven and ten as well. Ones who went missing around September or October."

Quaid lost color as the pieces fell into place. "'Not like Juniper."

"Exactly. Lily and Evelyn failed the test. They were sent back—thank god. But it also means this person is still hunting for a match."

"Oh fuck."

## CHAPTER 11

# Quaid



I t was after eleven, and the living room carpet was about ten laps from being worn through. With the phone pressed to my ear, I worked hard to control my temper. "Fine! I'll go in and work on it right now."

"No. Go to bed and handle it in the morning," my partner said.

"Eden—"

"Quaid! Allison and I spent six hours today going through files. Six. We aren't going back in right this second to start over with different search parameters, and neither are you. It's almost midnight. You woke me up. I agree, it is highly probable that we'll find a match, but even if we do, we can't know with one hundred percent certainty if it will be related to our case."

"But the probability—"

"I know, Quaid. I hear you, but you aren't listening to me."

"I can go in right now, and—"

"And what? Get your ass in trouble? Do you understand how close you are to getting taken off this case? Edwards is doing you a favor by allowing you to stay on, but his patience is running out. You were told to take the night off. He told you to go home and sleep on it and come in fresh and with a level head. It's late. You should be in bed, not fighting with me on the phone."

I opened my mouth to protest, but Eden stopped me. "Is Aslan there?"

I hesitated, glancing at where he watched me from the couch. "Yes."

"Take the night off, Quaid. Hang up the phone and take your man to bed. I promise we will tackle this first thing."

I pushed out a long, frustrated breath, tearing fingers through my hair. "Fine. Did Erik get anywhere with the Vaccari family?"

"Yes. They're going to prep Lily for a second interview. It may not happen tomorrow, so don't hold your breath. The doctor felt she should have some advanced warning. We'll try to do this without the mother present this time."

"Okay. Good. We can go over the more specific questions, and—"

"Quaid. We'll talk tomorrow. I'm hanging up now. Go to bed."

"Thanks, Eden."

My phone arm fell heavy against my side, and I stared at Aslan on the couch. He'd been reading through my notes for the first half of my conversation with Eden. Now he'd sunk down into the couch, relaxed, arms stretched across the back, feet kicked up on the coffee table. Clad in nothing but a pair of basketball shorts—which were tighter than they should have been—he was unfairly attractive with his broad shoulders and plenty of defining muscles across an impressively hairy chest. His thighs were thick and solid, covered in coarse hair as well. The mischievous look in his eyes called to me.

"I hate you. You don't even have to do anything and you ooze sexiness," I snapped.

Aslan laughed, his dark eyes sparkling with humor. "I'm literally just sitting here waiting for you to get off the phone. Why you gotta hate on me?"

"You're practically posing."

"I'm not posing."

"You're draped over the couch, looking like a sex god waiting for his minion to pleasure him."

"Hater."

I tried for an indignant scowl, crossing my arms and sneering, but it only made him laugh harder.

"Smile, minion."

"Don't you dare. It's not fair. I've seen you fresh out of bed, and it's the same thing. God knows why you're with me." Aslan's smile fell. "Quaid—"

I hadn't meant to say that. It was old insecurities leaking through. I recovered quickly, interrupting before he could give me shit. "Any chance you're hungry for dessert yet?" I wiggled my brows.

He stared at me for a long moment before regaining his smile. It was roguish that time. "The only reason I've lasted this long without attacking you is because I relieved some pressure in the shower."

"You cheater." I couldn't hold back the smirk. It tugged at the corners of my mouth.

"Oh, and you didn't jerk off in the shower earlier? Bullshit."

"I did not."

"Lies."

"Huh. Sounds like I have more self-restraint than you, Doyle."

"I don't want to play this game anymore."

"Because you lost."

"You're a mouthpiece sometimes. Get over here." He patted the couch beside him.

I tossed my phone onto the coffee table among the mess of folders and handwritten notes and collapsed next to him, tipping my head against the back of the couch and rocking it to the side. I was met with his dark bedroom eyes taking me in.

His hand landed on my thigh, where it smoothed a slow path up and down.

"Eden gave you shit, huh?"

"Yeah. Don't wanna talk about it."

His dense five o'clock shadow had always appealed to me. No matter how frequently he shaved, it stubbornly refused to be anything less than thick scruff. I reached over, dragging my fingers over his jaw as his hand moved over my groin and rubbed me through my joggers.

"What do you want, Valor?"

"Will you take me to bed?" I asked, gaze fixed on his mouth.

"Mm... The answer is always yes."

Grinning, Aslan leaned over and kissed me. His teeth found my bottom lip, and then his tongue commanded everything, rolling with mine and exploring my mouth. We never made it upstairs to the bedroom.

Aslan pushed me down on the couch, our mouths never parting as he straddled me. We broke apart only once as he worked my shirt over my head and tossed it aside. Aslan rutted his hard length against mine, the fabric of our clothed lower bodies allowing enough delicious friction to make me writhe and whimper.

He moved one hand to my jaw, holding my chin in place as he devoured my mouth. The strong grip and random growls of pleasure made me squirm even more. His other hand moved between us and tugged his shorts and my joggers down enough that he could take hold of our erections.

"Az," I panted, thrusting. "Upstairs."

But he didn't listen, setting a determined pace, stroking us together with a tight enough hold it was going to undo me in seconds. His kiss was brutal. Bruising. Spine melting. When a tremble started in my center and rolled through my limbs, Aslan lifted his mouth.

His hand on our cocks slowed as he peered down at me. "Do you have any idea how much I want you, Quaid? Do you know how incredibly attracted to you I am?"

I couldn't speak. I chased his mouth, wanting his kiss, but he denied me.

His grip on my jaw tightened. "Listen to me." His hand below moved with purpose. "You. Are. So fucking beautiful. Inside and out. Mind. Body. Soul. Never forget that."

He dropped his forehead to mine. He was trembling too. We were both cusping the edge. I was lost in his eyes, swimming in the dark pools staring back at me and trying to comprehend why.

Why me when he could do so much better?

"Quaid..." My name was nothing more than a breath of air, a harsh whisper in his throat.

Then he was coming, his warm release hitting my stomach, but it was the helplessness in his eyes that undid me. Aslan was never helpless. He was strong and confident. He was always so sure of himself, but in those few seconds when his peak took him, he looked almost afraid.

I didn't have time to ponder. My orgasm rode on the heels of his. With a few more strokes, I cascaded over the precipice into oblivion. I gripped the back of Aslan's neck and pulled him back into another kiss. It was sloppy and uncoordinated but perfect.

And I hated my head for thinking, *Don't get too attached. It won't last.* He'd get bored. I wasn't special. Eventually, he'd miss his old lifestyle and move on.

The heat simmered. Aslan didn't move. He nuzzled his face against my neck, panting.

"Why do you doubt me, Quaid? I see it in your eyes. I feel it." He kissed my temple, my cheekbone, and my nose.

I couldn't answer. To confirm my fears would make me seem woefully insecure, and there was nothing more unattractive than insecurity, so I kept my mouth shut.

We made our way to the bathroom, then the bedroom, where Aslan crashed right away, arms tight around my waist, face buried in the back of my neck. For a man who rarely had overnight guests before we got together, he was clingy when he slept.

I tried to let go of my worries about the case, about my shaky new relationship, but everything spun in my brain, too loud to shut out.

When Aslan's alarm went off at four, I was finally crossing the bridge to dreamland. I stirred, but he pecked my cheek and told me to go back to sleep.

"Why so early?" I asked, voice croaking. "I thought you didn't have to be in until seven."

"I want to hit the gym before work."

"We can run. I'll come with you. We can go now."

"No. Sleep. You were up half the night tossing and turning."

"How do you know?"

"I know." He tucked the covers tightly around me and left me with a delicate kiss on the forehead.

I lay quiet, listening to him move around the room, gathering his clothes and slipping out. But once he was gone, I couldn't get back to sleep. All I could think was that I needed to check on my dad. I needed to search case files for other little girls who matched Juniper's description. I needed to make a plan, interview more people, dig deeper, and find answers.

My phone buzzed on the nightstand twenty minutes after Aslan left.

Aslan: I'll be busy today, but keep me posted. Take care of yourself. Eat. xx

And if I caressed the small kisses at the end of his message with my thumb, no one needed to know.

# CHAPTER 12

# Quaid



I t didn't matter that we'd dissolved into multiple yelling matches over the past two days. I landed at Dad's house before eight that morning, letting myself in with a key.

"It's just me." I kicked my shoes off on the mat by the door.

"In the kitchen," Dad barked.

I found him leaning heavily on the counter, struggling with the cap on one of his pill bottles. I took it from him without asking and got it off, handing it back as I picked out the various signs of pain reflected on my father's face. His tight lips. His creased forehead. The strain behind his eyes and clench of his jaw.

"Are you okay?"

"Usual aches and pains. I think using that damn cane makes my arm sore. Bloody thing has been bugging me all night. Couldn't sleep on that side at all." He dumped two pills into his palm and added them to the small pile he'd accumulated on the counter beside a glass of water. "Did you eat breakfast?"

He grunted—it wasn't a yes or no—and added the pill bottle beside the others in the cupboard before retrieving a bottle of Aspirin.

I checked the sink. No dishes. No point asking again. While Dad worked at organizing his morning pills, I found two bowls and a full box of Raisin Bran that I was pretty sure had been in the cupboard since I'd bought it for him months ago when he'd asked me to grab him a few groceries.

"That stuff tastes like cardboard," Dad mumbled as he scooped the collection of pills into his palm and counted them.

"This stuff will keep you alive longer."

He threw back the mittful of pills and chased them down with a few gulps of water before looking at me for the first time. His eyes were flinty and weary, the skin underneath sagging into deep, dark pools. "Did you come here to yell at me some more?"

"No. Besides, you were the one doing most of the yelling yesterday, not me. I came here because I thought you'd like to be part of the process."

"Thought I was forbidden."

I ignored the snide remark. "We're meeting this morning to figure out what direction to take. There's... new information."

I shook cereal into both bowls and added skim milk and spoons. "Go sit down. I'll make coffee."

"What new information?"

"Sit, Dad. I don't have the energy to go to war with you this morning. I barely slept. I would prefer you let me handle this, but since I know that's never going to happen, we need to find a compromise. You need to listen to me. If we want to stay involved in the case, we need to work together cooperatively and keep our heads about us."

Dad stared for another long minute before grabbing his cane and hobbling to the table.

I set the cereal down, found the coffee grounds and filters, and started a pot. "You're using your cane a lot more than usual."

"My leg hurts. Bloody knee is swollen like a balloon. It's the weather."

"Did you ever call that orthopedic doctor for an assessment?"

"I don't want a new knee. I'm fine. The old one's fussy is all."

I set out two mugs while the coffee brewed before sitting across from him at the table. He methodically rubbed his arm near the shoulder, working the joint up and down and around once. "Now this damn arm's acting up. If it's not one thing, it's another."

I didn't pick up my spoon. All the worries I'd accumulated before broaching the Juniper stuff with Dad resurfaced. His health wasn't good. The added stress wouldn't do him any favors.

But there was no talking him out of it.

"Dad. I'm sorry I didn't come to you right away about the backpack."

He picked up his spoon, hand trembling a fraction as he moved the cereal around his bowl. "It's fine. I... should have handled it better. You caught me off guard. It was the last thing I expected."

"We never talk about it... Her."

He said nothing and ate his cereal. Apparently, we *still* didn't talk about it.

After a few minutes, I picked up my spoon and went through the motions of shoveling food into my mouth. It did taste like cardboard.

Dad didn't ask what else I'd learned about the case, and I didn't offer.

An old childhood longing for something I'd never had made my stomach muscles quiver and contract. I was no longer hungry.

I put my spoon down and studied my old man from under downcast eyes. He didn't notice the attention.

"I love you, Dad."

His chewing slowed, and his gray eyes lifted to mine, softer and unguarded. "Love you too, kiddo." Before he continued eating, he slid a hand across the table and squeezed my arm.

\*\*\*

Headquarters was a circus. The media was relentless, demanding updates, shouting questions, and inquiring about what we were doing with the cases. I blamed Edwards. They wouldn't have been half as relentless if he'd waited on the press conference. We'd have had more information to share.

Dad and I fought our way into the building, heads down. More than a few people tried to get my attention, asking how I felt about the renewed interest in Juniper's case and what it all meant.

A woman from the *Toronto Sun* caught my arm in the lobby, asking if the rumors circulating were true. I shoved Dad into an elevator, telling her no comment and punching the button for the fourth floor.

"What rumors?" Dad asked.

"I have no idea. It doesn't matter. They start making up their own stories if we don't give them information."

We convened in a conference room twenty minutes later. Around the long table sat Dad, Allison, Eden, Erik, me, and Edwards, who'd stormed in late with a scowl.

"If I catch any of you entertaining the media, there's going to be a problem," Edwards barked. "They go through me and only me. Understand?"

Shocked at his abrasiveness, we all nodded. Edwards wasn't usually so frazzled and on edge.

He pointed at me. "Especially you, Valor. You direct anyone who wants a comment to me."

"No problem. Not my first rodeo."

"Now tell me what's happening. Fill me in so we can make a tight game plan. I want progress and answers."

It wasn't unusual to keep Edwards briefed on cases, but he didn't often implant himself so thoroughly in the process or help us develop strategies. He trusted us to do that ourselves. I couldn't help thinking he was monitoring Dad and me since we'd caused a scene the previous day after Evelyn's interview. Our personal attachment to the case had shifted things, and he wanted to stay more intimately involved.

A whiteboard took up the length of one wall. Apart from its aluminum frame, it blended with the bland white paint behind it. The previous case's notes had been wiped from its surface, and it glistened under the fluorescent overhead lights, waiting to be filled. The vertical blinds on the window at the far end of the room had been opened. The view showed little more than a winter sky and a city washed of all color. Heavy snow clouds hung in the air, pregnant and threatening. A few long dead leaves swirled and danced in the wind, levitating from the tiered rooftop one story below. The meteorologist had predicted flurries for later that morning, and I didn't think they were wrong for once.

The table was littered with thick folders containing the information that had been gathered for the three kidnapping cases, plus the ones for two missing boys whom Allison and Eden had dug up the previous day. They were the only ones who met the criteria Evelyn had described in her interview.

"Who's taking the lead?" Edwards barked.

"Me. Hang on." Erik's tone indicated it was nonnegotiable. I bit my tongue, reminding myself it was originally his and Allison's case.

Erik tapped away on a laptop, sipping takeout coffee. We all looked tired and ragged, but Erik was the most put-together. His shirt was crisply ironed, and his tie hung straight. He was also the senior detective with more years than all of us save Edwards.

Once he was set, Erik pushed his chair back and stood, smoothing a hand down the front of his tie. He took a spot at the whiteboard and selected a dry-erase marker from the small shelf beneath, uncapping the lid. "We all know the intricacies of the cases, so I'll keep the summary quick. Then I think we should list our next steps and divide the tasks so we can work as efficiently as possible. I don't want to waste too much time on stuff we already know. Unlike a typical MPU case where we deal with one missing person who needs to be recovered in an emergent time frame, we are instead dealing with three connecting cases in which two of the girls have reappeared, and the third is, for all intents and purposes, considered to be deceased."

Dad stiffened beside me, his hands strangling a ceramic coffee mug. There was no sympathy on Erik's face, but he must have registered his blunder when the words left his lips. He turned to my father and me and muttered, "Apologies. It was not my intent to be insensitive. I was merely stating factual information, which I'm sure can't be disputed."

"We can all agree the likelihood of Juniper Valor being alive at this stage in the game is extremely unlikely," Edwards said. "No one takes offense to your summary, Travolta. Continue."

In other words, if Dad or I had an issue, we were welcome to leave because we would not be treated with kid gloves.

Fair enough.

Dad remained silent, staring a hole in the table.

I offered Erik a tight smile.

Erik turned back to the whiteboard. His expression and tone never changed as he spoke. He wrote three names at the top. Lily on one side, Evelyn on the other, and Juniper in the middle.

Allison rose and taped pictures of all three girls beside their names.

Erik drew arrows from both new girls' names, pointing to Juniper. "Our two recent abductions undoubtedly connect with Juniper Valor's case from thirty years ago. We have yet to determine why and how, but it seems safe to assume, unless further evidence debunks it, that we are looking for the same unsub from 1992. This isn't the type of case where we'd see a

copycat. Unlike serial killers whose stories become known to the public, the raw details of Juniper's abduction are only known to the person who took her thirty years ago. Lily Vaccari"—Erik tapped the end of the marker over her name —"reappeared last month with a backpack belonging to Juniper Valor. Our forensic team has confirmed it is not a new backpack or a replica but one that easily dates back three decades. Any forensic evidence from Juniper has long since been erased or worn off. Yesterday, Abraham Valor, Juniper's father"—Erik motioned to my dad—"confirmed it was the same bag Juniper had in her possession the day she vanished. So the authenticity of the item is not in doubt. Why Lily was in possession of the backpack is yet unknown. In Evelyn Rice's interview yesterday"—he tapped Evelyn's name—"she made a blatant statement that the boy who spoke to her through the vent claimed she was being let go because she was 'not like Juniper.' It should be noted that Evelyn was not prompted during her interview nor did she have any knowledge about who Juniper Valor was prior to this interview."

Erik turned to Edwards. "Sir, have you had a chance to review the interview, or should I go through all the details?"

"I've seen it. Jump ahead."

"Yes, sir." Erik swung a finger between Lily's and Evelyn's names. "These two girls reappeared one month apart from each other. Both had been missing for several months prior. They both reappeared in the same park wearing the same mismatched pairs of shoes. This information alone seems to

draw its own connection between the two cases, while the backpack and statement from the boy also connects them both to Juniper."

I held up a hand, catching Erik's attention. "I don't mean to interrupt your flow, but if it hasn't already been noted by everyone, Lily and Evelyn share an uncanny resemblance to Juniper. They are both blonde haired, blue eyed, and are within the same approximate age range as Juniper was when she went missing thirty years ago. Also..." I paused, glancing at Dad, a lump growing in my throat. "There is another detail that didn't occur to me until late last night. Lily and Evelyn were returned wearing outfits undeniably similar to the one Juniper wore on the day she vanished. Summer style dresses, tights, and fancy shoes. Juniper's shoes didn't have buckles, but it feels like a minor variance. According to the files on Lily and Evelyn, these were not the outfits the girls were wearing when they disappeared. During her interview, Evelyn claimed her abductor brought her those clothes to change into early on. I think we can assume the same happened with Lily. Between the clothing, the matching physical attributes, and the nature of the unknown boy's statement, it seems to suggest that our abductor is possibly trying to recreate Juniper in these girls."

Erik rushed to add the new details to the board.

Surprise crossed Allison's face, but Eden—who already knew since I'd talked to her the previous night—kept her lips pressed in a firm line as she watched Edwards for a reaction.

A dark shadow crossed Edwards's face. He rested his elbows on the table and tapped steepled fingers against his lips as he nodded. His gaze was far away. "Interesting observation, Valor."

"If I can continue, sir. There's more."

"Go ahead."

Erik leaned a shoulder against the wall, listening. Everyone else's attention turned to me. Only Eden knew what I was about to say. She nodded in silent support.

"I think there's a strong possibility our abductor is holding another little girl right now." I explained the theory that our unsub was trying to find a replacement Juniper and how I believed he released Lily and Evelyn because they didn't match. "Like the boy said, Evelyn was not like Juniper." I explained the time frames of Lily's and Evelyn's abductions, how their releases overlapped, and how it could have coincided with when Evelyn was moved to her downstairs room.

"This leads me to believe our unsub has someone in their possession. If I'm correct, we need to check out recent cases of blonde-haired, blue-eyed little girls between the ages of seven and ten-ish. My guess is they would have gone missing in September or early October. Evelyn and Lily were taken from busy group settings. A district soccer tournament and an end-of-the-year school party. Both abductions involved crowds of hundreds of children and parents. This *could* be indicative of a pattern."

"Juniper was taken in a similar setting." It was Dad who spoke, his voice gruff and almost inaudible.

The focus in the room shifted to him.

He cleared his throat and continued. "If we're looking at the same person, it further validates a pattern. Thirty years is a long time, but if we're saying these cases are related and the same person who abducted Juniper abducted these girls, then it's a solid part of his MO. The Remembrance Day parade was a more adult-oriented setting, but there were a number of children around. Dozens of families were gathered at the starting area of the parade as we set up. There were half a dozen Boy Scout troops, army cadets, air cadets, you name it. It may not have been hundreds of children, but there was a notable amount. Juniper..." Dad adjusted his weight on the seat. The plastic creaked in the quiet room. "She was chatting with a group of kids. A friend of mine, his family was there with his two young daughters close to Juni's age and a cousin who was a Boy Scout. It was... it was why I wasn't as worried about her. It was why I turned my back."

Erik turned to the whiteboard and started to break down the information into columns, adding the bits and pieces as they came out. He added a section for tasks and included a note for us to thoroughly search recent cases to see if we could find a girl who resembled Juniper, Lily, and Evelyn.

"Let's veer back to Evelyn's interview yesterday," Edwards said, redirecting the conversation when we threatened to get hung up on points for too long. "I want to know how the

information she shared helps us. I want to brainstorm as many questions as we can for Lily's second interview. In case the girl is determined to stick with head gestures again, I think we need to break a few rules and feed her information to see if she can confirm or deny that what happened to Evelyn happened to her as well. It's not an ideal way to conduct an interview, and I want it used as a last resort. Preferably, we want Lily to lead us, not the other way around, but this might be our last chance to get anything out of her."

Allison scribbled notes on a pad as Edwards spoke. Erik made a new section on the whiteboard where he jotted down important facts about Evelyn's interview as they came out.

We went through it piece by piece, everyone contributing thoughts and ideas. Erik pulled the interview up on the laptop, and we took our time watching parts of it again and discussing anything relevant.

"Do we know when Lily's interview is taking place?" I asked.

"Dr. Benoit is meeting with her this morning to broach the subject," Erik said. "Based on her assessment, she thinks we can do it sometime tomorrow or the next day."

"And who's leading the interview?"

Edwards answered. "Bright is taking it solo." When I opened my mouth to speak, Edwards held up a hand. "It's nonnegotiable, so save your breath. Everyone else is welcome to watch from a separate room." To Eden, he said, "Let's hear

your thoughts on this unknown boy in the vent Evelyn talked about. Do we think it could be another missing child?"

"Debatable. Although we can all agree he's at risk. After Evelyn's interview, Bright and I decided we should investigate to see if there might be any missing boys who loosely fit the vague profile of the boy Evelyn spoke to while in captivity. We didn't have much to go on, but we feared he might be another abducted child as you said, sir."

Eden slid two files forward and opened them. "To be honest, we no longer believe that to be the case. I think we're running in the wrong direction here. Bright and I spent several hours yesterday reviewing cases from the past two years. We broadened our original time frame because we weren't getting hits."

She removed two pictures, one from each folder, and pushed them to the middle of the table. "Roman Dias and Lenard Penn, eleven and nine respectively, were the best matches we could find. Roman went missing nineteen months ago. He's from Pickering. Lenard went missing twenty-two months ago. He's from Welland, a small town south of St. Catherines. Roman was taken on his way home from school. He walked to and from. Lenard was taken while biking home from a friend's house. His bike was found abandoned in the gutter of a sideroad he typically took to get home. Neither boy has been recovered. There were no other open cases involving young boys in all of Southern Ontario."

"The abduction locations of these two boys stretch the parameters of our geographic search area," Allison added, taking over. "The only other unrecovered male children we could find stretched the parameters of our age bracket. A fourteen-year-old and a four-year-old. So, as you can see, we don't have anything that feels concrete enough to call it a match." She shrugged. "I'm more apt to believe this child Evelyn heard through the vent is a family member of our unsub and lives at the house like he claimed. It's entirely possible he's been in the house a long time, abducted at a young enough age he doesn't remember anything else, in which case we might have to search back years to find a match, but it's my opinion that including these two boys' cases"—Allison tapped the open folders Eden had laid out —"will send us too far off track. We'd be better off focusing elsewhere."

"I agree," Edwards said. "Let's put them on hold for now. I want to discuss our unsub and whether or not we can agree on a rough profile of who we're looking for."

Erik squared off a new section on the whiteboard and scribbled our thoughts as we threw them on the table. Ultimately, it looked similar to the rough profile Aslan and I had discussed the previous night. The conversation also erupted with the same arguments and questions we'd posed. If it was the same person who'd taken Juniper, why the thirty-year lull? Had there been a lull at all? Were there more children unaccounted for? And if the boy was somehow related to our unsub, then how? Was he a son? A grandson?

No one had answers. We discussed the possibility of our unsub being someone else entirely, someone who'd followed Juniper's abduction back in the nineties, someone with an obsession over her case. Had they learned the truth behind her disappearance? How else might they have discovered Juniper's backpack?

After we'd gone on for too long without making progress, Edwards waved a hand. "Enough for now. Let's talk game plan." He glanced around.

Erik spoke, positioning himself near the section on the whiteboard where he'd been accumulating tasks. "Although this could be daunting since there were a lot, I think we need to go through the old interviews from Lily's and Evelyn's cases. I have a hard time believing no one saw anything, especially with such a dense crowd of people. We can also look to see if anything new stands out or if anything connects these two abductions that would have gone unnoticed before. Was there someone specific present at both locations? Was there a similar distraction or vehicle someone noticed? If required, we should compile a list of the people who need to be reinterviewed.

"It should be noted that several of these kids from the endof-school party could easily have taken part in the soccer tournament. We need to seek out those connections now that we know about them. Considering there are upward of a hundred parents, teachers, and coaches, it will take time. But we have new information that could shine a light on details we saw as insignificant the first time around." "Excellent."

Erik looked like he was about to break it down and assign tasks, but Edwards took over. "This is how it's going to work. Travolta, you start with the school party and the previous interviews. Bright, you take the soccer situation. Same thing. Work through previous interviews first. Compile lists of names. Gelekar"—Edwards swung his attention to my partner and pointed with a ballpoint pen—"you go through recent cases of missing children to see if we have a little girl who matches these parameters."

"Consider it done."

"If something turns up, bring it to my attention immediately, and we'll go from there."

Edwards turned to me. As he thought, he tapped the pen on the table in a rhythmic pattern. A long moment passed before he shifted his attention to my father. Dad held Edwards's cold stare without blinking. It was steel and concrete. Impenetrable. Unreadable. He would not be dismissed, and Edwards knew it.

When Edwards spoke, he addressed me. "Are you two able to work amicably together?"

"Yes, sir."

What I wanted to say was that my dad wasn't a detective any longer, and I didn't want him to have any responsibilities, but I knew it was like shouting into the wind, and he would be involved whether I liked it or not. "I'd like you two to mirror what Bright and Travolta are doing but with Juniper's case. It will be harder. The interviews are thirty years old and dusty. Reinterviewing people at this stage probably won't yield much as far as new information, but it can't hurt to have fresh eyes on it. The detectives who were involved, although retired, may be able to provide insight that isn't in the files. Consider making some phone calls."

To my father, Edwards said, "You weren't a detective at the time, correct?"

"I think you know the answer to that."

They shared a long moment of tension where they seemed to have a silent conversation the rest of us weren't privy to.

Dad broke first. "It didn't mean I wasn't involved from day one. I was more involved than all those goddamn quacks they put on her case."

"Dad!"

He didn't apologize.

"I'm aware of your feelings on the matter," Edwards said. "How do you feel about reconstructing that day for your son? And I don't mean regurgitating what's on the report. I mean taking a step-by-step stroll through November eleventh from beginning to end with as much detail as you can remember."

"Sir," I cut in. "If there was anything to be found—"

"Then you'd have found it. I have no doubt. But maybe you weren't looking in the right places."

"I know Juniper's file inside and out. Going over it again feels redundant. I'd be better off—"

"While you're taking apart the old case," Edwards said over top of me, "you should focus on the media coverage it had at the time. Look into the phone calls that came in over the helplines. Reexamine tips. Look and see if anyone in particular showed a more than natural interest in Juniper's disappearance. I'm aware none of the old cases have been uploaded to our system, but I trust you both have enough familiarity with Juniper's file to efficiently conquer this task."

"Sir," I tried again, "it would be more beneficial if I helped Bright and Travolta. The likelihood of us finding anything in the old file—"

"It's not up for debate. You have your orders."

I clenched my jaw. "Yes, sir."

# CHAPTER 13

### Aslan



o one ever told me about the behind-the-scenes part of detective work. While in the academy, my end goal was to one day get promoted and work as a detective in homicide. I thought it would be like all those crime shows on TV I was obsessed with at the time.

Spoiler alert. Not even close.

It was a naïve dream. It wasn't that I hated my job. I loved it, but there were times it could be mind-numbingly dull.

Sure, we chased down leads and interrogated suspects, but there were days when the bulk of our time was spent sitting in front of a computer screen, going through endless hours and days' worth of CCTV footage or leafing through pages and pages of forensic evidence reports that more often than not gave us little to go on.

We asked a lot of questions of a lot of people and hoped something stuck out. Every now and again, we got lucky and were able to unfold a lead that brought us to an arrest. Torin and I spent most of that Tuesday with our eyes crossing in front of our computer screens, piecing together our victim's movements prior to the assault behind the mall that had ended his life. We compiled a list of people we needed to interview and drank endless cups of breakroom coffee that was never quite hot enough and was tinged with a thin layer of burn.

Viewing video footage was monotonous, and my eyelids drooped more than once, so I entertained myself in other ways, like counting the number of times Torin got up and wandered into no man's land in the hopes of running into Allison.

It was shy of noon when he returned to his desk again after his eighth trip across the building. Each time he left, he returned with something redundant from the supply room so I wouldn't suspect what he was up to.

#### Amateur.

He dropped heavily into his seat and fiddled with a tiny box, brows knitted as he explained, even though I didn't ask. "Mechanical pencils are awesome, but I'm the worst for busting those little leads inside. Gotta refill them all the time."

"Uh-huh."

"It's true." He got the box open and spilled the new leads on the desktop before digging through a pen holder and finding a mechanical pencil, holding it up like it confirmed his statement. "Tor, you've never used a mechanical pencil in the eight years we've worked together."

"Have so. This one right here. I use it all the time, hence why it needs to be refilled."

I let him fumble with it for a few minutes, trying to figure out how to open the end to refill the lead, but I couldn't hold back the chuckle.

"Need help?"

"I got it." He turned it over and twisted a part not meant to be twisted. A snap of plastic sent his brows to his hairline as splinters of the pencil's casing landed on the desk. "Shit."

"Broke it, huh?"

He tossed the pieces into the trash bin beside our desks. "I'll go find a new one. I saw a bunch in there."

He stood and aimed again for the hallway to no man's land and the supply room.

"Hey, Tor."

He shifted around but kept walking backward. "Yeah."

"Is she still in a meeting, or are you too scared to go over there yourself?"

He threw his hands up. "I'm going to the supply room. What the hell are you talking about?"

"Fine, but if you need emotional support, speak up."

"Emotional support to get a pencil?" He shook his head like I was the one not making sense. When he vanished down the hall, I returned to the video I'd been watching and restarted it.

Torin returned less than a minute later and fell emptyhanded into his chair.

"You forgot your pencil."

"Shut up." A pause. "They're *still* in a meeting. Man, I was all ready to tackle this. I had my game face on. I was pumped. I spent half the night preparing a solid speech that made me sound both witty and smart and young and charming enough she'd forget I'm in my forties, but if they don't come out soon, I'm going to lose my nerve."

"A speech?"

"Just... It's nothing. It's just something to kick-start the conversation and steer it in the right direction. I didn't want to choke. I have one chance at this. I need to do it right."

"I'm afraid to ask but also far too curious not to. Can I hear it?"

"No." Torin looked adequately affronted. "It's private."

"Tor, how many times have you gotten laid in the past year?"

"That's none of your goddamn business, and what does that have to do with anything? I'm not you."

"No, you're not. I'm just saying, I have skills you could benefit from. I know how to woo a lady into a date. Let me hear the speech." "No. You don't ever woo ladies into dates. You woo them into bed. That's not my goal here. Allison is special."

He shifted and punched a few keys on his computer with unnecessary force, glowering at the screen. He picked up his mug of coffee, brought it to his lips, and tipped his head back only to find it empty. Muttering under his breath, he set it down again. He ignored me for a solid forty-seven seconds—I counted—before pivoting to face me.

"Okay, fine. I'll read it to you, but you can't laugh."

"I wouldn't dare."

"Remember my end goal."

"Which is?"

"To marry her and have her bear my children."

"Steep goal, my friend. I hope you don't open with that."

"Shut up." With two fingers, Torin dug into the pocket of his shirt, withdrawing a folded piece of paper. His speech, I presumed. Oh man, this was going to be good.

He cleared his throat and skimmed the words on the paper before laying it facedown on the desk and closing his eyes. "Allison, if I were a poet, I would describe your beauty as one of the greatest wonders of our universe. Your smile fills the hollow places in my soul. Your laughter is like an angel's song. When I'm with you—"

"Oh my god. Stop."

Torin's eyes popped open, and he scowled. "What? I've barely started."

"It's already terrible."

"How is it terrible?"

"Trust me. I don't need to hear any more. Ditch the speech. Do this naturally. Let your heart guide you."

"I can't. I'll trip on my words if I'm not prepared. Then I'll sound like an idiot."

"Well, we wouldn't want you sounding like an idiot, now would we?" I waved a hand. "Please, by all means, continue."

Unimpressed, Torin dug a second paper from his pocket. "Fine. This is my backup speech, but I think it's lacking." He studied it a moment, then rocked his head side to side. "Okay, maybe it isn't too bad. Here we go. Allison, shall I compare thee to a summer's day—"

"Oh god..."

"Stop interrupting. This is poetry. Epic love poetry. I found it online."

"It's Shakespeare."

"Allison," he said, starting again. "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? Thou are more lovely and more tempting."

"For the love of god, stop. Are you trying to earn your first restraining order or go on a date with her?"

"I don't think you're my target audience, so maybe I shouldn't listen to you. What do you know about love poems

anyhow?"

"First off, it's not a poem, genius, it's a sonnet, and the line is 'Thou *art* more lovely and more *temperate*.' Tempting, Tor? Seriously."

"It was late. I was tired." Torin slammed the second paper down on the desk. "What do you suggest then, hot shot? Since you're so good at this. Please. By all means. Write me a script because I can't improvise for shit. I'll mess it up." He waved a hand for me to take over.

"Keep it simple. You're overcomplicating it. You don't need poetry. You need honesty. Try this. Allison, I think you're a fascinating person. Every time we run into each other in no man's land, I wish we had longer to chat. I'd like to get to know you better. Would you like to have dinner with me sometime?"

Torin stared slack-jawed. "Nothing about her hair?"

"No."

"What about if I said her eyes were—"

"No. Nothing about her eyes or her hair or her lips or her curves—"

"She has nice curves."

"Simple, Tor. Keep it simple."

"Okay, okay. Say it again. Slowly."

"Allison, I think you're a fascinating person. Every time we run into each other in no man's land, I wish we had longer to chat. I'd like to get to know you better. Would you like to have dinner with me sometime?"

Torin mouthed along, nodding. When I finished, he repeated it verbatim and pushed away from his desk. "I'll be back."

He vanished down the hall toward MPU, and I returned to the damn video I was never going to get through. Two minutes later, Torin returned, hovering beside the desk, wringing his hands.

I paused the video *again* and hitched a brow, asking without asking.

He thumbed over his shoulder. "The meeting's over."

"Great. Did you talk to her?"

I knew he hadn't.

He didn't move. He was doing the whole, trying to look chill but freaking out on the inside thing I'd seen him do before.

"You know, I've got a lot of super mundane work to do, Tor. I don't have time to read your mind. Spit it out."

"Is that emotional support backup still available? It's really busy over there, and we're technically the enemy, and everyone keeps staring at me."

I chuckled and pointed at my laptop screen. "You know, this guy is literally getting away with murder because of you. Because of a girl."

"I know, I know. But I said I'd do this today. I *have* to do this today, or she won't go out with me."

And because I was a good friend and couldn't miss an opportunity to watch Torin flounder and trip over his tongue because of a pretty girl, I followed him to MPU.

The first thing I did was scan for Quaid. I found him at his desk with Abraham sitting across from him where Eden usually sat.

Eden wasn't around.

Edwards was squatted down beside Quaid's desk, talking to him while stabbing a finger on the desk's surface to get his point across. I could feel the intensity of the conversation from across the room. Quaid's expression was flat and unreadable, but he nodded along. I didn't want to interrupt, so when Torin grabbed me by the arm and dragged me toward the other side of the room, I went.

He was right. A few people stared, but I hitched my chin, offering a few hellos and good-natured winks that no one quite knew what to do with. Eventually, most people turned back to their work, their curiosity at the arrival of two homicide detectives on their turf fading.

Allison and Erik were at their joined desks with a slew of papers spread out among them. Erik saw us approach first and motioned for Allison to look our way. When she did, a smile quirked the corner of her mouth.

Torin's advance stuttered to a halt.

I shoved him along, shaking my head. "This century, man. Do it."

When we were close enough, Allison shifted in her chair to give us her full attention, passing her gaze from Torin to me and back. "Fox. Doyle. What brings you to MPU?"

"Um..." Torin stood taller—which didn't amount to much since he barely crested five eight. "I was... um..." He scratched the back of his head. "How are you? Long meeting this morning, huh? I was... Not that I was looking for you, but... I was... a few times. In the hall. The supply room. My mechanical pencil needed new lead."

I groaned. You'd think we were in high school and he was asking out the head cheerleader, knowing he didn't stand a chance. Erik and I shared a look. For as expressionless as Erik was half the time, a hint of humor shone out his eyes.

Movement across the bullpen caught my attention. Edwards abandoned Quaid's desk as Torin's gears rolled haltingly forward. It was embarrassing.

I slapped his shoulder and whispered in his ear. "You're doing great. Keep it up. I'll be back. You've got this."

"You're abandoning me?" he hissed.

"I believe in you." I gave him two thumbs-up, which earned me a scathing look that called me a traitor.

I crossed the bullpen and squatted beside Quaid's desk in the exact spot Edwards had been a moment ago. Quaid startled and dashed his gaze around the busy room. A tiny quiver at the side of his mouth hinted at a suppressed smile when he looked back at me. "We aren't even pretending to hide this anymore, are we?"

I shrugged. "Nah. Too much work, and who really cares? Are you ashamed of me?" I playfully batted my lashes. "I'm like the golden ticket in Willy Wonka's contest. You won me. I'm yours. You should be flaunting that shit around. Shouting it from the mountaintops."

Quaid snorted, and the smile broke free. "Do you hear yourself when you talk?"

"Every word." Grinning, I greeted Quaid's dad, who returned a curt, "Doyle," before staring intently at some pages he'd been reading.

"I hear you were in a meeting all morning," I said to Quaid.

"Briefing, in essence. Edwards, for some reason, has plowed into the middle of this case and has taken over, so I anticipate many more."

"Taken over? I saw him over here a minute ago. He didn't look happy. What's going on?" I glanced at the mess of papers across both desks.

Quaid's mouth tightened in a straight line as he glanced at his father. "I don't know. The media is a bigger pain in the ass than usual, so Edwards is ensuring things are all under control. It's like he's on a power trip and doesn't trust us to do the right thing. He wanted to ensure I understood the importance of the tasks he assigned me in case I felt the need to go off and do my own thing."

"Us," Abraham said.

"Sorry. The task he's assigned *us*. We've been instructed to review every aspect of Juni's case, including making lists of \_\_\_"

"It's a waste of goddamn time." Abraham pushed back from his seat. "I need more coffee." He shuffled away, leaning heavily on his cane.

Quaid's gaze followed him until Abraham disappeared out of sight. With a sigh, Quaid rubbed the back of his neck, then dropped his hand. "Dad's not happy. Neither am I if I'm being honest. There are more pressing matters that require attention. Plus, Edwards has split us up, and it makes no sense. If we're going to find out how these cases are linked, we should be working through tasks as a team, but what do I know? He wants Dad to take me through a minute-by-minute breakdown of the day Juni vanished. He wants us to review the old tips that came in at the time and see if anything is relevant to today. It's pointless."

"And he's letting your dad help?"

"Against my better judgment, yes. I don't know how we're going to manage. We've never openly talked about Juniper. After the meeting, I asked Dad if he wanted to find a quiet room and start from the beginning, but he said no. I asked if he wanted to help compile a list of people of importance. He said

no. He wants to review the case files and hotline calls first. Alone. He's stalling and shutting me out."

"Give him time to come around. He will. He wants answers as much as you do."

Quaid didn't seem convinced. He rattled his head, flicking away the remaining tendrils of frustration and glanced around the bullpen before frowning. "What are you doing over here anyway? I thought you guys had a heavy caseload."

"We do. It's on hold. Big moment for Torin. He's decided *now* is the perfect time to ask Allison out. I'm his one-man emotional support team."

We both glanced toward Allison's desk in time to see Torin withdraw a piece of paper from the breast pocket of his shirt.

"Oh, hell no. Shit. I gotta run before he ruins this." I popped up from a squat and, without thinking, bent and planted a kiss right on Quaid's mouth while at least a dozen people watched —including Edwards from his fishbowl office.

Quaid's eyes blew wide, and his cheeks pinked.

I paused when our lips parted, reading the shocked expression on his face before laughing. "Oops. I did that without thinking. I'm going to pay big time, aren't I?"

Quaid playfully sneered, grabbed my tie, and dragged me down for another kiss. A slightly longer one. We earned a few hoots and hollers and *get a rooms* before he released me. "*I'm* the one who's going to pay for this. Thank you for that. Do

you not realize how hard it is to work with these people on a good day?"

"You've got this." I pointed at myself. "Golden ticket, remember? Top prize. They're gonna be jealous as all hell." I winked, then brushed a finger over a spot on his neck. "By the way, you missed a spot shaving this morning."

He shoved me away. "Go save your partner before your ego explodes."

I crossed the room with an overly dramatic strut, meeting a few gawking gazes as I went, dishing out a few comments of "Get back to work," and "Mind your business," and "What? You never seen two guys kiss before?"

Torin was about three lines into a fumbled Shakespeare sonnet before I caught his arm and ripped the paper from his hand. "I should never have left you alone." To Allison, "I swear to god, he's not usually this much of a dumbass. Here's the thing. Torin's a great guy, but you've got him messed up in a bad way. He can't think straight, let alone form appropriate adult sentences when he's in the same room as you. He came over here to ask if you'd like to have dinner with him sometime. If you say yes, I promise he will be nothing but a perfect gentleman, and all this rambling, tongue-tied bullshit will go away. And if he's not a perfect gentleman, call me, and I'll arrest him myself. So, what do you say? Are you busy Friday night?"

I didn't think I'd ever seen Erik laugh before, but the man buried his face in his hands and his shoulders bounced. Sotto voce, lips unmoving, Torin said, "I hate you so much right now."

Allison, amused by my interruption, spoke to me, not Torin. "Let your partner know I'd love to have dinner with him, and Friday sounds lovely. Can we make it seven?"

Torin hissed, "Tell her yes. Tell her yes right now."

"This is like a bad Abbott and Costello routine. I swear to god. Seven would be fantastic," I said to Allison. I shoved Torin forward, patting his shoulder. "Congratulations. You've won a date with the lovely Allison Bright from MPU. God knows why she wants to date you. Now grow some balls and exchange phone numbers with her, then meet me back in homicide so we can get some fucking work done."

I didn't wait around and headed back toward no man's land. Quaid wasn't at his desk anymore, and Abraham was nowhere to be found. I pulled my phone out to text him to see if he wanted to have dinner later, but I didn't know what the rest of my day entailed, and I couldn't guarantee I'd be available.

At my desk, I submerged myself in CCTV footage and took notes. Torin didn't return for another fifteen minutes, but he grinned ear to ear as he collapsed into his desk chair.

Before he could speak, I pointed at his laptop. "No more talking. Work."

As I suspected, by five that night, Torin and I were heading out to do some late interviews for our Woodbine Mall stabbing case. Depending on how they went, I had no idea when we'd be done with work. Quaid had texted at half past three, and it was only as Torin and I got in the elevator that I checked it.

Quaid: Come by tonight?

Aslan: I'll be working late. Not sure when I'll get off. You've been looking pretty haggard lately. Maybe you should try to get some proper sleep. All I do is keep you up when I'm there.

"We need to throw ourselves into this case hard. I don't want anything to ruin my date Friday night," Torin said as he punched the button for the ground floor.

"Do you know where you're taking her?"

"I've narrowed it down to three places. One is this quiet little Mediterranean joint on the west end. It's got great reviews and isn't too far from a theater. I thought we might see a movie after. I know, I know, it's cliché date material, but I didn't know what else to do."

My message to Quaid delivered as Torin explained, and the bouncing dots indicated he was typing a response.

"It's a good first date. Get a feel for each other."

The elevator opened on the first-floor lobby, which was bustling far more than usual. It took me three seconds to peg most of the crowd as press. Quaid had said the media was relentless. Were they all here for that, or was something else going on in a different department I didn't know about?

"Jesus. What the hell is happening here?" Torin said, scanning the mess of people.

"Don't know. Come on." I steered Torin down a back hall to the doors that exited to the parking garage behind the building.

I glanced down at my phone. The bouncing balls in the message kept bouncing. I was expecting a novel at this rate, so when Quaid's message landed with a simple Ok, I frowned. Three minutes of typing for an Ok?

I stopped walking and stared at my phone.

Torin was moaning about his and Allison's age difference again, something that came up at least three times a day. I'd missed the segue that had led us there this time, but I didn't care. He was rambling to hear himself at this point.

I geared up to reply to Quaid, sensing he was having one of those insecure moments where he thought I wasn't coming over because I was tired of him and had better things to do with my time. My thumbs hovered over the keyboard when someone called my name from the lobby behind us.

"Detective Doyle. Excuse me. Detective Doyle."

I spun and caught sight of a familiar woman hustling after us, high heels clicking along the tiled floor. She wore a dressier outfit consisting of a skirt that was miles too short, showing off her long, toned legs, and a sheer blouse that didn't hide the lace bra she wore underneath. It was unbuttoned enough that her ample bosom was trying to escape.

It took me a minute to place where I knew her from. I didn't, in fact, know her at all but had bumped into her outside the press conference room the previous morning.

The woman, Daniella, if I remembered correctly, caught up and offered a charming smile as she shrugged her purse higher on her shoulder since it had slipped.

"So sorry to bother you." She motioned at herself. "Daniella. We met yesterday."

"I remember."

To Torin, she said, "I don't think we've met. Daniella Kismet. *Upfront and Center* magazine." She offered a hand.

Torin eyed me, a thousand questions ripe on his tongue, and took Daniella's hand, shaking. "Torin Fox. Detective Torin Fox. I'm this one's partner."

"I'm sorry. Can I help you with something?" I asked. "We're in a bit of a hurry."

"Oh. Oh, I'm so sorry. I know it's late in the day, and this crowd"—she waved over her shoulder toward the lobby —"probably hasn't let up. I... I was just going to ask if... You know what? Never mind. I'll catch you another time." She dug inside her purse and came up with a green pad of Post-its and a pen. She scribbled on the top piece, pulled it off, and handed it to me. "Here. That's my number. If you could give me a call when you're available, I'd love to chat."

I stared from the Post-it to her, frowning. "I'm confused. What's this regarding?"

"I'm doing a cover piece on the two missing girls who turned up recently, but after hearing about the connection to the old case from 1992, I thought it would make a great spin to include the other girl. Juniper. A complete recap of the old story and how it ties in with the recent cases. I was hoping you could help. I would love to talk to the key people involved. Specifically, it's my understanding that a detective in the department is related to the missing girl from thirty years ago. His insight would be priceless."

I tried to hand Daniella back the paper, but she refused to take it. Torin plucked it from my hands, reading it with a frown. "You're a reporter," he said.

"Journalist."

Shaking my head, I said, "You have me mistaken. I don't work in MPU. This isn't a case I'm familiar with or involved in. It's my understanding that Sergeant Edwards is fielding all media information. He's who you'll want to talk to."

She tilted her head and smirked like I was pulling her leg. "But you were at the press conference on Monday."

"No. I wasn't. I was looking for someone when I ran into you. If you'll excuse us, ma'am. We really have to go."

Torin and I turned back down the hall toward the parking lot.

"Upfront and Center is one of those trashy tabloid magazines," Torin said, handing back the paper with Daniella's name and phone number.

"Is it? Christ. No wonder I've never heard of it. And no wonder she's being a nag."

"Detective Doyle," Daniella called, undeterred that I'd dismissed her. "If you won't help me, perhaps you can tell me where I might find Quaid Valor. He's the one whose sister went missing before, isn't he? I heard rumors his father's back on the case too. Came out of retirement to help. An interview with the family members would be golden, front-page material."

I screeched to a halt and spun, marching back to Daniella. "How about you take yourself out of here and forget your story? This isn't a family tragedy for you to exploit. You nosing around, asking questions, and printing embellished stories in your piece of shit magazine will only hurt people. Go find someone else to harass."

Daniella lifted her chin and shrugged, then spun on her heels, clicking off down the hall. "I can find him myself. Thank you for your time, Detective."

I knew it was wrong when I did it, but I grabbed her arm, forced her to stop, and spun her around. She glared at where I held her and moved her gaze back to my face.

"I said don't." My voice bordered on a growl.

"I'm afraid I'm free to do as I want, Detective. Your sergeant isn't talking to anyone. If I want my story, I need to fight for it, which means going to the source. The more information I can get, the better the story I write. It saves me

having to... What did you call it? Embellish details? Now, if you'll kindly let go of my arm, I'll be on my way."

"I can't let you do that."

"Az." Torin touched my shoulder, and I knew he was telling me to let go of her.

I did, but I was ready to block her path if she thought she would continue her quest to find Quaid. He was under enough stress after discovering Juniper's backpack. The last thing he needed was some hotshot journalist annoying him about his past.

I expected Daniella to march off, empowered by the authority she thought she was entitled to because of her position at a trashy magazine—journalists had no morals—but she didn't. She stepped closer, facing off with me, her grin haughty and furtive, bordering on devilish. She was close enough her heavy perfume engulfed me. She stared with heavy-lidded, bedroom eyes at my lips. I didn't back down because I didn't want to give her more power. I stayed rooted to the spot, disgusted that she thought she could manipulate me by batting her extended lashes and licking her plump painted lips.

"If you don't want me bothering him, make me a better offer."

She reached out and pinched the fabric of my tie, gliding it through her fingers as she moved them down, her knuckle grazing my chest. She hitched a brow in question. "Leave him alone. *I'll* talk to him about it and have him call you *if* he's interested."

"No deal."

"That's the best I can do."

"How about you encourage Mr. Valor—father and son—to be interested? Then you can call me personally and set up a time for us to meet."

I ground my teeth. "If I agree to this, you turn around and walk out of the building right now."

"You'll get me my interview?"

"I said I'll talk to him."

"I'll be waiting for your call. Don't take too long. I get impatient quite easily, and when I get impatient, I tend to break promises and do as I please. I'll give you until Friday morning. That sounds fair."

She flattened her hand to my chest and pushed off, spinning and marching down the hall, her heels echoing off the empty walls, her hips swaying.

When she turned the corner out of sight, Torin summed it up with three words. "What the fuck? Are you seriously going to talk to Valor?"

"Not a chance."

## CHAPTER 14

## Quaid



Wednesday morning at eight sharp. Edwards had called another meeting. There was news to share. If something had been discovered the previous day, I'd been kept in the dark.

Dad and I had worked silently for most of the previous day, making lists of all the hotline tips that had come through in 1992 when Juniper had gone missing and highlighting the ones that contained information we wanted to explore further. Nothing was dismissible this time around. We recorded the names of all those who had provided tips along with a brief summary of what they were reporting. As was typical in a high-profile case—which Juniper had been at the time since her father was an officer of the law—there were hundreds.

Dad and I hadn't spoken.

At seven, when Dad had looked ready to drop out of his chair, I'd insisted we were done for the day. I could have kept going, but his grunts of pain and weariness were hard to ignore, and I knew the only way to convince him to go home was if I was doing the same.

Aslan hadn't come over, and it stung.

We weren't at a stage in our relationship where I expected constant overnight companionship, but I couldn't shake the hollowness in my belly every time I was alone at night. Was it loneliness or fear? Was he working or pulling a Jack? I had to give him more credit than my despicable ex, but it wasn't easy. I was hardwired to assume the worst.

Alone in the dark with nothing more than the creaking sounds of a house settling all around me, I couldn't shake the unsettled feelings of impending doom. Our relationship always felt like it was on the brink of disaster. And it was my fault. Every day was like sitting in the eye of a storm, the horizon on all sides black and ominous, a swirling mess of clouds edging closer and closer, ready to snuff out the only serenity I had.

The calm wouldn't last. The single beam of sunlight and happiness I'd found could only end in destruction.

It was inevitable.

It was those nights, alone in bed without Aslan, when my mind relentlessly replayed the dozens of times Jack had made excuses for not wanting to come over. I knew in my heart Aslan was different, but it was so hard not to brace for the hit. It was so hard to not hear deception in his tone when he said he wasn't coming over because he was tired or had something else to do.

I didn't want to be like this, skeptical and doubting, but it was so deeply ingrained that I didn't know how else to be.

I didn't know how to trust, and that scared me.

I'd tossed and turned half the night, sleeping in fits and starts, accumulating five or six hours at most. A phone call from Erik had woken me at six. "Conference room at eight. Don't be late," he'd said. "Edwards's orders."

So there I was, hugging a steaming mug of takeout coffee with two extra shots of espresso as Edwards asked Eden to take the floor and catch us up on what she'd found.

Eden, a grim expression on her face, rose and pinned a fiveby-seven picture of a little girl to the whiteboard.

My stomach dropped. The coffee in my belly turned acidic. I was right.

Blonde hair. Crystal blue eyes.

"Nine-year-old Avery Rebecca Newman," Eden began. "Avery went missing four weeks ago on October thirty-first. Halloween. Avery's father took her to an afternoon Halloween party at their local swimming pool and rec center, where Avery's older sister, Rose, was part of the junior swim team. Friends and family of the junior and senior swim teams were invited to the event, along with a neighboring district's two swim teams. Approximately eighty or ninety families in total, including parents, brothers, sisters, cousins, friends, you name it. The Etobicoke Olympium is a large enough multiuse facility that it has in the past hosted several national and

international events. Apart from the Olympic-size pool, it has a decent-sized multipurpose room where the main event was located, a gym, a weight room, and an indoor track. The event was not open to the public. The children were invited to swim since the pool was open for the entire length of the three-hour party. Avery's father couldn't assist his daughters in the changeroom, so he let them go off by themselves to get their swimsuits on while he stayed and chatted with another parent in the multipurpose room. Since it was a closed event, he stated in an interview, he wasn't too concerned. He described Rose as a mature eleven-year-old, indicating she often took care of her sister like a mother hen."

Eden flipped a page on her notepad, cleared her throat, and continued. "Rose was also interviewed. She claims she and her sister entered the changeroom together and got into their swimsuits. Avery wanted her hair tied back for swimming, and Rose tried to assist her, but the hair elastic got tangled, and neither girl could get it out. Rose told her sister to ask their father to help untangle it, and she would meet her in the pool. Avery left the changeroom on her own and was never seen again."

Eden placed a hand over the bulky file folder she'd set on the table. "This case belonged to Bentley and Nguyen, but after consulting with Sarge, we've taken it over. I spent the bulk of yesterday afternoon getting caught up on every aspect of this case and every step taken to recover Avery."

Edwards jumped in. "There is a small chance this child is unrelated to our case, but I think the similarities can't be ignored. Thoughts?"

"There is a variance." Erik jumped in right away. "Yes, Avery was taken in a large group setting, but she is the first to be taken at an *indoor* location. The other three were taken at events that were outdoors."

"We discussed that too," Eden said. "Considering the declining weather and that our unsub seems fixated on achieving their fantasy of remaking Juniper, we felt that particular detail was flexible. People of this nature become more desperate, which could be a small indication of their control slipping. How does everyone else feel?"

I waved for Eden to slide me the folder. As I thumbed through the information, noting the rough numbers of people who had gathered for the event, the breakdown of children to adults, and the umpteen interviews that had been conducted, I knew Eden had found the right one. "I think the similarities outweigh the differences. I'd bet anything this little girl is one of ours."

I passed the folder to Erik, who did the same, skimming and nodding along as Allison read over his shoulder. After a long minute, he nodded. "I agree with Valor. We can't dismiss this."

"Even if we're wrong," Edwards said. "Even if we end up running in the wrong direction—"

"She's a missing child," Allison concluded.

"Precisely. It's settled. She's officially ours. Gelekar, you're taking this one solo for the moment."

"Sir?" Everything in me told me to protest, but Edwards must have sensed the words crawling up my throat. One look from him, and I clenched my teeth. "Never mind."

I didn't understand why he was adamant about keeping us all working separately.

"Valor, once you and your father complete your review of Juniper's case, you can join forces with Gelekar and help her out. For the time being, I want everyone to compile lists of every person present at their particular event. Eventually, we're all going to sit down and put our information together to see if there are connections or crossovers, but not before I say so. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," we all muttered.

"Where's Abraham this morning?"

I'd left him at home, informing him I'd come by once I'd finished the meeting so we could keep working. He'd argued, of course, but the strain and fatigue in his tone made me put my foot down, risking another fight. He'd grumbled and hung up, his means of acquiescing.

"We're meeting later this morning. Once I'm done here."

"Good. The rest of you get outta here. Lily Vaccari's interview is scheduled for tomorrow morning at nine. I want everyone present. Valor, hang back a minute."

I cursed under my breath as Eden, Erik, and Allison slipped from the room. Edwards closed the door behind them and stuffed his hands into his pockets. "Have you spoken to the media?"

"No, sir. You told me not to."

"Good." Edwards narrowed his eyes and rocked on his feet. "They're getting underhanded, and I don't like it. Information is starting to surface, and they're getting desperate for us to confirm or deny certain... aspects of this case. Under no circumstance is that to happen."

"Of course. I would never do that."

Had I given him a reason not to trust me? Why the lecture? We'd shuffled around media before. This wasn't new.

"So, you and Doyle, huh?"

I flinched at the shift in conversation. My lips parted, but no words came out. This wasn't what I was expecting. "Um... sir?"

"I caught your little display yesterday in the middle of the bullpen. I had my suspicions."

I scrambled for an explanation. There was no definitive rule stating we couldn't date. We didn't work in the same department. It might be different if he was MPU, but he wasn't.

Edwards, sensing my turmoil, held up a hand. "I'm not here to reprimand you over your personal affairs. You're one of my most stringent rule followers."

I grimaced. It wasn't the glowing review most people would take it as. Other detectives hated that fact about me. "Thank you, sir."

"Doyle has a tendency to... get himself in trouble. I hope that isn't a trait I start seeing in you. Let's keep it professional at the office." He slapped my shoulder and headed out the door, leaving me queasy and confused.

\*\*\*

"Where did you park that morning?" I asked as I set a freshly brewed mug of coffee onto Dad's TV tray.

Leaning forward in his recliner, left leg stretched out with an ice pack resting on the knee, Dad concentrated on a chess game he was playing with himself. The set had once belonged to my grandfather. The hand-carved wooden chess pieces were worn after years of use, but it was a family heirloom, the same set I'd learned on when I was six years old.

Dad was being difficult, imposing a physical barrier between us so he didn't have to look me in the eye as we went over *that day*.

"Dad? Where did you park that morning?" I asked again as I settled with my own mug of coffee onto the couch and pulled my notepad onto my lap.

I'd shown up on his doorstep shortly after my early morning meeting, announcing we were going to piece through the day Juniper vanished whether he liked it or not. If he chose to be uncooperative, I would report to Edwards that he was unwilling to help, and he'd be no longer welcome during briefings.

He'd decided to cooperate.

Mostly.

"It doesn't matter where I parked. It's irrelevant. Can you shut that damn recorder off?"

"No, I need it so I can refer to it later instead of hounding you twice when I forget details. Answer the question."

Dad moved the white bishop alongside a rogue black pawn, keeping one finger on it as he scoured the board to be sure it was a safe move. When satisfied, he released the finger and spun the board to play the black pieces. The pieces weren't technically black and white. They were dark rosewood versus the much lighter boxwood, each with a felted bottom so they easily slid along the glossy checkered board.

"It was a designated lot by the Legion Hall, cordoned off for anyone taking part in the parade. I got there at half past nine, and your sister and I walked to the starting location so I could check in. It was about six blocks away."

He paused.

I wasn't sure if the memories of the day were stalling his speech or the damn chess game he refused to put away.

"She wouldn't hold my hand," he mumbled, barely loud enough for me to make out. "She was always stubborn like that. Too busy chatting my ear off and bouncing ahead, skipping and singing some song she'd learned in school. I had to remind her three times this was a serious event, not some fanciful parade like the one we watched at Christmas time."

Dad moved a black pawn forward one square and released it, but his gaze remained distant, stuck in the past. "She was a talker. We called her a motormouth all the time. The only time her gums weren't flapping was when she was asleep. I used to say to your mother, I wish she'd stop for five minutes and give our ears a rest. She'd tell me that one day Juni would be a surly teenager who wouldn't want to talk to us at all, and I should be grateful." He blinked away from the memory and peeked at me once before spinning the game board around to play white. Pain rimmed his eyes. Sadness. Regret.

The silence in the house after Juniper's abduction had been the most painful thing. I had been the quiet kid, uncomfortable in my own skin, unsure where I belonged after our lives had been turned upside down. It was me who'd turned into the surly teenager who had rarely spoken.

Juniper's place in the family was a gap I could never fill.

I pushed away those hollow feelings of ineptitude and focused on our task. "How long did it take to get to the starting position of the parade from the parking lot?"

"Fifteen minutes, give or take. It was a cold walk. The wind off the lake blew right through me. I told Juni a dozen times to put her warm hat on, but she wouldn't listen. After I was registered, we headed over to chat with a couple of guys I knew from my division."

I shuffled through a stack of papers on the couch beside me until I found the list I'd made of the people directly in the vicinity of Juniper when she'd vanished. "Who were the men?"

"Tom Staple and Robert Flat. Tom had his daughters with him. Natalie and Megan. They were a little older than Juni. Ten and twelve, I think. They were playing with some sticker book thing. You won't remember them. The little girls went nuts for them back in the day. They bought these books, princesses or fairies or popular TV shows or bands. I don't remember. There were a ton of choices. Then they bought these corresponding packages of baseball-card-size stickers. You never knew what ones were in the package, which was part of the fun. The stickers went inside the book, and there were a couple dozen to collect. So the kids bought these card packages by the dozens, hoping to get the rare ones they didn't have and trading the duplicates with their friends. It was the *in thing*, Juni told me. She made a point of saying she wanted to use her allowance to buy a book and some card packs too."

Dad paused, scowling at the chess board, moving a pawn forward but inevitably changing his mind and putting it back where it originally was. "So Tom's girls were unpacking cards by the dozens and sticking them in their new books. Juni wanted to go hang out with them. I let her go since they were sitting on the grass less than ten feet away. I told her not to leave my sight. She rolled her eyes like my concern was the most ridiculous thing in the world."

Dad moved a white rook across the board and took out an unprotected black pawn, jeopardizing the black player's queen. He spun the board and frowned at the predicament he'd placed himself in.

I made small tics beside Tom, Robert, Natalie, and Megan's names. We had transcripts of all their interviews on file, and I'd read them a dozen times over the years. "Do you remember who else was in the vicinity? Were there other children near Juni and the girls? Were the adults surrounding you all men and women from the department? Did you know everyone, or were there strangers present?"

Dad's gaze came up, steely eyes meeting mine. "Is this how you interrogate people? Throw a hundred questions at them at once?"

I sighed and swiped a hand over my face. "Can you focus on me and not the game? It's distracting."

"I can multitask just fine."

"Then answer the question."

"Which one?"

"Dad, stop being difficult!"

He moved the black queen out of the rook's path, tucking her behind his knight. I was ten seconds from launching off the couch and telling him to forget the whole thing when he spoke.

"There were dozens of men and women from the department gathered in the same area, but we weren't the only

ones. I didn't know all of them. There were various other divisions involved in the parade. I recognized a handful of guys I worked with, but most of them were strangers or people I'd seen in passing, but I didn't know their names. As for other children near the girls, there were a ton. Tom's nephew, who was a Boy Scout, was there. Godfrey? Geoffrey? No, I think his name was Godfrey."

I scanned the list of names but didn't see it. "Are you sure?"

Dad shook his head. "It's been thirty years, kiddo. I'm not sure of anything anymore. His name won't be on the list. He and... I don't know who she was. Some girl. Maybe his sister. Anyhow, they chatted with the girls a bit, then took off. The Boy Scout leader came and corralled Godfrey, barking orders and telling him he needed to stick with the group, and he couldn't keep wandering off. The leader I remember. The guy couldn't have been long out of his teens. Still pimple-faced. Surly. He shouted at half a dozen other kids as he wandered around, arms crossed like he was in uniform."

"Hang on." I skimmed a few papers. "What was his name? The leader."

"I don't know. It's on file. He was interviewed."

I jotted a note to remind myself to find that interview and reread it.

"So he came and collected Tom's niece and nephew?"

"Just the nephew. The sister stuck around for a little longer. She and Juni were laughing, giggling, and whispering for a long time, but then she must have wandered off. I didn't see her again, so I figured she'd gone to find her brother or family."

Dad spun the chess board and, within ten seconds, slid the aggressive white rook he'd used two turns ago across the board, taking out an unsuspecting bishop and lining himself up in the path of the black king. "Check," he muttered under his breath.

"Dad? Did any other kids or adults stand out that morning?"

Dad spun the board, rubbing his chin as he contemplated his king's impending doom. "There was a group of young men about twenty feet away. Cadets. Part of the marching band. One was a bugle player. He was the kid going to play 'Taps' once we reached the cenotaph. He was practicing until someone shouted for him not to. Then he and his other bandmates goofed around with different music, making a racket. Juni was fascinated by them and, at one point, ran over to ask if she could go sit and listen. I told her no. She didn't like that, crossed her arms, and sulked. I told her no again, and she stomped off to sit with Tom's girls."

I put my finger over a set of four names. "They interviewed those musicians, correct? John, Keagan, Caleb, and Dixon?"

"Yeah, that's them."

"Did you see any adults talking to the girls at any point, even in passing? It could have been a simple hello or an innocent wave?"

"No. I don't know. Quaid, it was busy. People were coming and going and chatting with one another."

"Okay." I shuffled on the couch, hating the next question but knowing it was important. Dad must have sensed it coming. His shoulders tensed, and although he concentrated extra hard on his game, he didn't seem to see it anymore. "Tell me about the moment you discovered Juni wasn't where she was supposed to be."

Dad's jaw moved back and forth. His nose wrinkled in disgust. "In other words, tell you about the day I destroyed my family."

"Dad... I didn't say that."

"I should have left her at home with you and your mother. I should have taken her to the bathroom when she asked instead of telling her to wait one minute because I was in the middle of a goddamn conversation. I should have made her stand by my side and forced her to hold my hand even though she hated it."

I didn't push, watching as the past strained the sides of Dad's eyes and the horrors of that day returned to him.

He'd never looked so old.

Pushing the chess game aside, rattling the pieces until two of them toppled over, Dad settled back in his recliner, removing the ice pack from his knee.

Rubbing absently at his upper thigh, he said, "Robert was telling Tom and me about some new legislation that was supposed to be passed. It was going to have profound effects on how we did our jobs." He paused, a sad chuckle huffing from his chest. "I don't even remember what it was about anymore or if it went through."

Dad winced as he bent his leg, testing the joint. "Juni ran up to me and hung on my arm, bouncing up and down, jarring me, telling me she needed to use the bathroom. It was obnoxious. I shook her off and told her she was being rude and interrupting. I told her I'd take her to the bathroom in a minute. She said she had to go badly. I told her she was old enough to wait one second. She had a tendency to be overdramatic when she wanted to be. Came with the age. She whined and then got angry when I persistently ignored her. Finally, she bounced back to the other girls and plopped onto the grass beside them, giving me the stink-eye. I didn't feed into it. Robert kept talking. There was a lull in the conversation. I glanced over to see if Juni was ready for me to take her to the bathroom, and lo and behold, she was deeply engaged with the girls again and seemed to have forgotten all about her emergent bladder."

Something changed in Dad's eyes. There were levels to his sorrow, and the more he talked, the more amplified it became. "I was about to head over and ask her if she was ready, but one of the parade coordinators interrupted us. He said he was making a master list of those present so they could double-check their numbers. He had a clipboard and told us to add our names and jot down where we were from. Our divisions or whatnot. Robert and Tom went first, then I added my name

and handed the clipboard back. The man pointed out where our division would start, then set off to the next group of people."

Dad pressed his lips together and shook his head. "Once he was gone, I turned, intent on taking Juni to the bathroom, but she wasn't with the girls anymore. I scanned the crowd, figuring she had found someone else nearby to talk to, but I couldn't see her anywhere. I didn't panic right away. I figured she'd gone to the bathroom by herself. There was an outdoor facility nearby, and knowing Juni, she wouldn't see it as a problem. I asked the girls if they knew where she was, and they said they didn't know. I asked if she'd gone to the bathroom, and they shrugged and said maybe. I ran to the bathrooms, but she wasn't there." Dad's breathing hitched, and his knuckles turned white as he dug his fingers into his leg. "I shouted for her. I scanned the crowd. I checked the bathrooms again, but she was just... gone."

Dad's mind drifted, and it was a full minute before he glanced up, eyes glistening. "It was chaos from then on. Tom and Robert helped me look. Other officers who were present organized an immediate search of the area. Tom called it in, but..." Dad shook his head. "She... We couldn't find her. She was gone."

An awkward silence filled the space between us. It pulsed and swelled, pushing the air and heat from the room until I was chilled, and my lungs screamed.

Without warning, Dad got up and walked out, locking himself in the bathroom, officially ending the interview.

## CHAPTER 15

## Quaid



I left.

Unlike the last time Dad had locked himself in the bathroom, I didn't pound on the door and tell him he was being ridiculous. There was no yelling or screaming. My heart

was bruised after hearing Dad talk, and I didn't know how to help him, so I ran away like a coward.

I gathered the folders containing all our information on Juniper's case, put on my shoes, and slipped out the door.

I made my way back to headquarters in a daze. The conversation, reliving the worst day of my father's life through his eyes, was heavy. A brick sat in my stomach. I'd tried hard to remain clinically detached, but it had been impossible. My own vague memories of that day screamed to the surface. When Dad claimed it had all turned chaotic, I remembered. The whirlwind of events that had followed might not be clear in my head—I'd been too young—but the emotions attached to that day were still profound even thirty years later.

When I arrived at headquarters, MPU's bullpen was quiet. There were only a handful of people around.

Eden had pulled up a chair next to Bentley's and Nguyen's desks, and they were deeply engrossed in a conversation. Allison and Erik had spread their files out on opposite ends of the conference room table and were working quietly—and separately—as they went through their assigned cases.

I headed to the breakroom to secure myself a fresh cup of coffee before getting to work.

Part of me wanted to interrupt Allison and Erik to see where they were at, but Edwards had been clear about his orders. And my orders—although not said in so many words—were to stay out of other people's way. I could read between the lines.

Coffee in hand, I headed for my desk only to find a small, unmarked paper bag and a folded note sitting front and center. My name was printed in a familiar scribble across the folded paper. I glanced around, but when no one in particular seemed to be looking on expectantly, I sat, the corner of my lips hooking into a small smile as I opened the note.

Missed you last night. Don't work too hard today. I figure you probably haven't eaten, so I got you a treat. Ignore the missing bite. Torin dared me to try it. Quaid, I say this in the nicest way, this muffin is by far the most unpalatable thing I have ever tasted in my life. I'm not ashamed to admit I spit it into a napkin and did away with the evidence. Then I gutpunched my partner for laughing at me. It was disgusting. Don't tell Li Mei.

Az xx

I peeked inside the paper bag, finding one of my favorite muffins sold at Organic Life. The smallest piece of the top was missing. I would hardly call it a bite. I couldn't contain the smile as I pictured Aslan's face after trying it.

I found my phone in a pocket and sent him a text.

Quaid: Best muffin ever! I can't believe you spit instead of swallowed. For shame. Thank you. <3

I second guessed the heart after I hit Send. I didn't want him to mistake it for a declaration of love. We weren't there yet, and the last thing I wanted was to scare him off. It was probably one step too far, but I couldn't take it back.

My phone vibrated.

Aslan: You KNOW I don't usually spit. What does that tell you about your cherished muffin? I've been scraping my tongue with my teeth for an hour. I can still taste it. It's vile.

I glanced at Edwards's office, but he was busy on the phone and didn't notice me grinning like a fool.

Quaid: Are you in the building?

I planned to sneak over to homicide for a quick minute when he responded.

Aslan: Nope. On the road. Running three goddamn cases today. Insanity.

Damn.

Hating how needy it sounded but unable to help myself, I typed, *Will I see you tonight?* 

There was a long pause that I read far too much into. He was thinking up an excuse. He didn't want to come. Despite my effort to stay aloof, I'd been too whiny and clingy lately. He saw through me to the insecure person I truly was. It was unattractive. The last thing I wanted to do was smother him.

His response, when it came, wasn't any more reassuring.

Aslan: Not sure. We might be making an arrest today if things unfold the way we predict. I might be stuck in an interrogation room all night. You know how it is. I'll let you know.

I tried not to be disappointed. It was the nature of our jobs after all. Nothing more. Instead of answering with a pathetic sounding *Ok* like I'd done the previous day, I tucked my phone away and focused on work and the muffin.

From a folder, I extracted a few of the lists I'd made surrounding Juniper's case. I laid them out side by side as I relaxed my brain and got to work.

I reviewed every word of Dad's recorded interview, listening with a pair of Bluetooth headphones and making more notes. Once I'd gone over it three times, fast forwarding and rewinding in several places, I hit Stop, tapping my pen on the list I'd pulled forward.

Tom. Robert. Natalie. Megan. Those were the four names that had come up when Dad had made his original statement

back in 1992. It all matched.

Godfrey—or Geoffrey—Tom's nephew had been mentioned in passing, but the emphasis had been placed on the Boy Scout leader and his actions instead of the child.

I shuffled through more papers to find the leader's name. Dad had claimed he'd been interviewed.

Bingo. Parker Cohen.

I had a stack of interviews, and it took me a few minutes to find his. I set it aside to review. While searching, I also set aside Tom's, Robert's, and the interviews taken from Tom's two girls. There were no interviews done with Tom's niece or nephew, which didn't surprise me. The police wouldn't have interrogated too many children unless they felt it was to their benefit.

The cadets practicing nearby had all been interviewed since Dad had recalled Juniper's interest in watching them play. Had she wandered off to listen to them against his order?

I set their interviews aside as well.

I checked my notes, bouncing the end of my pen on the pad of paper. Near the bottom, I'd written. Who was the coordinator with the clipboard who distracted Dad?

I riffled through one of my stacks of papers and extracted the list of parade coordinators and organizers. I scanned, noting there were only four men's names listed. I cross-checked them with the list of men who'd been interviewed back in 1992, but none of them matched.

Picking up my desk phone, I called Dad's number, hoping if he saw the department line, he'd be more inclined to pick up.

"Hello." His voice was gruff and scratchy.

"I have a quick question. The parade coordinator who interrupted you, do you know his name?"

Silence bled through the line before, "No. I'm not sure I ever knew."

"Do you know if he was interviewed?"

"I don't know. He should have been."

I didn't tell him that none of the organizers on the list had been interviewed. Was it possible a subgroup of people were around that day, helping to get things organized?

"Did the organizers wear anything distinctive? Those sticker name tags, maybe? Lanyards?"

"Not that I remember. The guy wore tan slacks, a navy button-down, and a jacket... Black, I think."

"Hair?"

"Silvering, but still with dark strands. I'd put him in his mid or late forties. Not a vet, I don't think. A lot of the organizers are vets and their wives. I don't know, kiddo. It was such a short conversation. I barely remember him."

And the likelihood was many of these coordinators wouldn't be around anymore.

"Okay. That might help me figure out who he is. I have to make some calls." With the tip of my pen, I tapped a name on my notepad. "What about Tom? Is he...um..."

"Retired? Yes."

"No, I mean, is he..."

"Alive?" Dad huffed. "Yes, Quaid. Us old farts aren't all dead yet."

"It's been thirty years, Dad. It's not an unreasonable question. He could have been in his midforties back then for all I know."

"He wasn't. Same age as me. You want to talk to him?"

"Do you have a number?"

"Hang on."

Dad found me a contact number for Tom Staple, and I punched it in immediately when I got off the phone with Dad. It rang three times before a man answered with a gruff, "Speak."

"Um... Hello. This is Quaid Valor with the Toronto Missing Persons Unit. I'm looking to speak with Tom Staple. Is he available?"

"I'm Tom. Valor, you said? Christ, I haven't heard that name in years. You must be Abe's son."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, son of a bitch. How is the old man?"

"He's doing all right... for an old man."

Tom chuckled. "Good to hear. What can I do for you, kid?"

I explained to Tom how recent events had forced us to reopen Juniper's case, and I was wondering if he would be willing to sit for another interview.

"Hell, I'd be happy to, but I can't promise this old brain will remember much from back then."

"I understand. Sometimes a fresh set of ears can make all the difference."

We set up a time for me to swing by his place the following afternoon since he was on his way to one of his granddaughter's school recitals.

Dad didn't have Robert's number, but it didn't take much for me to search him. He was another retired police officer. After a quick call, I secured a second interview with him as well, also for the following day.

It was trickier, but I did some digging to locate the parade coordinators from back in November of 1992. Unfortunately, three of the searches turned up obituaries. Like Dad had pointed out, most of the organizers had been a collection of old men—vets—and their wives. The final male organizer—a man by the name of Fred who was in his nineties—and one of the women, Pearl, were in nursing homes with dementia, but the last name on the list, a woman named Iris DaSilva, agreed to see me in an hour provided I came by her house. She didn't drive anymore and seemed eager for company, informing me she'd just made homemade cookies and would plate them up and serve them with tea.

I took note of her address, tidied my desk, and headed out.

Iris DaSilva was in her eighties, a wrinkly old woman with weathered, sun-marked skin that clung to her bones like melted wax. She was skeletal but spry, answering the door with a beaming smile of yellowed teeth. Thick lensed glasses, too big for her face, clung to the tip of her nose as she took me in from head to toe.

"Well, aren't you dashing? It's been ages since I've had a gentleman caller as handsome as you."

I may have blushed. "Thank you, ma'am. Quaid Valor. Detective with Missing Persons."

She batted my hand away when I offered it to shake. "None of that. You'll call me Iris, and I'll call you Quaid. I'd hug the stuffing out of you, but I get the sense you're a bit skittish." She side-eyed me with a hint of mischief.

My blush deepened, and I tensed, waiting for her to drag me into her arms and hug me in greeting, regardless of my discomfort.

She didn't but must have found my anxiety amusing since she laughed. "Come on now, lad. I've boiled water for tea. No sense standing on the porch in the cold. Do you like homemade lemon drop cookies?"

"They sound amazing."

I let her guide me into the front foyer, a vast, dimly lit area with the air of an eighteenth-century palace. Iris's house was in an old neighborhood that boasted Victorian century homes with three stories, sculpted gingerbread frame work, and a moodiness that suited the old woman.

Dark wood trim framed the doors and windows on the inside. A narrow winding staircase with a carved banister led to the second level. The walls were covered in burgundy wallpaper with a raised gilded design over its surface. Several framed pictures of, I assumed, Iris's family hung all about. A mosaic wooden tiled floor glistened in the low light, giving off the scent of waxy floor polish. The ceiling was easily twelve or more feet high. Strung in the center of the foyer was an ornate chandelier that sparkled and glistened with the sunlight that peeked through the domed stained-glass window above the doorframe. Multicolored fractured light danced on the floors and walls.

Over top of the waxy lemon polish scent was the distinct aroma of jasmine and cloves. Incense, I thought. A long antique mirror with a rustic, gilded frame sat near a coat rack. I caught sight of my reflection and flinched, noting the deep shadows beneath my washed-out blue eyes and the wind-blown disorder of my hair. My tie was crooked, and I instinctively reached up to fix it. I was grossly pale in the odd lighting of the room and grimaced, turning away, wondering—not for the first time—what it was Aslan saw in me. I looked like a wreck.

Iris deposited me onto an electric-blue velour couch in a loudly decorated living room. The furniture style was what I thought was referred to as art deco, circa the nineteen thirties

or thereabouts. Oddly shaped tables and chairs were crammed together, making it feel claustrophobic. The bright blue, chocolate brown, and cream color theme was everywhere. The carpet was busy, as were the throw pillows and heavy drapes on both sides of the long, arched windows. The shelving that filled almost every available wall space was filled with leather-bound books with similar spines that kept their contents a mystery. It was a big house for one person. Unless Iris had remarried after her husband passed away, she lived there alone.

Iris returned with a silver tray of fine china, including a teapot, teacups, serving dishes with milk and sugar, and a plate stacked high with small round cookies.

Iris settled on a separate chair and poured the tea. "So you're Miss Juniper Valor's little brother, is that right?"

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"I am."
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"Not so little anymore, are you?"

"No, ma'am."

Iris *tsk*ed and shook her head with a sad smile. "Such a tragedy what happened to her. They never did find her, did they?"

"No, they didn't, but that's why I'm here. Recent events and new information have forced us to reopen Juniper's case. We're looking at it with fresh eyes to see if there's anything that might have been missed thirty years ago." I accepted a mug of tea, adding a splash of milk and a cube of sugar. When Iris held up the plate of cookies, I took one to be polite. I wasn't a big fan of lemon or cookies, but I wasn't about to tell her no.

"So how can an old lady like me help you, sweetie?"

"Well, as I said on the phone, I was tracking down some of the key people who were present at the time of Juniper's disappearance. You worked to help coordinate the parade, isn't that right?"

"It is. My husband and I were organizers every year until his health deteriorated. When he died, I passed it along to a younger generation. It's hard to keep up these days. The world moves too fast with computers and the internet and whatnot."

"I'm sorry to hear about your husband, ma'am."

"It's the circle of life, and he lived a good one. That's all any of us can ask."

I sipped my tea and nibbled the cookie, wondering why Juniper hadn't gotten the chance to live out her life. Before I got sucked into a spiral of depressing thoughts, I cleared my throat.

"With the help of my father, I've been reconstructing the day Juniper vanished to the best of my ability. It means piecing together old interviews and talking to anyone who might be able to give a new perspective of what they saw that day. According to my notes, none of the coordinators were interviewed by the police. Is that correct?"

"No, none of us were officially interviewed."

"Officially?"

"An officer did come and speak with the group of us to see where we all were during the time frame when she disappeared. Since our sign-in tables and information booth were located a fair distance from where your father was with Juniper, they didn't feel the need to take any of us into the station. We weren't a high priority. They asked us a handful of general questions to see if we had seen anything peculiar. None of us had, or they might have followed through with a more substantial chat." Iris shrugged, her frail hands gripping her teacup. "We were all quite busy that morning being sure people knew where to go."

I frowned and plucked the list of organizers' names from the papers I'd brought. "Can you confirm if this list is complete or if there were other volunteers who aren't accounted for?"

Iris took the page and studied it a long time, squinting from behind her thick glasses before handing it back. "That looks about right. We were an intimate group. We'd been organizing the parade together for years."

"And you say you were all working at sign-in tables?"

"Fred worked an information booth beside us, but in essence, yes."

I traced my tongue over my upper lip. "My father reported that an organizer came around with a clipboard, asking participants to add their names to a list. This happened around the same time Juniper vanished. Do you know who this might have been?" I started giving her the same description Dad had given me—male, forties, silvering hair—but my words faded as Iris shook her head.

"That's not something we do. Participants come to us at the sign-in tables and get their information. We don't go to them. It would be far too difficult to ensure no one was missed. The parade is quite a large affair."

"I see. So you don't know who this man might have been or what he was doing?"

"I'm afraid not."

My blood ran cold as I made a note. I didn't like this. Whoever this person was, his presence seemed like it might have been an intended diversion. I hoped Tom or Robert could provide me with a better clue on his identity.

"Um... I know it's been a long time, and if you've worked several parades over the years, I don't expect you to remember much of that particular day, but—"

"Sweetie, it isn't every day a child goes missing at a function I'm running. That day is still with me even all these years later."

"True. Can you recall anything or anyone who might have stood out? Anything that might have raised a red flag after you heard a child went missing? It could be simply someone acting strange or someone who gave off a bad vibe. A misplaced vehicle."

Iris offered me the plate of cookies again. I accepted but held the treat between my fingers. The dry crumbs of the first one still lingered unpleasantly in my mouth, sticking to my throat.

I sipped the tea as Iris contemplated, thinking back to a time long ago.

She didn't speak for long enough I was about to tell her not to worry about it when she raised a finger. Her hand trembled as she waggled it in the air.

"In fact, I do recall something. The young officer who came to speak with us asked the exact same question. Someone complained to Fred at the information booth that one of the Boy Scout leaders—I don't know what troop—was... What did he say? Ah, yes, being a little harsh with the children. Verbally reprimanding them in a way that didn't sit right."

My ears perked.

"Fred asked if one of us could manage his booth for a moment while he saw to it that one of the police officers handled it. We had a few officers on standby who were present for crowd control." She *tsk*ed. "Crowd control. Can you believe that? It's a sad day we live in when we need to ensure crowd control measures are in place for a Remembrance Day parade."

"Do you remember the name of the Boy Scout leader in question?"

Iris shook her head, expression pained. "I don't recall, sweetie. If I knew, it's long gone now. I know he was young. Just past being a boy himself, I think. He didn't know what to do with a bunch of rowdy children. Who can blame him for a little shouting when he had his hands so full?"

It had to be the same leader Dad had pointed out. Parker Cohen. There might have been several troops present that day and many leaders, but it was too much of a coincidence, and I didn't believe in coincidences.

"And one of your crowd control officers dealt with it?"

"I believe so. Fred said he was going to take the problem to one of them. He came back to his booth, and we carried on."

"Do you remember who the officer was?"

Iris shook her head. "Sorry, no. It was too long ago."

We chatted more, and Iris managed to stuff me full of four more cookies before letting me leave—not without a rib-crushing hug that time. I went rigid, engulfed in old lady perfume and stick thin arms that were surprisingly strong as Iris told me not to be a stranger and how much she had adored my company.

I felt sorry for Iris. She was clearly lonely, and I knew how that felt since I was anticipating another long night without Aslan again.

It was late afternoon by the time I got back to headquarters. As I sat at my desk, contemplating where to begin, my phone buzzed.

Aslan: I left my spare house key in my desk. Come over tonight and crash in my bed. I'll be late, but I won't be all night. I would love to curl up beside you when I get home.

A spark of giddiness made me sit up straighter. I didn't want to sound too eager, but the wash of excitement was hard to ignore.

*Quaid: I'll be there.* 

# CHAPTER 16

# Quaid



The key was exactly where Aslan said it would be. If anyone in homicide thought it strange I was rummaging through Aslan's desk, no one spoke up. It was nearing five. Eden, Allison, and Erik weren't around. Edwards was chatting with a woman—media by the look of it—in his office. His door was closed, but the pinched expression on his face told me whatever they were discussing was serious, and he wasn't happy.

There had been whispers around the office when I'd gotten back that afternoon, but I'd kept my head down and ignored them, knowing Edwards was serious when he'd told me to stay out of all the press bullshit.

I packed a bunch of folders to take with me since I knew Aslan would be late getting home. I figured I could keep working in comfort on his couch rather than at my desk. After a pitstop at home, where I showered, changed, and grabbed a fresh set of clothes for the following day, I headed out.

It was odd. Although we'd split our overnights fairly evenly between our two houses, I'd never been in Aslan's place without him present. I felt like an intruder despite the fact we'd been dating a month.

I left my work on the coffee table and wandered to his kitchen for a drink and a bite to eat since a handful of lemon drop cookies and a small muffin were all I'd consumed since breakfast.

For a fleeting, wistful moment, I imagined the house was ours and that we lived together. Every night we shared this space, ate meals we cooked side by side, fought over who did the dishes, and fell into bed each night to make love and sleep curled up under the same blanket.

A familiar yearning tugged at my heart. Was it wrong to daydream of such things so early on?

"Yes," I mumbled to myself as I opened the fridge.

I shook the fantasy away before it took root, before I craved it too much or those dreams grew too big. I was hopeless. I'd spent my whole adult life chasing an unrealistic idea of romance. It had taken until I'd turned thirty-six to realize how futile it was. My fantasies could be so saccharine they made my teeth hurt. If Aslan knew where my thoughts strayed, he'd run for the hills. I should celebrate that he'd stuck around for a month. It was three weeks longer than I'd expected.

Before the fretting set in, I rummaged through the contents of the fridge. Aslan wasn't a chef, so his food situation was always dire. He relied on takeout and convenience foods all too often. I found a half empty jug of Sunny D, a few cans of Coke, a carton of milk, and leftover takeout from the Asian fusion restaurant Aslan enjoyed—the place he'd taken me on our first official date. Otherwise, there wasn't much else.

I scraped together the ingredients to make a sandwich—white bread, of course, and processed lunch meat and cheese I found buried in a small drawer inside the fridge. Not my first choice for a healthy meal, but it would have to do. I was starving. There were always those dreaded frozen chocolate-chip waffles in the freezer. A quick peek told me he'd stocked up recently.

Between Sunny D and the waffles, Aslan was a six-foot-tall five-year-old. For someone who grew up eating his mother's traditional homemade Italian cooking, I was surprised he didn't make more of an effort.

While eating, I read through Boy Scout leader Parker Cohen's interview from 1992. The kid had been twenty-one at the time, so like Iris had said, he was almost a boy himself. There wasn't anything that stood out in his interview. The police constable's questions, although harsh at times, weren't overly invasive and didn't yield a lot. Parker Cohen was one of two leaders responsible for his troop of fifteen boys. The second leader was a man named Garrett Neville. Parker complained Garrett, a man in his midthirties, was useless and didn't help.

Parker admitted he'd seen Juniper earlier that morning when he'd gone to collect one of his stray Boy Scouts, but otherwise, he had been too busy keeping track of his troop to know what had happened to a random girl he didn't know.

PC: Where were you when the commotion in the park peaked?

Cohen: Taking two of my boys to the bathroom.

PC: Did you see this young girl in the vicinity while you were at the facilities?

Cohen: No. I told you. I didn't see her again after I collected Godfrey. She was with those other girls. Godfrey's cousins. She wasn't my responsibility.

*PC*: So you didn't see her at the bathroom facility?

Cohen: I said no.

PC: Did you enter the bathrooms with the two boys or wait outside?

Cohen: What the hell, man! I waited outside. I'm not allowed to go into the bathrooms with them. I'm not one of those creeps. Why are you asking me this shit? I didn't even know this girl. You think I took her? How?

PC: No need to get testy. Just answer the questions. So you remained outside the bathrooms by yourself?

Cohen: Yes.

*PC*: *Did* you see anything unusual?

Cohen: You mean besides a ton of people running around in a frenzy? No.

PC: Can anyone vouch for your whereabouts? Can anyone confirm you remained outside the bathrooms while the two boys under your care were inside?

Cohen: The whole fucking park! Are you serious? I don't know. There were hundreds of people around. Man, this is bullshit. I don't get why you're asking me all this. I didn't even know this girl.

Parker Cohen's frustration jumped off the page. The police constable went around and around with him, asking about his behavior with the kids under his care that day, how long he'd been a scout leader, why he was so irritable, and in the end, the constable circled back to Juniper over and over to no avail. Based on the disintegrating interview transcript, Parker Cohen grew increasingly upset until the officer called it quits.

The transcript didn't tell me anything. Sure, the kid was stressed out. He'd admitted it. Twenty-one was young to be taking care of a bunch of preteen boys who wouldn't listen, especially if this Garrett person didn't help much. It didn't mean Parker was involved in a kidnapping.

I was about to tuck the interview form away and move on to the next when something at the top of the page caught my eye. I rarely took in the trivial details at the top of the forms. They were standard and had been used for decades with few changes. The first section was where they listed the time and date of the interview, along with the full details of the person being questioned; their name, age, date of birth, phone number, and address. But right below the interviewee's information in tiny, typed font was the name of the constable who'd conducted the interview, his badge number, and the division where he was stationed.

Hank Edwards, 14 Division, Badge #32

Hank Edwards? My boss? Was he part of the investigation in 1992 when Juniper had gone missing? Why the hell hadn't he said anything? Why the hell hadn't Dad said anything?

Why the hell didn't I know this?

I stared at Edwards's name a long time, perplexed. I'd been over Juniper's case so many times that it seemed impossible that I would have missed such a significant detail. To be fair, my focus had never been on the officers whose names appeared on the forms. I was more interested in the suspects and any possible leads—of which there had never been any.

I flipped through the stack of interviews I'd collected, focusing on the constable's name at the top to see who'd taken the other statements, but Edwards's name didn't show up again. Then I dug around until I found the long list of names compiled of those present on that cold November day thirty years ago. It was a list of all the police constables from every division who'd been present for the parade.

And there he was. Constable Hank Edwards was one of sixteen officers who'd come from 14 Division to march as representatives of the Toronto Police Department.

"Son of a bitch."

My brain spun and whirred as I flicked my attention from the name on the list to the name on the interview form. It shouldn't have been a huge surprise. Edwards might have been about a decade younger than my dad, but he was an officer back then. He would have been a rookie if my math was correct. Early, maybe midtwenties? How old was my boss? I wasn't sure.

The sheer volume of police who'd helped the day Juniper had vanished was in the hundreds. The park had been full of constables from across the city, and the missing girl was the daughter of one of their own. Once Missing Persons had gotten involved, the number of people helping to find her increased. I might have been just shy of six at the time, but I remembered the chaos. I remembered the sheer volume of frantic men and women in uniform trying to find my sister.

It made sense Edwards had helped. He'd been at the park and in the thick of it.

Then why was this information so bothersome?

"Why the hell didn't I know this?" I said out loud, setting the interview form down.

#### Did it matter?

I couldn't think. Pacing Aslan's living room with a frown, I tried to shake off the weirdness that accompanied my discovery. It was nothing. A small notation I'd missed over the years. Big deal. Edwards probably figured I knew of his involvement, and like most people, he'd avoided the topic of Juniper until her case had been spotlighted by recent events.

Maybe that was why he was so involved now.

It was nothing. I was overreacting.

Once I'd calmed down, I sat and tried to focus. I read through the other interviews I'd collected and jotted a few notes for when I met with Tom and Robert the following day, but my mind kept snagging on Parker Cohen and his interview with Edwards.

I went back to it, read it again, then tossed it aside. I reviewed my notes, read through more lists—paying closer attention to the names of other officers—and scowled at the stacks of paper in front of me. I hated working alone. I wanted my partner back. I wanted Eden to be there so we could toss ideas back and forth. What had she discovered about the missing girl, Avery? What had Allison and Erik discovered?

Why had Edwards divided us like this?

In a tailspin, I found my phone and texted Eden.

Quaid: Did you know Edwards was present at the Remembrance Day parade in 1992?

I wasn't surprised when my phone rang two minutes later. Eden hated texting.

"Edwards was at the parade?" she said in lieu of hello.

"More than that. He conducted at least one interview, possibly more. I don't have them all with me, so I can't check."

"Huh." In the background, I heard Eden's daughter Delilah call out. Eden yelled back, asking her to wait a minute. "I didn't know that," she said to me.

"Is it weird? Why hasn't he brought it up?"

"I don't think it's weird per se. There were tons of officers in the park that day. Everyone helped. Was his name on the list?"

"Yes."

"See?"

"But why didn't I know? Why didn't we know? Why hasn't he said anything?"

"I don't know. Is it important? It was right in front of you. Maybe he figured you already knew, and he wasn't sure how to bring it up." A pause. "It's not easy talking to you about Juni, Quaid. No one likes rocking the boat. You've always been... closed off."

I wanted to protest and say I had not, but she was right. It had been a sore spot for so long that few people dared broach the subject.

"Actually, it makes sense," Eden continued. "No wonder he's stuck his nose so far into the case. He remembers it all from back in the day. He was there. He might have had a new baby at home by that point. He can empathize with your dad. He wants closure too."

I sighed and rubbed the back of my neck. "I guess. It surprised me is all."

"How is the case review going with your dad?"

"It's... going. I forced him to talk to me this morning. It was rough. I've lined up a few interviews for tomorrow. It's hard to pin people down from thirty years ago. Not everyone is... alive."

"I bet."

"Are you getting anywhere with Avery?"

"I don't know. It would be nice to have someone to bounce ideas around with."

"I know. Same. I think we should all take five minutes and pool our information tomorrow."

"Agreed. Are you going to the interview with Lily in the morning?"

"Are you kidding?"

I could hear Eden's smile through the phone. "I figured. Maybe afterward, depending on how long it takes."

"Okay. Let's plan for that."

"I'll see you in the morning."

We hung up, and I scanned Aslan's living room. It was nearing ten. He hadn't texted, but he said he would be late. How late? I had no clue. I tidied my work, stacking folders and papers into neat piles on his coffee table, then wandered up to his bedroom, figuring I'd curl up under the covers, bask in his scent, and wait him out.

His bedroom, unlike the rest of the house, was a disaster. Aslan was great for keeping the more public living spaces of his house in order, but his bedroom never saw the same care. It was a reflection of how busy he was at work. If he was juggling cases and working late nights, it showed.

His laundry hamper was overflowing, the bed was unmade, the blankets a tangled lump in the middle, and a few stray pieces of clothing hung over the chair in the corner. The deodorant on top of his dresser was uncapped. His toothbrush lay abandoned on his bedside table—I wasn't sure how that worked—and his electric razor was on the floor, the charge cord plugged into a nearby socket.

The closet door sat open, and empty hangers dangled from the rod. The top drawer of his dresser was ajar, the one that held his socks and underwear, and it was equally empty, a few mismatched socks spilling out the sides.

Instead of getting into bed, I figured I'd start a load of laundry. Otherwise, he'd have nothing to wear in the morning. Plus, it fortified my secret fantasy of domesticity—something I would never admit when he asked later why the hell I was washing his clothes.

Maybe it was weird, but I didn't care.

I picked up the stray clothing lying around the room and stuffed it into the hamper. A shirt had fallen to the ground on the far side of the chair in the corner, so I kneeled on the cushioned center and stretched over the back to reach it, pinching it between two fingers as I lifted it from the floor. I

had every intent on tossing it with the rest of the clothes, but a faint out-of-place fragrance tickled my nose. I stilled, sniffing the air, wondering what it was. I didn't smell it again, so I dropped the shirt in the hamper and carried it to the basement and the washing machine.

It was a decent-sized unfinished basement. Aslan had turned it into a home gym with a collection of free weights and a bench. I'd never been a weightlifter and cringed when I calculated the amount of weight on the bar. Never in a million years could I lift that much.

As the water filled the machine, I checked the pockets of his trousers and turned his shirts the right way before dropping them in one at a time. When I got to the shirt I'd fished from behind the chair, I smelled the fragrant scent again. It was faintly perfumy. Not cologne.

Not masculine.

I stared at the shirt with a frown and brought it to my nose. At first, all I smelled was Aslan's personal scent and a hint of body wash and sweat. I was convinced I was losing my mind when a small piece of green paper poking out from the front shirt pocket caught my eye.

I pulled it out and discovered immediately where the perfumy scent was coming from. Double checking, I touched the paper to my nose and inhaled. It tickled the back of my throat, making me cough. Yes, definitely perfume.

I should have set it aside with the loose change and package of gum I'd found, but I couldn't. Blood pulsed in my ears, and I stared at the folded Post-it note, a million thoughts racing around my brain.

My willpower was nonexistent. I unfolded the paper, and the words inside made my breath catch. All the mistrust and skepticism that lived inside me surfaced. The crushing weight of suspicion, doubt, and uncertainty I'd carried with me for over a year when I'd dated Jack returned in a flash. I told myself not to jump to conclusions. It was nothing.

It was nothing.

It. Was. Nothing.

Then why couldn't I breathe?

On the paper was a phone number and a name. A woman's name.

Daniella.

# CHAPTER 17

### Aslan



I t was eleven before I managed to escape work. Torin and I had been chasing leads all day for the Woodbine stabbing, only to get a call from Staff Sergeant Summerfield at seven, telling us we had to get across town and handle a separate case. People often thought homicide detectives worked one case at a time—that was how TV made it look—but that wasn't true. It wasn't unusual for us to juggle several at once, making our lives crazy and sleep unavailable. At present, we had four on the go, all at different stages.

The Uber dropped me off at home at half past eleven. Quaid's car was in the driveway, and a mix of excitement and guilt surfaced. I hadn't wanted to turn him down twice in a row, but I also knew I was condemning him to a sleepless night asking him to come over, and the man had been perpetually exhausted lately since Juniper's case had gone from cold to hot.

As I found my keys, I noticed a faint light through the small window beside the door. It was coming from the kitchen. I shouldn't have been surprised Quaid was still up, but I'd hoped he would take advantage and get some sleep, knowing I was going to be late.

The house was quiet, the living room dark. I kicked off my boots and hung my jacket, wandering toward the kitchen as I yawned. I anticipated Quaid would be at the table, buried in work, oblivious to the time.

I was half right.

He was at the table, but he wasn't working. The air in the kitchen was still and tense. I paused in the doorway. The first thing I noted was the pallor of Quaid's cheeks. Then I noticed the rigidity in his shoulders, the vacancy in his eyes as he stared into space, and the whiteness of his knuckles where his hands were balled into fists.

Something was wrong. He was angry.

He hadn't acknowledged my arrival, but I didn't for one minute think he didn't know I was there.

"Hey. Are you okay?" I asked, entering the kitchen and ducking my head to try to meet his eyes. "Did something happen?"

Had I missed a text? Was there news about his case? Bad news?

In the back of my mind, a quiet voice whispered, *Did Jack call you?* I didn't ask that question out loud.

Quaid blinked, his vision clearing. He turned his head to look at me, but the blues of his eyes were arctic cold.

I couldn't read him. Not today. Was this to do with Juniper? Had they made a discovery?

No. I didn't get that vibe.

The harsh glare and the thin press of his lips told me it was personal. He was angry at me.

"Ouaid?"

He unclenched a fist, and I caught sight of a slip of paper in his hand. A green slip of paper.

No longer looking at me, staring intently at the crumpled note, he manipulated it between his fingers for a long minute as though deciding what to do. Then he unfolded it and pressed it against the table, shoving it toward me.

His words when he spoke were tight and strained, overflowing with all the emotion he was trying hard to suppress.

"Is this something I should be worried about?"

I glanced at the paper and cursed. I'd forgotten all about it. After Daniella had attacked us in the hallway the previous day, I'd slipped it into my pocket, intent on tossing it the first chance I got.

Torin and I had taken off, and I'd ranted about how much I hated reporters and journalists, how they were the scum of the

earth, and swearing up and down if she tried to contact Quaid in any way about his sister's case, she was going to be sorry.

In the craziness of my day, I'd forgotten about the phone number in my pocket. I'd come home from work the previous night at long past midnight. I'd stripped from my clothes, showered, and fallen into bed. The question of how Quaid had found it barely registered as a blip on my radar. It didn't matter. The point was, he'd found it and had convinced himself it was something it wasn't.

And I blamed Jack for that.

Motherfucking Jack Pilkey could rot in hell for all I cared.

I'd had every intention of talking to Quaid about the journalist and letting him know she could be a problem. I had planned to tell him I'd handle her, but it hadn't come up because we hadn't seen each other. I'd barely had a moment to breathe over the past two days.

Now, my fragile, brand-new relationship was in jeopardy because my boyfriend, who had severe trust issues, had discovered a woman's phone number in my shirt pocket. Not a business card for a legitimate magazine, tabloid, or newspaper identifying Daniella as a journalist, but a small piece of paper with a random name and phone number.

Perfect. Lovely.

And knowing Quaid, anything I said to explain it away would be suspicious. Jack had made enough excuses and told

enough lies over the year they'd been together that I didn't stand a chance of being heard.

Quaid broke eye contact when I didn't immediately respond. He turned the paper around with two fingers, staring at the scribbled writing, tracing his finger over her name. "I wasn't snooping. I know that's what you think. It was something I did with Jack, so why not you, right?"

"Ouaid—"

"Don't. You can talk in a minute. I need you to know that I wasn't going through your stuff."

"I know you weren't."

He huffed a humorless laugh. "Sure. Insecure, untrusting Quaid had an opportunity to ransack his boyfriend's house since he wasn't home. Why wouldn't he take it?" He shook his head. "That's not what happened. I was heading to bed. Your laundry hamper was overflowing, your closet door was open, and the hangers were empty. I... I thought I'd put your clothes in the wash so you'd have something to wear tomorrow. I knew you'd be home late, and I didn't want you to have to worry about it when you got in."

It made perfect sense. Quaid was a bit of a neat freak. If he'd seen my room was a mess and my laundry was piling up, it was something he'd naturally do. He was neurotic like that. Had there been dishes in my sink, he'd have washed them. Had I left the coffee table littered with crap, he'd have organized it. If the garbage needed to be taken out, he'd have done that too. It was who he was.

"It was in a shirt pocket. I always check pockets before washing clothes." He went quiet. His expression morphed from anger to deep sadness. He continued to stare at the phone number. The doubt and utter defeat in his eyes crushed me. "Is this something I should be worried about?" he asked again, his voice shredded.

That time I didn't pause to think. "No." I pulled a chair up beside him and sat, taking his hand. "Look at me."

His glassy blue eyes lifted, but he couldn't maintain eye contact and instead stared at a spot over my shoulder. I didn't push it. He did all he could to wipe the emotion from his face and act stoic.

He was also failing miserably.

"She's a journalist for some bullshit tabloid magazine called *Upfront and Center*. I ran into her the other day while looking for you at the press conference. Then I ran into her again yesterday as Torin and I were leaving the building. She stopped me, thinking I was involved in Juniper's case. She wants to write a story. Get an interview. I told her I was in homicide and couldn't help her. She knew your name. She knew you were Juniper's brother, and she knew about your dad's involvement. She wanted to get in contact with you and asked me to help. I refused. I didn't want her harassing you about this. Then she told me she'd find you herself. She was pushy, and I didn't like her, so when she tried to take off, I stopped her. I told her to leave it alone because you weren't interviewing for trashy tabloid magazines. She didn't listen.

So I told her I'd talk to you and see if you'd do the interview. I told her to let me handle it. It was a diversion. I wanted time to warn you she was out for blood so you didn't get sucked into a trap. She gave me her number and told me to call her when you were ready. She threatened to write some bullshit piece if I didn't get your cooperation."

Quaid's jaw ticked. He was clenching his teeth and staring at the paper again. I got the sense his minimal control was slipping, and it was all he could manage not to scream and yell... or cry, which would have been disastrous since Quaid would rather die than cry in front of anyone.

I stroked the inside of his wrist, massaged his palm, and whispered his name. His fingers were chilly and limp. He didn't acknowledge me.

I couldn't read his mind, but I knew he was turning the information I'd given him around in his head, wondering if he should believe me and if doing so made him a fool.

It made *me* want to rage. Not because Quaid didn't trust me but because of the damage his fuckwad ex had caused, because of the cracks he'd put in Quaid's foundation.

I pulled out my phone, set it on the table, and found Torin's number. I hit Connect and put it on speaker. Quaid's attention flicked to the device as it rang, a dip in his brow.

"What are you doing?" he asked, voice hoarse.

I didn't answer.

The line clicked, and Torin answered. "I thought we were going home to sleep. What the hell do you want? Please tell me I don't have to leave my house again."

"Hey, Tor. Yesterday, someone chased us down the hallway when we were on our way out of the building, remember?"

"Yeah, that reporter bitch. Why? Is she bugging you again?"

"No. Do you remember what she wanted?"

"What's going on?"

"Answer the question."

A pause. "She wanted an in with lover boy's case. Wanted to write a trashy story in her junky magazine."

"And what deal did I make with her?"

"Az—"

"Tor. Please. Say it."

He hesitated, unsure what was going on. "You told her you'd talk to him and get back to her. You made her promise not to contact him yet."

"And she gave me her phone number?"

"Do you have amnesia? Why are you asking this shit?"

"Did she give me her phone number?"

"Yeah. Did you lose it?" A pause. "Wait. Are you..."

Before he could question my motives and insert any more doubt into Quaid's mind, I jumped in. "Thanks, Tor. See you in the morning." I hit Disconnect and stared at Quaid.

It took a long time before he was able to meet my eyes. "You must think I'm a real piece of work."

"I don't."

He huffed, disbelieving. "I told you Jack messed me up. I warned you I wasn't past it yet."

"I know. And I told you I understood. I hope someday you learn to trust me, Quaid. To trust this." I swung a finger between us. "I'm not Jack. I'm all in. Both feet. Wholeheartedly."

He looked away, so I snagged his chin and turned him back to face me. "I'm *not* a cheater. If I have to say it a hundred times, *a thousand*, I will. Every day until you believe me. I'm not going to step out on you."

The skepticism on his face broke my heart. Would he ever believe me? He scarcely believed I was capable of having a relationship because of my past. He wanted to trust. He wanted to believe. Desperately. But every day, Quaid waited on pins and needles for me to give up and walk away.

"I should go," he said.

"Why?"

"Because I basically just accused you of cheating, and now I feel like an idiot."

"You didn't accuse me of cheating. You had an honest concern, and you addressed it. I had a woman's phone number in my pocket. It was reasonable."

"A phone number I found by snooping."

"I thought we determined it wasn't snooping."

"Potato, potahto. I'm a real piece of work sometimes."

"You know, this self-deprecating attitude needs to stop, mister. It's really unattractive. I like you better when you're snarly and aggressive and challenge me whenever I open my mouth." I was poking fun and smirked, jabbing his ribs to take the sting out of the words, but I immediately saw the comment landed wrong.

He twisted it around and turned it into something it wasn't —me getting fed up with his insecurity.

He slid his chair back.

I reached for his hand, but he pulled away, fingers folding back into a firm fist.

The raw feelings that had been on his face a moment ago vanished. The steel wall slammed down, shutting off all emotions. This was the side of Quaid that frustrated me. This was the man who refused to be vulnerable, who hid behind barriers and acted like everything was fine when I knew he was a mess on the inside. Quaid had convinced himself that I would leave if I saw him as weak. He'd predetermined those qualities were unappealing, so he tried to prove that he was strong and confident. The self-hatred he carried was rich and ugly.

When he met my eyes again, none of the uncertainty and fear remained. He wore the prickly coat of armor he donned for work every day. Crisp blue eyes, a stiff upper lip, and a slight turn of his nose that hinted at a sneer. This was the Quaid I'd first gotten to know back in August. The one who didn't allow the world to see his true self.

"Your laundry is done."

"You didn't have to do that, but thank you."

He shrugged.

"Ouaid—"

He shook his head. "We don't have to talk about it anymore. I'm fine. It was stupid. I shouldn't have brought it up. I trust you."

You don't, and it's not your fault.

I wanted to argue and point out he wasn't fine and didn't have to be fine for me, but it was late, and I wasn't in the mood for confrontation. We were cusping the edge of a fight, and I didn't have the energy.

I wasn't going to convince Quaid that he was allowed to have feelings and be emotional and that they wouldn't scare me off. Not tonight.

I stood and hooked two fingers under his chin, forcing him to look at me. "Are you coming to bed?"

"Is that what you want?"

I huffed a laugh, but it was tinged with irritation. "Just let this go. I'm not upset. I'm tired. And yes, I want you in bed. I always want you in my bed. That's why I told you to come over."

And did he take that wrong too?

Of course he did because why would I want more than sex from him?

Quaid folded his bottom lip into his mouth and clamped it between his teeth as he reached up and undid my belt. The look in his eyes shifted to a mixture of desperation and need. Don't hate me, it screamed. I'll be better. Don't toss me aside. Don't give up. Give me a chance. I can make you happy.

I brushed my fingers through his hair, pushing it back off his forehead. It was soft without product, the different tones of blond all blending together.

I wished I could take away the taint Jack had left behind. I wish I could purge his soul of the rot that poisoned him from the inside out.

"Quaid. That's not what I meant. I didn't invite you over because—"

He shook his head. "Please. Let me."

My belt was undone. He removed my holster, set it on the table, and popped the button on my trousers next. My pants and underwear were down in a flash, and Quaid dropped to his knees and took me into his mouth. I wasn't even hard, the conversation hadn't amplified the mood, but Quaid didn't care. He had something to prove and wouldn't be deterred.

I grunted, grasping a fistful of his hair, trying to slow him down. I pinched my eyes shut at the sudden intensity of a hot wet mouth on my dormant cock. It didn't take long for my blood to rush south.

I should have stopped him. I knew what this was all about. The influence driving him was all wrong. It felt ugly and forced. But my mind went on the fritz, and all I could focus on was the intense heat flowing through my veins and the delicious suction making my toes curl.

Quaid hollowed his cheeks, working me eagerly. I petted his hair and watched my cock disappear between his plump lips over and over as he bobbed up and down. He must have sensed the attention and peeked up, eyes glistening and hungry, utterly defenseless.

With our gazes locked, he ramped up his effort, adding a hand at the base and stroking with a twist of his wrist each time he went up and down. He swirled his tongue around my tip. He massaged and tugged my balls with the other hand. The slurping and tight heat of his mouth was extreme. My thighs trembled as I tried to keep my footing, tried to savor the sensations and not blast to the finish line too soon.

"You're so good at that," I rasped, stroking his cheek.

He came off and used a flat tongue to lick a slow path from root to tip, gathering a tiny bead of precum and sucking it into his mouth.

I groaned. "Let's take this upstairs."

"No." He went back to work. I knew what he was doing. He was trying to impress me because he was convinced there was always something better around the corner. Helpless, I gave him what he needed. Praise. Lots of it. For someone so sure of himself at work, when it came to relationships, his self-confidence flatlined.

This was Quaid's game, although I didn't think he played it on purpose. It had happened twice before since we'd started dating, always during times when he feared I would cast him aside. He would throw himself at me, working extra hard to please me and make himself seem worthy—whatever that meant.

Quaid didn't seem to realize I didn't need these heroic displays. I didn't need him to be perfect. I just wanted him to be comfortable enough with me to fall apart if he had to.

But progress was slow. We weren't there yet.

I slipped a hand under his chin, feeling my cock slide along the inside of his throat and his muscles work when he swallowed around me. My knees almost gave out.

"You're gonna make me come if you keep it up. Your mouth is incredible."

He hummed his approval, the vibrations running along my cock.

"Is that what you want? You want me to come?"

He nodded, popping off for a second to say, "Yes. Down my throat."

Before he could swallow me again, I held him back, tracing my thumb over his abused bottom lip. I wanted to tell him to stop performing. I wanted to tell him I saw through him, and this wasn't what I wanted, but the wide-eyed puppy-dog look staring up at me made the words stick in my throat.

"You're so fucking gorgeous, Quaid. I can't believe you're mine. All mine. I don't want anyone else."

A brief flash of shame crossed his eyes, and he flicked his attention to my erection.

I tried to force us onto a different path. "Can I take you to bed and fuck you properly?"

He shook his head, his throat muscles working with a hard swallow as he blinked furiously. "Like this. Please."

"Quaid—"

He fought against my hold and took me into his mouth again. I didn't have the capacity to fight anymore. His skills and determination trumped all the levelheadedness I'd tried to maintain.

A few more glides up and down my shaft, and I was coming, gritting my teeth and growling his name as I shoved as deep as I could into his mouth, making him cough and choke.

My whole body trembled with the aftershocks, and I stumbled back a step, almost tripping on my pants and grabbing at the table to steady myself.

Quaid's lips were bright pink and swollen, his cheeks flushed. My coordination was shot, so it took a second for my head to stop spinning. Quaid got to his feet. He took my face between his palms and kissed me long and hard. It wasn't sweet. It was brutal, and I tasted the fear on his tongue. I felt every vibration that ran through his body.

He trembled with as much intensity as me. It jittered through his limbs. I kissed him back, but I could hardly keep up and forced him to relent after a second, holding him back by the shoulders. "Hey. Relax."

Our eyes locked. He looked like he had a thousand things to say but didn't know how to begin.

I reached to cup his cheek, but he batted my hand away.

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"Quaid..."
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"Don't."

I was about to ask if he was all right, but he furiously shook his head and scooted around me, darting down the hall.

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"Quaid?"
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He didn't answer. I went to chase him down but almost tripped on my pants again since they were still around my ankles. By the time I had them done up and was halfway down the hall, the front door slammed.

"Shit." I ran, but he ran faster.

He was in the car, engine roaring and pulling out of my driveway before I could stop him. I stood at the end of the driveway as he drove away, his taillights fading into the night until they blinked out altogether.

## CHAPTER 18

## Quaid



I made it three blocks before the internal shaking was too much to control. No matter how hard I clenched my teeth or blinked my eyes, my vision blurred. I pulled off to the side of the road and hit my hazards, chanting, "I'm not going to cry. I'm not going to cry. This is bullshit. I'm *not* going to cry. Get a grip!"

Staring straight ahead, the halo of streetlights lining both sides of the road grew fuzzier and fuzzier. The sting in my eyes intensified. I forced air in through my nose and out through my mouth. In and out. My teeth chattered if I released the tension, so I didn't.

I'd fucked up. So freaking typical. Leave it to me. I'd let my stupid insecurities take over and did exactly what I swore I wouldn't do. I'd backed Aslan into a corner.

How many times had I told myself not to cast Aslan in the same mold as Jack? How many times had I told myself there would be a perfectly reasonable explanation for the phone number, and I was acting stupid? And what had I done? Instantly assumed the worst and jumped on him the second he walked through the door. I didn't ask. I'd accused. He was guilty until proven innocent instead of being the other way around.

How unfair.

I smacked my palm against the steering wheel, growling my frustration, blinking furiously.

Then, in a failed effort to remedy the situation and show Aslan I wasn't worried or vulnerable or pathetic, I'd thrown myself at him because if I was desirable, he wouldn't secondguess his decision to date me, right?

Fuck me.

He'd seen right through the act, but I hadn't been able to stop. The desperate need to prove I was cool and confident was too strong.

I was going to lose him before we'd barely begun.

My chest constricted, and I squeezed the steering wheel, doing everything in my power to remain in control.

I was so stupid. So, so stupid.

It was a losing battle.

When the first tear escaped, more followed, and they wouldn't stop.

Hugging the steering wheel, I buried my face in my arms and wept.

Morning came early. I woke with gritty eyes to my alarm, and although I'd slept, I felt like I hadn't. My body ached as I crawled out of bed and into the shower. I shaved and dressed robotically, forcing my mind to think about Juniper's case and all I had to do today so I wouldn't revisit the nightmare that had happened at Aslan's.

I poured coffee into my travel mug and looked for the work folders I'd brought home, only to realize I'd left them at Aslan's house.

"Shit." I pressed fingers into my eyes, a headache growing at the base of my skull.

Shaken and unsure if I was ready for a confrontation, I pulled out my phone, intent on sending him a text, when I saw the time. I panicked. I'd been dragging ass all morning, and if I didn't hurry, I would be late for Lily's second interview.

I'd worry about collecting my folders later. I still had Aslan's spare key. I could sneak in and grab them once I had a free minute. He'd be gone all day since he was neck-deep in multiple cases.

It wasn't until I parked in the lot at headquarters and reached for my coffee in the cup holder that I realized I'd forgotten it at home on the kitchen counter. This day was not starting well. I needed to pull my shit together.

I hustled inside and took the elevator to the fourth floor and MPU, working to erase all signs of distress from my face and donning a stolid mask of indifference. When the doors opened, I got off, aimed for my desk, then stalled.

Aslan was there, feet kicked up, chatting with Eden.

He saw me, and a soft, wary smile crossed his face as he waved. He pointed to a large takeout coffee sitting on the corner of the desk, then hooked a finger, beckoning me over.

Eden glanced over her shoulder, following Aslan's gaze. The look on her face told me they hadn't been chatting about work.

Lovely. Just what I needed, to have my pathetic personal life on display.

When I got to our joined desks, I flicked my attention between them.

"You're sneering," Aslan pointed out.

"No, I'm not," I mumbled. But I was. I could feel it on my face.

Eden stood and squeezed my arm, giving it a gentle rub. "Ruiz is setting up the video cam right now. You have fifteen minutes or so before we start. Same room where we had Evelyn." Then she leaned closer and lowered her voice. "I know I said I didn't like him, but maybe I was wrong. He's a good guy."

He was.

Aslan was better than good, but I was blowing it. I'd told him back in October I wasn't sure I was healed enough from Jack's abuse to pursue a new relationship.

And look where it had landed us.

"I know. Thanks. See you in there."

She wandered away, leaving me alone with Aslan.

"You're still sneering."

I scowled at the mess of papers on Eden's desk. "Rough night."

"I figured." Aslan dropped his feet to the ground and slid the coffee toward me. "Thought you might need this. Milk, fake sugar, and I had them add a shot of espresso because I was afraid you didn't sleep and might need the extra caffeine."

I struggled to meet his eyes as I accepted the coffee. "Thank you. I... left my coffee at home on the counter, so I appreciate it." I tried to smile, but I wasn't sure I succeeded. I cracked the lid on the cup and took a large gulp, sighing.

"Thought you might need these too." Aslan patted a stack of folders on the desk. The case information I'd left at his house. "Found them on the coffee table."

I said nothing, staring at the coffee in my hands, my stomach clenching. A dull throb radiated up my neck and pulsed in my temples.

Aslan must have read hints of pain on my face. He tugged a drawer open, riffled around, then tossed me a bottle of Advil.

I tapped out two tablets and took them with another mouthful of coffee. "Thank you." I floundered for words as

Aslan stuck the bottle back into my desk. "Az..."

He got up and stood in front of me, touching my arm. "Can we talk? I know you've got this interview soon, but... please?"

I stole a quick glance at Edwards's office. My boss was working, but I had no doubt he had half an eye on me, and his comment about professionalism rang in my mind.

"Sure. Not here." I set the coffee down and hitched my chin, telling Aslan to follow as I aimed for no man's land and the first supply closet on the right. We were getting far too familiar with the space.

Once we were out of sight and the door locked, I tugged fingers through my hair, messing up the neat order I'd created less than an hour ago. "Edwards knows about us and felt the need to remind me about professionalism, so... we need to be careful." I tried to meet Aslan's eyes, but it was impossible, so I stared at a shelf where a stack of copy paper sat crooked, gathering dust. I had the sudden urge to fix it, to clean the whole goddamn room instead of facing Aslan and the repercussions from the previous night. "We should... get to it. I don't have much time. Lily's interview is—"

"I know. Eden told me. I don't have much time either. Torin's waiting for me. We've got a busy day." He stepped into my space and took my face, angling it so I'd look at him. "I'm going to say this, then let you get to work. No interrupting or arguing. Listen, take it with you, and absorb it. Understand?"

His tone was harsh and brooked no argument. This was it. This was the moment when he told me he couldn't tolerate being accused of infidelity. If I couldn't trust him, we couldn't make this work.

I held my breath, tightened my jaw, and steeled my spine.

Aslan huffed a small laugh. "Jesus. You're already bracing for impact, and I haven't said a thing." He fixed a strand of hair off my face and brushed his knuckles over my cheek. "Stop sneering."

"I'm not—"

"You are." He smoothed the deep crease between my brows. "I see you, Quaid. I know what you're doing. All these walls you put up, all that fear in your heart that you desperately try to hide, I see it. You told me you weren't ready to date again when we got together."

I closed my eyes. He did remember, and he was going to acknowledge how right I was and use it as an excuse to leave.

"Don't do that. Open your eyes and look at me. Stop fucking hiding."

I opened my eyes. His irises were such a dark brown I could barely see the pupils. They shone with a mixture of worried affection, but there was annoyance too.

"Are you listening?"

"Yes."

He kissed my forehead. "Breathe, Quaid. Good grief, you're wound tighter than a spring."

I couldn't breathe. The act of dragging air into my lungs physically hurt. My chest pinched, and I was so fucking mad at myself.

Aslan sighed and brought his forehead to mine. "You can't do it. You are physically unable to relax and trust this moment, aren't you?"

I was surrounded by his scent. Cologne, leather, and Aslan. "You are so bullheaded sometimes," he said.

"My head is pounding, Az. I slept like shit, and I have a mess of a case on my hands. If you're trying to break up with me, rip the Band-Aid off already."

The bastard chuckled. "Jesus Christ. Why am I not surprised that's what you think?"

"Az—"

"I'm not breaking up with you, idiot." He flicked my forehead, and I scowled. "Shut up and listen to me. Stop drawing your own conclusions. You told me Jack fucked you up and that you didn't know if you had enough distance from him to make a relationship happen with me. I respected your honesty, and I took that into account. I told you I understood but still wanted to try even though I knew I would have to work extra hard to earn your trust."

"It's not fair."

"I get it, Quaid. *I don't blame you*. Jack lied to you over and over again for a solid year. He took you for granted. He abused your trust. He messed with your head. He went behind your

back so many times that you question everything and everyone. He made you feel unworthy of love, but you are so worthy, Quaid Valor. Do you hear me? I'm going to prove it to you. I know you're waiting for the day I break your heart, but "

"No, I'm not."

"You just assumed I was going to break up with you. You walk on eggshells around me because you're afraid to do anything wrong that might drive me away. You perform, and don't tell me that wasn't a goddamn performance last night. It was. Please stop. I'm not going anywhere. I don't want my old life back. I want to make this work with you, but you have to work with me here. Communicate. Stop shutting down. Give yourself permission to not be okay for a change. It doesn't make you weak in my eyes, I promise you. You're allowed to hurt. You're allowed to take time to heal after what Jack did to you. You're allowed to spend time learning to trust me and asking questions. You're allowed to feel emotional and vulnerable and angry and sad. Stop hiding from me, Quaid. Stop saying you're fine when you aren't. Stop trying to prove yourself because you think I wouldn't like you otherwise."

The burn was back. The sting. I blinked hard, refusing to move my gaze from the top button of his shirt, certain that any eye movement would start a flood.

He kissed me, and when I squeezed my eyes closed and kissed him back, one snuck out. He suckled gently on my bottom lip, teasing the tip of his tongue with mine. I moved my hands around him and clung to the back of his shirt.

Aslan pulled back a minute later and swiped a thumb along my cheek, smearing the single tear away. He kissed my eyes, then my forehead. When he brought his mouth to my ear, he whispered, "You are worthy, and I'm not going anywhere. I will tell you every day until you believe me." Then he kissed my temple, squeezed my hand, and slipped from the room.

It took me another five minutes to absorb all he'd said and pull myself together. As much as I wanted to deconstruct our whole conversation, I didn't have time. Blowing out a breath, I packed it away and hustled out the door to the room where Lily's interview was about to start without me.

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The small office we were using to view Lily's interview was crowded. Dad had shown up, and for a startling second, I panicked, wondering if I was supposed to have picked him up that morning and forgotten. But no, we hadn't made plans because we'd barely spoken after the previous morning when Dad had begrudgingly unloaded about the day Juniper had vanished, then locked himself in the bathroom.

He and Erik were chatting, sitting side by side on chairs near the table where the laptop was angled so everyone could see.

Edwards was present, talking quietly to Eden.

On the screen, in the neighboring room, Allison reviewed her notes while Lily and Dr. Benoit, the child psychologist, sat on a couch opposite. Lily, more alert than the previous time I'd seen her but no less nervous, studied the room as she played with a hot pink rubber bracelet around her wrist. Her cheeks were pale, and her wide blue eyes radiated fear. Her mother wasn't present, so she couldn't burrow into her side and escape. Maybe we'd get somewhere.

"You made it," Eden said, drawing my attention from the screen as she came up beside me.

"Of course." I offered her a tight smile, crossing my arms over my chest, hoping she saw nothing but cool indifference.

"Are you and Aslan okay?"

"We're fine."

"He told me what happened."

"He shouldn't have. I said we're fine. Are we still meeting as a group afterward?" I asked, redirecting the conversation.

Eden sighed and glanced at Edwards, lowering her voice. "Not sure. We'll have to see what's what."

In other words, it would depend on how the interview went and how deep Edwards was sticking his nose into our activities.

"He has a meeting with a few people later. Media. Something's going on. I don't know what, but the phones won't stop ringing, and they're demanding another press conference."

I flicked my gaze to Edwards, who shifted and eyed me. I didn't respond to Eden's comment. Something told me to keep my mouth shut.

Erik and Dad glanced back, noting my arrival. Erik offered an acknowledging nod, and Dad gave me a skeptical onceover before turning back to the laptop. I had to refrain from checking to be sure my tie wasn't crooked or my shirt wrinkled.

Edwards cleared his throat to grab our attention. "Bright has been informed that if at any time Dr. Benoit feels the child is not coping well, the interview will end. For that reason, Bright's questions might seem sporadic and out of order. I've instructed her to ask the most pertinent ones first. The more answers we can get, the better. How are we looking?" he asked Erik, who held up a finger.

On the laptop screen, Allison typed on her phone. A moment later, Erik's phone pinged. He glanced at the screen. "Allison is ready. If we have additional questions, we are to text them to her, and she will try to include them. Otherwise, she'll stick to the script."

Edwards reached around Dad and turned up the volume on the laptop. The room hushed as Allison began.

"Good morning, Lily. How are you today?"

"Good." The little girl's voice was meek and mild. She twisted her fingers together in her lap as she sat rigidly on the couch.

"Did Mommy and Dr. Benoit tell you what was happening today?"

Lily nodded. "I have to talk about the bad place for a little bit, but Mommy said if I do good, then we can go to McDonald's for lunch."

Allison smiled. "That sounds fun. How about we ask the questions super fast so you can leave? Does that sound like a deal?"

Lily seemed to like that idea and nodded with a weak smile.

Allison glanced at her notes, and I think everyone in the room with me held their collective breaths, hoping Lily could answer better than she had before.

"Do you remember the place where you were taken, Lily?"

A hesitant nod.

"Can you tell me what it looked like?"

Lily chewed her lip, plucked at the bracelet a few times, then shrugged. My heart sank. Were we going to get a bunch of gestures like last time?

"Was it a big place or a small place? Was it dark or bright? What can you remember?"

Lily twisted her lips and kicked her feet rhythmically against the couch. "It was... like a basement."

"That's good. What was in the basement?"

"A little bed."

"Anything else?"

A nod.

"Can you tell me?"

Lily's nose wrinkled, and her cheeks pinked. "A bucket. I had to use it like a toilet. It was gross."

"Was there a window or a door in the room?"

Another nod. Then a shake. "Um... just a door. Not a window. All the walls were like rocks. Um... stones."

"Concrete?"

"Yeah. Concrete. But... one wall was different. It was... like... different. Like the ones inside my house at home. The door was metal and locked."

"Were you alone in the basement?"

Lily hesitated, then nodded, but she didn't seem sure.

"Did you ever see anyone else in the basement?"

Lily twisted her fingers and glanced at the doctor, then to the door at the far side of the room. Fear filled her blue eyes, but she nodded. "Sometimes. When I was supposed to be sleeping."

"Who did you see?"

Lily's gaze flicked side to side, but she shook her head. "A grown-up."

"Do you remember what the person looked like? Was it a man or a woman?"

Lily shook her head. "It was too dark."

"Was it a fat person or a skinny person?"

"Um... not fat. They had a hat on."

"What kind of hat?"

"Like a baseball one."

"Did this person ever speak to you?"

She shook her head.

"Why did they come into the room?"

"To give me food and stuff. And a clean bucket."

Allison shifted, crossing her legs the other way as she referred to her notes. "Do you know if there were other children in the basement with you?"

"No... Um... yes."

Erik made a fist and rested it against his mouth. Eden shuffled closer until her arm rested against mine. I wasn't sure if I was holding her up or she was holding me up, but I knew my partner well enough to know her heart had skipped a beat the same as mine.

"What does that mean?" Allison asked.

Lily's bottom lip trembled. "I heard a boy sometimes, but I didn't see him. He was... somewhere else." She glanced around frantically, and the doctor moved closer, patting Lily's hands and telling her she was okay.

"What did the boy say?" Allison asked.

"He wanted to talk to me all the time, but I didn't want to talk to him. I told him to go away. I wanted my mommy, and I cried a lot." Tears rolled down Lily's cheeks.

"She needs to ask about the backpack," Dad mumbled. "This girl isn't going to last."

"She will. It's on the list," Erik said.

"It should have been top of the list," Dad snapped.

"Abe," Edwards said, a warning in his tone.

Dad shut up, but he didn't look pleased.

Allison gave Lily a minute to calm down before asking, "Do you know what the boy's name was? Did he tell you?"

Lily shook her head.

"What did the boy want to talk about?"

"I don't know," Lily shouted. "I hated him. He called me a baby. He told me to stop crying all the time. He said I was dumb, and he didn't like me."

Allison shared a look with Dr. Benoit, who subtly shook her head, warning Allison off this line of questioning.

Much to everyone's chagrin, Allison switched gears. "We're almost done, sweetie. Just a few more questions. You're doing great. I'm so proud of you."

"I want my mommy."

"She's waiting right outside the door. Don't forget you can have McDonald's soon."

It dawned on me that Lily's mother hadn't joined us to watch the interview on the screen. I would have expected her to be present. Maybe she hadn't wanted to revisit the whole ordeal, or maybe Edwards had asked her not to be part of it, knowing it would be difficult and fearing she might stop the interview before we got the answers we needed.

"Lily, the person who brought you food, did they bring you other things?"

"Yes. Clothes. The boy said I had to wear them. I didn't want to, but I was scared, and..." Her chin wobbled. "I peed in my other clothes. It was an accident, so I put on the new ones. I hate dresses. Mommy doesn't make me wear them, but the boy said too bad."

"That sounds frustrating. Lily, I have an important question. Do you remember the backpack you had with you when the man found you at the park?"

Lily nodded.

"Where did you get it from?"

She shrugged. "It was there when I woke up. The boy said if I listened really good, I could go home and see Mommy. He said I had a job to do. I had to keep the backpack and not let go. He said only give it to the policeman in the picture."

Ice water pooled in my belly, sending a wave of goose bumps down my arms and up my neck. Eden took hold of my arm, and only then did I sense I was swaying off-balance. My mouth dried, and I couldn't find enough saliva to form words.

"Shit," Erik muttered under his breath.

Dad shuffled, leaning closer to the screen.

"What picture?" Allison asked.

"It was with the backpack. The boy said I wasn't allowed to keep it. He said I had to look really good and remember, then I could go see Mommy, but I couldn't keep the picture. I gave the backpack to the policeman in the picture, like the boy said. He came to the hospital to see it."

Allison didn't speak for a long minute, and my ears rang. She turned and stared at the camera. "Erik? How do you want me to proceed with this?"

Erik, whose fist was still covering his mouth, didn't move. After a beat, he slowly shifted and stared at me. I felt the heat of Edwards's gaze on the back of my neck. Dad didn't turn around, but the stiff set of his shoulders told me enough.

It was Eden who spoke. "In the hospital, Lily wouldn't let anyone take the backpack away from her. She was extremely possessive over it until the day Quaid came with me to see it. After, she didn't seem to care anymore."

"She'd fulfilled her task," Dad muttered.

Erik pulled out his phone and typed. A minute later, Allison, having read whatever message he'd sent, nodded at the camera and shifted around. "Lily, can I ask one of my friends to come into the room? I want to know if he's the police officer you saw in the picture, okay?"

Lily hugged herself and glanced at the doctor as though seeking guidance.

"It's up to you," Dr. Benoit said.

In the end, Lily nodded. "Okay."

I barely felt the ground beneath my feet as I moved into the hallway and crossed to the room next door. My palm was slick on the knob as I pushed it open. I hoped my face was neutral and didn't show the depth of my fear because I was trembling hard enough on the inside to rattle bones.

I stepped into the room and found a smile for the little girl on the couch. It felt tight on my face. "Hi. I'm Quaid."

Lily's eyes widened. "You're the policeman in the picture."

"Am I?"

She nodded, her hair flopping into her eyes. "You have the backpack now, right? I was supposed to give it to you."

"I have it. Thank you."

A roar of questions filled my ears, pounding against the inside of my skull, screaming to get out. If I opened my mouth and voiced them, I would overwhelm the girl. I would ruin the whole interview. I didn't know where to put myself until Allison waved me over to sit on a chair she'd pulled beside hers.

I sat hard, my head a cyclone of activity. Allison, sensing my turmoil, rested a hand on my thigh and squeezed.

Lily stared at me in wonder, and I stared back, my skin crawling and itching, my insides twisting so tight I was glad I'd skipped breakfast.

"Lily," I said before Allison could continue. I knew I was invading the structurally organized interview, but I didn't care. I couldn't help it. "The boy you heard, did he ever talk about a little girl named Juniper?"

Lily's face scrunched, but she shook her head. "No."

My hopes plummeted. I opened my mouth to say more, but Allison squeezed my thigh again, silencing me.

"Lily, can we talk about your end-of-school party at the park?"

Lily took a minute to switch her focus from me to Allison. When she did, she nodded.

"It's very important we know what happened that day and who took you."

"You arrest the bad people, right?"

"We do, and we think the person who took you might have another little girl right now. We need to find her. What can you remember about that day at the park?"

Lily stared at her hands. She rolled the rubber bracelet around her thin wrist. A tiny crease appeared between her brows. "I don't know everything. I can't remember."

"Tell me what you can."

"I was running around a lot, and it was hot. We were playing on the climber."

"Who's we? You and your friends?"

Lily nodded. "Portia, Savannah, Damien, and two boys from the other school. We were playing tag, and Portia fell and scraped her knee. Ms. Daisy came to fix her up. I told her I was too hot and needed a drink. Ms. Daisy told me to wait because we were going to have lunch in fifteen minutes. But that was a long time, and my throat was sticky. I told her, but she said to wait. Then the boy from the other school told me his teacher brought a cooler with drinks, and he said he could show me where they were. We ran over. It was near the shady trees. He gave me a bottle of water and..."

"Did you drink it?"

"I think so. I don't remember."

"What happened after?"

"I don't remember. He ran back to the play equipment, and I... I don't know. I woke up inside the basement, and I was scared." Her eyes pooled. "Can I see my mommy now?"

I stared at Lily, noting the confusion on her face and the intensity with which she grappled at those missing memories.

"Almost there, sweetie," Allison said. "Do you remember the name of the boy who took you to get a drink?"

"Um... he was from the other school. I can't remember which one he was because we were playing with two boys that

day. One boy was named Alex, I think. The other was... um... Kader."

The oxygen I'd breathed into my lungs froze, and I felt Allison stiffen beside me. "Did you say Kader?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

Lily nodded. Evelyn's interview came back to me, her precocious little voice telling us how a boy named Kader had directed her to where she could get a balloon animal. What were the chances that the two girls who'd gone missing recently, the same two girls who later reappeared out of nowhere, had both spoken to a boy named Kader within minutes of vanishing?

It wasn't a coincidence.

## CHAPTER 19

## Quaid



ow on earth can you say that? It's not a goddamn coincidence." I slammed my hand on the conference room table. "Look at the facts."

"I'm not saying it isn't a strong possibility. I'm saying we have to be careful we aren't warping possible evidence to make it work for us." Erik, expression flat and voice monotone, challenged me from the other side of the table. He stood with his arms crossed, Allison, a silent sentinel at his side.

Eden stood by the door, watching for Edwards, who'd needed to deal with something press-related before he could join us. Dad had taken a seat at the head of the conference room table, but he'd been annoyingly silent, listening to Erik and me volley arguments back and forth. It would have been nice if he'd taken my side.

"We have two missing girls who were lured away from a crowded setting by a boy named Kader."

"You keep saying lured. That is subjective. I'm playing devil's advocate, Valor, and you know I'm justified." Erik held up a finger when I opened my mouth to retaliate. "Listen to me. One. The soccer tournament brought in hundreds of kids from all over the city. It is not unreasonable to think this Kader boy Evelyn spoke of went to one of the two schools present for the end-of-the-year party with Lily." He held up a second finger. "Two. According to Evelyn, this boy didn't *take her* anywhere."

"No, but he told her where to go to find a balloon man who didn't exist."

"Someone was making balloon animals that day for the kids, so ergo, he did exist. Plus, the boy who took Lily for a drink ran back to the playground after showing her where the water was. Those were her words."

"She didn't sound positive about that. You heard the uncertainty in her tone. My gut tells me this boy *lured* her there and gave her contaminated water. She doesn't remember anything afterward because she was drugged and taken. The *same boy* convinced Evelyn to go somewhere specific as well. He didn't have to take her hand. All he had to do was make sure she followed through."

Erik threw his hands up. "Well, you've got it all sorted then."

"I'm not saying I do. I'm saying—"

A sharp whistle cut into the room, and Erik and I both fell silent. Edwards had come through the door, and he made a

point of slamming it behind him. "All right, listen up. This is what's happening." He addressed Allison. "We have lists of all the children on all the soccer teams present for the day of the tournament, correct?"

"Yes."

"Sir," I interrupted. "The boy didn't play soccer. His sister did."

Edwards's cold glare landed on me. "I'm aware, Valor. I've seen the interview."

"Sorry. It's just that—"

"Bright. Travolta." Edwards spoke over me. "You two will divide the list and contact every family on the field that day. Your only goal is to find the child named Kader. He is the brother of one of the players."

He's not, I wanted to shout. I kept my mouth shut.

"Gelekar. Do we have a list of people who were present for the pool party on Halloween when"—he snapped his fingers —"what the hell was the girl's name?"

"Avery, sir," Eden said.

"Right. Thank you. Do we have that list?"

"I have a basic list of those invited, sir, but it may not encompass everyone present that day. The party was open to friends and family of team members. We don't have exact records." "Do what you can. I want to know if we can tie this boy to the pool party as well."

"Sir," I interrupted, "with all due respect, I understand why you think this is necessary, but if Kader is the boy from the vent and his purpose was to lure these girls into a trap, his name won't turn up anywhere. He's a ghost. He wasn't at the soccer field to play. He wasn't at the pool party to swim. He's not a student from either of the schools. He was present for one reason and one reason only."

"Are you running this investigation, or am I?"

I opened my mouth, thought better of it, then closed it again. I glanced at Erik and Allison who looked equally surprised at the snap in Edwards's tone. We'd all been under the impression that Erik was lead on this case, but Edwards had stormed in like a wrecking ball and had taken over.

Dad sat silently, observing from the other end of the room, a scowl on his face as he stared at my boss.

"Sorry, sir."

"Valor, you and Abe go through the lists of students present for the end-of-the-year party. If anyone finds any connection to this Kader child, I want to know."

We all mumbled our agreement, and Edwards left.

No one spoke.

Eden slipped out of the room first, followed by Allison and my father, who leaned heavily on his cane, moving slower than he had been the previous day. Allison touched my arm on the way out, explaining she would get the lists of students for us to review ASAP.

Erik hung back. He stared at the table's surface, arms still crossed over his chest, a hint of a frown on his face.

"Why the hell is he railroading our investigation?" I asked, figuring I was missing something. "You're lead. He assigned you as the lead. What is happening here?"

"The press is up his ass. I don't know what's going on, but there seems to be something. Revealing these cases are somehow tied to Juniper has caused an uproar. They should have kept it quiet. He's been fielding media all week. I overheard someone from CTV wants to do a segment on the case and bring one of us onto the show. They have questions they want answered, and they figured the extra coverage would be helpful to us."

"It's all bullshit." I scrubbed my face, thinking of the woman from a tabloid magazine trying to get at me through Aslan. I'd skipped the press conference and had been so tied up in my work that I hadn't realized how relentless the media was getting. Erik was right. Every time I walked through the lobby, there was a media presence. Every time I saw Edwards in his office, he was battling with someone from the press, whether on the phone or in person.

"You're right, by the way," Erik said.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Right? About what?"

"The more I think about it, the more I'm convinced. We aren't going to find this Kader kid. He's not going to be on any of these lists."

I scowled. "Not five minutes ago, you fought with me, adamant this was a coincidence."

"I wasn't adamant. I was merely suggesting we shouldn't jump to conclusions. You've been running this case hot since the backpack showed up in October. I get it. The case is personal, and I'd be the same way in your shoes. I was trying to be logical, but what you're saying makes sense. We have three girls who somehow vanished in a crowd of other adults and children, and no one, not one single person, saw a goddamn thing. How does that happen?" Erik lifted his gaze to mine. "These girls weren't taken kicking and screaming, Valor. Someone would have seen that. Children aren't likely to go anywhere with a stranger. We've trained them too well for that. But—"

"If it was someone they knew—"

"If it was someone they trusted, like another child who they thought was their friend—"

"Then they'd go willingly. They'd let someone guide or lure them into a trap."

"This boy in the wall. He's our Kader, and he isn't going to be on any goddamn list."

"So what do we do? Edwards is adamant, and I get the whole dotting our i's and crossing our t's thing, but..."

"Edwards is on some kind of power trip right now. I don't know why. Maybe it's the media or something else, but we'd better do as he says. In the meantime, keep running whatever leads you've got."

I shook my head. "This is ridiculous. We need to meet up outside of here. It's time we pool resources and toss ideas around properly. How are we going to make connections when we're all separated? I'm tired of going solo."

"I agree. Let me talk to Allison. We'll figure something out."

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Allison got Dad and me a list of students' names from both schools that had been at the park the day Lily had gone missing. I asked Dad to review them since I had other engagements lined up and was scrambling to get out of the building so I would be on time for my interview with Tom and Robert that afternoon.

I figured Dad would argue I was giving him the shitty tasks and insist on joining me, but he didn't. He was unnaturally subdued and agreeable. Maybe spending a day going over the events that had led to Juniper's kidnapping was enough.

"Are you okay?" I asked as I shrugged on my coat.

His skin was gray, his eyes heavy. After a few days on this case, he looked worse for wear.

"Just tired. I'm not sleeping well."

Him and me both.

"Do you want an ice pack for your knee?" He'd been rubbing it obsessively.

"Nah. It's fine."

"There's Advil in the drawer there. Help yourself."

"Good grief. I'm fine, kiddo."

Dad pulled the list of names forward and adjusted the glasses on his nose.

"I don't expect you'll find anything, but text me if something comes up."

Dad grumbled and shooed me away.

I knew it was a long shot, but I swung by homicide to see if Aslan was around. I had his house key and wanted to be sure he got it back. Also, part of me wanted to see him again now that I'd cooled off and was thinking straight. I wanted to properly apologize for the previous night and offer to make it up to him.

He wasn't around, which I figured would be the case. Several of his coworkers glared when I sat at his desk and dug through a drawer, looking for a small envelope. I ignored them. By that point, I'd been in and out of homicide enough times they had to know Aslan and I were friends at the very least.

I found a stray envelope, put the key inside, then jotted a quick note on a scrap of paper. Didn't want to forget to give

this back. I know you're in the thick of things, but let me know when you have some free time. Maybe I can take you out for dinner. I'd like to talk properly.

I wanted to add something about the weight of shame I was carrying around because of how I'd acted, but I didn't. I wanted to tell him how awful I felt, how sorry I was, but I couldn't. I signed it with a Q, considered, then added a tiny heart instead of the traditional xoxo. I tucked the note into the envelope with the key, scribbled his name on the front, and left it propped up on his desk where he'd see it.

The entire way to Tom's house across the city, I thought about Lily, the interview, the picture she'd been shown of a police officer, me, and the instructions she'd been given surrounding the backpack. I thought about the boy named Kader and how I was certain he had aided in the girls' abductions.

Whoever this boy was, he was a victim, like Avery who was still missing. Like Juniper who'd never come home.

Tom Staple lived in Princess Gardens, a neighborhood on the western side of Toronto. His wife, Hillary, answered the door when I rang the bell. She and her husband were both retired and in the same age bracket as my dad, which put them in their midsixties.

"Come in. Come in," Hillary said when I introduced myself.

She smelled of cloves and cardamom and was dressed in pleated tan pants, a finely knitted sweater, and an abundance of tinkling jewelry. Her white-blonde hair was thick and pulled back in a chignon, exposing time-worn skin that hung on her fine-boned frame. Deep creases bracketed her mouth when she smiled.

"Tom is fiddle farting in the basement. I'll let him know you're here. Let me take your coat."

Hillary hung my coat in the hall closet and guided me into a small sitting room. It was filled with pictures of the couple's children and grandchildren. A skinny Siamese cat slept curled up on a decorative pillow at the end of the sofa, so I chose the hardbacked chair with the crocheted afghan draped over its back.

"Can I get you some tea or coffee?"

"Coffee would be fantastic. Thank you."

Hillary went to call after her husband and fix some drinks. Once she was gone, I took a minute, studying the photographs around the room. On a nearby end table was a picture of two women, early forties if I had to guess. I picked it up, taking a closer look and noting their similarities. They were obviously sisters.

"My beautiful girls," a man's voice said from the doorway across the room.

I startled and set the picture down, jumping to my feet. Tom Staple might have been an old man, but he had spunk. His hair was snowy white, his eyebrows were thick and out of control, and his skin was leathery and heavily wrinkled, but he moved like a man half his age, crossing the room with one hand out and a wide grin on his face. "Tom Staple. Holy hell, you look just like Shari. Unbelievable."

I shook Tom's hand. His grip was strong and sure. "Nice to meet you. I've been told that a lot."

The few pictures I had of my mother seemed to confirm it. I wasn't sure how I felt about it, though, considering I'd barely known my mother. Sharing her features seemed unfair.

Tom scrubbed a hand over his bristly chin, the scratch of his silver scruff like sandpaper. "I don't mean to pry or unearth rotten memories, but I suppose you're here because of your sister... Did Shari ever turn up? I knew she left, but we didn't talk much once Abe got promoted to MPU, so I never heard if things changed."

"No. She didn't come back. She passed away in 2003. Cancer."

"Son of a bitch." Tom sighed. "Sorry to hear that. I tell you, my heart went out to you, kiddo. There wasn't a single day for a long time when I didn't wonder if someone was taking care of you. Everyone was so wrapped up in your sister's case I worried you'd gotten lost in the shuffle."

Tom was right. I had been swept aside. I had been forgotten. At least when my mother had taken off, Dad was forced to open his eyes and see that his family was falling apart. He was forced to acknowledge that his only son was withdrawn and hurting because he didn't understand what had happened to his sister.

"I turned out all right," I said instead, which was partly a lie. I carried many scars from childhood, ones that wouldn't be there had Juniper never been taken.

"And you followed in your daddy's footsteps. MPU, huh? Good for you. Come on. Let's have a seat and chat. Hillary's bringing coffee."

We sat, and while waiting for his wife to return with the drinks, Tom gestured to the photograph I'd admired. "Those are my girls. Natalie and Megan."

I glanced at the picture again. Hearing their names confirmed what I already knew to be true. It brought a stone of sadness to the pit of my stomach. Juniper would have been close to that age. Those were the girls she'd been with that day, talking about whatever little girls talked about, giggling over sticker books and rolling their eyes at their fathers.

Hillary dropped off coffee but didn't linger. Once I added a splash of milk and a tiny bit of sugar and had taken a sip, my thoughts were in order, and I was ready to begin.

"Like I said on the phone, we have two current cases that seem tied to Juniper's disappearance thirty years ago. We believe there is a third, possibly a fourth, child out there who could be in trouble."

Tom had seen the news report about Evelyn and Lily, but I explained what I could about the girls' reappearance and the connections to Juniper. Tom was a retired police officer, so I was more transparent than I might have been with a stranger.

Although I told him about Avery, I left out our recent discovery about Kader.

"Incredible," Tom said when I finished. "All these years later, and now this. How can I help, son?"

"I want to review the day Juniper vanished. You were with my father at the time. Juniper was socializing with your daughters. I have tons of interviews from that day, but I'm trying to reconstruct the events and see if there is anything that might have been overlooked."

"Okay. I'll do my best. The old noggin may give us some trouble. It was a long time ago."

"I understand."

I took Tom through the day, minute by minute, like I'd done with Dad. Their stories matched to the letter. Tom remembered the surly Boy Scout leader who'd come to fetch his nephew. He remembered the band practicing, Juniper asking if she could go watch them, and my dad telling her no. He recalled Juniper needing to use the bathroom and interrupting their conversation.

"Don't ask me what we were talking about. I don't have a clue anymore."

But Tom recalled my dad telling Juniper to wait a minute, and he'd take her soon.

"Then a parade organizer came around and had us write our names on a list. He said they were about to get everyone in position." Tom scratched his silver scruff, peering into the middle-distance, squinting at the memory. "It was after that when Abe couldn't find Juniper. We all figured she'd wandered off to the bathrooms on her own. The facilities weren't that far away. The girls didn't know where she'd gone, only that she'd been bouncing around nearby and then wasn't there. Abe ran off to check the bathrooms, but Juniper wasn't there either. That's when a sense of wrongness kicked in. You could feel it crawling in your bones. I scanned the crowd while Abe and Robert ran around, calling her name. I couldn't leave my girls, so I couldn't help, but I took the crowd apart with my eyes, scanning, looking for little Juni." Tom's lips formed a thin line as he shook his head.

"Did you see anything suspicious? Did anything stand out?"

Tom scratched his forehead, frowning. "The one thing I remember noticing was the scout troop, and it was only because it was a clump of children that I paused to look closer, thinking Juniper could have been mixed up with them. They were about twenty or thirty yards away and running wild. I remember thinking, where the hell is your leader? They were roughhousing, and it wasn't the place to act like that. I knew my sister wouldn't be pleased. She trusted them to watch her son that morning because she couldn't be at the park." Tom shook his head. "When Juniper didn't turn up and things got frantic, I took the girls to their mother and helped organize a search. By then, every officer present was on alert and searching the area. It should have been impossible for her to vanish like that."

Tom sipped his coffee. There wasn't much more to tell, and he waited for me to absorb and ask questions.

Two things stood out, and I weighed them both in my mind.

"The organizer who came around to have you add your names to a list, did you get his name?"

Tom considered. "No. Not that I... Hang on a minute. He had one of those sticker tags. Do you know the ones I'm talking about? What the hell did it say?" Tom closed his eyes. "With a B. Barney? No. Barrie. I want to say Barrie."

"How sure are you?"

"I'm not. It could have been Barney, but I remember an *i e* at the end. I feel like it's Barrie."

"Okay." I knew there was no Barrie or Barney on the volunteer list for parade coordinators. "And he was an organizer? You're certain?"

"That's what he said. He carried a clipboard. Seemed official. I... Are you saying he wasn't?"

"I have reason to believe he may not have been who he said he was."

"Well, shit."

"Can you give me a physical description of the man?" Not that it much mattered. Thirty years of aging would drastically change a person. Plus, how many men named Barrie or Barney lived in the greater Toronto area? Without a last name, the search would be daunting. Impossible. Tom described the same man my father had. White, mid to late forties, dark hair streaked with silver, tan slacks, and a black coat.

Not much to go on.

"One last thing," I said, considering the second detail that had stood out when Tom had described the day. "You said the Boy Scouts were horsing around unsupervised?"

"That's what it looked like. I didn't see a scout leader anywhere. So far as I understand, there should have been two of them."

"Thanks."

I said my goodbyes and headed out to the car, mulling over the information I'd gathered, which wasn't much. With the car running and the heat cranked, I tried to recall what I'd read in Parker's interview. Garrett Neville was the other leader. More than once, Parker had mentioned that Garrett wasn't helping him with the children. Garrett was absent. Garrett had left him alone numerous times to deal with the rowdy bunch of kids.

When Tom said the leaders weren't present when Juniper had vanished, I knew Parker had been at the bathrooms with two of his boys, but where had Garrett been? Maybe it wasn't significant, maybe it was, but I couldn't let it go.

I flipped through my internal databank, trying to remember if he'd been among the people interviewed that day, but I didn't think so. I had an hour before I had to be at Robert's house, but he was on the other end of the city, so I set the GPS and headed out as I connected a call to my desk phone at work. It rang several times.

When Dad answered with a gruff hello, I asked, "Garrett Neville. Can you check and see if he was interviewed? I can't remember."

"Who's he?"

"Just check."

Dad grumbled under his breath. A shuffling of papers and Dad's labored breathing were all I could hear for a long time as Dad went through the file I'd left on my desk.

"Nope. No interview with Garrett Neville."

"Check the list of scout leaders and troops. Tell me if he's listed."

Another few minutes passed.

"He's on it. Sixty-fifth troop. He and a guy named Cohen."

"Yes. Good. Find him for me if you can. I want all the information you can pull. I need to talk to him if possible, so a recent phone number or address would be great. Also, see if you can locate Parker Cohen. I want his info too. Backgrounds on both. Everything."

"You understand how difficult that's going to be, right?"

"You can figure it out. You have all the resources available at your fingertips. Call Ruiz if you need tech support."

"I'm not incompetent." Dad tsked. "I'll see what I can do."

"Did you find Kader on those lists?"

"No, but—"

"Not surprising. I didn't figure you would. Look, I have to \_\_\_"

"Hang on. Stop flapping your gums for five seconds." A pause. Someone spoke in the background. "I'm gonna let your partner talk to you."

The phone exchanged hands, and Eden came on the line. "Where are you?"

"On my way to Robert Flat's house. What's up?"

Eden lowered her voice. "We need you back here. Allison and Erik found something."

"On Kader?"

"Yes. Maybe. We aren't sure."

Frowning, I flicked my indicator and switched lanes, going around a slow-moving sedan. "What does that mean?"

"Can you get back here?"

"I'm on my way to an interview. Just tell me."

"It's possible we have a photograph of the boy."

The taillights on the car in front of me illuminated bright red. My reaction time lagged, and I slammed on my brakes in just enough time to avoid a collision. I laid on the horn and jerked the steering wheel to the side, passing the car as my heart thumped in my throat.

"I'm on my way."

# CHAPTER 20

### Aslan



I thad been a long day. Our easy mall stabbing case that had looked like it might solve itself quickly had turned into a complicated mess. Our leads were duds, and our primary suspect had a solid alibi, forcing us to either break it down or look elsewhere.

Torin and I had been chasing our tails most of the day, revisiting interviews for another case we'd been working, reviewing CCTV footage from various other locations near the mall for the stabbing, and mostly beating our heads against the wall since we'd been denied warrants for a third case that was also giving us a headache.

So when Summerfield called midafternoon and told us to head to a little area off Chesterton Shores, a short jaunt from the Waterfront Trail, because a body had washed up on shore, I knew it was going to be another late night.

"This is five active cases. Does she not realize what she's doing to us? This had better be a homicide if I gotta stand out

here freezing my fucking balls off," Torin said, bouncing foot to foot and blowing hot air into his cupped hands as I maneuvered down the stony embankment to the crowd of emergency responders who'd gathered at the scene a few feet from the shoreline.

Torin came down next, cursing the entire descent. When the smooth sole of his dress shoe slipped off a wet rock and he almost fell, skinning the palm of his hand as he grappled to save himself, he bitched more. "Why can't people die inside where it's warm or at least have the courtesy of dying in the city and not out at the lake at the bottom of an impossible embankment."

"You should lodge a complaint."

"I should."

The wind coming off the lake was bitter and cut through my thin shirt, sending goose bumps pebbling down my arms. I zipped my leather jacket to my chin and stuffed my hands into the pockets as I laughed and waited for Torin to make his way down.

He did not think I was funny.

"This person probably drowned. Why are we even here?"

"We'll know in a minute what we've got. Summerfield didn't seem to question it, so it must be a sure thing, or they wouldn't have called us."

"Can we say a prayer that it's an accidental drowning? I have a date tomorrow night. A date with a beautiful, much

younger woman. I will not get a second chance at this. Nothing can mess it up." Torin crossed fingers on both his hands as he jumped the last foot down beside me.

"It'll be fine. Relax."

We approached the crowd, flashed our badges, and made introductions. But all it took was a glance at the body to know it wasn't an accidental drowning. Not unless our victim accidentally wrapped himself in black garbage bags and somehow secured them with duct tape so they wouldn't come loose before falling into the lake.

"Fuck me," Torin said, kicking a rock.

"Don't worry. You can still have your date."

"Yeah right. We're dancing around four goddamn cases right now. Add this one to the mix, and we aren't ever going home. How do you suppose Friday's going to happen? We barely have time to eat and shit, let alone sleep, yet I'm supposed to go on a romantic dinner date with a lovely woman in just over twenty-four hours. This is never going to happen. I'm going to be single forever. Our children would have been beautiful. Her dark skin, my enthralling personality."

"Hopefully her height."

Torin punched me in the shoulder. "Fuck you, Doyle."

"So rebook the date," I said. "Allison will understand."

"I don't want to rebook it. Motherfucking killers are ruining my love life." "You signed up for this, remember? We both did."

"Shut up. At least you're getting laid."

I didn't respond, remembering the desperate blow job I'd received from my overanxious boyfriend the previous night. It hadn't been sexy or satisfying. It had been unsettling.

I shoved Quaid from my mind and tried to focus on the task at hand.

The following three hours were spent by the lake in the harsh December wind. I couldn't feel my toes or fingers after the first hour. By the second hour, my nose wouldn't stop running, and my cheeks stung.

Dusk settled around us. Then night. The sun set early in December. Numerous pictures were taken. Dr. Thornlow, the forensic pathologist, showed up and did an initial scan right on the shore. We spoke with the person who found the body. We chatted with the officers who were first on the scene. Torin and I discussed a direction and made plans to meet Dr. Thornlow at her office for the postmortem.

It was dark when my phone rang at five forty-five. The body—male, possibly in his midfifties—was being removed from the lakeside and carried awkwardly up the rocky embankment by four emergency responders.

"Doyle," I said, turning my back on the gusty wind, letting it pummel my back and whip through my hair.

Torin's teeth chattered as I answered.

"Where are you and Fox?" It was Summerfield.

"Still at the lake. We were just leaving."

"I need you back here immediately."

"Ma'am, we were going to follow Dr. Thornlow to—"

"Right now, Doyle. In my office. Have Fox drop you off, and he can carry on if necessary."

"Ma'am? What is this about?"

She hung up, and I stared at my phone.

"Can we leave?" Torin asked, shoulders high, protecting his ears.

"That was Summerfield. She needs to see me in her office."

Torin frowned. "Why?"

"I don't know."

"What did you do?"

"Nothing."

But a seed of worry grew in my stomach.

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It was half past six before we got back to headquarters. Torin slapped my shoulder and thumbed at our joined desks. "I'll hang out. I have stuff to do here so no sense me going anywhere without you."

Dr. Thornlow had suggested doing the postmortem in the morning since we'd needed to detour to the office and didn't know how long we'd be.

"Wish me luck."

Staff Sergeant Summerfield was at her desk, the door to her office partially closed. I rapped my knuckles on the doorframe. "Ma'am?"

She glanced up. Her face was unreadable. "Come in. Close the door."

Lindsey Summerfield was in her early fifties, a strikingly attractive woman who could have passed for forty in a heartbeat. She wore her auburn hair short and kept her makeup subtle. She wasn't married and seemed to prefer it that way. Rumors had spread a while back that she was asexual, which wouldn't have surprised me. Over the four years she'd been our staff sergeant, I'd seen plenty of people try to flirt their way into a date, but she never showed interest. Her job was her life, and she seemed satisfied to keep it that way.

Summerfield was easygoing and often joined in on office banter, teasing, and tossing around witty comments and comebacks. She liked to keep her detectives in a good mood since our job carried an inherently heavy atmosphere. She was strict but fair. No one had ever said differently.

Today, her amber eyes had crystalized into a hardness not often seen around the office. There was no humor behind them. Whatever it was she needed to see me about was serious. Her expression was cast from stone. I had a bad feeling but tried to ignore the souring in my gut as I took a seat in front of her desk.

The silent pause that followed my entrance stretched for several minutes, but I didn't squirm. I waited.

"I haven't had you in here in a long time, Doyle," Summerfield said, replacing a pen in a small cup holder beside her laptop.

"Over a year, ma'am. Last October." And I could still hear that conversation echoing in the back corner of my mind. Professional appearances are an important part of this job. You can't come in here looking like a hungover frat boy all the time. We have a dress code.

She nodded, balancing her elbows on the desk and folding her hands together. "Over a year." She sighed. "I wish we could have kept that going. Something has been brought to my attention, and unfortunately, I'm forced to deal with it. Due to the nature of this... issue, I'm not sure what the repercussions will be."

I could have asked her to clarify, but there was no point. She was going to anyhow, and I'd learned long ago that I was better off keeping my mouth shut. Besides, I couldn't think of a single thing I'd done wrong in almost a year that would warrant me sitting in my boss's office.

#### Except...

"As you're aware, Constable Nathan Briggs was arrested last month in conjunction with a case you and Fox worked. He's been charged with various crimes, including taking bribes, obstruction of justice, and aiding and abetting in the murder of..." She checked her notes. "Journey Guzman."

A cold wash of dread flooded my veins.

"Since Briggs's arrest, there has been a deep internal investigation to uncover what all he might or might not have been involved in. Every bit of his work in the department is being picked apart with a fine-tooth comb. He's been interviewed several times, and over the course of the investigation, some curious information has been brought to the table. Mr. Briggs has decided transparency is his best course of action. I think he's doing all he can to worm his way out of a sticky situation. Perhaps he thinks it will earn him leniency. Perhaps he doesn't want to be the sole officer to go down, so he's throwing old acquaintances under the bus. Either way. Nathan Briggs has been extremely talkative lately. Are you following?"

Oh, I was following, and I could see the imminent implosion of my career on the horizon.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Want to jump in, or should I keep going?"

Was there a point?

My lack of response encouraged Summerfield to continue. "It's come to my attention that you were involved in an automobile accident last year at the end of December." She tugged a report free from a folder and studied it. "Slick roads caused the driver to lose control of the vehicle." She peered up from the form, waving the paper at me. "Do you remember this accident?"

My throat swelled. "Yes, ma'am."

"How about you tell me about it in your own words."

"I'd rather not."

"Don't want to shoot yourself in the foot, huh? I get it. There's nothing on record, and you don't want to implicate yourself. Fair enough. I'd feel the same way." She opened the folder again but extracted a few glossy printouts that time, sliding them across the desk toward me. "I suggest you talk."

The air in my lungs turned to cement. I didn't reach for the pictures. I didn't have to. Anger and betrayal roared under my skin, but I shouldn't have been surprised. I'd known all along that Nathan Briggs was a slimeball. I should have known he'd have taken pictures when he arrived at the scene, if not for a report than for himself. Blackmail. Reassurance so he would have people on his side if he ever got in trouble.

Or, in this case, he could bring me down because I'd brought him down.

The top picture told enough of the story I didn't need to see more. I was slumped behind the wheel of my car. My unconscious state had nothing to do with hitting the hydro pole. The airbag had deployed, and it was deflated between my body and the wheel. I had a vague memory of the car spinning, of the impact, but most of that night had been drowned out by alcohol. My intoxicated brain had not been able to problem solve quickly enough, and I'd passed out before coming up with a solution. A concerned civilian had called 911. Briggs had been the responding officer that night.

An open bottle of Jim Beam sat in the cupholder beside me, no cap on the bottle. I'd been swigging from it, unconcerned like the idiot I was, pissed because I'd gotten into a fight with my brother-in-law at Christmas dinner at my sister's house.

I'd gotten drunk that night long before I left Amelia's, chasing back one beer after another in a desperate attempt to be *social*. Chris and I had never gotten along.

"Talk to me, Doyle. I'm the only person sitting between you and unemployment. My word carries sway. I don't know if I have enough sway to save your ass, but unless you communicate with me, there is zero hope for you." Summerfield's voice had softened.

"I never told him to write the cause of the accident as slick road conditions. We were never acquainted before that night. He knew me because I was a detective, but I didn't know him. He should have breathalyzed me. I was drunk off my ass and should never have gotten behind the wheel. He should have thrown my ass in the drunk tank and left me there to rot. I'm not defending my actions. I drank. I drove. I crashed my car. I should have suffered the consequences. Ma'am, you can believe me or not, but I swear on my family, I did not coerce Briggs into covering this up." I motioned to the top picture. "As you can clearly see, I was in no condition to make deals." I've been sick about it ever since. He left me in a position where if I spoke up, I'd be throwing him under the bus. I... I know I should have anyhow, but I didn't." I couldn't look at her. Shame and regret made my chin drop. "I didn't want to lose my job."

Summerfield drew the photographs toward her and leafed through them one at a time. "There's been a big change in you this past year, Doyle. You used to be in my office twice a month for one reason or another."

"That right there is why. I'm an alcoholic. I can admit that now. That incident was a wake-up call. My life was a mess, and I recognized it too late, but I've been sober for almost one year. I'm really proud of that accomplishment, and I don't want to go backward. I go to AA meetings several times a week. I have a sponsor. I..."

I trailed off. How could I defend myself when I'd spent a year hating the weight of the secret Briggs had forced on my shoulders?

I should have come clean right away.

I should have lost my job.

I should have had my license taken away.

I should have been forced to crawl out of the ditch because that was what I deserved.

But none of that had happened because a dirty cop thought he'd do me a solid. I knew it would come back one day and bite me in the ass, but after I'd worked so hard to get my life on track, it seemed unfair.

Summerfield tucked the photographs away. She stared at a spot on her desk for a long time, her lips pursed, her brows nearly touching.

When she looked up, I braced for impact.

"I'm sorry, Aslan. You're suspended. Effective immediately. The board will review your case and make a final decision about your job by the end of next week. I'll do what I can to offer a character reference since I have witnessed an incredible change in you over the past year, but I can't promise anything. It's out of my hands. I'll need your badge and gun."

# Chapter 21

### Aslan



Summerfield left me sitting in her office after I'd given up my gun and badge. She packed her things and walked out, squeezing my shoulder gently as she passed, offering a plaintive "I'm sorry" for the second time.

The shock of the whole situation had knocked the wind out of me. When I stood, my legs were unsteady. Robotically, I made my way toward my desk.

Torin glanced up as I approached. "Finally. Are we good to go? What was that about?"

"You're on your own."

"What?"

I scanned my desk without seeing anything, but there was nothing there I needed. I didn't keep personal effects at work. Head buzzing, skin taut, I aimed for no man's land, ignoring Torin's question.

"Where are you going? What the hell do you mean I'm on my own?"

"I'm suspended," I spat. "Don't like it, take it up with Summerfield."

"Are you serious?" Torin raced after me. "What the fuck?"

"Briggs ratted me out. The board will decide if I can keep my job. Until then, I'm not to be here."

Torin grabbed my arm, but I shook him off. A raging fire burned in my core, and my fuse was shortening. I was on the cusp of an explosion and didn't want it to happen here.

"What the hell am I supposed to do? We have five active cases right now. You can't leave me."

"Not my problem, Tor. Like I said, take it up with Summerfield."

He cursed as I stormed away. My vision narrowed to a pinprick, the edges blurring.

At least Torin had stopped following.

Quaid wasn't in MPU's bullpen and neither were Eden, Allison, or Erik.

I left, setting up an Uber as the elevator took me to the ground level. An internal shake vibrated my bones so hard I was sure I was coming apart at the seams, but I kept my gaze trained forward, ignoring everyone I passed.

I waited outside on the stairs at the front of the building. The cold concrete numbed my ass, but I didn't care. I thought of our cases, of Torin's date with Allison tomorrow night, and of all I'd accomplished with a year of sobriety.

Adrift, I tried calling Quaid, but there was no answer.

"Hey, you've reached Quaid Valor. I can't come to the phone right now. Leave a message, and I'll get back to you."

I stabbed a finger on the screen to disconnect. "Fucking figures."

He was probably still sulking over our conversation that morning. Let him ignore me. Fuck it.

I ground my teeth, cracked my knuckles, then closed my eyes to breathe through the toxic rage poisoning my system. One fucking year of doing all I could to make things right, of battling my addiction, and it was all shattered in an instant.

You're suspended.

You're suspended.

You're suspended.

Summerfield's voice grew louder and louder.

Instead of being rewarded for my efforts, I was being punished.

Something wet hit my face, and I opened my eyes. Fat flakes of snow fell from the sky, swirling and dancing but melting when they hit the ground. They shimmered in the streetlights, magical and silent as they descended from the heavens. I'd have given anything to take the bike out. Riding helped calm me down, but it was too cold, and I'd packed her away for the winter.

The Uber took me home, but I paced, unsure where to put myself. I tried calling Quaid again but was met by his voicemail which only elevated my anger.

I put on joggers, a hoodie, and sneakers, grabbed a pair of headphones, then left to go running. Fueled by resentment and rage, heavy metal cranking in my ears, I ran. I didn't feel the cold. The snowflakes sizzled and burned away the minute they touched my skin. The sidewalk beneath my feet, which had started to jar my shins and hurt my bones in recent days, no longer bothered me.

I ran.

I ran long and hard and fast until my lungs burned. Then, I ran some more.

The miles vanished. The night deepened.

The snow started to accumulate, no longer melting away.

My mind went on the fritz. I blocked out the world and the people in it. Even the music I'd adored in high school couldn't erase the pain, but it did take me away for a while.

When I came back to my senses, I found myself in a liquor store, wandering the aisles. Sweat dripped from my brow and into my eyes. A thick layer coated my skin under the hoodie I no longer needed. Pantera screamed in my ears.

I stared at the rows and rows of amber and clear liquid lining the shelves in fancy bottles with fancier labels stuck to their fronts. How had I gotten here? Chest heaving from exertion, I glanced around the store, trying to piece it together. I'd zoned out. The itch I'd ignored for eleven months was insatiable and had taken me to the door of salvation.

It would be easy to drown myself and all the bullshit in a bottle of whiskey or rum.

The stale scent of beer hung in the air, calling on a dormant need.

I should leave.

I should walk out the door and go.

Without looking at the labels, I snatched one of the bottles off the shelf and took it to the counter.

Everything happened through a thick fog like I was in a dreamland, looking down from above, no longer in control of my actions but cursed to watch the story play out.

My inner voice screamed for me to stop, but I was powerless, no longer in control.

A slave to this yearning, this hunger.

I paid with the tap feature on my phone and headed out into the night. A blast of cold air and snow hit me in the face as I rounded the corner, and I abruptly stopped. Cars zipped down the road in both directions. Four lanes of traffic. Headlights hazy and blurring together.

A gas station across the street.

A man pumped gas, yelling through the window at the passenger in the car. His wife? His girlfriend? His mistress? I didn't care.

A city bus stopped down the road, air brakes sighing. Then it moved off again.

I wasn't sure where I was or how I'd gotten there. I'd run blind, escaping the weight of reality.

But it had followed me.

You're suspended.

Briggs had torn the rug out from under me.

And I was going to lose my job.

It was over.

Everything I'd built and fought so hard to keep was gone.

I veered down the alley that led behind the liquor store. It was quiet and dark. It smelled like sour cabbage, fish, and vomit. The weight of something in my hand made me look down. The bottle. I stared at it for a long time, weighing my options.

I uncapped it, letting the sharp sting of gin with subtle woody undertones fill my nose. I didn't like gin, but that was what I'd grabbed. The pull was fierce. Desire scraped at the inside of my bones and clawed its way to the surface. My salivary glands worked overtime, forcing me to swallow as my mouth pooled. I could almost taste it, feel the sting as it slid

down my throat, the warmth flooding my veins. It would be so easy.

But it was Amelia's warning from almost a year ago that made me stop.

If you can't clean yourself up, you won't be allowed near Graham again and forget about getting to know this baby when she's born. It won't happen. Chris is right, and you can hate me for siding with him all you want, but look at yourself, Aslan. I'm done. I can't do this anymore. Either get sober or get out of my life.

I closed my eyes as the first hot tears tried to escape. My lungs shriveled, making breathing difficult, but I sucked in one breath after another. When the inner tremble calmed to something more manageable, I opened my eyes again. I set the bottle on the ground next to the building and walked away.

Three blocks later, I called Tony. He'd been my sponsor since January, and he'd talked me off a ledge more times than I could count. Why I hadn't called him earlier, I didn't know. I was spiraling, that much I knew.

And it was worse than all the times before.

When Tony answered, his gruff smoker's voice rasping on the other end of the line, all I said was, "I need a meeting. Find me a meeting. Please."

"Where are you?"

I gave him street names and described the intersection. He insisted I stay where I was. Thirty minutes later, he picked me

up and drove us to a small church three neighborhoods away. It wasn't a secular meeting nor advertised as LGBTQ-friendly, but it didn't matter.

Tony had sensed my state of mind was precarious.

He didn't drop me off. He came inside with me. He sat in the chair next to mine. He kept one arm around my shoulder. I was sweaty, shaking, and stank like sweat, but it didn't matter.

I buried my face in my palms and didn't speak, but I listened. I listened to everyone else's stories, everyone's failures, and everyone's successes. I soaked it in.

After, Tony drove us to another. It was a big city, and there were a lot of meetings to choose from.

We attended four that night before Tony finally spoke. "I can't find anymore." We were parked behind a community center, and he was searching on his phone. "It's getting too late. Unless you want to catch an online meeting in a different time zone. What do you want to do?"

"Can you take me home?"

"Are you ready to be there by yourself?"

"Yeah."

"Do you want to talk about what happened?"

"No. Not yet."

Tony didn't push. He drove me home, his hand on the back of my neck the whole time, massaging the stiff muscles and offering silent comfort. He didn't let me out of the vehicle until I'd promised to call no matter the hour if I wasn't okay.

Inside, I stripped, showered, and collapsed into bed. Before falling asleep, I checked my messages. Two texts from Torin, both raging about what had happened. Apparently, Summerfield had assigned him a guy from cybercrimes to assist with the cases we'd been tackling. Torin was not happy.

I had a half dozen missed calls and several missed texts from Quaid that must have come through while I'd been running or in a meeting. After leaving my house earlier, I'd shut down. The texts were all the same. Where are you? and Why aren't you answering your phone?

I huffed. *Hypocrite*. *Where were you when I needed* you to pick up your phone?

Two voicemails waited. The first had been sent hours ago. Az, I heard what happened. Where are you? I'm coming to your house.

The second one simply said, *Please call me when you get this*.

I didn't have the strength or energy to deal with him tonight. The ground was more stable than earlier, but I was still too shaky to risk upsetting my newfound balance.

I shut off my phone and buried my head under the pillow. The electric buzz of an alcohol craving still tickled over my skin, but I could ignore it and fall asleep.

## CHAPTER 22

### Quaid



I canceled my meeting with Robert after talking to Eden on the phone. When I got back to headquarters, I parked in the lot behind the building and entered through the rear doors, hoping I could sneak through the lobby to the elevators without anyone from the press noticing me.

It was late afternoon. The influx of reporters I'd seen lately wasn't as bad. A few people buzzed about, hoping to catch someone from MPU. Two police officers sat behind plate glass at the reception desk, one dealing with a woman who looked to be making a public complaint. The other typed at a computer, phone pressed to his ear, ignoring the lingering media presence.

They had likely been told not to entertain them.

Gideon, an elderly officer many years past his prime, worked to encourage a verbose man in a suit out the door. The man was saying something about impeding his rights.

Gideon's job description lately was the equivalent of building security, but he didn't seem to mind.

I kept my head down and aimed for the elevator, punching the button and hoping it wasn't delayed on the top floor.

Movement nearby made me curse under my breath. My plans to go unnoticed failed. A sharply dressed man with movie-star hair and a heart-stopping smile caught my arm. He'd been seated on a bench a moment ago, silently observing. I hadn't seen him pop up and approach, but of course he had his eyes peeled for anyone from our unit.

"Quaid Valor, is that right? Just the man I was hoping to see."

"Um..." I glanced at the numbers above the elevator doors—tenth floor—and sighed. "Yes. That's me. How can I help you?"

The man held out a hand to shake. "Dennis Dennis Joy. I'm with City TV and was wondering if you had a minute to talk."

I shoved my hands into my pockets instead of accepting the handshake. "It's not a good time. I'm sorry."

I punched a knuckle on the button again like it would somehow bring the elevator down faster.

"Am I correct to say you are Juniper Valor's brother? The little girl who went missing in 1992?"

"No comment."

"I thought so. I looked you up. It must be shocking to find out the current kidnapping cases are directly linked to her. Things like that don't happen often. Do you think it will lead to answers? Do you think there's a remote possibility your sister may be alive?"

Scowling, I turned to face the man head-on. "What part of no comment didn't you understand?"

"Come on, man. It's my job. What do you expect?"

"I expect you to respect my answer. If you wish to discuss this, find Sergeant Edwards. He's handling the media."

Dennis Joy's eyes were the color of whiskey, and I didn't miss how they subtly took me in. "Maybe I'd rather talk to you. There have been rumors going around. I was hoping you'd validate them." Dennis adjusted his tie, glanced over his shoulder to the front doors and the reception desk, then up at the numbers above the elevator before returning to me. "Let me buy you a coffee. I just want to pick your brain for fifteen minutes. Is that so wrong?"

"No thanks."

"You aren't even going to give me a chance?"

"No."

"How about coffee and we don't talk about the case?"

I didn't bother repeating myself and stared at the slowly descending numbers above the door.

"You're gay, right?"

I flinched and jerked my head around. "Excuse me?"

"It's no secret. I told you I looked you up. Read everything I could find." His smile was back.

"And what does my being gay have to do with anything?"

The man, Dennis, chuckled. It brought out a single dimple on his left cheek. "Come on. You aren't that dense."

I was sure his good looks got him whatever he wanted most of the time. Something told me Dennis Joy wasn't gay, but flirting and playing a role were part of his game. He wanted information, nothing more.

"Not interested," I mumbled, turning back to the doors, wishing I'd taken the stairs.

"Look. City TV is a reputable news station. We give the people informative updates about things they want to know. This case has the city in an uproar. The new information that's come in has everyone curious. If you come on the show, I'll interview you personally. No funny business. We'll only discuss the things you want to discuss. What will it take to convince you?"

He touched my elbow, and I pulled my arm away. Thankfully, the doors to the elevator opened. "If you'll excuse me."

"Can I at least give you my card?" He held it out. "In case you change your mind about the interview?"

"Or coffee?"

I glared at Dennis Joy, hoping he'd get the point.

Dennis was forced to pull his hand back as the doors slipped closed. The spark of interest vanished from his eyes, and I heard him mutter, "I heard you were an asshole," as the doors came together.

Yeah, well, fuck you too, Dennis.

I found Eden at our joined desks with Dad. The instant she saw me, she jumped to her feet, wide-eyed and anxious. Dad moved slower, but he got up too, relying heavily on his cane to take his weight. Eden snagged my arm and steered me toward the hallway that led to the conference rooms.

I didn't question her but glanced at Edwards's office on our way by. He wasn't there. It was nearing five, so it didn't surprise me.

Allison and Erik had taken over the room. A printer whirred in the corner, one that must have been brought in from elsewhere since it hadn't been there earlier. A tangle of wires ran haphazardly from the laptop to the machine and the wall. Erik stood hunched over Allison, the pair of them studying something intently on the laptop. A second laptop sat abandoned on the other side of the table, a mountain of papers beside it.

Erik pointed at the screen. "That one too." Only after Allison clicked a few times and the printer whirred again did they glance up.

"Close the door," Erik said, turning to the printer and waiting for it to finish spitting out the newest page.

Dad settled in a nearby chair, but Eden and I stood.

"You have pictures of Kader?" I asked, not wasting time.

"We have pictures of an unidentified boy at a soccer game," Allison said, shoving back from the table and taking the stack of photographs Erik had removed from the printer tray.

Erik sighed, then explained. "Edwards instructed us to do a thorough search for Kader as a possible player on a soccer team from the day Evelyn was taken. Our initial search through names turned up nothing as we figured. So we started making phone calls. First to the parents on the same team as Evelyn, then branching out to the players on teams she'd played against that day. We were seeking names of siblings, friends, cousins, whoever. Any child that might have been present by the name of Kader. Four soccer fields were in use that day, but the age bracket we were looking for was contained to the one on the northeast side of the park. That was where Evelyn spoke to Kader, so it was where we concentrated our search. It didn't take long before we got something we didn't expect."

Erik glanced at Allison, who took over. "One of the mothers has been overly concerned about Evelyn and all that transpired. Her daughter is a close friend. She'd never heard of a boy named Kader, but she did recall the man who was making balloon animals and swords. He was a parent, and according to her, he was nowhere near where Kader told

Evelyn she might find him. This mother, Beth is her name, shared that she had taken dozens of pictures of the kids at the game that day and asked if they might help locate our boy. We asked her if she'd be willing to email them to us, and she gladly sent them over. The next part was trickier. It required us identifying who was who in the photographs."

"Beth helped significantly," Erik said, picking up the story. "She was able to give us the names of most of the children pictured. The rest was a process of elimination. It took most of the day, but we ended up with four pictures of a boy no one can identify. We've made more calls to other parents, asking if they have photographs of that day. Those who did sent them along, tagging the children they knew. In total, we ended up with over two hundred pictures of children who were milling around the northeast field. We came up with two more pictures of the same boy. No one knows who he is. He is not the sibling of anyone we've contacted."

Allison spread the photographs on the table and waved us over. Eden and I huddled close. Dad didn't move. Erik uncapped a gold-colored Sharpie and circled the same boy on six print-offs. In two of them, the child was in profile. Another showed the same boy—or so I assumed based on the clothing—facing away from the camera. The final three were frontal shots. Two were from a distance, making him fuzzy, but the final one was clearer and close enough to make out details and gain a proper profile. He was between the ages of eight and ten, dark brown hair cut in a buzz cut, pale skin, and freckles across his nose. The eye color was impossible to determine.

His clothing was standard for his age, knee-length shorts with a red and blue design I couldn't quite make out and a plain white T-shirt.

"We need to contact Evelyn's mother to see if Evelyn can identify this boy as Kader," I said, taking the clearer picture from the table and studying it.

"Already called," Erik said. "It won't happen until tomorrow. Evelyn had a late appointment with Dr. Benoit today and isn't up for coming in."

"So email it and have her mother show her. We can get a response now. She doesn't have to come in."

Erik glanced at Allison, his face unreadable. Allison answered. "Edwards said it needed to be done in person. He doesn't want us sharing personal photographs through email."

"Are you serious? That's such bullshit." I traced my tongue along my upper lip, trying to tuck away my frustration. "Okay, fine. We need to contact the parents who volunteered at the end-of-school party and see if anyone took pictures. If this is Kader, maybe he'll show up in them too."

"Already ahead of you," Dad said from the other end of the table. I'd forgotten he was there. "The mother in charge of Lily's group in the park that day took over eighty pictures of the kids. They're in your inbox, waiting for you to go through them. My eyes aren't good enough."

"Perfect. I'll start now." I flicked the paper with the clearer image of our unknown child. "Can I keep this copy?" I asked

Erik.

"All yours."

"I have to head home for the night, but Erik and Allison are going to contact some swim parents and see what we can find," Eden said. "If Avery is connected to these cases, which I feel confident she is, then we need to do the same with that case too. If we can tie this boy to all three, then at least we have groundwork to build from. It's not going to be as simple, though. The pool has a no photography rule, so we might not get anything."

"We should run this boy's face through our databank of missing kids across the province," I said.

"Already in the works," Erik said. "Let's reconvene in the morning and see where everyone's at. Where we go from here, I'm not sure. All we've got so far is a face and no name. It doesn't tell us who or where this kid is."

"It's more than we had two days ago," I pointed out.

"True."

We split up. Allison and Erik remained in the conference room. Eden gathered her things and headed home for the night, and Dad made his slow way back to my desk, his pace faltering. When he grabbed for the wall more than once because his knee locked, I sneered at the back of his head, resisting the urge to reach out and take his arm, knowing he'd throw me off.

"Get your coat. I'm taking you home."

Dad grumbled but didn't argue, which said a lot.

In the car, he inquired about my meeting with Tom.

"The organizer who came around with the clipboard. Tom said his name was Barrie or Barney. Does that ring any bells?"

Dad was silent for a moment. "No. I don't remember that. What was this about the Boy Scout leaders? I never got a chance to start looking into them."

"It's fine. I'll see what I can pull up."

"I can do it in the morning."

"Not a big deal, Dad. I'll look into it tonight."

"You know it's six o'clock, right? You'll never go home if you go through all those pictures and start looking into those men."

"I'm fine. It's necessary."

Dad muttered something that sounded an awful lot like *miserable child*. I'd heard it all my life, so it bounced off.

"Where's your man? Why not spend the night with him instead of working yourself to the bone?"

I frowned and checked my messages when I got to a red light. Nothing from Aslan. "I'm not sure where he's at. He's been busy." I figured he would have messaged me when he received my note. Maybe he hadn't been back to the office yet. Then a familiar niggling worry fluttered inside my belly. What if we weren't as okay as he'd claimed that morning? What if he'd changed his mind and was fed up with me?

I squeezed the steering wheel, forcing the ugly thoughts from my head, reminding myself not to be so insecure because it wasn't an attractive quality.

At Dad's house, I walked him inside, noting the way he put more and more of his weight on his cane. By the time he collapsed into his recliner, he was short of breath, a pinched expression of pain on his face he couldn't hide.

"Maybe you should sit tomorrow out. You look beat. I can handle this on my own."

"I'm fine."

"Dad, all you did was sit at a desk today and go over paperwork. Look at you. You don't have to do this. We have a whole team on it. I swear I'll keep you in the loop."

"I said I'm fine. Pick me up on your way in tomorrow."

I scrubbed my face. "Fine." I hovered, wanting to help but knowing I was stepping on his toes. "Do you want me to make you a sandwich or something before I go?"

"Nah, I'll order food."

"Dad, it's not good for you. I can cook something." I headed for the kitchen.

"Would you let it go? I said I'm fine."

Ignoring his protest, I grabbed a pack of ice from the freezer, scanning the other contents and grimacing at all the frozen dinners. His fridge didn't contain much else.

Back in the den, I handed him the ice pack. "I'll run to the store and grab some groceries, then maybe I'll make you some chicken soup and dumplings. It's a cold night. It'll be nice."

Dad snatched the ice pack from my hand. "Good grief. I'm a grown-ass man. I don't need a nursemaid. If I want to order out, I'll order out. Didn't you say you had a mess of work to do?"

He grunted and pushed himself forward on the recliner, stretching to reach the remote for the TV. He flicked it on and turned up the volume so I'd have to shout if I wanted to be heard. When he purposefully switched to a program he knew I hated, I tried hard not to roll my eyes.

"Fine. Suit yourself. I'm out."

I was halfway to the front door when he yelled over the TV, "Pick me up in the morning."

I didn't respond and slammed the door behind me. In the car, I stared at my childhood home, gritting my teeth and wishing there was a way to convince my dad to back down. He might not say it out loud, but the personal nature of the case was taking a toll. He was closer to it than I was, and it was hard enough being in my shoes. I couldn't imagine what he felt, knowing the guilt he carried over Juniper's disappearance.

I stopped at home, made a quick bite to eat, then was back at headquarters by half past seven. I dropped my coat and phone off at my desk and went to the conference room. Allison and Erik were nowhere to be found. Their paperwork was stacked in neat piles, and the laptops were closed. They might have gone for dinner, or they might have given up for the night. I had no clue.

I headed to the breakroom to make coffee since I had a long night ahead of me. Once it started brewing, I wandered back to my desk, dropped into my chair, and pulled my phone onto my lap. Two calls from Aslan had come in within the last half hour, and I'd missed both because I'd set my phone to vibrate while I was at Tom's earlier and had forgotten to turn it back on.

No voicemail.

Figuring he might be in the building, I wandered to homicide instead of calling him back.

I found Torin at his desk, shouting at someone on the phone, but no Aslan. Standing back, brow hitched, I listened to the tail end of his conversation, which mostly consisted of cursing. Then he slammed down the phone with a final, "Motherfucking bullshit motherfucker."

"Hey," I said, announcing my presence. "Everything okay?"

Torin shot daggers in my direction before his face shifted from rage to concern. He glanced behind me to the hallway that led to MPU and back. "No, everything is not okay. Did he leave? Where is he?"

"Who?"

"Az. He went looking for you about thirty minutes ago."

"I just got back. I haven't seen him." I held up my phone. "He called me, but I had it on vibrate and missed it. I figured he was over here. What's going on? You look frazzled."

"Frazzled is an understatement. They fucking suspended him."

"They what? Who? Are you serious?"

Torin glanced around, and despite there only being a few other detectives in the bullpen, he lowered his voice. "Fucking Briggs ratted him out about the accident last year. I never trusted that motherfucking dumbass piece of shit. I told Az it wouldn't stay buried. Goddammit." Torin slammed a fist on his desk. "I have no clue how they can take that asshole's word over Aslan's, but Summerfield took his badge and gun and told him to head home. If the board decides to fire him over it, he's done."

"Shit. You said he went looking for me thirty minutes ago?"

"Yes." Torin drew his phone forward and typed on it. "We have five hot cases right now, and Summerfield is sticking me with some guy from cybercrimes. I'm so pissed off I could fucking punch someone." He dropped his phone onto the desk and waved at it. "I just texted him. Fucking bullshit." Torin kicked the edge of his desk, sending his chair rolling away a few feet. "Not to sound selfish, but to top it off, I had a date tomorrow night. That's not going to happen now. I haven't gone on a date in over a year, and this one was special."

"Don't worry about Allison. She'll understand." I stared at Torin's phone, but it remained silent. "Where do you think he went?"

"Hopefully not a fucking bar."

My stomach dropped like a stone in a lake. He wouldn't. Would he? I had no idea how sensitive Aslan's triggers were, but ripe panic took hold.

I pulled up Aslan's number on my phone and hit Connect. It rang and rang and rang until his voicemail kicked in. I hung up and texted. *Where are you?* Impatient and not getting a reply, I called again.

No answer.

Why aren't you picking up your phone? I texted. The third time I called, I left a message.

"Az, I heard what happened. Where are you? I'm coming to your house."

I hung up and met Torin's eyes. "I'll go find him."

"Thanks." Torin slumped in his seat, tipping his head back to stare at the ceiling. He blew out a long breath, then made a call on his cellphone. As I hustled away, I heard, "Hey. It's me. Um... sorry. It's Torin. About our date tomorrow night..."

# CHAPTER 23

### Quaid



Aslan wasn't home. Since he didn't own a vehicle, I couldn't be sure if he was there and ignoring me or hadn't made it this far yet. I wished I'd had the forethought to see if he'd taken the envelope with the spare key I'd left on his desk that morning, but I'd raced out of the building so fast I didn't think to look.

Eventually, I gave up. He still wasn't answering my texts and phone calls. Torin's words played on repeat in the back of my brain. *Hopefully not a fucking bar*. So on my way back to headquarters, I stopped at six different bars situated between work and Aslan's house, checking to see if he was in any of them.

He wasn't.

It was thin relief considering how many other bars were scattered throughout the city.

I contemplated trying his sister's house, but if he wasn't there, I wasn't sure how to explain my urgent need to find him without revealing he'd been suspended. It wasn't my place to relay that information.

With nothing else to do, I returned to headquarters and my desk to focus on finding an unknown boy who could be Kader in the eighty or more pictures that had been taken at the end-of-school party. It was tedious work, and my mind wandered to Aslan more than once.

Even blown up on the computer screen, I had to scrutinize each child in the photographs. It was a different day than the soccer tournament, so it wasn't a matter of finding a boy wearing the same clothing. It came down to faces and doing what I could to match them to the one I already had in the picture Erik had given me. I would swear every little boy had a buzzcut. It must be a new fad.

The entire time I worked, I kept my phone's volume high and checked it constantly. I called Aslan one last time around ten, leaving him a voicemail asking him to call when he got my message.

The phone was irritatingly silent.

My stomach remained in a tight knot.

I made my first discovery shortly before eleven. The picture I'd landed on showed a small group of six children sitting on the edge of the upper level of a play structure. Three girls and three boys. One of the girls was Lily, and the one beside her was the photographer's daughter, Savannah. The last girl had

been identified as Portia. Savannah's mother had identified one of the boys, the blond kid in the red ballcap. His name was Damien. The other two boys were unknown, the mother stating they were from the other school and not part of her group.

I pulled up the transcript of Lily's second interview, checking to be sure I'd remembered correctly. "Portia, Savannah, Damien, and two boys from the other school." This was them. The children Lily had mentioned she'd been playing with that day.

According to Lily, the two boys from the other school were Alex and the elusive Kader. I didn't know who was who. They both had dark hair, but one of the boys was covering his face with his hands like he was trying to hide from the camera. The second had his head tipped back, laughing.

I noted their clothing and scanned back through all the photographs I'd already viewed, looking for matches.

It didn't take long to find a few. The boy with his face covered was the one I was looking for. I'd disregarded two previous pictures with him because he was in the background and hard to make out. Now that I looked closer, I was more certain. His facial structure was the same. Same ears that stood out a little too far.

It took another hour to go through the pictures a third time. I blew up and printed every one I could find with our unknown boy. There were five in total, most of them unclear, but it was him. We had an undeniable connection.

With the print-offs in hand, I studied the face of the boy, considering where we went from there.

Would this boy be a student in the city?

It was possible.

It would take time, but maybe we could pinpoint what school. Narrow things down. Maybe we could use facial-recognition software on elementary school pictures. I'd have to ask Ruiz how impossible that might be.

I jolted upright.

Facial recognition.

Photographs.

"Oh shit."

What were the chances there were photographs lingering around of parade participants from 1992? I shoved the prints of Kader aside and opened a new browser. I typed in *Remembrance Day parade* + *Toronto* + *1992*, then hit Enter.

Unsurprisingly, there were dozens and dozens of articles, all of them with headlines about Juniper.

I clicked over to the images tab and scanned past numerous magazine articles and countless pictures of my sister and parents. Her school photograph, the one that had been circulated and shown on the news every day for over a month, monopolized the search results.

Three pages in, I found what I was looking for; candid shots of people gathered for the annual Remembrance Day parade in 1992. I opened them all, printing them off as I went. One link took me to a Facebook page for the Legion Hall responsible for organizing the parade. Although Facebook hadn't been a thing in 1992, the Legion had scanned and uploaded dozens of pictures from past events, some going back to the late eighties. They had even added albums of their war vets along with grainy black and whites taken in the forties. Men in uniform danced with ladies in flowing dresses. Men saying goodbye to their families before going off to fight for their country. Men far younger than me in most cases.

It was easy to get drawn into scanning old photographs of strangers, but I focused on a specific folder and a specific date.

If we could find pictures of an unknown boy named Kader, maybe we could also find pictures of an unknown man named Barrie or Barney.

In the end, I found a measly thirteen pictures. It was after midnight, and I yawned as I closed my laptop and took the newly printed photographs and my phone to the breakroom.

There was still no word from Aslan. Despite the late hour, I called again, but it went immediately to voicemail as though the device had been shut off.

In the breakroom, I sprawled out on the couch, kicking my feet up on the armrest since I was too tall. I tugged my tie loose and yanked it over my head, discarding it on the back of the couch, then I unbuttoned a few strangling buttons at my collar.

Exhausted, eyes heavy, I flipped through the pictures one at a time, scouring faces, wondering if the man who'd taken my sister was staring back at me. I would call Tom in the morning and ask if he'd review them. I'd bring them to Dad and see if he recognized the man who'd acted as an organizer.

Then I considered Iris. Would she have more pictures? She'd claimed she and her husband had been the parade coordinators for many years. Was that something they might have collected? Would there be more albums in the Legion Hall?

I would call her too.

I should have gotten my ass up and driven home, but I was too tired. Laying the photographs on my chest, I closed my eyes. I would take a short nap and rejuvenate. First thing in the morning, I'd see if Aslan had made it home.

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Laughter down the hall woke me several hours later. I returned to the surface of consciousness, a myriad of unremembered dreams teasing the edges of my brain. The wall clock told me it was shy of seven.

As I pulled myself upright, catching the printed photographs before they fluttered to the ground, Allison entered the breakroom. She stalled when she saw me, then offered a sympathetic smile.

I was wrinkled and disheveled, my hair sticking up and sleep in my eyes. Not how I liked to present myself at work.

"Were you here all night?"

"Yeah. I found him. Kader. It's the same boy. I left them—"
A yawn interrupted my explanation. "On my desk."

"Okay." Allison wasn't as enthused as I expected. She shuffled her feet, then glanced over her shoulder, out the door and down the hall, before looking back. "I heard about Doyle. Is he all right?"

My brain cleared, and I checked my phone. No messages. No calls. I frowned. "I don't know. I couldn't get a hold of him last night. I'm going to swing by his house, then run home and shower. I have to stop by and see Dad too, then I'll be back."

"No rush. I'll grab those pictures and see how Erik wants to proceed." Allison nodded at the few print-offs I'd set beside me on the couch. "What are those?"

"Another possible lead. I don't know. Looking for Kader gave me an idea, but it may amount to nothing."

I told her about Tom's and my dad's accounts of the day Juniper vanished, about the organizer who wasn't who he said he was, a man possibly named Barrie or Barney. "It's a stretch, but maybe he's in these pictures. Maybe Tom or Dad can spot him."

"And if so, then maybe we can run his face."

"Exactly."

Allison nodded. "Get out of here for a bit. If Edwards sees you sleeping at the office, he'll take you off the case."

"I don't know why. I've spent plenty of nights here. Just because it's personal doesn't mean I should be less invested."

"I know. But he's in a rare mood lately. You don't want to test his patience."

She was right.

"I'll be back in a couple of hours."

I went home first, showered, shaved, and grabbed a granola bar since I was starving. On my way to Aslan's, I went through a drive-through and picked up two large coffees, one percent and Sweet'N Low for me and a generous splash of milk for Aslan. No sugar.

It was eight thirty when I parked across the street from his house.

Why did I park across the street? Because there was another car in his driveway.

I killed the engine but didn't move to get out.

Why didn't I get out?

Because Aslan, dressed in nothing more than boxers, was standing at the front door to his house, saying goodbye to a very attractive woman.

### CHAPTER 24

#### Aslan



B ees woke me the following morning. They buzzed in my ear, piercing the soft cushion surrounding my brain, calling me back to consciousness. When I buried my head under the pillow to escape them, it did nothing more than muffle the sound.

Buzz.

Buzz, buzz, buzz.

Sleep peeled away in layers until I understood there weren't any bees. Someone was ringing my doorbell. Someone persistent. Someone who didn't get the message that I wasn't in the mood to wake up or be social.

Someone with a death wish.

Groggy with sleep, I checked the time, squinting at the digital clock on my nightstand. Twenty after eight. The sun shone through the window, cutting a bright rectangle across the bed. No dreary clouds today, which was unfair considering my mood.

The previous night came back to me.

You're suspended.

The liquor store.

The gin.

Calling Tony.

The meetings, one after another.

The itch under my skin where I couldn't reach.

It was still there but less persistent—unlike my early morning visitor who pressed the doorbell again three times in a row.

Buzz, buzz, buzz.

My mouth was sticky and dry. My head was thick with cotton. I hadn't drunk the gin. It should have been a win, but for whatever reason, it didn't feel like it. Almost a year sober, and I felt like a failure.

You're suspended.

The doorbell rang again, four times in a row.

Buzz, buzz, buzz, buzz.

Torin. It had to be Torin. No one else was that annoying. I dragged myself from bed, bleary-eyed and still exhausted. My bones ached, and I had to remind myself again that no, I hadn't drunk the gin.

Not an ounce of alcohol in my system, yet I was hungover. Emotionally hungover, and perhaps that was worse. I wouldn't be able to quell this nausea with strong coffee and a greasy breakfast.

Another series of buzzes.

"For fuck's sake."

In nothing more than boxers, I dragged my sorry ass downstairs to the front door.

The buzzer sang the entire time, and I cursed under my breath, reminding myself that it was wrong to punch people in the face before noon, even pissant partners who lived to annoy me and couldn't take a hint that I didn't want to talk about the fact that I was on the verge of losing my job.

I unlocked the door and swung it open, fire and ice on the tip of my tongue, but I stalled when I came face-to-face with Daniella from the tabloid magazine. The wires in my brain crossed and sparked, unable to make proper connections.

"What... Huh?"

"Good morning, sunshine. It's Friday. We had a deal."

I squinted into the bright morning sun. It was deceivingly cold. Goose bumps rolled over my exposed skin and pebbled my nipples. A chill ran down my spine, and I shuddered as I tried to make sense of what was happening.

"How the fuck do you know where I live?" I scowled, my voice deep and sleep roughened.

"Sweetheart, you're not that hard to find." She waved her phone at me. "I took you at your word, Detective. You didn't call."

"Maybe you should have taken that as a sign that I didn't want to."

She tipped her head to the side, her wavy brown hair falling over her shoulder. Unlike me, Daniella was alert and puttogether. Her makeup accented her amber eyes and emphasized her full mouth. She was dressed down today. Fitted jeans and a low-cut blouse under a fashionable black leather jacket she hadn't bothered fastening. Like before, she wore heels that added a few inches to her height.

I recognized the heavy perfume immediately.

"Did you talk to him?"

"He's not giving you an interview."

"Did you ask?"

"I don't have to. If Quaid was inclined to speak to anyone, it wouldn't be a trashy tabloid magazine, so please take your scampy ass off my porch and don't come back."

Daniella's mouth quirked at the edge. "Scampy? That's kind of low."

"I know your type."

"Do you? Pot, meet kettle. You see, I've read up on you too, Detective Doyle. You have quite the reputation."

"Yeah. I don't really want to do this right now. Whatever you think you know about me, you're wrong. Please leave."

"That's not how this works. I promised I wouldn't pester Detective Valor so long as you got me an interview. You reneged on your half of our deal, so I will be forced to renege on mine." She handed me a tablet. "How does this sound? Usually, my boss wants theories and suspicions to have corroborating evidence, but this new little rumor is juicy enough that I could get away with printing it regardless of Detective Valor's cooperation. Every newspaper in the city wants to be the first to print it, but it will be me who brings it to the people."

I glanced at the tablet's screen and the article displayed. The title read, *Is Juniper Valor's Brother Burying Secrets For His Father? Who Was Really Responsible For The Nine-Year-Old's Disappearance Thirty Years Ago?* 

I snatched the tablet from her hands and skimmed the first paragraph. When I got to a part that alluded to Abraham refusing to pay a ransom to get Juniper back and how he may have conspired with her kidnapper because he didn't believe Juniper was his daughter, I snorted and shoved it back at Daniella.

"You're kidding, right? No one will believe that garbage. Print whatever the fuck you want. Just get out of here. I don't understand you people."

I went to close the door, but Daniella caught it with the edge of her toe, forcing herself onto the threshold. She lost her flirty edge, and her amber eyes solidified into something more threatening. She held my gaze, daring me to shove her out of the way and slam the door.

Lowering her voice, she said, "You will cooperate, Detective Doyle. I've been more than agreeable so far. Sources say that Quaid Valor may not be Abraham's son either. If you had kept reading the article, you would have seen how it unfolds. You would have seen that what I'm suggesting isn't as far-fetched as you believe."

"It's bullshit."

"No. Right now, it's a perfectly plausible theory that every newspaper and TV station in the city is fighting over. Haven't you heard? Reporters and journalists alike have been trying to get someone in MPU to talk, but no one's listening to us. Like you said, I work for a trashy tabloid magazine. Nothing is stopping me from printing this. How would your boyfriend feel, learning from a magazine that his father isn't his father and that he knows more about Juniper's kidnapping than he's letting on?"

"It's not true."

"Isn't it? Maybe Quaid already knows. Maybe he's been sucked into this whole conspiracy. You don't know the facts any more than I do. No one does. But there's more going on here, and the people have a right to know."

"What the fuck do you want?"

"The truth. I want Quaid Valor to consent to a DNA test and prove this wrong. I think there is a lot more going on than

meets the eye. If he agrees and the test proves he's Abraham's son, then I'll walk away. But if I'm right and he isn't, then the entire focus of the investigation takes a drastic and unexpected turn. The department is hiding something, and I *will* find out what that something is. Do you really know the man you're sleeping with? Maybe he's playing you for a fool."

I was too tired for this shit. "Do you lie awake at night and dream of ways to mess with people's lives? Is that what they teach you in tabloid school?"

Daniella's gaze roamed my body, a slow perusal up and down, lingering an extra minute on my boxer briefs.

Her teeth caught her bottom lip. "That's not what I dream about at night, sweetheart."

When she reached out to touch my chest, I caught her wrist, squeezing harder than I should have as I held her back.

She winced, but I didn't loosen my grip. "You need to leave."

"A shame. We can help each other. You are in a perfect position to get information for me, and I will fully compensate you for whatever you unearth." Half-lidded eyes landed on mine. "Fully compensate."

A car pulling up across the street drew my attention. A black, unmarked Charger with tinted windows.

Quaid.

Fuck my life.

The last thing I needed was this fucking bitch to get her claws in him and make him question his paternity or whatever other nonsense Daniella was trying to imply.

Daniella, hearing the car too, glanced over her shoulder. When she turned back, a malicious grin monopolized her face. "Well, well, well. Look who it is."

"You need to leave," I said again.

"Just the man I wanted to see."

With her hand still clasped in mine, I backed her out the door, using my size to intimidate her. It was not my usual style to try to frighten women, but this one was getting on my last nerve.

I got in her face, hissing, "If you talk to him or go anywhere near him, I'll find a reason to have you arrested. I can be creative. Don't test me."

I didn't like the look on her face. She was conniving, brewing some wicked plot I couldn't figure out.

"Leave," I said again.

"I'm going."

"And stay away from him. And me."

"We'll see."

I released her hand, but before she spun to walk away, she flattened a palm on my bare abdomen, her thumb sneaking close to the elastic edge of my boxers. "You should get inside, sweetie. It's cold out here, and you're not properly dressed." She blew an air kiss, winked, and walked away.

Her heels clicked on the driveway. The sway of her hips was intentional. When she flicked her hair over her shoulder and waved with a delicate flutter of fingers at Quaid in the Charger before getting into her car and driving off, I was prepared to reevaluate my no punching anyone before noon rule.

The moment she was gone, the door to the Charger opened, and I knew, *I knew*, I was going to pay for Daniella's early morning visit. What were the chances I could convince my severely insecure boyfriend that what he'd witnessed wasn't what it seemed?

On the other hand, how did I tell him what Daniella had threatened without upsetting his balance? Despite how levelheaded Quaid could be when it came to work, he was not so when it came to personal relationships and family. He was fragile—not a word I'd call him to his face. He wanted desperately to be liked.

#### Loved.

He hadn't spoken much about his childhood, but I'd pieced together enough to know how displaced he'd felt after Juniper had been taken. How alone and lost and confused he'd been when his mother had up and left without even a goodbye. He carried a fear of abandonment everywhere he went, and it bled into his relationships, whether he wanted to admit it or not.

Why else would he stay with a man who'd cheated on him for a year?

Although he acted like his mother's absence didn't matter, she was a bruise on his heart and soul. Jack wasn't the one who had initiated the mistrust Quaid carried everywhere he went. It was Shari Valor. How could you trust anyone when the person who was supposed to love you most in the world walked away without a second glance when you were six years old?

I studied Quaid as he crossed the road, trying to get a read on how this whole situation would play out and wondering if I had the strength for the coming battle. He carried a tray of takeout coffee. His hair was damp from a recent shower, darker than his usual wheat blond.

There was no sneer. No scowl. No frown. No... anything. In fact, his face was unreadable. Blank. Expressionless. His baby blues were cold, impenetrable ice.

He was doing the whole hide-behind-a-thick-barrier thing. Pretending to be okay when he was screaming on the inside.

So that was how we were playing it.

"I didn't know you had company," he said when he was halfway up the driveway. "Should have called first, except I was worried about you since I couldn't get a hold of you last night."

Intentional barb. That was fine.

I didn't respond, studying his every move and nonexpression, looking for hints or clues. I knew him better than he thought. The stony exterior didn't fool me.

Quaid climbed the stairs to the stoop, stopped a few feet away, and held up the tray. "Thought you might need a coffee. I heard what happened. At work. I came by yesterday, pounded on your door for... Oh, I don't know, fifteen or twenty minutes. You weren't here."

"I got home late."

"I figured."

Where were you? He didn't say it, but I could read between the lines.

Since I hadn't moved to take a coffee, he plucked one from the tray and held it out. I accepted it and held the front door open, inviting him in.

By silent agreement, we went to the kitchen. I pulled out a chair at the table and collapsed. Quaid refused to sit. He paced a bit, then leaned against the counter as far away from me as he could get. More barriers. He fiddled with the plastic lid on his coffee to the point of excess, refusing to make eye contact.

Tension vibrated the air between us. I was too exhausted for games and counted backward from ten before opening my mouth.

"You're not going to ask about her?"

"Nope. None of my business. I trust you, and there must be a perfectly reasonable explanation for a beautiful woman to be leaving your house at eight thirty in the morning while you're dressed in nothing but incredibly revealing boxer briefs."

I snorted. "Is this how we're playing it?"

He shrugged and sipped his coffee. "I don't know what you mean."

I scrubbed my face, hands rasping against my unshaven jaw. A dull throb pulsed behind my eyes. I needed to shower and brush my teeth since they were fuzzy and gross. "I don't think I can do this this morning, Quaid."

"Do what? I came to bring you coffee and check in on you. Torin said you were suspended. I figured maybe you'd need some emotional support."

"Right. So you aren't raging inside your head right now because you showed up and found a woman on my doorstep?"

"Nope."

"And you don't want an explanation?"

"No." He sipped his coffee again, winced when he burned his tongue, and set the paper cup on the counter.

He still wouldn't look at me.

"Fine." I drank my own coffee and watched him out of the corner of my eye. I gave it ten minutes before his head exploded.

It took three.

It started with his tongue abusing his upper lip, gliding back and forth, back and forth. Then he clenched and unclenched his hands and plucked at the seam on his trousers. A stitch appeared between his brows until he realized he was making a face and worked hard to neutralize it.

"Here it comes," I muttered.

"So, who is she?"

I chuckled, which earned me one of Quaid's trademark sneers, his attempt at maintaining a neutral expression all but forgotten. Ordinarily, I would have teased him about the sneer's presence, but I sensed the timing was bad. He was unstable and had gone on the defense.

"That was Daniella from the tabloid magazine. The woman who was harassing me the other day because she desperately wanted me to set up an interview with you."

"The one who gave you her phone number on a random Post-it and not a business card?"

"Yes."

"Because she wanted an interview with me?"

"Yes."

"And instead of actually speaking to *me*, she came to *you*? At your house? At eight o'clock in the morning?"

"Yes, Quaid."

"Sure. That's logical. Makes perfect sense."

"Sarcasm doesn't suit you."

"So you're not fucking her?" His voice rose, his anger barely restrained.

"Christ." I dug my fingers into my eyes. "Of all fucking days. No, Quaid. I'm not fucking her. She wasn't here all night. She woke me up by ringing the bell this morning. That's why I'm not dressed. I came right from bed."

The heat of his attention was searing. I held his gaze, refusing to look away.

In the end, he shrugged and grabbed his coffee off the counter. "Okay. Fine. Whatever you say."

Jesus Christ.

I didn't have the energy to deal with this. If he wanted to pretend he was fine, so be it. I drank my coffee, wishing it was something stronger. The craving was back in full force, and I'd have killed for a drink.

He still wouldn't sit.

"So," he said after a long period of silence. "How are you?" I deadpanned.

"The suspension. How are you?" His tone rang so falsely complacent that I wanted to scream.

"How am I? Honestly? Really fucking shitty, Quaid. My worst nightmare has been realized, and in a handful of days, I might not have a job. Not only that, but some fucking bitch from a tabloid magazine wants to turn your life inside out, and in an effort to protect you, I'm being accused of fucking around."

"I didn't accuse you—"

"You asked me flat out if I was fucking her. That's an accusation." My voice bounced off the walls, and I couldn't rein it in anymore.

"Well, to be fair—"

"Yeah, I get it. You saw what you saw, and your brain instantly jumped off the deep end. Instead of giving me the benefit of the fucking doubt, you toss me in the same goddamn box as Jack, which is incredibly unfair. I have not cheated on a single person in my entire life. The thought disgusts me, same as it does you. But you've already decided that's what happened because of how I lived my life previously. I can't possibly want a monogamous relationship. All Aslan wants is to fuck around with a hundred different people."

"I didn't—"

"You did! But you know what? It's how you're programmed. You can't help it. I knew this going in, and on most days, I can handle having to reassure and coddle your insecure ass, but right now, Quaid, I can't. I had a bad fucking night, and right now, it isn't about you!"

I drained the last of my coffee and shoved the paper cup aside hard enough that it toppled and rolled to the floor. The chair legs shrieked as I pushed back from the table. "I need to shower and brush my teeth. You can see yourself out."

I left him in the kitchen. He'd either leave in a huff or chase me down. But this was Quaid, so I knew the latter was the only option. Everything I said would make him sick with worry that I was pushing him away. He wouldn't go anywhere until he could fix his misstep, until he could be sure I wasn't angry.

The burning itch under my skin was getting harder to ignore. I hadn't had such a bone-deep craving in a long time, and it was making me antsy and reactive. I should have bitten my tongue instead of lashing out, but I couldn't take it back now. Besides, maybe Quaid needed to hear some hard truths.

The bathroom was across from my bedroom. I started the shower, set it to cold, and kicked my underwear across the hall, where it landed a few feet shy of my unmade bed. I listened for Quaid but didn't hear him.

Under the cold spray, I closed my eyes, letting the water cool the burn in my veins and simmer the incessant internal shake unique to addicts craving a fix. If I focused, I could still smell the gin. It took ten minutes for the craving to calm to something I could live with. I washed and got out.

Unsurprisingly, Quaid had made it upstairs and sat on the edge of my bed. My underwear had miraculously found its way to the hamper, and the bed was made. My poor neurotic boyfriend couldn't help himself. I didn't know if I should laugh or cry.

I dried and wrapped a towel around my waist before smearing toothpaste onto a brush and popping it into my mouth.

I leaned against the doorframe to the bedroom and brushed my teeth, watching him.

Quaid peeked up once but cut his attention to the carpet again. "Tony's been calling." He motioned to my phone on the bedside table.

I removed the toothbrush from my mouth and talked around a mouthful of foam. "Six, two, one, one."

Quaid frowned. "What?"

I gestured to the phone. "Check message." It sounded more like *che mehage*, but he caught my drift and shook his head.

I returned to the bathroom, spat, rinsed my mouth, then went back to the bedroom. I took my phone and called Tony. He answered on the first ring.

We kept it short, and I told him I'd meet him for lunch at noon. Only after I reassured him several times I was okay did he let me go.

I dropped the phone on the nightstand and sat beside Quaid, who was twisting his fingers together.

"Where were you last night?"

I'd been waiting for that question. After everything I'd said downstairs, he still couldn't help himself. It was eating him alive.

"After I left Summerfield's office, I came home and went running. I ended up at a liquor store somewhere and bought a bottle of gin."

Quaid glanced over, and the arctic quality of his eyes had melted into sympathy. Any other time, his sympathy over my addiction might have irritated me, but I needed it right now.

"I uncapped the bottle in a back alley. Got as far as inhaling the scent before calling Tony. It was close. I wanted it. Badly. Still do. Tony picked me up, and we went to a handful of meetings together. He brought me home around eleven or eleven thirty. I shut down and went to sleep. It was bad. Still craving, but it's simmered."

Quaid set a hand on my towel-covered thigh. "I'm sorry."

"I'll get through it. I'm in control. Mostly. I didn't mean to shout."

"I deserved it. And you woke up to... that woman at the door?"

"Yes. Did you know some rumors are going around? She claims she has dirt on you, your dad, and Juniper's case. Whether you believe me or not, I've been trying to keep her away from you."

"What kind of dirt?"

"I don't know. Tabloid-worthy garbage."

"The press has been especially bad with this case. Edwards has been deflecting them. He's made it very clear we aren't to engage with anyone, no matter what they try to tell us. I had a guy from City TV approach me about doing a piece. He was pushy. Said something about having me verify rumors. Are they the same, do you think?"

"Did he specify what he was talking about?"

"No. I didn't ask him to clarify. Can you just... tell me what she said?"

I sighed and flopped back onto the bed, covering my face with my hands. The weight of the previous day still clung to my skin. "She's trying to claim she has a source that confirms Juniper isn't your father's daughter and that he refused to pay a ransom back in 1992 because of it. She alluded that he might have been connected to her kidnapping somehow and that you might be in the loop."

"In the loop? I was six years old."

"I'm just telling you what she claimed. She questioned your paternity as well."

After unloading that on Quaid, I didn't know what I expected, but a laugh wasn't it. It burst from his chest. "Are you serious?"

"She thinks she can blackmail me into getting her inside information." Quaid's back was to me, so I reached for his arm, encouraging him to turn around. Once he did, I added, "Honestly, I think she's done some research and knows about my history. She's playing a very heavy seduction card, but I'm not tempted in the least. These people are dirty, and they play dirty, but the game is only fun if the opposition plays along. I'm not. She threatened to write a piece that exposed all these rumors if I didn't cooperate. It would make heads roll, but seeing as she's part of a *tabloid* magazine, I doubt anything that gets published would be credible. Now you have a headsup so you won't be blindsided. I've done my duty."

Quaid studied my face, gaze flitting back and forth from one eye to the other. He didn't trust anything, not even his own instincts, but he wanted to. Desperately.

"I'm not sleeping with her, Quaid. I'm not even tempted."

His tongue went to town on his upper lip. "Okay. I believe you. I'm... sorry I'm like this."

I gave his arm a tug. "Come here."

He rolled down beside me and propped on an elbow, his body flush with mine. I stroked his cheek, then smoothed his eyebrows one at a time. "It's not going to go away overnight. This taint Jack left inside you is going to take time."

"I frustrate you."

"Today, yes, you did, but only because I'm dealing with my own shit. I'm sorry I lost my temper. Quaid, I get it. We aren't always going to be perfect, and there will be all kinds of bumps in the road. News flash, we're going to fight. It's inevitable. All couples fight. Any couple who tells you they don't is lying. It's having the ability to move past an argument and forgive each other that makes us stronger. This isn't a romance novel, hot stuff. I know you want it to be, and your good looks make you a fine contender for a lead role, but let's be honest, real life is a lot more complex. It doesn't magically become perfect when you find someone you... want to be with. It's getting through the tough times that will make us stronger. Perfection doesn't exist."

But that was what Quaid strived for every day of his life. And he had dreams that were romance-novel quality. That wasn't a bad thing, but it also wasn't realistic. He was deeply flawed. We both were. His wounds were irreparable no matter how hard he strived to fix them, smooth them out, or pretend they didn't exist. He carried around so much internal anger, pain, and uncertainty that I didn't know how he managed to hide it from the world most days.

What I wanted most of all was honesty. I wanted the barriers to come down.

But it wasn't that simple.

It didn't take much urging to get him to lie down. He wrapped an arm around my middle and put his head on my shoulder. I caught the scent of his hair product and aftershave. A whisper of fabric softener drifted off his clothes. His body was warm, and mine was chilled from the cold shower.

When I closed my eyes, I could zero in on the thrum of his pulse, beating under my palm where I'd rested it on his neck. A soft flutter, a little faster than normal.

"Are you okay?" he asked, his tone soft, his lips brushing my skin. "You're meeting Tony for lunch, but..."

"It's under control right now. Last night was bad, but I handled it. One day at a time. If anything changes, if I find myself slipping, I'll call him."

"I'm sorry I wasn't there for you."

I squeezed him tighter, kissing the top of his head. "How's the case?"

"Lots going on, but progress is... slow." He lifted his head and propped his chin on my chest. "Do you need something to keep you busy?"

"You mean help you? Summerfield took my badge. I'm not allowed in the building until they call me for a meeting. If I'm caught working in any official capacity, I'm done."

"It doesn't have to be official. I can bring it all home, and we can go through what's come up so far. I value your opinion. Plus... it might help distract you." He trailed his fingers through my dense scruff, scratching at it with his nails. I knew how much he liked it when I delayed shaving. He'd mentioned it many times.

I found his hand and wove our fingers together, bringing them to my mouth and kissing his knuckles. "That would be very helpful. Thank you."

A stitch of worry appeared between his brows. "I'm not pushing you away, am I?"

"No."

He didn't look like he believed me.

"Bring those sexy lips over here so I can kiss them."

A tiny smile quirked the corner of his mouth. He shuffled higher, and we shared a long moment just for us. His tongue teased the seam of my mouth, then it glided alongside mine, velvety smooth. Intoxicating. Like the first time we kissed, it ignited a spark within me. I was burning again, but this time, I willingly let the flames consume me.

# CHAPTER 25

### Quaid



I t was late morning before I left Aslan's. My shirt was wrinkled, and my hair was misbehaving, but I was calmer, satiated from a long make-out session that inevitably ended in sex. In the back of my mind lived a tiny seed of guilt, shame, and a touch of uncertainty.

I wasn't sure the uncertainty would ever go away. For now, I could ignore it.

Despite what I'd witnessed when I drove up to his house, I didn't get the sense Aslan was trying to deceive me. He'd always been nothing but brutally honest, even if it stung. Even if it was a slap in the face.

I needed to solve this case so I could dedicate more time to Aslan and our fledgling relationship. He'd been so patient and tolerant, and I hadn't given him anything but a mountain of frustration in return. Aslan was easygoing and light-hearted, and I was wound so tight most days that I was ready to snap.

In my head, I planned a nice dinner. Something romantic. It would have to be when the case calmed down and I had a free night, but I would cook something special. Something he would like. Maybe we could go somewhere nice. Spend a weekend away from the city.

Our poor relationship needed a fresh start without so many outside factors dragging us down.

After the case.

My first stop was Dad's. I had a dozen pictures from the parade in 1992 for him to view. Even though I'd told him to stay home today, I knew he'd be up.

En route, I called Iris, hoping she might have access to more pictures or know where I might find them.

"You know, it's possible I do have some. We used to have a few albums. They might be at the Legion Hall, but... Let me get back to you, sweetie."

I thanked her and called Tom next, setting up a time later that morning when I could swing by and show him the photographs.

"I might have a handful kicking around," Tom said. "The wife was there that day, and she was always taking pictures of the girls. I'll have a look in the old albums."

"Thank you."

Aslan was coming by after his lunch with Tony, and I planned to collect all I needed from work and catch him up on what was going on with the case. If Edwards wasn't lording

over us and insisting that we work separate angles again today, maybe I'd invite everyone over and start a base of operations in my living room. We'd get further if we worked together.

Dad was in the kitchen when I arrived, brewing a pot of coffee. The telltale scent of bacon hung in the air, and a discarded Wendy's bag in the garbage told me what he'd decided to have for dinner the previous night.

Ordinarily, I'd have grumbled about his diet and cholesterol, but I'd provoked enough fights for one day and didn't want to engage in another.

"Did you take your pills?" I asked instead.

"Yes, Doc. Every morning. Are you having a cup?"

"Please."

"Did you eat? There's that cereal you think is good in the cupboard. Might as well have it. I'm not eating that crap again."

Since my granola bar was long gone, I made a bowl of Raisin Bran.

Dad poured two mugs of coffee and dressed mine with Sweet'N Low and milk—Dad took his black—before hobbling with them to the kitchen table where he sat. I joined him with my cereal.

"Thought you weren't coming over this morning."

"I need your help."

I explained how I'd reviewed the school pictures the previous day and found more that potentially included Kader. I told Dad how it had ignited an idea of how we might be able to identify our unknown parade coordinator.

I slid the folder of photographs I'd printed the previous night across the table. "There aren't as many, but I found a handful of pictures online from the parade. I want you to look at them and tell me if any of those people are the organizer Tom called Barrie or Barney. Iris and Tom might have more for you to view, but this is a start."

Glasses perched on the end of his nose, Dad perused the pictures one at a time. He had me retrieve a magnifying glass from a junk drawer and held it over each as he scrutinized them. Face pinched in a frown, he drew a finger over the crowd, touching each face, pausing, and moving on.

It was a long shot. Thirteen pictures were hardly enough to encompass the hundreds of people who'd participated in the parade that year. While Dad looked, I pulled out my laptop and did another search, looking for images I might have missed. It had been late, and I'd been tired. It wasn't unreasonable.

My phone rang, and Tom Staple's name was displayed. "Hello?"

"There were a couple of pictures Hillary took that day. We have them in an album. I don't know how to scan, so I took pictures with my cellphone, and Hillary said we can email them to you?"

"Yes. That would be great." I gave him my email address.

A few minutes later, Tom's pictures came through. I opened the file and scanned. They were mostly of his girls. Anyone in the background was too nondescript. In one of the pictures, Juni was with Natalie and Megan. A young boy and girl stood behind them, grinning at the camera. I assumed it was the Boy Scout cousin and his sister.

None of them were useful.

"How are you making out?" I asked Dad.

He mumbled and waved me off, so I left him alone and continued my internet search for more pictures.

"Hang on," Dad said fifteen minutes later. He held the magnifying glass close to the print, squinting as though it might help clear the graininess. It was a crowd shot consisting of at least twenty people, some clustered in groups and the odd person standing alone. A mixture of people young and old.

"Do you have something?"

"I don't know." He turned it toward me and pointed to a lone man set back in the frame. "It's too blurry to confirm, but... this man feels familiar. It's been a long time, kiddo. I could be making connections because I want to and not because they exist."

The man wasn't so much blurry as he was too far away to see properly. Taking a minute, I flicked through my search, trying to locate the same picture on the computer again. When I found it, I clicked it to fill the screen. I located the man Dad pointed out and blew it up in small increments. I didn't have

high-tech photo software, so when the image grew too distorted, I shrank it back one size.

I turned the screen to Dad.

"How about now?"

Dad stared a long time, lips parted, gray eyes like granite. "It's been thirty years," he said.

"I know. And?"

He sighed. "I... I think you should ask Tom. Don't take my word for it."

"Is it him, Dad?"

"I said I don't know. Maybe. Possibly. It... looks like him, but what if I just want it to be? What if he's nobody important?"

And what if he is?

I spun the laptop back and saved the image before attaching it to an email and sending it to Tom. I took out my phone and gave him a call.

"Check your email. I sent a picture, and I want you to look at it for me."

"Hang on. I'll do it from the desktop." A long pause. "This thing is slow as heck. It's opening." Another pause. "Okay. Here we go."

"Upper right-hand side of the picture. He's back behind a group of two women. Black coat and tan slacks. Do you know how to make your screen bigger?" Tom didn't say anything for a few beats, then, "No need. That's the guy. That's Barrie."

A trickle of ice water spilled down my spine. "Are you sure?"

"As sure as I can be. The old noggin isn't as sharp as it once was, but I remember him."

I thanked Tom, canceled our meeting, and got off the phone.

"What now?" Dad asked.

"Now, I bring this picture to Ruiz in IT. He can clean it up. I'll have him run it through facial-recognition software, and we cross our fingers and hope we get a hit."

"And the likelihood of that?"

Slim, but I didn't want to dash Dad's hopes. It was the first lead we'd had in Juniper's case in three decades, and it may not be a lead at all. "I don't know."

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I ended up at headquarters by eleven. My first stop was the basement and the tech offices where Costa Ruiz worked. He was the department's head IT guy and a total dick. Tattooed, arrogant, and homophobic in a not-so-subtle way that was reserved for me and me alone.

He listened as I explained what I needed and had me forward him the picture from the parade.

"It's not great quality," he said when he pulled it up on the monstrous screen of his desktop.

"I know, but can you fix it up or something?"

"Mm. Maybe."

When I hung over his shoulder to see what kind of photo sharpening he could do with his far superior software, I got told to stop breathing down his neck.

When I stood back and tried to watch from a distance, he told me to take a hike, and he'd let me know if and when he found anything.

"How long?"

"No idea. Don't hold your breath. The facial-recognition program is good but not great. If they have no online presence or aren't in our system, it will come up dry. Nine times out of ten, we don't get hits, or what we get isn't accurate, and that's with recent images. This face is thirty years old."

"On that note, is there any way to do an age progression on him?" If he was the man involved in Juniper's disappearance —I knew I was jumping the gun but couldn't help it—then Barrie/Barney's aged face would be more recognizable by parents or people present at the school party or soccer tournament.

Ruiz shook his head. It wasn't a no. It was annoyance at my request. "Yeah, I can try. Again, the picture isn't great."

"So you said."

"But I should be able to get something for you. Won't be perfect."

"How long?"

"You're a real pain in the ass, Valor."

"You wish."

He huffed. "No fucking way. I wouldn't take a dick if I had a gun pointed at my head."

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

"I don't wanna know."

"Does my gayness scare you, Ruiz?"

He pitched me a dirty look over his shoulder.

I smirked. Irritating the homophobes was more fun than it should be.

"How long?" I asked again.

"Jesus. An hour for the age progression. You aren't my only job, you know."

"I know, but the longer you make me wait, the more I annoy you until it's finished. Call my cell, not my desk."

"Get out of my office."

I left Ruiz to work and took the elevator to the fourth floor.

In MPU, there seemed to be a storm brewing. Edwards's office door was shut, and he was having an animated and extremely loud conversation with two men and a woman who had the slimy appearance of press.

When I inquired with coworkers in the bullpen, I was told Eden, Allison, and Erik were tucked away in a conference room with the door closed. I snuck in, shutting it behind me.

"What's happening out there?" I asked when Allison glanced up.

It was Erik who answered. "The major stations are demanding another press conference. They're claiming they've received new information and want us to respond to the wild rumors circulating immediately."

Eden's expression was wary as she watched me from the far side of the table. Allison didn't look any better.

"What new information?"

Aslan's visit from the tabloid woman and her threats came back to me. They'd seemed laughable at the time, something conjured up to cause ripples and shake the ground, but nothing bound in truth. Hell, the tabloid magazines reported celebrity alien abductions every other week. They had recently made wild claims that our prime minister was the son of Cuban dictator Fidel Castro.

"It's nothing," Eden said, jumping in before Erik could answer.

"He should know," Erik protested, glaring at Eden, an expression I rarely saw on his unexpressive face.

To me, Eden said, "They're trying to claim we're covering up the true depth of Juniper's investigation from thirty years ago. It's bullshit. Edwards is taking care of it, so don't worry about it."

"True depth?" I asked.

"Don't talk to the media, Quaid," Allison said. "For your own peace of mind. Nothing good will come of it."

"For Pete's sake." Erik's voice rose as he flipped his attention between Allison and Eden. Then his focus turned to me. "They're dancing around it. It's you and your dad they want most of all. They're making wild claims about your paternity, and Juniper's, and some ransom that the department is covering up."

"Erik—"

"No, Allison. He should be prepared in case they catch him off guard in the parking lot or somewhere else."

"Okay." I held up my hands. "Everyone chill. Rumors are rumors. They spread like a virus, but I can handle it. We've dealt with media vermin before. So what? Let's get to work. Where are we this morning?"

A queasy knot formed in my gut. It was stupid. There was nothing behind the rumors. Juniper's case was black and white, the same as all the kidnapping cases that had gone before and happened after. There was no hidden agenda, no undocumented ransom. The department wasn't covering anything up, and Juniper and I were both Dad's flesh and blood. The end. I refused to believe differently.

Erik checked in with Allison and Eden before plucking a photograph from the table and turning it around. It was the clearest image we had of the unknown child.

"Earlier this morning, Evelyn and Lily identified this boy as Kader. It's no longer in question. What we don't have is anything concrete to put him at the pool when Avery vanished, so her connection to this case is still unstable."

"We're in the process of doing a citywide search for male children between the ages of seven and eleven with a first or middle name of Kader," Allison said. "Luckily, it's not a common name. Unfortunately, this is going to take time."

"Well, in about an hour, I might have something else for us to go on." I told them about my idea of searching for pictures of the parade crowd from thirty years ago and about the unknown organizer Dad and Tom had identified. "It's not a solid lead, but until I figure out who this guy is, it's also the best one we have. In the meantime, I have a few questionable Boy Scout leaders I need to look up. Again, it's probably nothing, but their names have surfaced in ways I don't like, so that's where I'm at. Baby steps forward."

We spent the following hour discussing directions, of which there weren't many. Once Ruiz had a proper age progression of the man in the photograph, we would circulate it to the key people in all recent cases to see if anyone recognized him. Allison and Erik had plans to reinterview several parents from the soccer game and school party later. Eden was doing the same with the parents from the pool. I planned to dig deeper into the two Boy Scout leaders.

We had a game plan. We were organized.

Until Ruiz called my cell shortly after noon.

"Hey, you have an age progression for me?" I asked in lieu of hello.

"Nope, and it ain't happening."

"Why?"

"Because I got a ping on facial recognition almost immediately."

## CHAPTER 26

### Quaid



66 hat was fast. You said facial recognition could take a long time."

"I'm good at what I do, Valor. Try not to cum in your pants. You're not my type."

"You keep saying that, but don't flatter yourself. It was your computer software that impressed me, not you. You'd have to google where to find my prostate. I prefer experienced men, not clumsy dolts."

"Ha, ha. Please read the sarcasm in my tone right now. I beg you. Do you want this information or not?"

"You got a hit? Who is he?"

"Your guy is Dwaine Carlen Vincolla, and he's dead."

"What?"

"Dead, Valor. Ask your homicide boyfriend what it means. Opposite of living. No longer breathing. Decaying in the ground. Rotting six feet under." "Ruiz, I swear to god—"

"The facial recognition pinged on his obituary. He died in May 1994 at the age of forty-seven. The obituary didn't say how, so I dug a little deeper. You're welcome. Why I'm doing you favors, I have no idea. Dwaine Vincolla was shot, according to the report, in a home invasion. However, the officer's report tagged a few suspicions you might be interested in. You can read this shit and draw your own conclusions."

"He's dead?"

"I'm going to hang up now because you're irritating me. I'll send what I've got to your email, and since dead people don't age, I'm not gonna bother with your age progression. Have a good day. Don't come down here. I don't want to see your face or hear your voice."

The phone clicked in my ear. "Jackass," I muttered under my breath.

Three sets of eyes waited. "Okay, so no Barrie/Barney picture to show around. There's a snag."

"What snag?" Erik asked.

"He's dead. But..." I frowned. "I'm not done with him."

The circumstances surrounding his death warranted a closer look. First, Barrie wasn't Barrie or Barney, and why would he lie about who he was and act as a parade organizer in the exact place where a child went missing?

My phone buzzed. I figured it was Ruiz's email coming through, but when I checked, it was a text from Aslan.

Aslan: Heading to your place. Are you there?

Quaid: Leaving soon. I'll be there shortly.

Aslan: np xoxo

I sent a heart emoji, my worries over our morning upset almost completely gone with distance.

I pocketed my phone. "Any chance we can meet at my place tonight at seven? We need to make a collective decision on where we go from here. Perhaps without someone lording over our case."

No one disagreed. Plan in motion, I headed out to meet Aslan.

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It took thirty minutes to update Aslan on everything we'd been doing. He listened and expressed surprise when I told him about the picture Lily had been shown of me and the instructions she'd been given about ensuring I got the backpack.

I told him about the boy named Kader and showed him his picture. I explained about my interviews with Tom and Iris, about the questionable Boy Scout leaders I had yet to look into, and about the organizer who wasn't who he claimed to be.

Then I gave him the latest update from Ruiz about not-Barrie's suspicious death. Last, I told him Daniella's rumors were running rampant in other media channels.

"Edwards is deflecting, but it sounds like they're demanding another press conference to address it. Funny enough, no one has addressed it with me."

"Has he talked to your dad?"

I shrugged. "No idea. As for direct connections between Juniper's case and the three cases from today, we haven't found anything new. I was hoping this Barrie guy would be someone we could tie to today's kidnappings, but he was dead long before these girls were born. We have Kader, a child we can't locate, who likely doesn't have a public profile anywhere and might not be a registered citizen. He's a pawn, but we don't know who's controlling him. We strongly believe he's the boy in the vent and could be a direct relative to whoever was responsible back in 1992. We don't have evidence to back that up. Everything is speculation."

"Where are you focusing your attention right now?"

"Me? On Barrie. Rather, *not*-Barrie. Dwaine, whatever his last name is." I tapped the email icon on my laptop and opened the newest information. "Ruiz pulled an old report on his death. Shockingly, he was kind enough to scan and email it. I haven't read it yet. He sent it while I was driving home."

"Problem with Ruiz?"

"Always. The guy's a dick, but I've decided I like messing with him if for no other reason than to make him uncomfortable."

Aslan chuckled as he shuffled closer so we were sitting shoulder to shoulder.

I glanced over before opening the report Ruiz had sent. "Are we okay?"

Aslan nudged my side. "Yeah. We're good."

"I'm sorry about earlier."

"Water under the bridge."

"That feels too easy. You didn't deserve that. I tend to fly on instinct. I should know better."

"It's fine, Quaid. We're okay." He pecked my cheek. "Stop apologizing for being human. If anything, I blame Jack."

"Me too, but it's not an excuse. I should do better."

He headbutted me and growled. "Stop. We will have bumps in the road. We aren't kids. We can handle it."

"When this is over, we should go away for a weekend or something. Just us. We've barely had a chance to do this right."

"I like that. Deal. Now let's see this report."

I stole a kiss before clicking the file.

Together we read in silence.

I picked up on key pieces of information. Dwaine's wife, Willa, found her husband's body in the backyard of their home, west of King City. They lived on a cattle ranch that, according to the police report, wasn't in operation and consisted of overgrown fields, pastures, and empty barns.

Dwaine had been shot twice—once in the shoulder and once in the head. Willa claimed to have found her husband's body after returning home late one afternoon. She'd been at the grocery store.

The report had concluded it was a home invasion, like Ruiz had said. There was plausible evidence that Dwaine might have been chased through the house by an assailant—toppled furniture, back door left open—before meeting his end a few dozen feet from where he'd exited his dwelling. However, the police found suspicious evidence that led them to investigate Willa Vincolla.

First, forensic evidence suggested Dwaine Vincolla was *not* shot and killed where he landed. The blood surrounding the victim was not consistent with a person who had taken a shot to the shoulder and head. Although, due to recent heavy rain and the fact that dirt can act as a sponge, that piece of evidence alone had been written off as inconclusive.

Second, depressions in the surrounding grass led CSIs to suspect that Dwaine had been moved. They suspected he'd been wrapped in a tarp or blanket and had been dragged to the location where he was discovered. They found no tarp or

blanket on the property, and the depressions in the ground remained speculative.

Third, the evidence suggesting a home invasion was weak. The Vincolla family lived on a farm. Much of the property surrounding their house was mucky. Their driveway was gravel. Crime scene investigators noted there were zero traces of dirt or muck inside the house where Dwaine apparently fled from his assailant who'd come from outside. No muddy footprints. No apparent robbery. Nothing had been disturbed beyond the few pieces of tipped furniture in the path supposedly taken by Dwaine and his attacker.

Willa had been a prime suspect, but after an intense investigation, they'd dismissed her.

No one else was investigated.

The family had little to no communication with neighbors. No friends or family. They were tagged as loners who rarely went out or socialized.

What had happened to Dwaine Vincolla was unknown. The suggestion of a home invasion was flimsy at best. The police believed Dwaine might have known his attacker. They suspected the altercation that had ended Mr. Vincolla's life had taken place elsewhere and his body had been moved. Where he was at the time he was shot remained unknown.

A full search of the premises had turned up no clues.

Weeks of interviews and investigating had turned up nothing.

After four months, the investigation was closed, and Dwaine Carlen Vincolla was considered to have died from a burglary gone wrong.

No one had been arrested.

His case had gone unsolved.

I flopped back onto the couch once I'd finished reading. Aslan took another minute, skimming and scrolling back to the beginning. When he finished, he shifted to face me. "Thoughts?"

"I think it's a load of shit, and I want to talk to his wife."

"Do you think she killed him?"

"Maybe. Or she knows who did. Maybe he was kidnapping and killing little girls and she found out."

"You're reaching."

"I know, but he was at the parade the day Juni vanished and lied about who he was. I don't believe in coincidences."

Aslan shuffled back to the laptop and minimized the window. He pulled up one of the department's search engines, paused when it asked for login information, and turned back. "I can't use my ID. If they catch me working, I'm fucked."

I rattled off my ID number and password so he could get onto our server. From there, he did a search for a woman named Willa Vincolla.

"She might have reverted to her maiden name," I said.

"Maybe, but she'll be in the system. She was a person of interest in her husband's murder. That doesn't go away."

It took a few minutes before we got results. Willa Vincolla née Defleur was a resident of Nottingham Retirement Community in the small town of Aurora, about twenty minutes north of Richmond Hill. She was sixty-two years old, significantly younger than her husband would have been had he still been alive.

Aslan glanced over his shoulder and wiggled his brows. "Wanna take a drive and go harass an old lady about her dead husband who she may or may not have killed?"

"I certainly do. Your date ideas are so original."

"Excellent."

Except, instead of getting up, Aslan leaned in and pecked a lingering kiss on my lips. "Don't tell anyone, especially Torin, but I've missed working with you."

A kaleidoscope of butterflies fluttered in my belly, and I smiled, fisting his shirt front and yanking him closer. "Me too."

Another kiss. Another long minute passed, and neither of us moved as we savored each other. When Aslan's hand traveled up my inner thigh, I moaned into his mouth.

"Az?"

"Yeah."

"We need to stop. I'm working right now, and I try not to walk around in public with a hard-on if I can help it, but if you keep it up..."

He chuckled against my mouth. "Message received."

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Nottingham Retirement Community was a quaint, private collection of prefab condos on the outskirts of Aurora, a gated community that butted up against a golf course and required a keycode to enter. I buzzed the main office and was allowed through once I flashed my badge at the camera and explained my purpose to the man whose voice came from inside the steel box situated outside the control arm, preventing us from driving inside.

Once through, we wove down various mazelike streets until we found Willa Vincolla's address. Her tiny, single-story condo had white siding, a gently slanted roof, a single-car garage, and picturesque windows above gardens in winter slumber. It was identical to every other house on the block.

I parked on the road.

"I don't have a badge," Aslan said.

"I think we'll be okay. Stay in the background. If I show her mine, I doubt she'll ask for yours."

We wandered to the small concrete front stoop. It wasn't quite a porch, but a painted green wooden Adirondack chair sat beside the door. An old coffee can, half full of cigarette

butts, was tucked under its edge. It wafted its stench into the cool December air.

Aslan rang the bell—a musical chime sounded from indoors—then stepped back, peering toward the curtained front window and down the street in both directions.

A few minutes passed before a lock disengaged and a craggy-faced woman with white-blonde hair and yellowy-brown eyes answered. Tin of cigarette butts aside, the heavy wrinkles around her mouth and the smoky scent leeching off her clothes was enough to suggest she was a longtime smoker.

"Who are you?" Her voice was rough, scratchy, and deeper than I expected.

She coughed, a rattly sound that suggested early emphysema.

I held up my badge. "Detective Quaid Valor, Toronto PD. This is my partner, Detective Aslan Doyle." I couldn't help acknowledging how good it sounded to say that. "We were wondering if you had a few minutes to chat."

"About?"

"Your husband."

Her brows came together. Dull amber orbs shifted from Aslan to me. "I don't have a husband."

"Your deceased husband," Aslan added. "Remember him? Dwaine."

She *tsk*ed and sighed, puckering her wrinkled lips as she reached for something inside the door, out of our line of sight—a package of cigarettes. From a hook on the far wall, she snagged a light jacket and joined us on the porch. "That man just can't stay dead and buried, can he? Twenty-eight years and you people still aren't done harping on about the bastard."

Hacking and coughing, she moved to the Adirondack chair and sat, kicking the coffee can out from underneath and lighting a cigarette. Aslan moved off the stoop since it was crowded with three of us.

Willa Vincolla was not the typical fun-loving grandma figure. She was abrasive and bitter. Hardened.

She blew a cloud of smoke into the air and hitched a brow, waiting for me to initiate the conversation. The smoke tickled my lungs.

I cleared my throat. "I understand your husband is long dead, ma'am. My condolences. We're here because his name has come up in a current investigation."

Willa huffed a humorless laugh. "Imagine that. Even dead, he miraculously finds himself entwined in a current case. Not sure how that's possible. Care to explain?"

"When were you and Dwaine married?"

Willa sucked on her cigarette, glaring as though trying to determine my angle. "Eighty-four. I was twenty-four years old, and yes, my husband was fourteen years older than me. So what? It's not that unusual."

"Of course. When did you purchase the cattle farm west of King City?"

I could get all these answers with little effort from our system, but I wanted to get a feel for Willa, so a few base questions helped.

"March 1990."

"And did you and your husband have any children?"

Willa took a drag off her cigarette, eyes shrinking to slits as she studied my face. It wasn't until she exhaled the smoke from her lungs that she said, "No." The tiniest trace of a smirk gleamed in her eyes. "He was limp-dicked most of the time. Could only get off if I used my mouth. He didn't win any prizes for lover of the year, I'll tell you."

Yep, Willa was definitely not grandma material.

I didn't look back, but I sensed Aslan standing sentinel behind me, studying Willa's expressions and mannerisms, registering the most minuscule reaction like that odd little smirk.

"Mrs. Vincolla, we have photographic evidence from two years before your husband's death that places him at a Remembrance Day parade in downtown Toronto. Can you confirm he was present that day?"

Willa's tongue wet her dry, cracked lips, and she peered behind me at Aslan. She ashed her cigarette into the can, tilting her head to the side as she seemed to consider. "I don't recall. Doesn't sound like somewhere he'd go."

I turned to ask Aslan to retrieve the photograph from the car, but he was halfway there already, having read my mind. When he returned, I handed it to Willa and pointed. "Is this your husband?"

She took a minute to study it, then shrugged. "Could be. Looks like him."

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"And you don't recall him mentioning being at the parade?"
"No."
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"Did your husband ever go by the name Barrie or Barney?"

"No."

"What did your husband do for a living?"

"He was a door-to-door salesman."

"Selling what?"

"Insurance."

"Did he travel a lot for work?"

"Some. I'm failing to understand exactly why you're here, Detective. Can we move this along?"

A gentle touch to my lower back was enough to inform me Aslan planned to take over. I moved to the side.

"Mrs. Vincolla." He used a deeper, more authoritative voice that tended to give me chills. "We've reviewed the file regarding your husband's murder. There seems to be a lot of skepticism surrounding his death. The idea of a burglary gone wrong doesn't jibe with me. Too many pieces don't fit." The smirk was back. "Are you here to accuse me of murder? Again? My name was cleared, Detective. The police wasted time trying to pin this on me twenty-eight years ago. Do we really need to revisit it?"

"Why are you grinning?" I asked.

"Because I find this amusing. If you've read the investigation surrounding my husband's homicide, then you would have seen the concrete evidence that cleared my name. Three solid alibis. No gun powder residue on my hands or clothing." Willa buried her cigarette butt in the coffee can. "What is it you want from me? You claim Dwaine is somehow tied to a current case. How? What case?"

"You may not have been directly responsible, but I get the feeling you know something you're not saying."

Willa pushed herself to her feet and squared off with us. She wasn't tall. She was spindly and frail. But her personality was powerful and exuded a certain strength that came from having lived a hard life. "I'll tell you this much, and you do with it what you will. My husband wasn't a nice man. I'm sure many people would have happily pulled the trigger and ended his miserable life, but the brave soul who did will forever have my gratitude. If you'll excuse me, gentlemen. It's cold, and I think I've answered all the questions I feel like answering."

# CHAPTER 27

## Quaid



s this a dead end? Am I wasting my time?" I asked as I drove back into the city, scowling at the road ahead.

Cotton candy clouds filled the sky, the sun streaming through in parts, glistening off the windows of other vehicles and giving the impression the temperature was sitting a lot higher than three degrees Celsius.

"I don't know. Dwaine was at the parade. We have proof of that. He lied about who he was. His death is suspicious, but any connection to Juniper is pure speculation. Did he kidnap her? I don't know. His wife said he wasn't a nice man. Define not nice. It could mean anything from verbally abusive to... way worse. At this point, Dwaine Vincolla is a victim of homicide. But, for the sake of argument, let's say he did take Juniper. His wife finds out. She kills him."

"She had an alibi."

"If the alibi is as solid as the police work in that report, then I'm skeptical." "Okay. So she kills him because she finds out about his dirty secret. Which is what? Kidnapping little girls and..." I swallowed a lump, unable and unwilling to finish the sentence, hearing Willa's claim that her husband couldn't get it up for her. Why was that? Was she not his type?

#### I shuddered.

"Maybe that's what happened." Aslan adjusted the heat vent and held his hand in front of it. "But killing him, saving the world from a monster, made her susceptible to life in prison, so she plans to take the secret to the grave. She covered up her crime and called it a burglary."

"Why not call the cops on him if he was so awful?"

"I don't know. Maybe she was involved somehow, but he went too far. Their sick desires didn't align, and she'd had enough."

I slammed the heel of my palm against the steering wheel. "We are reaching so far right now I'd have better luck pulling a bunny out of a hat than solving anything based on this theory. No wonder Juni's case has sunk to the bottom of the ocean. Let's say all of this was true. How does it remotely connect with Evelyn and Lily and our boy Kader? Willa might be a spunky, crass old woman, she might have killed her husband twenty-eight years ago, but I can't believe for a second that she's involved in this complex case that seems to be built on the premise of teasing and toying with the police. She's sixty-two for fuck's sake."

"You know how many sixty-year-old criminals are out there? I deal with them regularly. Don't be naïve."

"I'm not. It seems far-fetched is all. If Kader is a relative, how? She doesn't have kids. Therefore, no grandkids. We're writing fiction. We need to stick to the facts and forget this."

Aslan's hand landed on the base of my neck. "I know. Breathe. You're getting worked up." He squeezed the tight muscles and ran his thumb along my hairline. "It was a good idea going to see her. Maybe we dig a little deeper and see what we find out. Have Ruiz run a complete background on her and see if anything odd turns up."

"Okay. Good idea. We can do that. I'm so frustrated. This case is nothing but dead ends. I gave Dad hope, but there isn't any."

"We still have the Boy Scout leaders. We haven't looked at them yet. We can do that next. Maybe—"

My phone rang in the cupholder. Aslan picked it up. "It's Eden."

The phone was connected to the car's Bluetooth, so when Aslan swiped to answer, Eden's voice came through the speaker system.

"Hey. What's up?" I asked.

"Where are you?" A hint of tension colored her words. She spoke in a hushed tone like she was trying to make sure no one around overheard the conversation.

"On the road. Heading back to the city. Why?"

"We need to meet. *Now*. The three of us are coming to your house."

"Why? I thought we were meeting tonight."

"This can't wait until tonight. We stumbled on something that is raising some serious red flags, and I can't talk about it on the phone. What's your ETA?"

"Ah... twenty minutes? Maybe less."

"We'll be there waiting."

"Eden, what—"

But she'd hung up.

"Do they know I'm with you?" Aslan asked.

"No, but I don't care. They won't say anything."

"What do you think it's about?"

"No clue."

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Thirty minutes later, we were all gathered in my living room. My house wasn't large, and it was rare I had to accommodate company, so it was crowded. Aslan pulled two chairs from the kitchen nook and brought them out for extra seating. Erik and Allison settled on the couch. Eden sank into the plump reading chair nestled beside the bookshelf.

No one said anything about Aslan's presence, but I felt the need to explain regardless. At this point, they all knew we were dating, so it wasn't a huge shock to have a detective from homicide in our midst.

"Doyle has extra time on his hands, so I invited him to *unofficially* assist us with the case. The keyword here is unofficially. At no point does his name come up on reports. At no point does Edwards find out he's helping. Is that understood?"

Erik almost smirked. "I may need to reevaluate everything I thought I knew about you, Valor. You are the last person in the entire department I ever thought would start breaking the rules."

"Not breaking. Bending." I held my fingers half an inch apart. "I'm coloring only a smidgen outside the lines."

Allison ducked her head, covering a smile.

"What was the emergency?" I asked. "I thought we were meeting tonight."

The three MPU detectives shared a look. It was Eden who spoke. "As you know, this afternoon I had follow-up interviews with Avery's parents and a couple of close friends who were also at the pool the day Avery vanished. One of my goals was to circulate Kader's picture to see if anyone recognized him since we have no photographic evidence suggesting he was at the pool party. My first interview was with David and Muriel French. Their daughter was on the swim team with Avery's sister, and the girls were close friends. During our conversation, something curious was brought up. Any other day, it would have slipped by me as

unimportant, but recent circumstances made this throwaway comment stand out."

Eden wasn't holding a folder with information. In fact, all the case files had been dumped onto the coffee table, and there they still sat. The apprehension on Eden's face and the reflected look in Allison's eyes made me lean forward, elbows on my knees, as Eden continued.

"I asked standard questions, inquiring about the relationship between Avery's parents to see if there was tension in their marriage or if they were happy. David seemed hesitant to talk poorly about his friend. He and Avery's father went to college together, so they've known each other for a long time. In the end, David shared that the couple's relationship has been rocky for a few years. He said Paul, Avery's dad, shared that Avery was the product of an affair. He found out when Avery was five. The couple had gone through a rough patch after their oldest daughter was born, and his wife had stepped out on him. They've since worked through it and stayed together, but it stained their marriage. Muriel is convinced the couple has overcome it and is doing better. Avery's real father is unknown, or rather, the Frenchs didn't know who he was."

A high-pitched whine came from somewhere far away. It grew in intensity and volume the longer Eden stared at me, waiting for a reaction. For a brief moment, I couldn't remember how to breathe. I didn't like where this was going.

"Okay," I choked out. "So maybe Avery's real father kidnapped her and she isn't part of our case. Why wasn't this

information discovered when Bentley and Nguyen investigated? That's the first thing we look for."

I knew how stupid my comment sounded. It wasn't the point. It wasn't what Eden was trying to say. I knew what she was alluding to, but playing dumb gave me an extra second to process.

"There's more," Erik said. "Eden called and shared this discovery with us to see what we thought. It felt both dismissible and highly relevant. We erred on the side of caution and did some similar investigating into Evelyn's and Lily's cases."

The whine was loud enough that I pressed a finger to my temple. The oxygen wheezing in and out of my lungs echoed inside my head.

"Quaid?" Allison's voice penetrated the madness. I met her eyes. "It took some prying, but Evelyn's mother admitted Evelyn is adopted. It was a private adoption, and they didn't want to reveal it because they don't want Evelyn to know yet. They were afraid with all the media attention it would come out. They aren't her blood."

"And Lily's dad left before she was born." I knew this story. I'd asked about her father before. "He has several children by several women and doesn't want responsibility for any of them. This is nothing. It's a coincidence."

I glanced around the room, seeking someone willing to agree with me.

"You don't believe in coincidences," Eden said, using my logic against me. "Quaid, all these children have varying degrees of questionable parentage or unstable connections to both parents. Is there any chance the rumors about Juniper's case are true?"

"No! It's preposterous. How can you even ask that?"

Erik held up a placating hand. "Don't start burning the house down. We don't want to play devil's advocate, but we have to. Do you know for a fact that Juniper is your father's daughter?"

"Yes!"

No.

I jumped to my feet and paced. The walls were too close. The room was too hot. My tie was strangling me. I pulled it loose and looped it over my head, chucking it aside.

"If there was any element of truth to those rumors, Dad would have spoken up. He would have addressed it."

"But that's just it," Allison said. "No one is addressing it. Edwards keeps slamming the door on the media. He's refusing a second press conference. If it's not true, why not prove the rumors are false and move on?"

"Your dad met with Edwards the other day," Eden said. "Closed-door meeting. You weren't around. I don't know what they were talking about, but it had a vibe. I can't describe it. Quaid, we can't ignore this."

I scrubbed my face, a sharp laugh escaping as I dropped my arms heavily to my sides. I found Aslan's face in the sea of blurring faces. Sympathy bled from his eyes. Only then did I hear the other part of the rumor as he'd relayed it to me after his random visit from Daniella. It was like someone was shouting it into a megaphone inside my head. *She questioned your paternity as well*.

I was six years old again. All the shouting and yelling after Juniper had been taken roared and bounced against the inside of my skull. I'd always assumed it had to do with her kidnapping. It was due to my father's irresponsibility and not watching his daughter. My mother had blamed him. He was at fault. Was there more? Was I too young and too naïve to see it?

"No. No, it's not possible. I refuse to believe it. If you guys want to explore this, you go ahead. I want no part of it. You're wasting your time."

I stormed off to the kitchen. My chest constricted. My knees wobbled.

And the whining, high-pitched scream inside my head was a railroad spike piercing my brain.

# CHAPTER 28

#### Aslan



uaid vanished into the kitchen, and the silence that followed had its own heartbeat. It thrummed and pulsed. No one knew what to say. I got the sense the three MPU detectives had anticipated it wouldn't go over well. They were right.

Allison looked down at her lap. Erik threw his hands up and flopped back on the couch.

Eden pleaded. "Doyle, you're the boyfriend." She tipped her head to the door where Quaid had disappeared. "Please. Talk some sense into him. We can't ignore this, and you know it."

"Yeah. Nice. You guys drop an anvil on his head, and I gotta fix it."

"Thank you," Eden said as I stood.

"Don't thank me yet. Take five. I may be a while."

Quaid, lost in his head, peered out the patio doors, hugging himself and chewing a thumbnail. A wooden deck covered a portion of his small backyard. Dying grass and gardens in a winter slumber stretched to the far back edge of his property. The scant snow we'd gotten the previous night was long gone. An old lonely tree sat naked in the middle of the backyard, the trunk wider around than my arms.

The barbecue was covered. The outdoor furniture had been put away for the season.

Winter was here. Summer days were behind us.

I wrapped my arms around Quaid's waist and rested my chin on his shoulder, following his line of sight to the distant fence at the back of his yard—chain-link and rusting, sagging in the middle.

"I refuse to believe it," he said.

"I've always admired your stubbornness."

"Az, I'm serious. It's not true."

"Then with that certainty in mind, you need to prove this theory—"

"Rumor. It's a convoluted rumor. Not a theory. And it barely matches these other kids' situations."

"Then you need to prove the *rumor* isn't worth following."

"I'm not taking a paternity test nor am I asking my dad if there is any possibility that Juniper wasn't his. I'm not. End of story. I'm not doing it. It's bullshit."

I kissed the shell of his ear. He jerked his head away and tried to free himself from my hold. I squeezed tighter.

"Let me go."

"No. Stop being difficult."

"I'm not being difficult."

I chuckled. "It's practically your middle name. Are you afraid of the results?"

His chest constricted under my arms, but he tightened his jaw. His scowl reflected back at us from the patio doors. He refused to show any outward signs of emotion. "No."

"Quaid."

"He's all I have. He's all I've ever had. You can't ask me to jeopardize everything I've ever known on a hunch. On a stupid, bullshit rumor. If my whole life is a lie, I... I..."

He growled and clenched his jaw tighter, shaking his head.

"I know. Then are you willing to disregard this coincidence?"

"What will it prove? Let's say I find out Juniper wasn't his daughter or I'm not his son. Then what? We are no further ahead. Apart from ruining my entire life, how does it help us find the person who took these girls? Because I can tell you, my father isn't responsible. It would only cause problems. He's fragile enough."

"Okay. Let me offer you this. If it's not true, if it's nothing more than a wild rumor like you believe, then ask yourself why it's spreading. Why is every newspaper and TV station hounding Edwards? Confirming it's *not* true might in itself be a bigger clue."

Quaid turned in my arms. "How do you figure?"

"Someone is trying to get your attention, Quaid. Both girls who were returned are pointing a direct finger at not only Juniper's case but at you specifically. This unsub showed Lily *your* picture and gave her Juniper's backpack. This same person told Evelyn she was not like Juniper."

"The boy said that."

"Same difference. Now a random rumor pops up out of nowhere concerning yours and Juniper's paternity. Maybe it's all part of some sick and twisted game."

"You're saying the person who started the rumor might be the person we're looking for?"

"If the rumor is false, then yes. Where else would it have come from? The person is making you sweat. The connection to the other girls is too coincidental, and I know my boyfriend isn't a fan of coincidences."

His nose wrinkled, and he glared with icy blue eyes, doing all he could to instill his disdain for my comment. I chuckled. "So growly. It's a good thing you're cute."

"I don't like it when people use my logic against me."

"Too bad your logic is all the rage. What do you want to do?"

Quaid's shoulders came down, and the contempt faded. "I guess I don't have a choice."

"We could go on the assumption it's not true and start hunting down the source of the rumor."

"That's shoddy police work."

"It's all the rage. You read Dwaine's report the same as me."

"Why do you keep saying that?"

"What?"

"All the rage.' Nobody says that anymore."

"It's my new thing. Saying it's 'all the rage' is all the rage."

He didn't want to, but a poorly hidden smirk leaked to the surface. "You're such an idiot."

"And yet you still wanted to go out with me."

He stepped from my arms and scrubbed his face, groaning. "Fine. I'll do it, but I'll have you know, I feel sick to my stomach. If these tests come back saying that my entire life to this point has been a lie, be prepared for me to be completely insufferable."

"You mean more so than you already are?"

And boom! Full-wattage trademark sneer for the win. "There it is. Love that face."

I laughed.

Quaid shoved my arm, mumbled something about hating me, then went into the front room.

I stood to the side and listened as Quaid explained what we'd discussed in the kitchen. His emotions were tucked away, and it struck me at that moment how alike he and Erik were when it came to walling themselves off. It was a wonder they hadn't become friends long before their cases collided. They were oddly alike in many ways.

"Are we bringing this to Edwards's attention?" Eden tentatively asked.

"Why not?" Erik asked. "If anything, Quaid agreeing to disprove the rumors will help get the media off our asses. Edwards has been the one bitching about how bad they've been with this case."

Everyone agreed.

After, the group discussed next steps.

Since there wasn't much more to go on, Allison and Erik agreed to look into the Boy Scout leaders who kept getting swept aside. Eden had to duck out since her evening wasn't free, and she needed to be home for her daughter.

Quaid planned to pop into headquarters and task Ruiz with doing a deeper investigation into Willa Vincolla, and I was going to sweet talk one of the department's favorite forensic pathologists to see if she'd run a rapid paternity test if Quaid provided her with samples.

Dr. Thornlow was one of the few people who worked with the department who liked me, and I knew she'd do us a favor if I asked nicely. She had connections and could get the job done quickly and discreetly.

Once we had results, we would know better how to move forward.

"We'll reconvene tomorrow," Erik said.

Everyone left after that, and Quaid and I were on our own. It was nearing five. I placed a call to Dr. Thornlow's office and secured her help. She was in the office until seven, so we had a couple of hours to swing by, grab a kit, and take samples. If we could get it back to her that evening, she promised to have the results by the end of the following day.

Quaid called Ruiz and explained what he wanted with regards to Willa Vincolla.

"Are you going to see your dad immediately after you get the test kit?" I asked.

"I have to. Time is of the essence. If we don't get this back to Thornlow tonight, we won't have results tomorrow. No sense delaying."

"Do you want me to come with you?"

He considered, lips pinched. "Maybe not. It could all blow up and get ugly. You don't need to witness that."

"Do you mind if I hang out here while you're gone? I want to review your case files, read them again, and ensure I've got everything straight in my head." "Sure. Once I'm done at Dad's, I'll run the kit back to Thornlow's office."

So that was what we did. I settled on the couch while Quaid took off, looking lost and forlorn, to take care of business.

I surrounded myself with paperwork, reading and rereading his files, using his laptop to watch the interviews with the kids again. I made my own notes. I did my own checks. It was a good distraction from the shitshow of my life and what might happen come the following week.

A faint tingle buzzed under my skin—a thirsty craving—but I was doing better than I had been that morning. So long as I didn't allow the stress of the unknown to get to me, I would be all right.

I'd always liked my job. Solving puzzles and searching for those elusive missing pieces that made all the difference was what I craved. I didn't know what I'd do if they let me go.

I hoped that fresh eyes on Quaid's case would turn up something new, something the others had overlooked.

I didn't expect to find anything, but a child listed as a participant in the soccer tournament caught my attention. A hunch told me to look deeper.

What I found gave me pause.

It was probably nothing, but I couldn't dismiss it. I circled the name and set it aside to show Quaid when he got home.

# CHAPTER 29

## Quaid



y palms were sweating as I clung to the paper bag containing a test kit that had the potential to upend my life. Why was I doing this? What was it going to prove?

I stood beside the Charger, mulling over the reasoning again. If the person who took Evelyn and Lily started this rumor, to what end? What was the purpose? They had our attention already. They had *my* attention. Was it a game?

Lily, Evelyn, and possibly Avery had been chosen because they looked like Juniper. That was the theory we'd gone with. But was the selection process more detailed than that? More precise.

I didn't understand how it all fit.

Moving up the driveway to Dad's house, the concrete beneath my feet disappeared. Stomach queasy, I breathed through my mouth, pushing the anxiety down, hoping I wouldn't throw up. I rapped a knuckle on the door, yanked it open, and called out, "Hello? Dad?"

The TV was on, blaring from the den. Old sitcom stars bantered back and forth, the accompanying laugh track drowning me out. I kicked off my shoes and found Dad slumped and asleep in his recliner, chin resting on his chest as his lips fluttered with soft snores.

With the remote, I silenced *Mork & Mindy*. Without the TV on, the room was dark, so I flicked on a shaded lamp on the end table. The dim yellow light chased away shadows, leaving Dad's skin jaundiced, accenting the lines of old age.

Dad snuffled, snorted, and shifted in his sleep. The leather recliner creaked under his weight. His face remained lax, cheeks scruffy and sagging with age. I stared at my old man, looking for pieces of myself, searching for signs of Juniper.

It was ridiculous. I'd been told all my life how much I looked like my mother, but I'd inherited Abraham Valor's personality, hadn't I? My stubbornness and work ethic were all thanks to him.

I set the paper bag on the cluttered coffee table beside a soiled plate containing the crust of an oven-ready pizza he'd likely had for dinner. "Dad?"

He continued to sleep.

I sat on the couch and touched his leg.

"Dad," I said louder, giving his leg a small shake. "Dad, wake up."

He snorted, waking with a start. Blinking blearily around the room, it took a moment before his gaze landed on me. "Hey, kiddo." He hiked himself higher in the recliner so he wasn't slouching. "I didn't hear you come in."

"You were sleeping."

He glanced at the dark TV and back, confusion clearing. "What's up? Something wrong? You're pale."

"I... don't know how to bring this up, so I'm just going to blurt it out, and..." I swallowed a lump. "Why isn't Edwards addressing the rumors circulating in the media? Why hasn't he come to me about it? Did he talk to you?"

Dad's brows dipped. The gray eyes I'd known all my life turned wary. "Since when does the department entertain media rumors?"

"Since never, but why have *I* been kept in the dark? No one has addressed this with me directly. Did he think I wouldn't find out? I have reporters hunting me down. Was I supposed to remain oblivious?"

Abraham Valor had no response.

"Tell me, Dad. Why hasn't anyone addressed this with me? Why did he go to you?"

"Edwards asked my opinion. I agreed you didn't need that kind of upset. We don't dance in the media circus. Never have, never will. End of story."

"I agree. But proving the media wrong would make them back down and possibly get them out of our hair, so I don't get it. Is there something I need to know?"

Nothing.

Dad leaned forward, stretching for the remote. I slid it out of reach, and he scowled.

"How about this. Do you know what we learned today? Avery is the product of an affair. Her father is not her father. Evelyn was adopted. Her parents are not her blood. Sounds like the rumors going around, doesn't it? I don't know how it all connects, but *it does* connect. If the rumors are true—"

"They aren't true."

It was the first time he'd said it. I didn't know why he'd waited so long, but relief flooded through me, and if I wasn't sitting, I'd have buckled at the knees.

"If they're true," I said in a softer tone, "it's another correlation between the past and present."

"They aren't true."

"Someone out there wants me to believe they are. Someone wove this whole scenario together to get *my* attention, and guess what? It worked. Someone is using me as a pawn in a very sick game of chess, and I need to find out who. Two children are in jeopardy." I ticked them off on my fingers. "Avery and Kader. I need to get to the bottom of this, and it starts with knowing the truth."

I snatched the paper bag off the coffee table and threw it at my father with more force and anger than I meant.

"What's this?"

"A paternity test."

Abraham's rage surfaced, and he flung the bag back at me as he launched from his recliner. "I'm not taking a goddamn paternity test." He got in my face, finger pointed. "If I tell you those rumors aren't true, then they aren't. End of story. You are my son just as much as Juniper is my daughter."

"But do you know for sure, Dad?"

"Yes!" he roared. "With every fiber of my being."

But the wariness in his eyes remained. Trepidation made his hand tremble. This case had leveled him. Revisiting the past had added ten years to my father's life. But asking him to take a paternity test was the killing blow.

Because he didn't know the truth and was as afraid as I was.

I grabbed the bag and stood. Face-to-face with my dad, I placed it gently in his hands. No words were necessary.

It was a simple cheek swab. Nothing complex. It took less than two minutes to complete. He sealed the container, placed the sample in the paper bag, and handed it back.

"It changes nothing," he said, enveloping me in his arms. The comforting scent of Old Spice and home surrounded me. "I swear to god, Quaid. It. Changes. Nothing."

I did my own sample in the car and dropped the kit off at the lab.

Back at home, I sat in the driveway for a long time, drained and unsure how to feel about the way everything had unfolded that afternoon. It was closing in on eight o'clock, and I couldn't remember the last time I'd eaten. I mentally tried to take inventory of what I had in the kitchen that I could use to make a meal.

Upon letting myself into the house, I was greeted by the scent of pizza and the nail-grating shrill cries of heavy metal.

I found Aslan in the living room, stuffing his face, surrounded by paperwork. When he saw me, he killed the music. His mouth was full, so I spoke first.

"For the record, we don't have music in common. That's horrible."

He grinned around a mouthful of pizza. "Lemme guess, you're into modern pop?"

"No, and you're disgusting. Didn't your mother ever tell you not to talk with your mouthful?"

"She did." He swallowed. "And I was a bit of a rebel."

"Shocking."

"Strictly show tunes?"

I smirked. "Not strictly. Dad got me interested in classic rock too."

"I can do that." He fiddled with his phone and hit Play again, turning the volume down to something more tolerable as "More Than a Feeling" by Boston played. He gestured at the pizza box on the edge of the coffee table. "I got hungry. It's half vegetarian since I figured you wouldn't want pepperoni or sausage. They have a cauliflower crust on the menu, but I couldn't do it, Quaid. I couldn't. It sounded repulsive."

"It's not that bad, but vegetarian is good too." I sank down on the couch beside him and helped myself to a slice. "I'm too hungry to care."

"How'd it go?"

"About as well as I expected. Some yelling and arguing, but he did it." I nodded to the folders. "You?"

"I found something suspicious. I keep going back and forth about its relevance, but... maybe it's worth mentioning. I need another opinion."

Aslan handed me a sheet of paper with a list of children's names from the soccer tournament. He'd circled one. It was a name with a star beside it, indicating the child was a close friend of Evelyn's.

Collette Carter.

I took another bite of pizza—it was ridiculously good and satisfying—and hitched a brow, asking Aslan to elaborate.

"Okay, so maybe I'm reaching, but Collette Carter rang a bell. I'd heard the name before but couldn't place it at first, so I looked it up. Collette Carter is Hannah and Sebastian Carter's daughter."

Aslan paused for effect, but I wasn't following. "And?"

"Hannah Carter. Think about it, Quaid."

Then it hit me. Hannah Carter, maiden name Edwards. Hank Edwards's grown daughter. Collette Carter was my sergeant's granddaughter.

I dropped the remaining half of my slice of pizza back into the box, my head spinning as I wiped my mouth on a napkin. "It's Edwards's granddaughter."

"Yes. Like I said, maybe I'm in left field, but didn't you tell me you were surprised to find out he was an officer at the parade thirty years ago?"

"Yes, but that doesn't seem so odd anymore now that I think about it."

"Okay, but isn't he the one trying to put a lid on the media?"

"Yes, but..." Edwards had also been lording over our case like he'd never done before, forcing us to work separately instead of together.

I huffed a strangled laugh. "Come on. What are you saying?"

"I'm not saying anything. You were all looking for names that linked these cases."

"Two weak connections doesn't make Edwards a suspect."

Aslan handed me another sheet of paper. When my gaze landed on another highlighted name from Avery's swim team, the small amount of pizza I'd eaten turned to ash in my stomach.

Lewis Kimball.

"Rebecca Kimball née Edwards," Aslan said, filling in the unnecessary blank. "Married to Felix Kimball. Lewis is Edwards's grandson."

The words, it's a coincidence, formed on my lips, but they wouldn't come out. "I... I can't..." I shook the paper at Aslan. "How is this possible?"

"When we went over the cases earlier, you told me about Kader and how easy it could be for a child to disappear in a busy crowd if they were lured away by someone they trusted. Like another child."

My thoughts turned to Juniper.

"Shit. Or a police officer."

# CHAPTER 30

## Aslan



I didn't intentionally plan to turn Quaid's whole case upside down, but that was what happened. We spent the rest of the night talking about how Edwards might connect to the cases and the impossibility of him being somehow involved.

At first, Quaid begrudgingly went along with it. We made charts. We argued motives—of which we couldn't come up with anything concrete. We graphed a rough timeline and debated how to proceed.

Around eleven, Quaid threw his hands up, stating, "This is the most ridiculous theory ever. It's right up there with suspecting my father of nefarious activity. Just because his grandchildren swim and play soccer with two of our victims doesn't mean anything. I'm done. It's bullshit, like everything else with this case. Edwards is not some criminal mastermind, and if he finds out I'm trying to make a case against him, I'll be fired. I'm not exploring this anymore. It's a waste of time. I'm going to bed."

He stormed off, leaving me alone in the living room.

He was right, but his comment triggered another detail we'd overlooked. A detail Quaid would revolt against if I dared mention it.

Edwards was a police officer in 1992 along with Abraham. They'd been colluding to keep the media away from the case without telling Quaid. Was there truth to the rumors? Were they working together? Did they have a deeper friendship no one knew about? Were they covering something up?

My head spun.

I put the leftover pizza in the fridge, washed up in the bathroom, and found Quaid in bed. He faced away from me, but he wasn't asleep. A soft strip of moonlight shone through the open blinds, licking delicately over Quaid's pale skin. Golden blond hair glimmered in the faint light. He hadn't gotten under the covers.

He was tormented and frustrated with a case he couldn't solve. Anxious about answers he still didn't have.

Stripped to underwear, I crawled in and encased him in my arms. He was rigid and unyielding. "I know you're stressed."

"I don't see a point in pursuing this line of thinking. I'm tying the noose around my neck, and for what? We have other avenues to follow."

"Then we let it go. What's the game plan for tomorrow?"

Quaid rolled over to face me. He had worn briefs to bed but nothing else. My hand skipped over his bare skin, tracing a moonbeam where it slanted over his ribs. It whispered over the faint hairs on his arm.

He flattened a hand on my chest, mindlessly dragging his fingers through my chest hair. "Tomorrow, you do some digging and see if you can uncover the source of this rumor."

"You don't want to wait for confirmation from the paternity test?"

"No." He punctuated the statement with a head shake. "We need to get ahead of it. I still say there's no truth behind it. The source of the rumor could be the key. We need to determine where it originated. I know of at least three stations and two newspapers making noise about it. Oh, and your tabloid bitch."

I laughed. "Wow. Harsh. Is she on my list of people to talk to?"

Quaid sneered. "I'd prefer you didn't. Try the others first."

I pecked a kiss on his nose. "Your jealousy is showing."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Never mind. And what will you do tomorrow?"

"Harass Ruiz until he gets me that background on Willa. I refuse to believe Dwaine's innocent, and he can't have worked alone. Willa has become a person of interest too, but if there's nothing suspicious in her background and it proves to be a dead end, so be it. I will begrudgingly concede and meet with the team and tell them what we discovered about Edwards. If, and this is a mighty big if, they agree it's too much to ignore,

then... we'll take it to Inspector Lassaline and get directions on how to proceed. I'm not convinced. A man doesn't make a career in MPU then decide to become a serial kidnapper."

"Sounds like the next Blockbuster thriller."

"Exactly. I think we're getting desperate for a connection and we're twisting facts to make them work. Everyone knows that's mistake number one."

I still couldn't draw attention to the Abraham and Edwards connection. If it turned out we were right, sadly, Quaid would learn it soon enough.

"Sleep on it tonight. It's been a long day."

The hand on my chest moved to my face. Quaid dragged his fingers over my stubbled jaw. "How are you doing? I've been so focused on everything else I keep forgetting why you're available to me and... about your close call last night. I've been incredibly selfish."

"I'm okay." The craving was nothing more than a low hum in the background. If I hadn't been kept occupied today, it might have turned into a problem, but it hadn't. "I'm trying not to think about the board's decision."

"Is there nothing you can do? Can't you fight this?"

"Quaid, I'm guilty. Not only did I drive drunk, but I allowed an officer to cover it up and didn't come forward. The only hope I have of keeping my job is if Summerfield thinks I'm worth saving and fights for me. Even then, there's no telling what might happen." "What will you do?"

"I don't know. I'm not going to go there until I have to. It's scary. I'm... afraid of slipping. If they fire me, I'm going to be a mess, and I don't know if I'm strong enough to get through it. Last night was a test, and I almost failed."

"You're strong enough. You have Tony. You have me. I believe in you. What can I do? How can I help?"

I caught his hand and kissed his knuckles before placing it over my heart. "Keep being your neurotically adorable, insecure self. You keep me on my toes."

Quaid frowned.

I chuckled. "It's too easy. Stop with the face."

"I'm not neurotic."

"You are so neurotic it's scary. I'm afraid to point out that it's been over twelve hours since you got that look on your face that tells me you're worried about us. I figure you're about due for some massive breakdown and will need reassurance that I'm in it for the long haul any second."

"Am I that bad?"

"Way, way worse, but it's okay. Believe it or not, I anticipated this. I did not enter this relationship naïve. And I'm not going to run just because we're having a bit of a rocky start. I don't mind telling you ten times a day that you're all I want. And when you don't believe me, I'm forced to get creative and find ways to prove it to you."

"God, I'm pathetic."

"No, you're not. You're human, Quaid. Anyone in your position would be the same. You know what kills me?"

"I'm afraid to ask."

"You don't see yourself as desirable. Jack did that to you. He obliterated your self-esteem. You can't figure out why I want to be with you. You see yourself as easily replaceable. You're used to guys walking all over you and tossing you aside for something else. And you've already convinced yourself that I'll do the same. You're just waiting for it to happen."

"I'm that transparent?"

"Quaid, I can read you like a book. Well, not entirely. Sometimes you hide from me or hold yourself back. Or you push me away. It's frustrating as fuck, but I get it. You're protecting yourself. Maybe someday you'll let me all the way in so I can know the whole story of Quaid Valor. The good, the bad, and the ugly."

"It reads more like a tragedy than a romance novel."

"Maybe at times. But we can rewrite some parts and fix the ending. Maybe I'm the unexpected love interest who helps the hero discover his true self-worth. We should edit out the bullshit ex-lover. Oh, or we could make him die a fiery, horrible death. Do your secret romance novels ever involve dragons?"

Quaid's lips quirked into a small smile. "No. I mean, what secret romance novels? I'm sure I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Uh-huh. Well, your story is epic, so I say we add dragons. I can be your dashing prince riding in on a brilliant white steed to save the day."

"Is this still a metaphor for my life? It's getting confusing."

I chuckled. "Can I tell you something?"

"Always."

I rolled, forcing Quaid to his back and positioning myself on top, caging him in my arms. I squeezed his outer thighs with my legs and brushed our noses together. Captivating blue eyes stared back at me.

My heart galloped like a runaway horse, hooves knocking mercilessly against my ribs. When I spoke, my words were more strangled and shakier than I had planned, but I kept going. "This is real, Quaid. You and me. Yes, it's only been a month, and I know we haven't found our groove. We are perfectly imperfect, but there isn't a day that goes by that I regret asking you out to dinner. I don't regret making this commitment to you and shedding my old life. This is far better."

Quaid's eyes glimmered in the moonlight streaming through the window. I recognized the anticipation on his face. The want. The desperate need. The yearning. He was barely breathing. But it was too soon.

I nuzzled his ear and whispered, "I know what you want me to say. I know you need to hear it. You will. Someday soon. I feel it, Quaid. It's foreign, but I know it for what it is. It's intense and consuming and overwhelming." I moved my lips over his and whispered, "It's beautiful. I've never... said it to anyone before. I've never felt it before. It kinda scares me shitless. Be patient with me. Give me more time."

His eyes fluttered closed, and his hands came around my waist, tugging me closer than we already were. "Will you show me instead?"

"I can do that."

I found his mouth, and we kissed. It was unrushed and deliriously good.

For that moment, that night, we existed in a bubble with feelings too big to express. Our relationship wasn't without flaws, but that made it real. We were willing to work through our issues instead of giving up at the first sign of trouble. We would be stronger because of it.

We lost our underwear, lips never parting. The heat of Quaid's body ignited a fire in my own. My pulse raced. Skinto-skin—my heart cracked open after *almost* admitting the depth of my feelings—we made love. It was slower and more intimate than any time before. We couldn't get close enough.

Quaid said to show him, and I did just that.

I covered every inch of his naked body with open-mouthed kisses, inhaling his scent and mapping the hills and valleys with my hands. He squirmed at the overwhelming sensations, arched his back, and begged for something he couldn't articulate.

I dipped my tongue into his navel. I dragged my hands over the coarse hairs on his legs as I encouraged them apart.

Nestled between his thighs, I took him into my mouth, making him pant and moan. Tiny tears leaked from his eyes and trickled down his face as he whimpered and gasped. I made his toes curl and didn't stop until he fisted a hand in my hair and pleaded for me to speed up, slow down, or fuck him already because he couldn't take it anymore.

I climbed his body and hovered over his mouth. "No fucking tonight. I want to worship you. I want to show you…" I fished blindly in the bedside drawer for a condom and lube.

We kissed more. We touched more. It was a slow dance that could have gone on for an eternity without me ever tiring of it.

When I handed Quaid the lube, he broke from my mouth with a question in his eyes.

"Prep me," I said.

His puzzled expression deepened, but he snapped open the lid and coated his fingers.

I didn't bottom often. As much as he'd made it clear at the beginning of our relationship that he liked to flip, he'd never complained when I too often took the role of top.

So my offer was enticing.

Straddling him, tongues tangoing, teeth crashing, and hearts racing, Quaid worked me open. My skin buzzed. My cock ached as Quaid used his other hand to stroke me. When the sensations were too much, I made him stop and rolled a condom down his length.

Then I got into position.

More than once over the past month, I'd almost suggested we get tested and do away with the condoms. It was early days yet, but I wanted it more than anything.

I thought it might help Quaid see the depth of my commitment, but his trust issues were glaring, and I feared it would backfire. I didn't want to force him into a corner and have him agree for the sake of agreeing.

I saw losing the condoms as another layer of dedication, but for Quaid, it would add another layer of fear. Of worry.

And that was the last thing I wanted.

Not yet.

I sank down onto his length, pinching my eyes closed at the sting and bracing my hands on the pillow beside his head. Quaid bit his bottom lip and dug his fingers into my hips. "Holy shit, that's good."

I stilled, adjusting, glancing down into the deep pools of blue reflecting back at me in the moonlight. It was good. It was so, so good. There was no doubt in my mind how I felt. Was it too soon to feel that way? Who cared? I might not have experienced these feelings before, but I knew them for what they were.

Quaid pulled me into a kiss, and we moved together, a slow blissful climb to the top of the highest mountain. When we crested the peak, the fall into oblivion was synchronized just right so that we tumbled together over the edge.

# CHAPTER 31

## Quaid



I t was Saturday. Ruiz wasn't in the office when I arrived at nine that morning. Scowling, I scanned a collection of dark monitors displayed on several desks in cluttered and cramped quarters. The air was dry and stale. It smelled faintly of warm plastic. Where the hell was he? I didn't expect to have to hunt him down.

Aslan and I had parted ways after a five-kilometer run and a long shower together earlier that morning. He was off to harass the people on the list of TV stations and newspapers I'd given him to see if he could chase down a source for the rumor, and my sole purpose was to get information out of Ruiz about Willa Vincolla.

But he wasn't here.

Phone in hand, I hit Call on his number.

He could have the weekend off. He might have assigned the work I'd given him to one of his team members, but none of

that information had been relayed, and there didn't seem to be any other techs around.

"You are *not* calling my cellphone, Valor. Tell me you are not calling my cellphone."

"Good morning, sweet cheeks. Did you miss me?"

"With every bullet so far."

"That one's been way overused. Where are you? You're not in your office."

"It's Saturday."

"I'm aware. Did you assign Vincolla to someone else? I need that information. I don't get the privilege of a weekend off."

"Well, la-di-da. I'm taking care of Vincolla, but I reiterate, it's Saturday."

"I heard you."

"I don't come in until nine on Saturdays. It's a little gift I give myself."

I glanced at the clock affixed to the far wall. "It's seven minutes after nine. You aren't here."

The sound of the elevator doors opening down the hall was followed by Ruiz's irritated voice echoing in stereo from both the phone and a few feet outside the office.

"You are the most annoying man in the department. Did you know that? Bar none. I'm hanging up."

He disconnected and came around the corner a second later, takeout coffee cup in one hand, a finger from the other pointed at my face. "Zip it. No talking. Let me sit down and get organized in peace."

"Did you find anything on Vincolla?"

"Ah, ah, ah! Shh. I said no talking." He glared.

I glared back but shut my mouth while he flicked on several computer monitors and dropped into his far too elaborate desk chair with a sigh of leather.

A hum and buzz vibrated under my skin like the room had come alive, a living, breathing entity of its own.

It took the monitors a few minutes to wake up, then Ruiz clicked away on two separate keyboards and squinted at several screens before sipping his coffee and spinning to face me. He'd dressed casually, which was typical for a lot of people in the department when they came in on weekends unless they had somewhere official to be.

Ruiz wore distressed jeans and a black, short-sleeve polo, the buttons on the front undone, showing off the array of tattoos on his upper chest and neck, along with a tuft of dark chest hair. His arms were covered in more tattoos and dark hair—no attempt to hide them today. His black hair was styled in a curtained sweep, a style that was a little more dated than I thought he realized. Ruiz thought he was a Hispanic god.

Sure, I supposed he was attractive, but he was a douchebag.

He drank more coffee and leaned back in his chair, affecting a relaxed stance. "You know, I have several things happening at once for you guys, and I get little or no appreciation, only demands for more, more, more. Faster, faster, faster."

"Funny, Aslan had those same demands in bed this morning. You aren't special."

"I'm..." He made a face and held his palms up, warding me off. "No. I'm not going to touch that. No sharing. Ever."

"You don't have to take all this work on yourself. You have a team. Assign duties and stop bitching."

"Oh, I'm sorry. How silly of me. Did you see other people down here when you came in?"

I hadn't. "No, but it's the weekend. I assumed they were off."

Ruiz huffed. "Right. So they can be off, but god forbid I take a day. Let me tell you something, Valor. I have two guys on my team. Two." He held up fingers for emphasis. "And they aren't full-time, and they only come in on contract, and I have to have those contracts approved. Wanna wager a guess on how often that happens?"

I didn't respond.

"Exactly. So don't piss me off today. It's Saturday. I work at my own pace on weekends because do you know when I last had a weekend to myself?"

I didn't. Again, I had no response.

"It's been over a month. Six, maybe seven weeks, to be precise. I have a wife and two little girls at home who don't see their daddy very often. I'm not in the mood to take shit from you. Be nice or find someone else to fill your nagging requests."

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize."

"No. No one does." He spun back to his main computer, sipped his coffee again, then flicked around with the mouse until the screen changed. "Now. Willa Vincolla, right?"

"Yes."

"Pull up a seat."

Surprised at the invitation, I dragged a chair over from another station and sat, ensuring not to hover too close since I needed Ruiz on my side today, and my goal of getting under his skin had backfired.

"Here we go. Willa Honey Vincolla née Pinborough, born in April 1960 to Stuart and Michelle Pinborough, both deceased. She married Dwaine Vincolla in May of 1984. Here are some interesting facts you might like. Willa Pinborough was arrested three times *prior* to her marriage to Dwaine for prostitution. Twice, she got a slap on the wrist and a fine, which she probably didn't pay because they rarely do. The third time she served three months in a correctional facility in Kitchener. She was arrested once more *after* her marriage to Dwaine for the same thing. That time she served one year, fall of 1984 to fall of 1985, in the same facility. During her second

incarceration, Willa then-Vincolla gave birth. The child was \_\_\_\_"

"Whoa, back up. She had a baby? She was pregnant?"

"That's what give birth means. I know you're gay, but you still learned about reproduction in school, didn't you? I can give you a crash course, but it costs extra."

"You're an ass. Willa said she had no children."

"Willa lied. Can I finish?"

I clamped my mouth shut.

"While incarcerated, Willa gave birth. On Willa's insistence, the child was given up for adoption."

"Was it Dwaine's?"

"No clue. Based on the prostitution charges, I'm guessing it wasn't."

"Did Dwaine know about it?"

Ruiz pierced me with a look of contempt. "I'm not a fucking mind reader, Valor. How the hell should I know? I find information and pass it on to you. I assume he would have known unless he didn't visit his wife in prison." He motioned to the screen. "This chick is still alive. Go ask her."

"I'm sorry. Ignore me. The child was given up for adoption. What do we know about the kid?"

"Nothing. I didn't go down that path. You told me to look into Willa Vincolla."

"Go on."

"She was released from prison at the end of 1985. There's nothing on her record after that. She must have cleaned up her act. The couple have no children on file. They moved around a lot but mostly lived in rented apartments in the Milton area until they bought the cattle ranch west of King City in 1990. When Dwaine Vincolla was found murdered outside their home in 1994, the investigating officers looked heavily into Willa but came up dry. Other than decade-old prostitution charges, her record was clean. Friends and neighbors called the couple antisocial. Blah-blah-blah. You've read the case file I sent on Dwaine, so I don't need to regurgitate that. That's pretty much it."

I sat with all Ruiz had unpacked for a long minute. There was no real viable reason to keep going with this line of inquiry except my gut feeling that Dwaine's presence at the parade was suspicious. *His wife* was still suspicious. Dwaine would have needed help to get at Juniper if he had been the diversion at the parade. His wife could have been that person. Plus, I couldn't shake the feeling that his untimely and unsolved death was significant. I hated loose ends, and this one kept unraveling in the most unexpected ways.

Why Juniper?

A baby in prison.

Rumors of paternity.

A hard lump formed in my throat. My skin prickled. I glanced at the clock, wondering if it was too soon to call Dr. Thornlow's office for those results. I'd given her not only

mine and Dad's samples but had pulled the DNA we had on file for Juniper.

"Can you look into the baby? Find me anything and everything possible."

I couldn't give up this line of inquiry just yet.

Ruiz sucked air between his teeth. "That could be tricky. I wouldn't hold your breath."

"You're good at what you do. If anyone can find anything, it's you."

Ruiz's brows lifted. "Was that a compliment?"

"Maybe."

"Are you hitting on me?"

"Because I gave you a compliment, you think I'm hitting on you? You wish."

Ruiz almost smiled, but he covered it with an eye roll as he spun back to face his computer. "Give me an hour. Do not come down here and harass me a second sooner."

"Thank you."

I rose to leave, but Ruiz held up a finger, asking me to hang on as he dug through a mountain of paperwork on his desk. "Are you meeting with Bright and Travolta?"

"I'm going to find them, yes."

"They asked for this."

He handed me a thin brown folder.

"What is it?"

"Background on some guy named Garrett Neville."

"The Boy Scout leader."

"I don't know. Fucking disgusting lowlife is what he is. Now shoo. I have work to do."

I opened the file and read as I wandered to the elevator. Ruiz's comment made sense once I'd scanned the pages inside. Garrett Neville was currently three years into a twenty-year prison sentence for distributing underage pornography. The guy was a fucking pedophile. But he couldn't be responsible for the current cases of missing girls if he was in prison.

I closed the folder and sighed, leaning back against the elevator's paneled back wall and closing my eyes. Another closed door. Another dead end.

For the most part, weekends were quiet at the office. Unless someone was working an emergent case or needed to get caught up on paperwork, the usual bustle of midweek was gone.

Edwards's office door was closed, and the lights were off. Erik, Allison, and Eden were gathered around a table on the far side of the room, no longer tucked away in a conference room like they had been all week.

"There he is," Allison said.

I dropped the file on the table and pulled up a chair. "Neville's background, courtesy of Ruiz. Dead end. The guy's

in prison and has been for three years."

"No shit." Erik pulled it forward and read, his nonexpression forming into one of disgust before he closed the folder and slid it away. "He's lucky he's still alive. Do you think he might have cohorts on the outside?"

"I doubt it. Evelyn and Lily weren't sexually abused. Neither has mentioned anything about photography nor have they raised any red flags in that department."

Eden took the file and read it. Allison glanced over her shoulder.

"So now what?" Allison asked.

I gave the team a quick summary of where I was at with Willa and Dwaine. "My gut can't let it go yet. I have Ruiz checking a bit more into the baby, but I'm a dog chasing his tail at this point. Going nowhere fast."

"Kader's face isn't a match on any missing child database across Ontario," Erik said. "We've expanded the search to the rest of the provinces, but I think it's safe to say he isn't going to turn up."

Eden tossed the folder aside. "So we're once again at a standstill."

I debated bringing up the recent discovery about Edwards but hesitated. Was I really going to open that can of worms? The backlash could be career-ending, and what did we really have on him? Nothing more than a loose connection via his grandchildren. That was barely anything.

I kept my mouth shut.

For now.

I'd let the last dying embers of this case burn out first. If the paternity test came back positive or if Willa's prison-born baby didn't surface, then I'd mention Edwards.

Maybe.

# CHAPTER 32

## Aslan



I 'd taken on an impossible task. Chasing the source of a rumor that had sprouted among the city's biggest newscasters was the equivalent of finding a needle in a haystack. I'd made it sound easy. Quaid needed a dash of hope, but the truth was, I anticipated a day of failure.

Armed with a coffee, sitting in Quaid's SUV, I scanned the list he'd made. Apart from City TV News and a guy named Dennis Joy, who Quaid claimed had approached him in the lobby a few days ago, I didn't have contact names. Edwards had dealt directly with the press, but Quaid had listed all the stations and newspapers who'd been poking around and making inquiries. CTV News, CBC News, the *Toronto Star*, the *Toronto Sun*, and the *Globe and Mail*.

Basically, any and all big hitters in the city.

"Lovely."

And randomly, the one not on the list was the tabloid bitch as Quaid had referred to her. I planned to leave Daniella for last. If possible, I would get information elsewhere. What I didn't tell Quaid was that people who worked for tabloid magazines would be more apt to share information for a price. They had no ethical code to adhere to. They didn't care.

After a quick phone call to be sure he was in the office on a Saturday, I put the SUV in gear, punched the City TV News broadcasting station address into the GPS, and took off. Mr. Dennis Joy was my first stop.

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It took a song and dance to be granted permission to see Dennis Joy. I didn't have police credentials to bully my way through the red tape, so I wove a different story, leaning heavily on lies and empty promises. Convinced I could get City TV News an exclusive interview with Quaid Valor before the end of the day, the lady at the desk was happy to accommodate my request to see Dennis Joy.

On the ninth floor of the building, an intern took me through a maze of cubicles—most unoccupied on the weekend—until we got to a glass office. It turned out Dennis Joy was someone important and deserving of more pomp and circumstance than his colleagues.

He wasn't present.

I sat in a chair in front of a large glossy wooden desk, peering out a wall of windows overlooking downtown. The intern informed me Dennis would be with me shortly. "He's on the air for another ten minutes, but I've left a message for him to come up to his office right away."

She left me alone.

Curious, I googled Dennis Joy. He was one of the weekend anchors for City TV News and easier on the eyes than I expected. Quaid had conveniently forgotten to mention that part. Of course, Dennis's picture gave the impression he was also arrogant and cocky, the type of guy who knew what he had and used it to his advantage.

It was odd that he'd personally come to try to convince Quaid to give an interview. These people usually had minions do their dirty work.

I stuffed my phone into my pocket and scanned the office. It was starchy and austere. Expensive polished bookshelves, framed artwork by an artist who was probably someone special, and tiny personal dashes of a man who lacked personality. No family photographs. It made me think Dennis Joy was not married. The only framed pictures around the room were of an orange tabby. The office screamed single man.

A few stylized sculptures sat in random places of note. They looked expensive and possibly foreign. I assumed Dennis had traveled a lot. In his line of work, that wouldn't surprise me.

His desk was clean. No clutter. A hint of lingering spice hung in the air, a memory stamp of the man's cologne. It told me he was one of those guys who got a little overzealous with the spritzer after his morning shower. I wasn't wrong.

I smelled Dennis before he announced himself. "Aslan Doyle, is that right?"

I wrenched around in the chair and was met by a man in a suit with the same allure and refinement as the man in the pictures I'd found on Google.

Dennis Joy didn't wait for me to confirm. He shed his suit jacket as he crossed the room, tossed it over his desk chair, and unbuttoned the cuffs of his shirt. As he rolled them, he said, "I'm told you can get me Quaid Valor for an interview. Are you full of shit? Because if you are, I'm going to find myself a coffee, and you can see yourself out."

"Sit down, pretty boy. I have a little quid pro quo for you. If you don't want to help, there are two other news stations in the city that might. You're top of my list, so curb the attitude."

Dennis wasn't used to being talked to like that. He sniffed, wrinkled his nose in disgust, and hit a button on his phone. "Angie, bring me a coffee and hold my calls."

Was the man prone to getting a slew of phone calls on a Saturday, or was the statement for show?

He got comfortable in his fancy office chair. "Are you supposed to be someone special?" he asked.

"Wow. Quaid never mentioned you were a dick."

Dennis's eyes narrowed as he scanned me. "You're acquainted with the detective?"

"You could say that."

"How do you know him, and what is it you want in exchange for an interview?"

"I happen to be dating Quaid Valor, so talk nice to me, pretty boy, or no interview for you. I have a lot of power here. A lot of sway."

It was muted, Dennis had supreme control of his facial expressions, but the tiniest hint of disappointment crossed his face at my comment. I didn't have to be a detective to put the pieces together on that one.

Dennis Joy was gay and, upon seeing Quaid, had taken a liking to him. Not surprising. Quaid was more attractive than he realized. I'd have placed bets that Dennis had flirted and Quaid had been oblivious. It wouldn't be the first time.

Dennis's secretary or intern or whoever the woman was knocked and entered with a steaming mug of coffee. She placed it on the desk and slinked out.

I was not offered a coffee.

"Get on with it. What do you want?"

"I need the source of these rumors."

"What rumors?"

"Don't be coy. You know what I'm talking about. Every news station and paper is itching for Quaid to confirm or deny the same thing. I want the source."

Dennis's eyes squinted a fraction. "The source."

"Yes. You tell me who gave you this information, and I'll convince Quaid to talk to you and only you."

"I'm afraid I can't do that."

I pushed out of the chair. "Thank you for your time, Mr. Joy."

I was halfway to the door when Dennis stopped me. "Wait. Sit."

"Now you're wasting my time."

"It's not that I don't want to give you this information. It's that I can't."

"Is it some confidentiality thing? Some kind of protective, bullshit clause?"

"No." He didn't continue, so I returned to the chair and sat, leveling Dennis with the same intense stare he thought might keep me in line. If he only knew I played this game for a living.

Dennis leaned back and steepled his fingers, bouncing them on his chin. "We require the interview with Mr. Valor because otherwise, we risk spreading misinformation. Being charged with slander can bring a station down. No one would be stupid enough to act until they confirmed the facts. We pride ourselves on bringing the people accurate and honest news."

"Is that your motto?"

"I don't like you."

"Feeling's mutual. Why are you and everyone following this bullshit rumor? It baffles me. It sounds like something a tabloid magazine would do, not credible news stations. What am I missing?"

"I don't believe it's bullshit. Our source is solid, but we can't go on air with it unless Valor or his father back it up. My boss wouldn't allow it."

"Who's your source."

Dennis chewed on his thoughts, staring with hardened whiskey-colored eyes and an egotistical tilt of his nose.

"I don't have all day, Dennis."

"I need some type of guarantee. How do I know you won't march out of here and leave me with nothing if I talk?"

"God, I hate dealing with you people. All right. Fine. If your source checks out, I will take you to Quaid personally."

"Right now?"

"Right now."

Quaid would kill me, but I had a contingency plan.

"How close are you two?" Dennis asked.

"An interview, not a date, buddy boy. Nice try. I don't share."

Dennis studied my face long and hard, looking for lies or loopholes. Then he opened the top drawer of his desk and rooted inside. He removed a small notepad. "I don't have a name."

I tsked. "So close."

"Shut up. What I can tell you is the source was a member of the police department. They wanted to remain anonymous, but I have a phone number. It's also the reason we didn't dismiss the rumor outright. The informant claimed to have worked the original case back in ninety-two. The one involving Valor's sister. The information seemed solid enough to pursue. They knew facts anyone outside the department wouldn't. Facts that were never revealed to the media back in the day. It's why everyone is chasing Valor for confirmation."

"Except your source isn't solid enough to go on air. It's just this side of shady."

"Slander. You understand. Police officer or not, the person didn't give us a name."

"So, technically, this could be anyone posing as a police officer. You don't have a name, badge number, or proof of any kind, do you?"

Dennis tossed the notepad at me. "This is all anyone has. You can ask around at the other stations, but that's it. You don't think we talk to each other? If it's not real, tell me how they knew stuff they shouldn't."

I removed my phone and inputted the number, tapping the speakerphone button as the call tried to connect.

"They won't answer. I've left three messages on their voicemail, seeing if I could get more information, but they haven't called back."

"The number you have reached is out of service," said a robotic voice on the other end.

Dennis frowned. "That's not possible. I called it."

"Is this all you have?" I waved the notepaper at him.

"I swear it was an active number two days ago."

"Well, it's not now. Who took the original call?"

"I... don't know. A secretary, probably. It was assigned to me."

"So you can't tell me anything about the person on the other end of the line?"

"I... No."

"What about the voicemail message? Male? Female? Accent? Anything?"

Defeat clouded Dennis's eyes. "It was generic. Automated voice."

I huffed. "Thank you for your time, Mr. Joyless."

He didn't stop me when I rose to leave that time.

In the car, I pondered. The person was posing as a police officer who'd worked Juniper's case.

Or was it fact?

Was someone on the inside manipulating things?

I called Quaid.

"How's it going?" he asked when he answered. "Any luck?"

"Are you alone?"

"No, but I can be."

"It's fine. Don't worry about it. Have you briefed your team about Edwards?"

"No." I heard the hesitation in Quaid's voice.

"Still holding off?"

"For now. I still don't buy it. I can't throw him under the bus until I run out of options."

"I met with your buddy Dennis. You didn't tell me he was drop-dead gorgeous in a pompous, assholish sort of way."

Quaid chuckled. "I didn't notice."

"Bullshit. I won't point out the hypocrisy of this moment, but you can no longer get pissy at me about Daniella." I kept my tone light. "Dennis was seriously disappointed to hear you were off the market. Did you know he was gay?"

"I caught a vibe. He asked me out for coffee."

"And you turned him down?"

"I didn't think my boyfriend would approve."

I grinned like an idiot. "I love how you conveniently forgot to tell me you were asked out on a date."

"I said no. Although, I didn't think it was a date he was after. He wanted information and was trying a new angle."

"Oh, he'd have tapped that. You did notice he was flirting, though, right?"

"I'm not as oblivious as you think, Doyle. Did you learn anything?"

My smile faded. "Maybe. I don't have a name, but Dennis claimed the source was someone in the department."

"What?"

"Yeah. Someone who knew more about Juniper's case than they should have. It's why they didn't dismiss it outright and have been pushing to confirm facts. The person claimed they helped on Juniper's case back in the day."

"But those detectives are all retired."

"He didn't specify they were a detective, and there were all kinds of officers helping with her case on the day she vanished, right? Hundreds."

Quaid was quiet a moment. "Yeah. Including Edwards."

"Dennis had a phone number. It's been disconnected. He claimed it was active two days ago. I'm going to keep poking and see if I can chase down a secretary or someone who actually spoke to the person on the phone. I may not find much, but every little bit helps. I'll cover my bases. Did you talk to Ruiz?"

Quaid filled me in on what he'd learned about Willa.

"Wow. Let me know if he finds anything more."

"I will."

We ended the call, and I sat in the SUV for a long minute, pondering the implications of Willa's prison baby and how it fit with the case.

My next stop was the broadcasting station for CBC News. Unfortunately, no one was available to help with my request on the weekend. It was the same at CTV News. Ahmed at the *Toronto Sun* gave the same information I got from Dennis. The phone number was a match, but he hadn't taken the call either nor did he know who had.

It was close to noon when I got escorted out of the *Globe* and *Mail* building. It turned out my dear friend Dennis had called around, warning people of my agenda.

I wasn't far from headquarters and contemplated popping in and touching base with Quaid, but I still had places to try before calling it quits. The *Toronto Star* and Daniella at the tabloid magazine.

I left the SUV parked in a coin-op spot and wandered down the block to a small deli, hoping to grab a bite to eat. While I walked, I searched for the phone number of the *Toronto Star*. When I called and explained my purpose, I was told the person I needed to speak with was on lunch. I made an appointment for one thirty and hung up.

As much as I didn't want to do it, I searched *Upfront and Center* magazine. Quaid had absconded with Daniella's phone number the night he'd found it—it was probably in a million pieces at the bottom of the lake—so I didn't have an easy way to contact her.

A receptionist answered, asking how she could direct my call, and when I requested to be put through to Daniella

Kismet's line, a small body ran into me from behind. My phone flew from my hands, landing and skidding along the concrete.

"Oh no! Oh no! I didn't mean it."

Startled, I spun and came face-to-face with a young boy dressed in a cub scout uniform, carrying a cardboard basket of apples, most of which had tottered and fallen, bouncing along the sidewalk and rolling away in every direction.

His face crumpled, but when he lifted his gaze to me, the shadows from his hat darkening his features didn't hide his fear. "Did your phone break? I'm so sorry, mister. I was running because my mom said to hurry. I wasn't looking."

His chin wobbled, and he sucked his lips into his mouth as his eyes welled.

"Hey, hey." I softened my tone and found a smile, squatting to be at his level. "We're all good, bud. No harm done."

"But your phone."

I searched for it and picked it up. It was scuffed. A faint crack split the screen, but I shrugged it off. "Right as rain. Just a little scratch, nothing more." I held it to my ear, but my call had disconnected. "You seem to have an apple problem, though."

The boy scanned the ground as he tucked a wild yellowblond curl behind his ear. It was one of a mess of curls that escaped his hat on all sides. "They're ruined now. I can't sell them bruised. Oh man. I'm in so much trouble." "Nah. We'll fix it. How much are they?"

The boy frowned and shrugged. "Just a donation. We're raising money for cub stuff. I get to go to camp in the spring."

I found my wallet and tugged out a twenty. "Here. I'll buy all the apples that are on the ground."

The boy wasn't sure what to make of that. He looked at the money, then scanned the street, glancing over his shoulder and back. He tugged his hat lower over his eyes like he was ashamed. "Okay. But... hold on." He carried a shoulder bag over one arm. "I have extras. Here." He handed me an apple.

"Nah. Keep it. We're even."

The boy shook his head. "No, you can't give me twenty dollars and not have an apple. They're really good. Super juicy. I had one earlier, and it ran down my chin and everything, and I don't even like apples."

I chuckled. "Sounds like something my boyfriend would like. I hate to say this, and don't tell him, but I'm not really a fan of apples either. Too healthy. I prefer chocolate." I winked.

He looked like he was about to protest, but something behind me made him clam up. His expression changed, and he backed up a step. "I have to go. My mom's going to yell at me." He tucked the apple away before turning around and bolting off down the road at a run.

"Take it easy, kiddo. Slow down and watch where you're going."

"I will."

His exit was head-scratching. I glanced over my shoulder to see what had set him off.

A man I recognized was coming out of the deli I'd been about to enter, and he had his gaze set on me. It did not look friendly.

Hank Edwards.

"Doyle." He wasn't carrying a sandwich bag. His arms were empty, and he stuffed his hands into his coat pockets. He was dressed Saturday casual, making me wonder if he was heading into the office or was randomly in the area.

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"Sergeant."
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"Just the man I was hoping to run into."

"Oh?"

Edwards glanced at the fallen apples scattered about, then down the street where the boy had run off. "Have a little accident?"

"Yeah. A collision. It was nothing." My thoughts coalesced, churning over the mountains of paperwork I'd read the previous day. I followed Edwards's gaze toward where the boy had run off and frowned.

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Was that...
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Had I just...

No.

The boy was nowhere in sight.

I turned back to Edwards when he spoke. "I understand you've gotten yourself suspended."

"Um... Yes, sir. It's a long story."

"Not really. I've heard it. I wish I could say I'm surprised, but I'm not. You've always made your own rules. Done your own thing. I've also caught rumor that you have your nose in MPU business. *My* business."

Two grandchildren in the same location as two abductions. A rookie cop taking interviews for Juniper's disappearance.

The source was a member of the police department.

I strained, trying to bring up a mental picture of Kader. I'd only vaguely glimpsed his picture in the file. A dark-haired boy with pale skin and freckles.

The cub scout was a curly-haired blond.

Not the same kid.

"Doyle? Are you listening to me?"

I snapped to attention, shaking free of my wandering thoughts.

"Yes, sir. I'm... nowhere near MPU business. I'm not sure what you're talking about."

Edwards stepped closer. "Don't be clever with me. I'm not stupid." His attention flashed down the street again.

It took everything in me not to turn around.

"Look, I know you and Valor are involved. I think that's great to be honest. He could use someone a little more social

to break him out of his shell. But I'm worried about you corrupting him."

I didn't say anything because I wasn't sure what to say.

"Here's the thing. I know he's enlisted your help on this case, and I'm warning you that I had better not catch you sticking your nose where it doesn't belong, especially when you're without a badge. You are on thin ice as it is, Doyle. Don't make it worse."

"Of course. I understand, sir."

"How come you're in the neighborhood? You don't live around here."

It took a second to understand his meaning. I was a few blocks from headquarters on a Saturday. He likely knew his detectives were in the office and suspected I planned to slither in unseen while the staff sergeants were off. And damn if I hadn't considered it not ten minutes ago.

"I was getting some lunch." I waved at the deli. "They do a killer Ruben. I had a craving. It's worth the drive."

"Uh-huh. What are you driving these days? A bit cold for the bike, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir. Borrowed Valor's SUV today." I thumbed over my shoulder in the direction of the vehicle.

Edwards studied my face a moment longer. "Enjoy your lunch. Have a good day, Doyle. Stay out of trouble."

Edwards sauntered off in the opposite direction as the kid.

I waited until he'd turned the corner and was out of sight before I breathed a heavy sigh of relief. His presence and concern for what I was up to triggered discord in my thoughts.

I had half a mind to go after him and see what he was up to, but I didn't know where that would get me. Plus, if I was caught, it could make my situation worse. Finding the boy and ensuring I wasn't losing my mind felt more important. He wasn't Kader. I knew he wasn't Kader. It was an eerie coincidence my mind had conjured because Edwards had appeared out of the blue. I was looking for connections where there weren't any.

But I had to be sure.

I raced down the sidewalk toward where I'd parked Quaid's SUV, glancing down side streets and into alcoves as I went, but the kid was gone. I continued for three more blocks, checking everywhere. I ran up a side street and glanced down the next main road. When I didn't see him, I tried the opposite direction.

Twenty minutes later, I'd covered four blocks. The kid was long gone.

Debating what to do, I sauntered back to the SUV, digging around through my coat pockets for the keys. Fuck lunch. I needed to finish this task and contact Quaid. Something about my run-in with Edwards felt off. I needed to tell him about it.

My keys weren't in my pocket. I checked my jeans. Nothing. *Dammit*. Had I dropped them in the collision? I wandered back toward the deli, scanning the ground as I went, but I didn't find them.

"Shit."

Had I left them in the car? I hoped not. I was sure I'd locked it, and the last thing I needed was to wait around for CAA on a Saturday. They would take hours.

Back at the SUV, I tried the passenger side door, but it was locked. I cupped my eyes as I squinted through the heavily tinted window and prayed they weren't dangling in the ignition.

And of course they fucking were.

"Goddammit." I kicked the front tire.

I tried the back passenger door. Locked.

I moved to the other side of the vehicle, crossed my fingers, and yanked on the driver's side door.

It opened.

"Oh, thank fuck."

I got into the car with a heavy sigh and started the engine. Scrubbing my face, I contemplated my next step. The call I'd made to the tabloid magazine had been disconnected, so I pulled the number up on my phone again and hit Connect.

As it rang, something flashed in my peripheral vision. I lifted my gaze to peer into the rearview mirror as the woman on the other end of the line answered. Instead of seeing the car

parked behind me, I was met with a pair of eyes and an arrogant, smug smile.

A hand covered my mouth with a wet cloth before I could react. Their grip was unexpectedly strong, wrenching my head back against the car's headrest. I dropped my phone and got my hands up, tugging at the arm and heaving my body forward to try to break their hold.

But they had leverage, and I made the mistake of gasping when the cloth hit my face. A sweet, chemical tang painted the back of my throat. I held my breath from that point on, but my head was already swimming with adrenaline and panic.

I couldn't breathe—wouldn't dare try—and fumbled at the tight fingers digging into my face through the cloth.

The longer I fought to get the hand off, the longer I went without air.

I was going to pass out. Between my need to breathe and the threat of sucking chemicals into my lungs, I fought harder. But it was no use. They had leverage and were pressing their knees into the back of the seat, throwing their entire body into the hold. I had the disadvantage of an awkward angle and a closed-in space that wouldn't allow me to turn around.

Lungs revolting, I sucked in a second and third chemicaltinted gasp of air from the wet cloth. The world spun. I grew clumsy. Dizzy. Darkness seeped in around the edges of my vision. I tried to hold my breath again, but it was useless. I was panicked and suffocating. Waving and undulating on a boat in the middle of the ocean, I worked on getting one finger up at a time, but my coordination suffered. I lost my grip, my strength waning. I tried again, thrashing with diminishing vigor, wanting to scream and shout but telling myself not to.

I was sucking in too much wet, poisoned air.

I was going to pass out.

A burst of adrenaline grew from the fear that I was being overpowered, and I spazzed, throwing my body forward to no avail, trying to jerk away from my assailant's hold. My thoughts grew increasingly disconnected.

It was too much.

My lungs burned. Screamed.

My eyes stung and watered.

A spinning vortex of darkness sucked me into its grasp, and I couldn't get away. I was spinning into a dark abyss.

The horn. I should have hit the horn.

But it was too late.

The blackness took me.

## CHAPTER 33

## Quaid



I t was noon before I heard from Ruiz. I'd been pacing all morning, resisting the urge to call him and ask what was taking so long. He'd said an hour, and we were long past two. Allison and Erik had gone for lunch, and Eden was on the phone with her babysitter, checking up on Delilah.

I took the call, and the minute I connected, Ruiz barked, "Get your skinny ass down here. Grab me a coffee on your way. Good coffee, not the sludgy leftover shit that you folks made this morning. Brew a fresh pot."

"Yes, Your Highness."

"Fuck off, Valor. You're gonna wanna suck my dick when you hear what I found. Try to resist."

"I'll do my best, but the temptation... I don't know. I make no promises."

He hung up, and I rolled my eyes.

I waved at Eden, telling her I was heading down to Ruiz's office, then detoured into the breakroom to make a fresh pot of coffee. Once it was ready, I poured it into the largest mug I could find and grabbed a few sugar packets, hoping he had milk or cream on his floor since we didn't have any of those little containers they gave you in diners.

It was quiet in the basement. All the other offices were dark, doors closed. I found Ruiz where I'd left him that morning, staring at multiple monitors, the faint glow of the screens shining off his face in the low-lit room.

It was warmer than before, the scent of heated plastic richer.

"Coffee?"

Ruiz jerked around like he hadn't expected me even though he'd called less than ten minutes ago. "Is it fresh?"

"Yes. And because you're working so hard on a Saturday, I found the biggest mug I could."

"Stop flirting. Give it here."

I set it down beside a collection of coffee mugs that were all empty and ringed with old, dried coffee at the bottom. "I didn't know what you took in it."

"Black like my soul."

"Fitting."

I pulled up the chair I'd sat on earlier. "What do you have for me?"

Ruiz grinned. It was impish and almost playful, a direct contrast from what I usually got from the guy who hated my mere existence. "Are you going to control yourself?"

"As hard as it will be, I'll try not to hump your leg."

"Good. I appreciate it."

I rolled my eyes. "I think you've been misinformed about gay men. For the record, and I think I speak for every gay man out there, we don't care about you, Ruiz. Don't flatter yourself. You aren't on our radar. We aren't blinded by your good looks. We aren't going to jump you in the street. There are plenty of other gay men for us to choose from. We have no desire to convert straight men. Understand?"

He stared at me for a beat, then pointed his pen at the computer screen. "Willa Vincolla's baby. Are you ready?"

"On the edge of my seat."

"Like I figured, it took a song and dance to find this information, but I'm not a quitter, and very few barriers stop me."

"You didn't illegally hack anything, did you?"

Ruiz didn't flatter me with a response. "Like I suspected, it was a closed adoption, so records are sealed tight. However, new laws implemented a dozen or so years ago make it easier for adoptees to access those records now. They can apply for a disclosure veto. It also means those records aren't sealed as tightly as most people think, and no, Valor, I didn't illegally hack anything, so calm the fuck down."

"I wasn't accusing you. I was simply—"

"You were. Now shut up. Willa Vincolla gave birth to a seven-pound, one-ounce baby girl on July twenty-third, 1985. The baby was adopted immediately by Daniel and Nancy Fredricks of Wheatley, Ontario. The baby was registered with the named Tabitha Ann. But this is where it gets good."

Ruiz glanced back at me, a giddiness in his tone that contrasted his usual ill temper. Ruiz wasn't just good at his job; he loved it. The nitty-gritty dirt digging gave him a hardon.

"Tabitha Ann Fredricks was abducted in March of 1990. She was four years old."

I sat straighter. A ripple of goose bumps crawled over my skin. "Are you serious?"

Ruiz acknowledged my reaction with a nod. "I know, right? It gets better. The search for her was a bust. Tabitha never turned up, and after a year, the investigation died off. She joined the ever-growing pile of unsolved cases. Then, miraculously, four years later, in May of 1994, guess who reappeared out of the blue."

"No." The single word came out on a breath. The room was sweltering. I wanted to open a window, but there were none. Beads of sweat formed at my temples. "You said May 1994."

"Yes. Sound like a familiar time frame?"

"Dwaine was murdered in May of 1994."

"Correct. However, three hundred and fifty-odd kilometers of distance separates the two incidents. Add to that a closed adoption, and authorities never linked them. I can't find it in Tabitha's old missing person report, but I don't think the Fredrickses disclosed she was adopted."

I needed a second to absorb. The child was taken, then *given* back in the same month Dwaine was killed. Given back. I had two children who'd been recently taken and were also given back. That wasn't common.

And it wasn't a coincidence.

I took out my phone and texted Eden. Get the team together. We have something huge here. Find Edwards and message him too. He'll want to hear this.

I placed my phone on Ruiz's desk. "Tell me about the child. I know you didn't stop there."

Ruiz *pff*ed and turned back to his computer, clicking around. "As if. Tabitha Fredricks was a mess upon her return. She was severely traumatized to the point the parents had to admit her into a mental health facility for children. She was almost catatonic. Nightmares. Screaming fits. Self-abuse. You name it. Doctors found no signs of sexual abuse, but whatever she'd been through, it was bad.

"She spent over a year at the hospital, then came home. I learned that from media coverage. There were all kinds of stories written about her at the time. However, her medical information is all sealed, so you'll need a warrant if you want that. After her release from the hospital, the Fredricks family

fell off the grid. It was assumed the parents moved to protect her, and since I can't find a Tabitha Fredricks anywhere that fits her profile, I think they changed her name. Finding the parents didn't take much, but they're both deceased. They died together ten years ago in a traffic accident. Tabitha's whereabouts are unknown."

"That's a lot to unpack."

"Yep."

"I need to digest."

Ruiz settled back in his leather office chair, hugging the mug of coffee I'd brought him, looking about as smug as ever. "Not bad for a Saturday morning, huh?"

"You're brilliant. You're amazing. You're—"

"Here. I printed this off in case it might help in some way. It's an old picture, but here's your little girl pre-abduction."

Ruiz handed me a colored printout of Tabitha Ann Fredricks. It was crisp and clear.

And the bottom dropped out of my stomach because I'd seen this little girl's picture before.

My phone buzzed, and I scrambled with shaky hands to pick it up.

Eden: Can't get a hold of Edwards. He isn't answering his phone. We're all ready for you.

Quaid: omw

"I owe you," I said to Ruiz as I stood. "You have no idea."

"Just doing my job."

I texted Aslan while I rode the elevator to the fourth floor.

Quaid: We've hit the jackpot. Call me when you get a second.

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Three visibly shocked faces stared back at me after I relayed what I'd learned about Willa, her prison-born baby, and all that had transpired with the child after she was adopted. A quick search of the old homicide report and a text to Ruiz confirmed the child, Tabitha, had reappeared the same day Dwaine was discovered murdered.

At that point, none of us believed in coincidences.

Plus, the picture Ruiz had given me all but confirmed a connection to Juniper. It was my loaded gun. It was my home run.

The team agreed.

"How does a detective not look into a child's birth parents when said child has been abducted?" Erik asked. "That's investigation 101."

I shook my head. "No disclosure, no reason to explore it. The parents probably didn't connect the importance since it was four years down the road. Who knows? Evelyn's parents didn't disclose it either. Regardless, we might have found Juniper's and Tabitha's kidnappers. Dwaine's dead, but I want

Willa brought in. We have reasonable grounds for an arrest. I want her in an interrogation room."

"I'll make a call and get officers to her house." Allison excused herself and went to her desk.

I didn't know how a sixty-two-year-old woman was managing this game, but I would figure it out.

"Have we heard from Edwards?" I directed the question at Eden.

"No. I left a message, telling him to call ASAP."

"Here's a thought," Erik said. "The parents would have had to apply for a name change. Can we not have Ruiz track that down?"

"Maybe. If it was a matter of the child's safety, the documentation might not be readily accessible. I'll see what he can do."

There was still no response from Aslan when I placed the call to Ruiz. I'd have thought he'd have been long done with his assignment by now.

Ruiz wasn't shocked to hear from me again and said he'd further look into the name change, but nothing had shown up on the first sweep.

An hour and a half later, Willa Vincolla was brought in by county officers who worked in Aurora. She was left in an interrogation room while we made a game plan for how to proceed.

Dad had joined us. Obligation had made me call him, and he'd insisted I pick him up so he could be present for Willa's interview.

"Has she asked for representation?" Erik asked.

"Not yet, but I'm going to guess the minute she realizes we have her backed into a corner, she'll demand it. Call Edwards again," I told Eden. "If this whole thing breaks wide open, I will not take shit for leaving him uninformed."

I texted Aslan again. It had been almost two hours since I'd heard from him.

Quaid: We're interviewing Willa. Things are happening. Where are you?

I waited for a beat, but my last message still hadn't been read, so I wasn't surprised when I didn't get an immediate response.

It was decided that Eden and I would take on Willa. Erik and Dad both thought I should sit out. Erik expressed concern about my ability to keep cool since we were potentially chatting with someone who could have been involved in Juniper's abduction.

"Plus," Erik added, "Edwards would never let this happen. It's too personal."

"Edwards isn't here. I'm doing the interview. I'm the one who uncovered all this. I'm going in with Eden." My tone brooked no argument.

Allison touched Erik's arm. "Quaid will be fine. He's nothing if not professional."

Dad squeezed my arm in silent support.

Armed with a long string of questions and prepared for the impact of a potentially life-altering explosion, Eden and I entered the interrogation room. Allison, Erik, and Dad listened in on the other side of the one-way mirror.

Eden played the soft, warm detective with comforting smiles and a gentle tone. I was a wall of ice, prepared to knock Willa back in line if she thought she was going to manipulate her way out of this like I suspected she might have done many years ago when accused of her husband's murder.

Eden sat.

I stood by the door, arms crossed, face fixed in what Aslan had coined my trademark sneer. It was partly for show but mostly indicative of the rage I felt toward the woman who might have been responsible for destroying my family.

Eden went through the preliminaries. She explained that we would be recording the interview, that with consent from a judge, we had a legal right to detain her for as long as ninety-six hours without officially pressing charges, and finally, asking one last time if she wanted legal representation.

Willa declined.

"Can you state your name for the record?" Eden asked.

"Willa Honey Vincolla."

"And how old are you, Willa?"

"Sixty-two."

"I'd like you to confirm a few things for us if you would. You were arrested several times in the early eighties for prostitution, is that correct?"

"Yes. I cleaned up my act."

"I see that." Eden glanced at the file she held. "And you did three months in a correctional facility in Kitchener in 1982, correct?"

"Sounds right."

"According to my file, you went back for a year from eighty-four to eighty-five."

Willa said nothing.

"Is it true you gave birth to a little girl in prison in 1985?"

Willa's expression petrified. Her dull eyes sharpened on Eden. "That's none of your goddamn business."

"Actually, it is," I snapped. "Answer the question."

The air was choked with cigarette smoke that wafted off Willa's clothes. She huffed and sat back. "Yes. I gave birth."

"To a little girl, correct?" Eden asked.

"That's what they told me. She was adopted. I never met her. Why is that important?"

"Can you tell me if this child was Dwaine Vincolla's daughter?" Eden's levelheadedness was admirable.

"That bastard couldn't father children. He could barely make his dick work on a good day."

"Is that a no?" Eden asked.

"No."

"Who was the father?"

Willa laughed until she ended up in a coughing fit. "You people are something else. Do you think I know? You know why I was in prison, so what makes you think I kept track of all the men who paid me to have sex with them?"

Eden let Willa's abrasive edge roll off her shoulders as she kept going. "How did your pregnancy make Dwaine feel? You were married at the time, correct? I assume he was aware you were carrying another man's child."

"Is that what this is about? Are we revisiting his murder again? Aren't you people tired of this yet? I have a rock-solid alibi. I can't believe I'm missing *Dallas* for this."

The only reason I knew what she was talking about was because it was a show Dad liked to watch sometimes. I was pretty sure it had gone off the air decades ago.

I crossed to the table and glared down at Willa. "I'm betting Dwaine was pretty pissed off his wife was pregnant by another man. He probably had no clue you were still earning a buck on the street when he married you. I'm betting that once you got out he made your life a living hell, until one day, you snapped and killed him."

Willa smirked and clapped her hands. "I applaud you. You have it all figured out. Bravo. Are we finished with this nonsense?"

I braced my hands on the table and leaned forward so I was in Willa's face. "Did you have any knowledge about the couple who adopted your daughter?"

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"No."
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"Liar," I spat.

"It was a closed adoption. They took her away, and I never saw her again."

"Tabitha Ann Fredricks. Ring a bell?"

If I was expecting a reaction, Willa was too well prepared to give me one. "No."

"You're lying."

"Am I?"

"Tabitha Ann Fredricks, your biological daughter, was abducted in March of 1990. She was gone for four years before miraculously reappearing again on May eighteenth of 1994. Do you know what else happened on May eighteenth of 1994?" I stabbed a finger on the table. "Dwaine Carlen Vincolla, your husband, was shot and killed."

Willa said nothing. Her gaze was as fossilized as mine. It was a staring contest she wasn't going to win.

"Do you know what I think? I think Dwaine wanted children. I think you couldn't give him children."

"The bastard was impotent. It had nothing to do with me. The only time he got hard was when he was beating me black and blue."

"I think he was mad with jealousy that another man had given you a baby, and you gave that baby up for adoption. I think Dwaine found her and took her back. You two kept Tabitha hidden away. Maybe you were on board with it. Maybe you weren't. Maybe you were as much a victim as that little girl. I think, one day, Dwaine took it too far, or maybe you had enough, and you snapped. You killed your husband, then sent the girl back where she belonged. You covered your tracks well, and no one found out. You went on to live a quiet life." I paused. "Until now."

Fury burned in Willa's eyes, but I wasn't finished. There was still a key piece to present. The nail in the coffin. The concrete evidence we'd discovered that drove it all home.

I took out the picture Ruiz had given me along with a second photograph taken on the day of the parade. One showed a group of children. My sister, Tom's girls, Tom's nephew, and a third little girl everyone had assumed was Tom's niece. She was not. Had I been paying attention, I would have realized Tom had never referred to her as a relative.

The third little girl was Tabitha Ann Fredricks.

We'd asked ourselves how a child might get taken in a crowd without anyone noticing. Easy. They would willingly

leave with someone they trusted. A person of authority like a police officer. Or another child. Like Kader.

Or Tabitha

I laid the pictures side by side on the table. "This is your daughter." I tapped the younger picture of Tabitha, the photo provided by her adoptive parents that had circulated at the time of her abduction. "This was before her abduction. She's four years old here." I tapped the other one, where she was grinning beside my sister. "This was taken at the Remembrance Day parade in 1992, two years *after* she went missing. The same parade where your husband was also present. Do you know who this little girl is beside her?" I touched Juniper's face but didn't wait for a response. "She's my sister. She went missing at the parade that year and was never seen again."

A quiet settled into the room. The air grew thicker as Willa stared down at the photographs. My heart thumped wildly in my chest, whomping in my ears as I waited for her to absorb what I'd said.

Before she could respond, before I could open my mouth to speak, the door to the interrogation room burst open, and Allison poked her head in.

Frantic, pale, and out of breath, she glanced between Eden and me. "Sorry to interrupt. We just got a call. Avery's back. She showed up in Crothers Woods. We have to get to the hospital. She's asking for Quaid Valor."

## CHAPTER 34

## Aslan



onsciousness came back slowly, a soupy, sludgy return that mimicked those insufferable days of too many back-to-back hangovers. I awoke on a turbulent ocean with lead in my veins and a head full of cotton. When I peeled my eyes open—a nearly impossible feat—blinding light seared my retinas.

I closed them again with a groan.

"Ah, you're awake. Good. Took long enough. I might have gotten a little overzealous with the pills. My bad."

Knifelike pain jabbed into my temple, making it hard to think. I squeezed my eyes tighter, fighting a wave of nausea before trying to open them again, bracing against the afternoon sun cutting like shards of glass into the room.

The wash of light was almost too much, but I persevered, hoping the hazy shapes of my surroundings would solidify.

They didn't.

"That shit can cause nasty headaches. My apologies. I didn't want to use it, but you're a big man to subdue for a wee little woman like me, and the Chloroform wasn't going to keep you unconscious for long."

"What... you give... m-me."

"A good strong dose of sublingual Ativan. Soaked right into your system while we drove here. You were kind of a bitch to subdue. Don't worry. It won't have lasting effects. It will wear off eventually, but you'll be hazy for a while."

I rolled my head to the side, lifting it a fraction with effort. It weighed as much as a bowling ball. The blurry shape of a person appeared in front of me, a safe distance away. I couldn't make out anything but a dark shadowy profile against a sunlit background. When I tried to lift a hand to shield my eyes, it didn't cooperate.

I was bound.

Pulling against the restraints around my wrists did me no good. I was too weak, and they were too secure. Plastic by the feel of it. It cut deep, painful grooves into my skin. My fingers were numb. Zip ties? Probably.

Bits and pieces of awareness returned. I was seated on a chair, or rather, slumped. My muscles were too weak to hold me up. Something had been tied around my chest, binding me to the chair. My legs were also tied at the ankles. The room was annoyingly crystalized and nondescript. No amount of squinting or blinking brought it into focus, but I got the sense I

was in an empty room on the main level of a house since there was a window nearby.

"Can you focus on me?" the woman said.

She'd moved closer, and when I shifted my gaze back, we were face-to-face. She had squatted down to be at my level. I blinked several times, trying to bring her into focus, but the harder I tried, the more nauseated I became.

I had to close my eyes again or risk vomiting.

"Who're you?" The words came out slurred and garbled. My tongue wouldn't work right. I moved it around my mouth, but there was no saliva, only traces of an acrid flavor I didn't recognize. I was unbelievably thirsty.

"Aww, sweetie, I'm insulted. Your poor head's such a mess right now, isn't it? Let's just say we have unfinished business."

The voice was familiar.

Stomach roiling, I peeked again, doing all I could to make her face clearer. "Dan... Daniella?"

"There you go. Now we're getting somewhere."

"But... How did... You work... I'm..." My brain was not functioning. The strings of thoughts wouldn't connect. The sentences fluttered away before I could figure out how to finish them. I was too scrambled to make sense of my predicament. What had happened? How had I gotten here?

"Poor baby. You're confused, aren't you? Here. Have a drink. It will help."

Fingers touched my chin, wrenching my head up. A second later, a bottle was pressed to my mouth, and cold water touched my lips. I coughed and sputtered, unable to coordinate the swallow reflex while also dealing with an inner alarm telling me not to take anything she gave me.

My reaction time was nonexistent, so instead, I drowned on the water. It went up my nose and into my lungs when I gasped. She wouldn't stop pouring. I coughed. Sputtered.

"Drink, Aslan," she snapped. "You're making this harder than it has to be."

I'd ingested too much and was wheezing and choking when she finally pulled it away. My shirt front was soaked, and my stomach heaved. Nothing came up.

Daniella wiped my face with a rough towel, then slapped my cheek when my chin fell. "Open your eyes and try to focus for a second."

I did my best. My neck could hardly withstand the strain of lifting my head. I fought through the pounding agony shredding my brain and blinked at the face standing a few feet away. She came in clearer that time.

"'Kaid's right," I slurred. "You're a fucking bitch."

Daniella laughed. "Aww. My brother is jealous is all. He thought I was trying to steal you away. Cute." She sighed. "I suppose with your reputation, it makes sense."

"What da h-hell... you talking about?"

"I'll explain when he gets here." She checked her watch. "He should have gotten notice that little Avery is back now. She has a message for him."

"He's... gonna arrest your ass."

"I don't think so. He's going to want to hear what I have to say, and when he knows everything, he'll understand our pain is the same. He'll protect me."

The woman was out of her mind. I didn't have the capacity to share a battle of words or wit. The groggy sensation was amplifying, not retreating. My head wouldn't stay upright. The undulating river beneath the chair rocked me toward unconsciousness again.

"You... bitch... You... dhruug me... 'gain."

"I don't trust you, Aslan. You're my ticket to getting Quaid to abide by my rules, but I can't have you overpowering or tricking me. I don't want to hurt you. The thing is, I'm not a violent person unless you force my hand. So have a little sleep, sweetie. I didn't give you enough to damage your organs or anything. It was only enough to keep you subdued for a while longer."

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I awoke an undetermined amount of time later. When I opened my eyes, I noted the sun had shifted, no longer blazing into the room. The light was a duskier late-afternoon yellow. My vision was as blurry as before. The world still rippled and moved in nauseating waves, and I was unbearably tired. I couldn't shake free of the sedation effect with willpower alone. I was useless, barely able to hold my head up and keep my eyes open.

With effort, I lifted my chin and was met by the face of a young boy seated on the floor across the room, staring at me.

"Hello," he said, adding a little wave.

I squinted at the child. Dark hair in a buzzcut, pale skin, freckles. "Yer... Kader." My voice sounded like it had been dragged through gravel.

"Yep. That's me. I'm not really a cub scout. That was a trick." He grinned, showing front teeth too big for his mouth. "I stole your keys when I bumped into you. You didn't even know it, did you? I've been practicing. It's called sleight of hand. Mom says I'm practically a genius."

The curly too-yellow hair had been a costume. The apples, the near tears, it had all been an act. I should have known. I'd suspected something was off. It had niggled at me. I'd run several blocks trying to find him again to no avail.

"Yer mom isha bad pershon, b-buddy. You aren't safe. I need... I... I ne-you to help untie me. I can get you outta here."

I wasn't sure I could. Based on my poor speech and limited strength, I wasn't sure I could stand on my own two feet if given a chance.

The boy snorted. "No way. Do you think I'm stupid? Me and Mom are a team. She said you'd try to talk your way out

of it, but it won't work. My job is to watch you and make sure you don't do anything stupid."

"Where ish yer mom?"

"Waiting for Uncle Quaid. He should be here soon. Do you want a drink?"

"No."

"It's just water this time. I promise. Mom said you had enough pills to put down a horse." The kid laughed. "You're a big guy."

"No offense, kid. I don't... trush...trush...Fuck me... I don't trush you."

He shrugged. "That's fair. I was trying to give you a poisoned apple." He smirked. "Mom said it would be fun to play *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. She wanted to lure you in with a poisoned apple like in the movie. It would have been easier than using the stinky cloth in the car. Mom was angry because it doesn't work as well as it does on TV. You fought hard. Once you were unconscious, she stuck a bunch of pills under your tongue, then I had to keep the cloth on your face until she was sure they'd started to work. She had to drive. So you see? We're a team. She needs me."

It was too much to process. This kid was as psychotic as his mother, through no fault of his own, but still. He legitimately didn't see that what he was doing was wrong, and all the nice comforting words in the world wouldn't bring him to my side.

The kid spun and went to his knees to look out the window, then turned and flopped to the ground again. "Mom said you're dating Uncle Quaid. Is that true?"

"Yes." I wet my lips, focusing intently on forming words. "Why... you call him uncle?"

"Because he's my uncle. He's mom's brother. I guess if you two get married someday, you'd be my uncle too."

I could have argued that he had no idea what he was talking about, but I was too tired. "How old are you?"

"Nine. I'll be ten in January."

"Do you... go to school?"

"No. Mom teaches me at home. I'm smarter than most kids my age."

"Brothers or sisters?"

That made him pause to think. His lips twisted to the side. "No. Mom wants me to have a sister like Juniper. Juniper was her big sister a long time ago. She misses her. She keeps bringing these girls here, but I don't like them. I don't really want a sister. They bug me. Do you have a sister?"

"Yes. A little sister."

"Does she annoy you?"

"Sometimes."

He nodded like he'd assumed as much. "I think Mom's done trying to find me one. She gets weird sometimes. It's not her fault. She said it's the hospital's fault. They screwed up her brain. But once Uncle Quaid comes and they have their talk, we're going to go out west so Mom can get better. I can't tell you where. I'm not allowed, but I'm excited. I like long car rides."

"He's awake again, is he?"

I startled and tried to wrench my head around to see the person who'd spoken behind me, but I didn't succeed.

"Not for long. Just a few minutes. He didn't want the water, but he's still talking funny, and he can't hold his head up too good."

Daniella strolled into view. "Go keep a lookout for your uncle. Yell if anyone pulls up."

"Okay." Kader jumped to his feet and raced around me and out a door I couldn't see.

"How are you feeling?"

"My fingers are numb. Mind loosening the ties a bit?"

Daniella laughed. "That won't be happening. We seem to be a bit delayed. My brother is annoyingly thorough and by the book, isn't he?"

I huffed what was meant to be a laugh, but it came out soggy. "You have no idea."

She *hmm*ed and retrieved the water bottle from the floor where Kader had left it, then squatted down, pinching my chin and glancing between my eyes. Her face was hazy around the edges. "Still feeling it pretty good, huh?"

If I'd had enough saliva in my mouth, I'd have spat in her face. "Fuck you."

"I think a little more is in order. You're too aggressive for my liking, and I'm not taking chances."

I fought it. I pinched my lips together, refusing to ingest any of the water. I yanked my chin from her grasp and tried to bite her when she got too close.

"Pain in my ass." She vanished behind me and wrenched my head back by taking a handful of my hair, straining my neck to its limits.

From behind, she was able to overpower me. Pinching my nose, she upended the bottle into my mouth. It was swallow or drown. Once she was satisfied, she let go and came into my field of vision again.

I spat the last mouthful at her feet. "You fucking bitch."

"You keep saying that. I'm a good person, Aslan. If I wasn't, you'd be dead. Simple as that."

"I'm gonna lock your ass up. I'm... gonna make sure... you pay... for... this..."

It could have been ten minutes, it could have been five, it could have been a half hour for all I knew, but eventually, the world faded again, and I slipped into the dark.

## CHAPTER 35

## Quaid



The emergency department at Toronto General was in chaos. Swarms of uniformed constables flooded the hallways, so it was hard to tell where we needed to be. Some were there for Avery, but a handful of other officers were there because a man who was clearly high on drugs was causing a scene, and they were subduing him.

Willa had been detained in a holding cell while Allison, Erik, and I went to meet up with the constables who'd brought Avery to the hospital. Eden stayed back at headquarters with Dad since I didn't want him overexerting himself. The stress of all we'd uncovered today was enough of a blow.

Erik bullied his way through a mess of people waiting to register. We found a scrub-clad nurse who directed us to where we needed to be.

Avery had been given a curtained-off area in the back corner with a horde of authority figures around her—police, ambulance attendees, doctors, and nurses.

"Okay, this is out of hand." A white-coat-wearing doctor shoved people aside as he made his way to the curtained area.

No one listened. The air rippled with tension.

Erik pulled aside a constable from the pack. Once they knew who we were, three police constables turned to me. "You're Quaid Valor?"

"Yes."

The older one of the group nodded and cleared everyone else out of the way. He motioned for me to approach the curtain. The doctor tried to protest, but the constable assured him it wouldn't take more than a minute, and it was imperative I be let in.

Avery sat on an examination table, big wet tears rolling unchecked down her cheeks. She was wrapped in a blanket and clearly distraught. A nurse tended to her, but Avery wasn't responding well, peering with glassy indifference at a spot on the wall.

The doctor glared from the sidelines, unimpressed by the invasion of his ER. He spoke with Dr. Benoit, who I recognized. The child psychologist who'd been brought in for both Evelyn and Lily.

"Avery," the older constable said once the nurse had stepped aside. The little girl's gaze shifted to the officer. "This here is Quaid Valor."

Her shimmering blue eyes turned to me.

"Can you read?" I asked, crouching so I was at her level.

She nodded.

I took my credentials off my belt and showed her. "That's me. Quaid Valor. I'm a police officer. I was told you wanted to see me."

She studied my picture for a long time, then pulled her hand out from under the blanket. In it, clutched tight in a whiteknuckle fist, was an envelope.

"This is for y-you," she stammered.

"Thank you."

"Is my m-mommy coming now? She said when I gave it to you, my mommy would come."

I glanced to the constable, then the ER doctor. It was Benoit who nodded. "Yeah, sweetie, she's on her way."

I left Avery in the care of the professionals and backed out of the curtained area. Allison and Erik waited.

"What is it?" Erik asked.

I turned the envelope around in my hands. My name was etched on the front. It was sealed. I tore it open and withdrew a sheet of paper folded in thirds.

Erik nudged my arm. "Open it, Quaid. What are you waiting for?"

I didn't want to say it aloud, but I was afraid. Juniper's past was unfolding too fast, and the ground was splitting beneath my feet. I'd been chasing answers for more years than I could count, and now it was all coming to a head.

I unfolded the paper, and my eyes were immediately drawn to an image below a block of handwritten text. A picture. The bottom dropped out of my stomach. I slapped a hand over my mouth and gasped as Erik said, "Oh fuck."

It was a picture of Aslan. The color printer used was low quality, but it didn't matter. The message was clear. Aslan was bound to a chair, body slumped, head drooping toward his chest. He was unconscious.

Sharp prickling needles speared my lungs. It took all my self-control to keep calm and not fly off in a raging panic. My head swam as I focused on the note, on the message above the picture.

I read it out loud, my voice strained and foreign. "I've learned a lesson. She's irreplaceable, but you knew that already. If only we could hurdle back in time. If only we could be the innocent children we once were. If only I could change the past and do things differently. She spoke of you often. There are days I feel like I already know you—or at least the boy you were. The tragedy that befell our sister is one I've carried with me for too many years. I thought I'd take it to the grave, but I can't. My mama's warning haunts me, but I want to get better, and this might be the only way to get there."

I coughed, clearing a lump from my throat. "I want to finally meet my brother. I want you to meet your nephew. Help me absolve myself of the wrongs in my past so I can move forward. Help me heal. You're the only family I have. My mama abandoned me. Twice. She never loved me. I've gone

back to where it all began. I will wait for you until sundown. Come alone. No phone. No wires. No weapons. No backup. Just you and me. If you disobey this simple request, I will be forced to hurt him, and you will never know the truth about Juniper."

My gaze drifted back to the photograph of Aslan.

A choked sob tried to escape, but I swallowed it down. When my knees buckled and my heart squeezed, Allison wrapped an arm around me, keeping me upright. "It's okay. Breathe. We've got this."

"Who wrote this?" Erik asked, taking the page from my hand. "I don't understand."

"My mama abandoned me twice.' It's Willa's daughter. Tabitha. The farmhouse. It has to be the farmhouse," I said. "That's where Dwaine and Willa lived when they took her. That's where they still lived when Juni was taken. I figured it was sold. I figured... Dammit, I never looked into it. I didn't get that far. Why didn't I think—"

"Stop. Here's what we're going to do." Erik spoke like a man in control, which was good because mine was slipping. "We go back to headquarters. If we still can't get a hold of Edwards, we call Inspector Lassaline, and—"

"No! I need to go there now. If we take this to Edwards or Lassaline, it will turn into a three-ring circus. They'll have to bring in SWAT, and—"

"Of course they will. She's taken an officer of the law hostage."

"And organizing a raid is going to take too much time. Plus, it risks Aslan's life, and I'm not doing that. I'm going alone, and I'm going now."

"Are you insane? I thought you were Mr. By The Book. That is breaking protocol. Edwards already thinks you're a loose cannon with this case. If you do that, you'll get your ass fired. I guarantee it."

"I'm not risking Aslan's life waiting for people to decide how to best run this operation. We are running out of time. If she feels threatened, she could kill him."

"For fuck's sake, Quaid. She's a serial kidnapper. This is a hostage situation. Do you hear me? Do you understand the severity of this? If you know where she is, then—"

"It's not up for debate."

"You're going to bury all of us, Valor. I'm not going down for you. You do this, I'll get on the phone with Lassaline. Your career is over."

"Do what you have to."

"Enough," Allison interjected, pressing a hand to both our chests. "Not here. Outside." She directed us toward the emergency room doors. "We're going back to headquarters to discuss this properly. We have a few hours until sundown, and

"I'm not going back to headquarters." I pulled from Allison's hold once we were outside.

Allison turned on me. She was so close I could smell the soft hints of her perfume. I was taller. She had to look up, but the burning intensity of her gaze made me feel small. "Stop. I will help you, but you can't run off like a loose cannon. You need to plan. You need to prepare. Do you trust me?"

"Allison!" Erik's tone was harsher than I'd ever heard it. "What the hell are you doing?"

But Allison wasn't dissuaded, and she ignored her partner. "Do you trust me, Quaid?" she asked, her tone quieter.

Did I have a choice? She was right.

"Yes."

"Go to your house and wait there. Give me one hour. Do not leave. Let's make a proper plan so no one gets hurt."

Erik grabbed Allison's arm and spun her around. "Are you out of your goddamn mind? Do you want to get fired too?"

"If you don't want to be part of this, Erik, then go back to headquarters and continue the interview with Willa Vincolla. She's a primary suspect in the abduction of Tabitha Fredricks and Juniper Valor. If Edwards asks, the last time you saw us was when we left to go to the hospital to see Avery. You don't know anything else. I know you won't throw me under the bus."

Erik's jaw ticked. His nostrils flared. When he swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbed. His gaze flicked to me, and for once, I saw raw emotion in his eyes. He was torn. He shoved away from Allison, paced a few feet away, then came back and planted his feet. "Fine. I'll help. What can I do?"

Allison lowered her voice and explained.

A thousand thoughts swirled in my brain as plans came together. Less than forty minutes later, Allison showed up at my house. She wasn't alone.

Torin was with her, and he looked worse for wear.

"I thought you had your hands full with a bunch of cases."

"Are you kidding me? I just found out my partner is missing, and you want me to work my fucking cases? My new shithead minion can handle a few things on his own tonight." He shoved around me, inviting himself in. "Where is the picture and the note? I want to see it."

Allison shrugged with a soft smile. "I hope you don't mind. I recruited reinforcements."

I obliged Torin and found him the note. He cursed for a solid five minutes straight. I wasn't sure if he was angrier at the situation or at Aslan for getting himself abducted.

Erik showed up a few minutes later with Ruiz in tow.

"Um..." I blinked at Ruiz, unsure what to say, shocked he was willing to help.

He munched on a piece of gum and shrugged. "Sounded like fun."

"Okay, then."

Everyone gathered in the living room. I paced. My nerves were shot, and I couldn't sit still.

"Okay, here's the deal," Allison said, taking charge. "If you're in this room, you understand we're doing this off the record. If you're not okay with that, leave now."

No one moved. Ruiz, who I was surprised had shown up, looked almost giddy.

Allison continued. "Edwards contacted Eden about twenty-five minutes ago. He was at the movies with his grandkids, which was why we couldn't get a hold of him sooner. Eden assured him we had everything under control. Because of Avery's sudden reappearance, she told Edwards we had to delay the interview with Willa Vincolla. So far as Eden, Edwards, and Abraham know, we—me, Quaid, and Erik—have gone to investigate a potential site where we think the children might have been held. No one else knows about Aslan or the letter. So long as the letter doesn't exist, there is no reason to believe the location in question can't be explored by the three of us in a safe manner. We derived the information from a combination of Willa's interview and Avery's report. The farmhouse will be easily explained."

Allison pointed between Torin and Ruiz. "You two aren't here."

"I'm working a case," Torin said with a shrug. "I know nothing."

"I went home for a few hours to see my kids. It's Saturday. I play by my own rules."

"Good." To Ruiz, Allison said, "Update him."

Ruiz nodded at me, then pulled out his laptop from a shoulder bag and set it on the coffee table. "The farmhouse in question is abandoned. It was never resold after Dwaine Vincolla died. Willa moved out that same year, and according to what I found, she's been paying the property taxes on it ever since. No one lives there.

"I also got a hit on the name change. Tabitha Ann Fredricks became Daniella Ann Fredricks in 1995. She was an on-again, off-again patient at the St. Thomas Psychiatric House for Women for most of her teen and adult life. It seems her abduction as a child had severe long-term effects. Her last stint as an inpatient was in 2012. After her parents' death, she was discharged and never went back. Then I lose her. She could have changed her name again, but the trail goes cold. I was still looking into it when these yahoos showed up and told me what happened." He indicated Erik and Allison.

Ice shot through my veins. "You said Daniella?"

"Yeah. Is that familiar?"

"Fucking right it is," Torin said. He and I locked gazes. "She's going by Kismet. Daniella Kismet."

"Hang on." I slapped at the back pocket of my trousers and unearthed my wallet. From within, I found the small piece of paper with a phone number I'd taken from Aslan's house. Daniella Kismet, I didn't want to believe it.

I punched it into my phone and waited. A second later, an automated voice told me the number was no longer in service.

"Someone find me a number for *Upfront and Center* magazine."

"It's her," Torin said. "Too much coincidence not to be."

"Aslan was chasing the source of the media rumors today."

And despite my protests, I figured *Upfront and Center* was on his list.

It took less than a minute before Ruiz rhymed off a number. I punched it into my phone. A receptionist answered, and when I asked about a woman named Daniella Kismet, she grew irritated.

"Look, I don't appreciate being hung up on multiple times a day, so let me make this very clear, mister. There is no one by that name who works here. Stop calling."

The woman hung up, and I stared at my phone.

Daniella Kismet was not a journalist.

Torin was right. I knew the woman we were dealing with. I'd seen her at Aslan's house. She'd been toying with him since the beginning. My stomach flopped about.

"We've met her," Torin said when my reaction confirmed what he already knew. "She goes by Daniella Kismet, but that might not be her real name either. She was fronting as a journalist."

I gave everyone a quick recap of what I knew about her from Aslan.

Torin filled in the blanks, adding, "I doubt Aslan would have seen her as a threat. She could have easily drawn him into some kind of trap."

Ruiz was tapping away at his keyboard. "I don't have any immediate hits on a Kismet."

"It doesn't matter what her real name is," Erik interrupted. "The point is, she has Doyle, and she wants to see Valor alone before she'll release him. Her demands are strict. He's to be unarmed with no cell phone, no backup, and no monitoring devices. Ruiz, what can you do? We can't send him in naked. We need something."

Ruiz set his laptop aside and rubbed his hands together like the evil villain in a movie. He'd come prepared with a few techy gadgets and pulled them out, setting them on the table.

"These are from my personal collection. I always wanted to play James Bond as a kid. Never thought I'd get to use them. We have department issue stuff, but it's not as clandestine as mine. Plus, we're going under the radar, and I didn't want to leave a trail by signing them out. Come here, Valor." He patted a spot on the coffee table. "Sit. I'll get you all hooked up."

I sat, and Ruiz was in my face, fiddling with my tie and poking at the buttons on my shirt. He unbuttoned a few, examined them, then did them up again. He ran his fingers under the collar of my shirt, hemmed and hawed, then spent a minute fiddling with my belt. I assumed he was deciding the

best placement for his little device, but I was no expert. I wanted to tease him about getting handsy, but it wasn't the time.

As Ruiz affixed something to my tie, I glanced down. "She won't notice that, will she?"

"Not a chance. It looks like a tie pin. Blends right in. It will transmit audio to us wirelessly. The only downfall is that it gets sketchy if you're more than a hundred yards from the receiver. I've tested it, and we might pick you up at one ten, one twenty, but no guarantees."

"Then it's not going to work. This is a farm. The property is huge. No one else can be within a hundred yards with the receiver. The house itself is farther than that off the main road. I have to go alone."

Ruiz grinned. "I know the situation, Valor. Have faith. I've come up with a plan. You're driving out there, right?"

"Yes."

"So park as close to intercept as possible. Leave the receiver locked in the glove box with your phone. Keep an open line with Bright or Travolta or whoever, then they'll be able to hear everything so long as you stay within a hundred yards of your car. It's brilliant."

"Sounds problematic."

"It will work. Trust me. If I had more time, I would come up with something better, but I don't."

Erik hovered nearby, examining Ruiz's handiwork. "What about a tracker? Do you have anything like that?"

Ruiz *pff*ed. "Already way ahead of you." He pulled two small black devices from inside his bag. These are magnetic. Easy to install. We'll put one on your Charger, just in case she decides to take your car or has you take her anywhere. The second one you can adhere to her vehicle if there's one nearby. Chances are she'll use her own to escape. That way we don't lose her."

"She'll have eyes on me. I don't feel safe taking the time to put this on her car. What if she sees me?"

I wouldn't jeopardize Aslan.

Ruiz patted my leg. "Think outside the box, dummy. Leave your shoe untied. If there's another vehicle, park as close to it as possible."

"Don't block it in, though. Give her a means of escape," Torin added.

"Then as you pass the car, you bend to tie your shoe. Use the car for leverage as you get up. Slap it on. Bingo-bango. Aim for an inconspicuous spot, but my guess is she'll be in too much of a hurry to get away, so it won't really matter. Piece of cake."

We spent the next thirty minutes pouring over a map of the area, trying to determine the best spots for Allison, Erik, and Torin to wait on standby. They wanted to be close enough to

get to the house in less than a few minutes yet not jeopardize Aslan or me.

"We have to go," I said when the talk around the table got to be too much. "We have an hour's drive to King City. She said sundown. I'll be cutting it close."

## CHAPTER 36

## Quaid



hile I drove, I made a call to Dr. Thornlow. I couldn't help myself. The itch to know had grown insatiable. She'd said the results would be ready by the end of the day, and it was close enough. I wanted answers before I walked into this mess. I wanted to arm myself with knowledge so I wasn't caught off guard. This Daniella woman had alluded to us being related. She'd called me brother. She'd referred to Juniper as her sister. I suspected she'd been at the root of the media rumors.

But why?

Were they rumors?

Every fiber of my being wanted to say she was wrong, but I couldn't shake the small thread of doubt.

I couldn't shake the look I'd seen in Dad's eyes when I'd asked him if he was certain I was his blood.

I got the sense that he didn't know the truth any more than I did, and it scared him.

Unfortunately, Dr. Thornlow wasn't available to take my call. I was informed she would get back to me as soon as possible.

That was no good. I was halfway to King City. Time was running out.

Thirty minutes later, I crossed the township line. Allison had driven with Erik, and Torin had taken another car with Ruiz. That was the extent of my backup.

They no longer tailed me when I turned onto a long gravel driveway that wound through a small patch of trees toward the Vincollas' abandoned farmhouse. Dried leaves covered the ground and crunched under the tires. The overgrown foliage on the side of the road reached out and scratched the sides of the Charger. It was a rarely driven path, narrow after years of disuse. Time and nature had tried to take it over.

The setting sun filtered through the bare branches, speckling the Charger's hood with small prisms of light.

The property was secluded. The closest neighbor was at least a half mile away on either side. It was the perfect quiet place for someone to keep a child without anyone knowing.

The old farmhouse came into view, a two-story century home made of crumbling beige brick and flaky, white-painted gingerbread trim. Two barns sat back on the property behind the house, one in rougher shape than the other. Rotted wood made both structures tilt and sag. Several planks of siding were missing or hanging precariously, waiting for a strong gust of wind to knock them loose. Rusted wire fences and

termite-eaten wooden posts marked the edges of overgrown fields.

Everything was in a state of decay.

Weeds grew around the house, some knee-high. Old vines crawled up the east side of the brick façade, strangling the chimney and choking out the few narrow windows.

An old tan-colored Ford Escort was parked at an angle beside the house, kissing the bottom of the steps leading to the front door. It looked as dated as the property itself. I might have wondered how long it had been there and if it was operational or decomposing with the rest of the structures, except I recognized it as the same vehicle that had been parked in Aslan's driveway Friday morning when he'd had an unexpected visitor.

I was in the right place.

Taking Ruiz's advice, I pulled the Charger up close to the house. The windows were dark and covered in a thick film of dust and dirt. I couldn't see inside. The setting sun didn't help. It cast reflections on the panes, so all I could see were the bare trees and spots of cloud-covered sky staring back at me.

Aside from a niggling prickle at the base of my neck, I had no way of knowing if I was being watched.

Before I exited the car, I connected a call to Ruiz. Leaving the phone in my lap and out of sight, I hit Speaker. "Can you hear me?" I asked when he answered.

"Yep. Loud and clear."

"Ford Escort, tan, probably early 2000s or late nineties. License plate bravo delta foxtrot golf 129."

"Got it."

"I'm putting you in the glove box now with the receiver."

"Remember to stay within a hundred yards."

"I'll try."

"Hey, Valor." It was Torin. "Don't be a hero. If you need backup, you say the magic words."

"Candy from a baby. I'll be fine. I'm putting you away now."

"Be safe. Get our boy back."

I tucked the phone and the receiver into the glove box beside my service weapon and locked it. That particular key I slid inside my sock, hoping Daniella wouldn't find it. The rest of the keys I left on the driver's seat.

One tracker was already on the Charger. The second tracker I tucked into the palm of my hand and reached down to untie the laces on one shoe. "I'm untying my shoe, then I'm all set. This better work, Ruiz. If she catches me being slick and hurts Aslan, I'm coming after you, and if you've stereotyped me as some weak, pansy-ass gay man, you are so fucking wrong. I will make you bleed."

I wouldn't know if he responded to my remark since the communication transmission worked only one way, but I got the sense he was nothing more than amused.

I got out of the car and sized up the vacant house. My heart battered my ribs with such ferocity I wanted to clutch my chest to calm it down. My palms grew slick, but I clung tight to the tracker as I reminded myself that Daniella had not shown evidence of being a physically violent person.

Yes, she'd kidnapped three children, but she hadn't hurt them. They'd all been returned unscathed.

Or was I giving her too much credit? She'd taken Aslan somehow. He was not a small guy and wouldn't have been easily subdued.

How had she done it? Was he hurt?

My stomach clenched as possibilities rolled through my brain.

I approached the house, waiting until I was beside the other vehicle before noticing my untied shoe. The car's placement at the foot of the stairs made it easy to stay inconspicuous. Regardless, I didn't mess around and finished the job as quickly as possible. Ruiz's plan was simple. Since the car was covered in rusted-out paint and countless dings, the tracker was unremarkable even when I stuck it in a place that would have otherwise been obvious on a newer car.

I doubted the trackers were necessary. They were a precaution. Allison and Erik were covering the main road off the driveway, and Ruiz and Torin were positioned at the juncture to the freeway, ready to dart off in either direction should it be necessary. There was a chance there was a service

road we didn't know about that exited out the back of the property, so this would ensure we didn't lose her.

The front door was unlocked.

I pushed it open. "Hello? Daniella? It's Quaid Valor. I'm coming in, and I'm unarmed."

"About time you showed up. I was starting to think you wouldn't come."

Daniella appeared from down a long, dark hallway. There were no interior lights, and the shadows were deep in the windowless section of the house.

She emerged into the brighter front hall. Her dark hair was tied back, and she was dressed casually in jeans and a light jacket. Her hands were empty, but the bulk in her right front pocket made me cautious. I suspected she had a weapon. There was no way she would trust me not to try to subdue her otherwise. Too risky.

"Come in. Close the door."

"Where is he?"

Daniella examined me. A small smile pulled at her mouth. "After all these years."

"Where is he?" I said again.

"He's fine. A little groggy, but it was necessary. I told you I wouldn't hurt him. I needed your cooperation, and when I learned how close you two were, it made sense."

Nothing about this made sense.

"What do you want?"

"To talk. To... purge my soul, I guess. I need to apologize. We'll get to that. Coat off. Toss it over."

I complied. She went through the pockets and patted the seams until she was sure there was no hidden weapon.

"Untuck your shirt, lift it, and spin." I did. I also pulled my trouser pockets inside out to show her they were empty and hiked up the cuffs at the bottom to show her I didn't have an ankle holster.

She handed my jacket back. "I'm glad you listened."

"I want to see him."

"You will. Let's talk first."

"No. I need to know he's here and okay."

She rolled her eyes. "Fine. Briefly. No funny business."

She gestured for me to go ahead of her down the hall. She kept a few feet behind me, one hand inside her pocket.

"Last door on the right."

I went inside, and my breath caught. It was a large empty room with worn hardwood floors. The old plaster walls were flaking and crumbling. It was lit by the fading sun coming in through a pair of dingy rectangular windows.

Aslan was in the same slumped position as in the picture. His back was to me, and a young boy I recognized sat against the far wall between the two windows.

He scrambled to his feet when I came in, chin high, confrontational.

I was about to race across the room to Aslan when something cold and hard came to rest at the base of my neck. "No. Don't. Wait."

I froze.

"Move to the side of the room."

I did so without question.

"Good." To the boy, she said, "Kader, baby, get out of the way."

The boy raced around the opposite side of Aslan and out the door. The pressure at the back of my neck vanished. "Now you may approach him."

When I glanced back, Daniella had tucked her hand and the weapon into her pocket again.

"Doesn't seem fair you get to have a gun and I don't." It was a throwaway comment meant for my team. I wanted them to know she was armed.

Daniella shrugged. "I need reassurance. I have no desire to hurt you, brother. Or him. That's not my goal. I brought you here to talk. Go on. I know you want to reassure yourself he's fine. He's heavily drugged, so he may be a bit woozy."

I moved to Aslan, crouching before him and taking his face in my hands. The heat of his skin under my palms made my eyes sting, but it was reassuring. I prodded at his neck, seeking his pulse. A soft rhythm pounded under my fingers. He was unconscious but alive. I didn't realize how scared I'd been about the alternative until now.

I patted his cheeks. "Az... Az, can you hear me? Wake up."

His eyelids fluttered, and his lips moved. "'Kaid?"

"Yeah, it's me. I'm here. Can you open your eyes?"

"Nnngh..." He wet his lips, smacking them repeatedly. "No. Too... herd... Can't."

"Okay. You're okay. I'll get you out of here."

His eyelids fluttered again, and the left one opened part way. "Can't... shee you."

"I'm here." I kissed him on the mouth. His lips were dry, and he couldn't kiss me back. "I'm here."

He fell unconscious again, and my anger swelled.

"What did you give him?" I asked, standing.

"Ativan. He'll be fine. I've spent a lot of years drugged up with that stuff. It's their answer to everything. Makes your head soupy, but it'll wear off."

I didn't know who *they* were, but I assumed it had something to do with her extended stay in a psychiatric hospital. I glared at Daniella, who had remained by the door. I needed to play her game to get Aslan to safety. If I complied with her need to talk, then hopefully she wouldn't see me as a threat.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Why am I here, Daniella?"

Her smile was sad. Pitying. "Because I've spent my whole life trying to reconcile the past and move forward, but I can't. I knew my baby brother was out there somewhere, and I hadn't met him, and he didn't know about me, and I had the worst secret in the world to tell him. I thought I could move on and leave the past behind, but it haunts me."

"I'm not your brother, Daniella."

She laughed, a sound that claimed I was ridiculous and naïve. "I want to tell you a story, but it has a tragic ending. Do you want to hear it?"

A hand squeezed my heart. My blood stopped flowing, and my extremities turned numb and cold. I knew the tragic ending already. Part of me wanted to slap my hands over my ears and tell her no, I didn't want to hear it. But if I wanted answers, if I wanted to lay the past to rest, I had to let her speak.

"Yes."

"Come to this side of the room, please."

I glanced down at Aslan once more. He was out cold, drooling a long string of saliva onto his shirt. I bent and used my sleeve to wipe it away. Then I kissed his cheek, took his hand in mine, and squeezed. "I'll be back for you. Everything will be okay."

"He'll be fine. Kader will watch him." Out the door, she called, "Kader, baby. Come."

The boy reappeared. Daniella waved for me to move aside.

"Keep an eye on him. Don't get too close if he wakes up."

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"I won't."
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"Come," she said to me.

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

We left the house via a back door. A small, crumbling wooden deck wobbled and swayed precariously underfoot. It didn't feel structurally sound enough to hold both our weights.

Daniella didn't seem concerned and descended the rotting wooden stairs to the overgrown yard beyond.

"Where are we going, Daniella?" If we were leaving the vicinity of the house, I'd lose reception with Ruiz and my team.

"It's not far. There are old servants' quarters on the property. It's been abandoned since the early twenties, according to Dwaine. He said a bad storm made it unlivable in the fifties, but part of it still stands. Although it should be condemned like the rest of this place."

We'd seen a few structures on the satellite image we'd pulled up before leaving my house, but we'd assumed they were barns or equipment sheds. I knew Ruiz was rescouring the satellite images this instant, trying to determine which building Daniella was talking about. Either way, I was soon going to be out of range.

I didn't follow her. Not right away. I planted my feet on the bottom step and pressed for more information, hoping to get her talking while the others could still hear.

"Do you remember Dwaine?"

Daniella's smirk became ugly and sinister. "Of course I do. I spent four years with him. I might have been little, but I remember far more than most people think. Trauma can shield a person from memories or make them unforgettably vivid. The doctors all assume I've blocked it out. I never corrected them."

She glanced across the landscape to the nearest sagging barn, a distant look glazing her eyes. "He wasn't always a bad person. Dwaine opened my eyes to a lot of things. I didn't know I was adopted until Dwaine brought me here. He was the one to reveal it to me. My parents had never told me. They'd lied. Dwaine introduced me to Mama. Willa was not happy to meet me. For a long time, I didn't think she liked me, but then I figured out it was Dwaine she didn't like. I don't have good memories of Mama. Like I said in my note, she didn't care for me much. She and Dwaine fought all the time. He told me how Mama had given birth to me and thrown me away like I was garbage. I learned what a 'dirty cheating whore' was that day too. It took until I was much older before I truly understood what it meant, but..." Daniella shrugged.

She turned and started walking. I had no choice but to follow. I wanted to whisper and warn Ruiz I was going out of range, but I didn't want to take the risk and get caught. He would know soon enough. I hoped they used the opportunity to advance on the house, knowing I had her at a distance.

"For the first few months, I was scared and wanted to go home." Daniella chatted as she strolled along the side of one of the barns going deeper into the property. "Dwaine kept me locked away. He told me I could have more privileges when I learned to behave and trust him."

Behind the barn was a copse of trees. The ground turned spongy, the fading day darkened, and the reek of rotting leaves and mold tickled my nose. The cold leaked into my bones and made me shiver.

We'd gone far enough that transmission was surely lost.

I was alone.

We walked for five or ten minutes before the trees parted on a clearing. In the clearing were the partial remains of a small house. The roof had long since collapsed, but many of the walls stood, some at awkward, dangerous angles.

Daniella was not deterred. She entered by way of the front door, which was no longer there. The interior was plain and consisted of nothing more than three rooms. She aimed for a section of what had once been a kitchen. The debris was thick. Old leaves, fallen branches, and crumbling brick covered the floor, but one place had been recently cleared. An old thick wooden panel sat flush with the ground. A cellar that I assumed at one time had been used for cold storage. Beside the panel, tucked against the wall, was a portable generator.

Daniella squatted at the generator. "Thirty years ago, Dwaine had electricity running out here. I think Mama tore it out. I don't really know for sure. Either way, the electricity to the house and property is all shut off, so I made do with this. Gets the job done."

The generator came to life, and a low rumble cut unnaturally into the quiet evening. She moved to the panel in the floor and heaved it open. It creaked on rusty hinges and clattered with a deadening thud and a poof of debris when it hit the ground. A dark hole greeted us.

"Give me a second to get the light on." She went down a steep set of wooden stairs that clunked under her feet. A moment later, a dim light shone from below. "Come down."

I hesitated.

How stupid would it be to follow her underground into a cellar she could easily lock? She had a gun in her pocket. I was at her mercy. Was her goal to abandon me here? How long before my team came searching? What would she do with Aslan?

I had the sinking suspicion she planned to unload her story while we were below, then force me to stay, lock me in, and take off.

The sheer claustrophobic notion made me plant my feet.

If I were playing the evil villain, that was what I'd do.

But what if she decided to kill me down there and leave me to rot, figuring no one would find me? Maybe I'd gone about this all wrong. Maybe she was more dangerous than I'd thought. I'd rushed into this situation with my heart, not my head. Was I about to suffer the consequences?

"Are you coming?" Daniella appeared at the bottom of the stairs.

I still didn't move.

"Quaid, if I wanted to kill you, I'd have done it already. Believe me, the idea of killing anyone makes me physically ill."

"I'm not going down there with you. You can tell your story from here or not at all."

I had the feeling it was more important for her to talk than it was for me to bear witness to whatever was at the bottom of the stairs.

Annoyance crossed her face. She flicked off the light and stomped up the stairs. When she turned off the generator, the absence of noise was deafening.

"Fine." Daniella sat on a broken beam that had long ago fallen inward. She kicked a chunk of tree bark out of her path and stared at the ground where a pair of pill bugs scurried away. "Dwaine kept me here. Below. He treated me well enough. I had food, toys, and games. He said the whore wouldn't give him children, so he was teaching her a lesson for fucking around. He wanted me to call him Daddy. I could tell you a lot of stories, but for the sake of time, I'm going to try to make this short.

"Eventually, he allowed me out of the cellar. I was a docile little thing. Cooperative. Too little to know any better. Too scared to fight. I succumbed to his brainwashing. After one

year in this cellar, I was rewarded for my good behavior. I got to stay in the house with them. I had a bedroom. I ate meals at their table. I was allowed to explore the property. Dwaine and Mama fought all the time. He was aggressive with her. Used her like a punching bag. I knew to be careful. One day, after a particularly nasty fight between them, Dwaine asked if I wanted a sibling. It was unexpected. I was thrilled at the idea. By then, I was six and lonely. I didn't go to school. I never left the property. I had Dwaine and Mama and no one else. The idea of having a sibling was intensely satisfying. I asked if she would be a real brother or sister or pretend like the parents I'd been slowly forgetting. Dwaine laughed and said the whore had finally given up the name of the man who fathered me. He said the man liked to get his dick wet with all kinds of women who weren't his, so he had more illegitimate children out there. He told me they would be half siblings, which was close enough to real. He promised to hunt them down."

My gorge rose. My palms itched. I hadn't heard back from Dr. Thornlow, but Willa Vincolla had claimed she had no idea who had gotten her pregnant. Was she lying? Did she know who the man was? Was there any truth to this tale Dwaine had told his six-year-old captive?

No, Dwaine had to have been lying. A prostitute wouldn't have a clue which trick had impregnated her. Unless there had been only one man. Or she'd persisted in using condoms, and the condom had broken.

The world spun, and I fumbled around for a place to sit, landing hard on a blackened stone that might have once been part of a hearth.

"It wasn't long after that that Dwaine said he'd found my sister and shared his plan."

"You helped him take Juniper." Rage burned my core. I wanted to lash out and hurt this woman, but it was unfair. She'd been a traumatized six-year-old girl. By no means was this her fault. How could I blame her?

"I did. I was an important part of the equation. It was easy. But when Dwaine brought her back here, it wasn't what I expected. He locked her down there where I used to stay." Daniella peered at the cellar door. "He said I could visit but couldn't go in the room with her. If you'd let me show you—"

"No."

Daniella dashed an impatient glare my way before continuing. "Before he took her, Dwaine did some reconstruction down there. He made the cellar into two rooms in case I misbehaved and needed to be locked back up. He added a small grate between the rooms. The angle of the vent prevented me from seeing her, but we could talk. We spent a lot of time talking. Getting to know one another. But Juniper was a handful. Defiant. She was older than me, and Dwaine didn't like the things she told me, so he stopped allowing me to visit. Only when Juniper promised to behave was I allowed down there again."

My lungs burned. I'd been holding my breath. My skin was too tight, and despite there being no roof above us, the room felt like it was shrinking. I didn't have a lot of memories of Juniper. She was more or less an idea I'd carried with me for years, but she was still my sister. I'd dealt with hundreds of missing person cases over the years, but listening to this story crushed my soul.

"She talked about you," Daniella said, driving the knife deeper. I dug my nails into my palms to keep my emotions in check.

"She told me she had a little brother. She said she missed you and wanted to go home. When I told her she was home, she got angry. When I asked Dwaine why I couldn't have my brother too, he smacked me across the face and told me I was ungrateful."

Daniella stared at the cellar door for a long time, lost in thought, before blinking and focusing on me. "Come."

She pushed to her feet and strolled away, deeper into the trees.

I followed. By this point, I was committed.

"The first time Dwaine let Juniper out of the cellar, she tried to run. She was wily and fast. So he put her back. He told me she wasn't ready. Dwaine's patience was thinning. I could see it. I recognized it. I told Juniper every day how she needed to behave. But she rebelled. I wanted to share my room at the big house with her. I begged Dwaine for a year. I did everything he asked. I wanted my sister to play with. I was tired of talking to her through a vent."

We'd gone another hundred yards from the crumbling servant's house. I couldn't see it when I peered back over my shoulder.

Daniella stopped and spun, staring at the trees and landscape, eyes narrowed and uncertain. She veered in another direction and walked in silence for another two or three minutes before examining her surroundings again.

Satisfied, she faced me. "One day, Dwaine told me we were going to let Juniper out of the cellar. It was time. I was surprised because he'd been cursing about her for a week straight, but I didn't question him. I was finally going to have my sister after over a year of waiting."

Daniella's eyes turned glassy as the last light of day glimmered off their surface. The sun had dipped below the horizon. Under the trees, the shadows were deeper and darker. Night encroached at a rapid pace.

I knew how this story ended. I'd known since long before I'd gone to the academy to become a police officer, but it didn't make the truth any harder to digest.

When Daniella didn't continue, I prompted. "He had no intention of letting her be part of your fucked up little family, did he?"

"No, but I was a naïve eight-year-old kid at the time. He took me with him the day he let her out. He told Juniper he would show her the boundaries of the property so she knew how far she was allowed to go. He brought her here." She stomped her foot on the hard-packed earth. "Where he'd

already dug a hole. Where he'd already made preparations to get rid of her, and..."

When she trailed off, I finished, a quiver in my voice I couldn't control. "And he killed her."

#### Daniella nodded.

Hot tears ran down my cheeks unbidden as I stared at the ground under Daniella's feet. An unmarked grave where my sister had slept for almost thirty years. Closure was a hard pill to swallow. I thought it might eliminate the hollow ache that had resided in my core since I was little, but it made it worse. The void was enough that I thought I might tumble in and never find my way out again.

#### How was I ever going to tell Dad?

"He made me watch." Daniella's voice was a bow-string stretched to the point of breaking. "I was numb. Cold. Shivering. Confused. He buried her here, and it felt like he was burying me. All my hopes and dreams. I had very little to be excited about back then, and Juniper had been the center of my world for a long time. It wasn't until he was finished and sweating and panting and leaning hard on the shovel catching his breath that he noticed how upset I was.

"He knelt in front of me and opened his arms. I was repulsed, but by then, I knew not to anger him, so I let him hug me. Comfort me. As we embraced, the hard shape of the gun he'd tucked into the back of his pants brushed my hand. I didn't think twice. I pulled it out, stepped back, and shot him before he knew what was happening. He'd shot my sister.

He'd taken the little joy I had. When he didn't go down the first time—my aim was bad—I shot him again."

Daniella shivered and wrapped her arms around her middle. "I don't remember much after that. I remember Mama came and found me. She screamed and shook me, slapped me, and called me a stupid bitch. I thought she was going to kill me, and at that point, I didn't care. I disconnected. It's mostly a big dark hole in my brain after that."

I fought the heavy wave of emotions trying to drag me under. I scrambled for the hundred and one questions I'd planned to ask. I grasped at the ledge before I tumbled out of control.

"The girls. Why did you take the girls?"

Daniella's face crumpled, and something in her demeanor changed. She pounded a fist against her temple. "Stupid, stupid, stupid. I don't know. It was a stupid decision. I want her back. I've wanted her back since the day he took her." She glanced around at the trees, the motion erratic. "Sometimes, it doesn't seem real. It's like a nightmare I dreamed, and I'm still a little girl, and the real Juniper hasn't been found yet." Her wild eyes landed on me. "I had to find her, Quaid. I had to, but none of them were her. Then I remembered you and how you didn't know the truth. I thought if I could fix it... or..." She shook her head. "I can't fix it." She slammed the heel of her palm to her forehead. "Stupid, stupid. I was so stupid."

Ruiz's quick recount of Daniella Fredricks's past made sense. Before me was an unstable woman tangled up with the frightened child she'd once been. Torn between past and present. Twisting facts and blurring reality.

Stable one minute and unstable the next.

She was an on-again, off-again patient at the St. Thomas Psychiatric House for Women for most of her teen and adult life. It seems her abduction as a child had severe long-term effects.

The haunting nightmare that was Daniella's childhood had destroyed her. It would anyone. She'd been returned to the Fredrickses in a nearly catatonic state. It made sense. She'd killed her captor. A man she'd probably grown to care for on some level. She'd witnessed the murder of someone she'd thought of as a sister. And all of it had happened at a time in her life when she was extremely impressionable and vulnerable.

I was more and more confident that her belief that we were siblings was far-fetched. Dwaine was a criminal, not a mastermind. He was intent on abusing his wife and punishing her for her wrongdoings. He'd taken advantage of the fragile mind of a four-year-old child. Nothing more.

"Juniper's gone, Daniella. She's dead. She's not out there anymore."

"I know that now," she spat. "I'm not a bad person. I didn't hurt those girls. I was... It gets confusing. In my head. I was confused. I wanted..."

"I understand."

She nodded frantically. "I knew you would. I knew it. You're just like her. She was always so nice to me."

She was always nice to me too, I wanted to say. According to Dad at least. Juniper had been a motherly big sister, always looking out for her little brother. It didn't surprise me she would be any different with Daniella.

"What are you going to do now? You and Kader?"

Daniella frowned. "I can't tell you, but we're going away. I need a fresh start. I think... getting the truth out will cleanse me. I'll be able to move forward now. I'll feel better."

"Have you never told anyone before?"

"No!" She seemed shocked I would ask. "Mama warned me if I ever spoke of it, they would put me in prison for the rest of my life. I was a murderer. Little girls who go to prison get raped. As a child, I believed her. As an adult"—she considered for a moment—"I guess I had my doubts, but by then, my secrets had petrified, and I was more or less living in a different kind of prison. All those memories were rotting the inside of my brain to the point nothing was salvageable any longer. They drugged me until I was no better off than your boyfriend in there." She waved in the direction of the house. "I got away, but it follows me. I was hoping that seeing you would help me escape the past."

"I hope it does."

But I had my doubts. Daniella would likely struggle with this for the rest of her life, especially if she wasn't getting help.

I didn't know how long I'd been out of communication range, but I suspected it had been enough time that the team had moved in on the house. If they knew I was far away with Daniella, they would probably have gotten Kader and Aslan safely away. It was time to go back.

It was time to end this.

"I need to go check on Aslan. Can we go back now?"

"Kader would have let me know if he wasn't okay. He's a good boy."

But she waved me to go ahead of her. I didn't like the idea of her armed and behind me, but I complied, picking my way through the trees back toward the house.

## CHAPTER 37

### Quaid



I sensed a change in the air when we entered the house. The team wasn't present, but I felt the imprint they'd left behind.

They'd been and gone.

Daniella went around me and headed to the room where she had Aslan tied up. Could she feel it too? Was she rushing to be sure nothing was amiss?

I tensed, following her, fearing what might happen when she discovered Aslan and Kader gone.

But Aslan wasn't gone.

He was still in the chair, slumped in the same fashion as when I'd left.

Kader, however, was nowhere to be seen.

"Where's my son?" Her tone was frantic and high pitched. She rounded on Aslan and kicked his foot until he stirred and lifted his head. "Where is my son?" she repeated. "Hey." I held my hands in a gesture that asked her to calm down. "He's tied up. He couldn't have done anything."

Daniella ignored me.

Aslan blinked a few times, confusion marking his face.

"Where is Kader?"

Aslan smacked his lips and spoke slowly but with a fraction more clarity than before. "He went outside. Hadda piss. Got tired of waiting for you to come back." Aslan wrenched his head to the side. "Quaid? Isat you? Hello?"

"It's me. I'm here." I went around where he could see me, keeping half an eye on Daniella.

Daniella glared at both of us, then flew to the doorway and peered down the hall, shouting, "Kader?"

The boy didn't respond. She yelled again.

"I said, he hadda piss." Aslan had found my face and was doing all he could to hold my gaze.

Daniella frowned from the door. She didn't like not knowing where her son was, but I didn't think she was ready to trust me not to run. Cursing under her breath, she vanished down the hall, calling out for Kader.

Aslan's eyes were glassy, but he focused hard on my face, a lopsided grin forming. "She gone?"

"For a second."

He hitched his chin the best he was able. "C'mere."

I crouched, watching and listening for Daniella.

"Tor was here." Aslan smacked his lips. "They have the kid. Quick. 'Tween my thighs. Bang bang. He said... He said you might need it." He seemed to be trying to wiggle his brows but failed. "Go on. Get it." His head dropped heavily against his chest, and he chuckled as he tried to lift it again. "Shit. I'm really fucked up."

"I know."

I dug the service weapon from between Aslan's thighs where Torin must have wedged it. Aslan snorted and giggled like he was ten. "Frisky."

"Oh my god. Not now, you pig."

He giggle-snorted, but his head swung on his neck again.

I tucked the sidearm into my coat pocket and was about to stand and go after Daniella when Aslan slurred, "Wait, wait, wait. Come back."

"I have to get a handle on this situation before she realizes her son isn't outside taking a piss. She's armed."

"They'll get her. Don't worry. Quaid?" Aslan didn't comprehend the severity of the situation. What if they had an issue? What if they needed my help or she'd gone out a different door and they didn't know?

Aslan tipped his head back, but his muscles weren't strong enough to hold it up, so it flopped immediately to the side. Then he puckered his lips. It was overexaggerated and ridiculous.

"Kiss me"

"You're a dork." But I kissed him and stroked his cheek. "I'm going to get you out of here."

Then he started singing. It was nothing more than a jumble of words with a semifamiliar tune.

"Know what?" he said after a few beats. "Kylee likes the singing. On the TV."

"Okay. Great. We can talk about that later."

"There's a show I put on sometimes..." He chuckled. "It makes her laugh. She's funny when she laughs." He started singing again, and I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. He was offkey and slurring half his words. "Skim'er ink er dinker dink. Skim'er dink e doooo." He held the last note a long time while he fished for the next words. "I love youuuuu."

"Az—"

"Skim'er dinky dink. Do dee do... No. Shit. S'not how it goes. Quaid?"

"I really have to do this, Az."

He blinked up at me like he was trying to make my face come into focus, then softer, he sang, "I love youuuu."

My heart did a two-step. Despite the urgency of our situation, I took his face between my palms and kissed him on his loose, pliable mouth. He could barely pucker up in time to kiss back before I pulled away.

"I know you're stoned out of your mind right now and probably won't remember any of this later, but I love you too.

I'm a pain in your ass, but we're going to work this out."

He grinned as his eyes fell closed. "Go bang, bang, Quaid. Be the badass I know you are. Imma have a nap."

His chin met his chest again, and he was snoring before I got to my feet.

I spoke into my fake tie pin. "I don't know if you're still listening, but I got your present. I'm heading to the front of the house." It was where I'd last heard Daniella calling out for Kader.

I ran down the hall, weapon trained on the floor, aware of every hidden place where Daniella might be tucked away.

But when I stepped outside, I'd missed the fun. Torin had Daniella in cuffs, and Erik and Allison were off to the side, standing near their parked vehicle.

Ruiz waved his phone at me with a wide grin as I glanced around. "I would have shouted that we had it under control, but listening to Doyle sing made my fucking day. That was awesome."

I sneered in Ruiz's direction before addressing Torin. "Where's the boy?"

Torin gestured with his chin to Erik and Allison.

Erik said, "Back of the car. He's none too happy."

I holstered the weapon and glanced at Daniella. Her gaze was distant. She didn't seem to have put up much of a fight.

"You get her weapon?" I asked Torin.

"Yeah, Valor. I've done this before," Torin said. "Was a BB gun. You weren't in too much danger. It wasn't even loaded. Ruiz has it."

I approached Daniella, catching her eye. She didn't look angry, only resigned. "You understand this is necessary, right?"

She nodded and glanced at the car where they'd put Kader. "What will happen to him?"

It was hard to say. Kader had been raised his whole life with an unstable mother. He hadn't been taught right from wrong. There would be extensive psychological evaluations involved. He might not be any better off than little Tabitha whose world had been upended when she was four.

"We'll make sure he's taken care of."

"He's your nephew. I trust you to do what's best for him."

Erik helped Torin get Daniella into the back of Torin's car, then he and Allison said they were heading out.

"Why didn't you get Az?" I asked Torin.

"Because that big lug weighs a ton, and in case you didn't notice, he's a bit woozy. By the time we got in there and got Kader out, we didn't have time to fight with him. You were on your way back."

"Do you have a knife?"

Torin dug a multitool from his belt and passed it off.

"Give me a hand."

He chuckled. "Lead the way. You all right for a minute?" he asked Ruiz.

"Go."

We went back inside and cut Aslan's binds. He was sloppy and singing again. It took both of us to get him stable on his feet and take him out to my car.

It was decided that I would take Aslan to a hospital while the others took care of Daniella and Kader. I wasn't sure how we were going to write all this up, but I would worry about it later.

By the time I settled into the driver's seat, Aslan was awake but bleary-eyed.

"Are you going to make it?" I asked.

"I'm thirsty."

"Hang on." I dug the small glovebox key from my sock and opened it, retrieving my phone and service weapon—I'd returned Torin's—and a bottle of water that, for whatever reason, had been tucked away in there for several weeks. It was warm but wet.

"Do you need help?" I asked as I uncapped it.

"Lemme try."

His coordination was questionable, so I ensured he had a firm grip before letting go. While he drank, I checked to be sure my phone was hung up—I didn't need Ruiz

eavesdropping anymore—and noticed a voicemail message from Dr. Thornlow.

Steeling myself, I checked it. It was simple and straightforward. All she said was that the results of the paternity test had been emailed.

I hung up and opened my email.

There they were.

I hovered a finger over the small icon for a long minute before tapping it. My stomach was in my throat as I read the results. Halfway down the page, tears blurred the words on the screen, but it didn't matter. I saw all I needed to see.

There was no more doubt.

Abraham Valor was indeed my father.

And Juniper Valor was indeed his daughter.

Daniella had been deceived.

# CHAPTER 38

#### Quaid



I t was a cold, snowy December fifth, thirty years and twenty-five days after my sister had been abducted that her body was removed from a shallow unmarked grave far back on the Vincolla property.

It was in the exact location that Daniella had shown me three days ago. The same hollow void yawned in my chest. The same sense of vertigo caught me unaware. I wondered at the intensity of my feelings for a sibling I barely remembered.

Crime scene investigators had gone over every inch of the cellar and the house. Clear evidence remained that proved Evelyn, Lily, and Avery had been held below ground. More evidence showed that Daniella and her son had been living in select parts of the main house.

The families had closure. What that meant, I didn't know. All three girls would deal with a lifetime worth of issues because of what Daniella had done. But they had answers. Justice would be served.

Kader had been given over to child services, where a long process of evaluations would determine the best course of action for his long-term care. It was unknown if he would be suitable for the foster system or if his capacity for criminal behavior meant he would need something different.

It hurt to think about. He was no different from Evelyn, Lily, or Avery.

He was a child.

A victim.

A cold north wind made the bare branches on the overhead trees creak and moan. It cut through my jacket and made me shiver. Aslan wrapped an arm around me, keeping me close, rubbing warmth back into my quickly chilling body.

Thick flurries swirled and danced in the air as they floated softly and silently to the earth. They stuck to my hair and eyelashes. They blanketed the ground, no longer melting away at first contact.

A somber lull filled the landscape. Even the wildlife was quiet as though respecting the fragility of the moment and all it entailed.

The only people present that morning were two forensic anthropologists, Edwards, Dad, Aslan, and me. Eden had wanted to come, but I'd asked her not to. She'd respected my decision.

No one spoke.

Dad leaned heavily on a cane, standing off to the side, alone with his pain. Had I given him closure, or had I ripped the Band-Aid off an old, scarcely healed wound? Would he be more at peace after today, knowing the truth? I didn't know.

Willa had been charged for her role in Juniper's abduction. Dwaine was dead.

Nothing could bring Juniper back, but was it enough?

Would he be able to close this chapter of his life and move forward?

Time would tell.

Edwards kept a distance, observing but not interfering. He wasn't happy with me. He wasn't happy with any of us who'd worked this case and had decided to step outside the boundaries to solve it.

The small team who had gone to extract Aslan from the farmhouse and arrest Daniella was in a mountain of trouble. Ruiz was the only one who'd escaped reprimand.

We hadn't followed procedure, but in the end, we'd gotten the job done. It had put Edwards in a tough situation.

So far, we'd earned the equivalent of a slap on the wrist. A sit-down chastising where we'd been told that our actions were disappointing and that the department expected better from us. We'd nodded, agreed, and raced out of the meeting with our tails tucked between our legs.

The case was too big for them to do anything more than turn a cheek. Especially when the media had exploded, calling us heroes.

So we took a verbal dressing-down and moved on.

That morning, none of it mattered.

That morning, it was about Juniper.

The process was like a reverse funeral and no less difficult. Instead of watching a loved one being interned into the earth, we watched a loved one exhumed from a shallow grave.

Dad couldn't hide his pain.

His stony façade broke as the collection of small bones grew. When he nearly collapsed to his knees and a strangled sob broke from his lips, I raced to his side, no longer respecting his silent request for space. I dragged him into an awkward hug—which he resisted—and held him as he silently cried. The embrace ended quickly when Dad pulled himself together and pushed me away, announcing he couldn't do it anymore and was going to wait in the car.

He hobbled away on the uneven ground, shooing me off when I tried to follow.

Edwards caught my arm. "I'll take him home."

"You don't have to do that, sir."

"Let me." Edwards shifted, stared after my dad, then met my eyes. "Valor... Quaid, I'm terribly sorry about how all this went down."

"Sir, you don't—"

He held up a hand. "I jumped the gun in the very beginning with the press conference and made a series of poor decisions from that point on. It was my fault the media was so relentless, and I was doing my best to keep them contained since it was my error. Needless to say, I failed." He shuffled and watched the forensic anthropologists at work. "My granddaughter... she's close friends with Evelyn. I was there on the day Juniper vanished. It all hit me hard. I couldn't stop thinking about how it could have been her. I guess I'm as human as the rest of you, but I allowed my personal feelings to get in the way, which I warned you not to do repeatedly. I shouldn't have stepped into the middle of the case. You're a competent bunch of detectives. I'll remember that going forward."

"Thank you, sir."

Edwards nodded, squeezed my shoulder, then followed after my dad.

When they were gone, I rejoined Aslan and sighed. "Dad never lets me help him."

Aslan wrapped his arm around me again and pulled me against his side, kissing my temple. "Let him grieve. This has been a lot to take in."

"I know. I'm grieving too."

But it wasn't the same.

The snow continued to fall. The men continued to remove Juniper's bones from the ground.

Aslan and I didn't speak.

The morning passed us by.

As much as I wanted to be present while Juniper's remains were fully removed from the ground, it was a lengthy and meticulous process, and my blood was freezing in my veins. I couldn't feel my toes and knew I wouldn't last much longer.

Despite having a pretty good idea of what had happened to my sister, it was still a homicide, and everything had to be done by the book. Her remains would be examined closely to confirm the cause of death if possible. No one doubted the identity of the bones, but legally that would need to be confirmed as well. I'd already ensured Juniper's dental records were available.

Once the remains were released, Dad and I would give her a proper funeral and a proper resting place. We hadn't talked about it yet, and I knew it wouldn't be an easy conversation.

My teeth chattered as I checked the time. It was twenty after twelve. "We should go. It's getting late, and I'm frozen."

Hand in hand, we made the trek back to my SUV. Aslan took the keys from me when I pulled them out, and I didn't argue. He liked driving, and I wasn't in the right mind for it.

"Two o'clock?" I asked once our seatbelts were fastened and the heat was pumping through the vents, melting the snow on the windshield.

"Yep."

I nodded.

I didn't need to ask if he was nervous. The somber expression on his face said it all.

Aslan was scheduled to meet with the board that afternoon. His fate as a detective would be determined.

"Do you want to get a quick lunch for the drive back?" I asked.

"Not sure I can eat. My stomach's twisted up."

"Okay."

Aslan swung the SUV around and took us down the long driveway to the main road. It was close to an hour's drive back to the city and headquarters, and we spent it in contemplative silence, both of us with lots playing through our heads.

At one point, Aslan reached over and took my hand. It was a small gesture, but it seemed to ground us both. I brought his hand to my mouth and kissed his knuckles. It earned me a soft smile.

I hadn't addressed Aslan's drug-induced declaration of love from the other day. He had vague memories of his time as Daniella's captive, and I doubted he meant it. We'd only been dating a little over a month. I was the one with out-of-proportion feelings, not Aslan. He was far more levelheaded. The last thing I wanted to do was rush anything or apply any pressure.

I already came across as insecure. No need to add clingy and overly affectionate to the list, so I'd determined that I wouldn't say it again until he said it first, no matter how long it took.

The roads were getting snow-covered, so it took us longer than usual to return to the city. We arrived at ten to two and went directly to the boardroom where Aslan would have his meeting.

We were met in the hallway by a handful of trusty coworkers. Eden, Torin, and Allison were present.

"What the hell are you guys doing here?" Aslan asked.

"Moral support, man." Torin held his arms wide, and Aslan took the offered hug, pounding him on the back.

"Don't you have a hundred cases on the go?"

"Don't remind me. I swear you'd better get your ass back in line because I can't take this new guy a second longer. My head's going to explode."

"Don't hold your breath. I've got a bad feeling about this."

"Think positive."

The door to the boardroom opened, and Staff Sergeant Summerfield surveyed the group of us before giving Aslan a tight smile. "We're ready for you."

I snagged his hand and gave it a squeeze. "There's a lounge down the hall. That's where I'll be."

"It's where we'll all be," Torin said.

Aslan vanished into the room, and we went to the lounge to wait.

Torin sat next to Allison, and they shared a quiet, intimate conversation for a while. I wondered if they'd rescheduled their date and how things were going with them.

Eden sat beside me and rubbed my back, offering silent support.

"What do you think?" I asked Torin when he and Allison finished chatting.

"Summerfield likes him. If she can save his ass, she will. I gotta hope her word is gold. Man, I can't lose my partner. This will kill me."

It was a long, horrendous hour before Aslan appeared at the door to the lounge. He had a folded bunch of papers in his hand that made my stomach lurch. His expression told me nothing.

I stood, holding my breath.

Torin stood too. "So? What happened?"

"You're stuck with me, I guess."

Torin tipped his head back and spoke to the ceiling. "Halle-fucking-lujah."

Aslan accepted congratulations from Allison and Eden and another hug from Torin before the three of them left us alone.

He was too glum for someone who'd found out he wasn't fired. "There's more, isn't there?" I asked once the others were gone.

"Yeah. I'm on probation for a year. I have to provide proof that I'm attending AA meetings weekly, and I'm to submit to a breathalyzer before driving department vehicles. Every. Fucking. Time. Torin will be informed since he will be obligated to fill in the paperwork and perform the tests."

The miserable expression made sense. For Aslan, that would be humiliating, even when Torin was his best friend.

"Do you need to be here right now?" I asked.

"No. I don't start back until next week. What the hell am I going to do now? This means I can't sign a car out overnight, which I know I don't do often, but it's fucking winter. I'm going to be stuck taking an Uber every goddamn day."

"Have you considered getting a new car?"

"I don't deserve one."

"I think you're being hard on yourself. You're mere weeks away from celebrating one year of sobriety. That's a huge accomplishment. Don't let this bullshit take away from that. Be proud of yourself. Today was the day you took ownership for a mistake you made a year ago. It's been bothering you since it happened, and now you can let it go. It's time to leave the past behind. Maybe it's time to reward yourself instead of punishing yourself."

I took his hand, giving it a tug and forcing him to look up and meet my eyes. "I'm proud of you, Az. Maybe that doesn't mean much, but I am. Think about it. Do you want to take off?" My work that week consisted of writing reports to close

our cases. I could do most of it from home, so I wasn't tied to the office.

"Sure. Let me take care of this first." He waved the papers between us. "Summerfield wants me to fill them out and leave them on her desk. I need ten minutes. I'll meet you at the car?"

"Okay. Take your time."

While Aslan went about his business, I took the elevator to the basement before heading out to the car.

Ruiz was alone in his office, engrossed in work, eyes glazed as he stared at multiple computer screens and clicked around with a mouse. The lighting was dim, and the soft glow of the monitor highlighted his face.

I rapped my knuckles on the doorframe.

Ruiz snapped to attention.

"Valor?"

"Hey."

"No rest for the wicked, huh. What's up? You got something for me?"

"No." I paced a few steps into the room and glanced around before meeting Ruiz's quizzical stare. "I wanted to thank you for helping the other day. You didn't have to, but you put your neck on the line, and you have no idea how much I appreciate it. You're a good guy."

Ruiz grinned and shrugged. "Bah, it was nothing. It can get dull down here in the basement. It was nice to have some fun for once. Did Doyle have his meeting yet?"

"Yeah. Just got out. They're keeping him around."

"Good. It would have been stupid to let him go. He's one of the good guys."

I didn't have anything else to say. A moment of awkward silence swelled, so I thumbed over my shoulder. "Anyhow, I have to go. I just... wanted to say thank you."

"You're welcome."

I was halfway to the door when Ruiz called, "Hey, Valor."

I turned.

"You've got bigger balls than I thought. It's nice to know you'll cross lines when it matters. I respect that."

It was about the best compliment I would ever get from Ruiz. "Thanks."

"See you around."

Aslan met me in the car twenty minutes later. When I handed him the keys that time, he almost turned them down. "Take them."

He did. Begrudgingly.

"Do we have a destination?" he asked.

"Nope. Wherever you want to go."

So he drove. I didn't ask where he was headed, but when he turned into a used-car lot a short time later, I smiled to myself. This was good. He needed this.

It was cold. The snowfall had slowed but hadn't ceased. The long rows of used cars were all hidden under an inch of fluffy white flakes. We paced the lot, and Aslan brushed the snow away from several windows so he could read the signs inside, indicating the car's information.

After a time, he returned to a 2016 Chevy Equinox in a steely gray color. He circled the car twice, wiping the snow away with a gloved hand and peering through the windows to examine the interior.

The saleswoman trailing us fetched the keys when Aslan asked to see the inside. She went through her spiel as Aslan played with the car's gadgets, moving the steering wheel up and down, shifting the seat forward and back.

"Can we take it for a spin?" he asked her.

"Absolutely."

Ten minutes later, we were on the road. He drove down various streets in silence, giving no opinion, his face masked.

"So? What do you think?" I asked.

"I think I'm hungry. Food?"

"Um. Okay."

When he pulled up at a fast-food joint, I groaned. "No. Anywhere but here."

"I want a burger."

"Then let's go to Linda's Lakeside Pantry. You like that place."

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"Nope. Too far. Here's good. You want anything?"
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"I hate fries. They're bad for you. Do you know how much cholesterol and salt you ingest when you eat those things?"

Undeterred, Aslan pulled up to order. A teenage voice came through the speaker system, asking what we'd like. Aslan asked for a burger combo, then turned to me. "You sure you're not eating?"

"No thank you."

"You're not stealing my fries."

"I don't want your fries."

To the teenager, Aslan said. "Could I get an extra side of fries?"

"Az, I don't want fries," I growled.

"Make them extra, extra large," he told the kid.

"I hate you," I mumbled.

"Biggest pack you've got. Superfluous salt on top."

There was no containing the snort that escaped my mouth.

"Is that everything?" the tinny voice from the speaker asked.

<sup>&</sup>quot;No. I can't eat this crap."

<sup>&</sup>quot;How about fries?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;I don't want fries."

<sup>&</sup>quot;You love fries."

Aslan hitched a brow. "Last chance. You want anything else?"

"No," I mumbled, sneer turned up to ten. But when Aslan turned to tell the kid that was all, I snapped, "Wait. Ketchup. Lots of ketchup. Can't eat fries without ketchup."

Aslan chuckled and relayed my request to the teen.

Once we had our order, he drove us beyond Queens Quay East where there was waterfront parking, and we could sit and watch the turbulent waters of the Inner Harbor. Center Island was barely visible in the distance due to snowfall.

We ate—I made sure to sneer plenty which amused Aslan—and chatted about random stuff that didn't have to do with work or the prospect of Aslan choosing to buy a new vehicle.

Despite my insistence on not wanting fries, I was starving. I could admit that I had a weakness for deep-fried potatoes.

And ketchup.

And I was glad he'd ignored me when I'd said I didn't want anything.

"I think I'm going to bite the bullet and buy it," Aslan said when we finished eating and gathered our garbage.

"I think that's a good decision. A step forward."

"You know, I was thinking about another step forward."

"What's that?"

"For us."

That got my attention. I shifted and faced him.

He studied my face for a long time, and I wondered if maybe he was going to utter those three little words again with a clearer head. My heart beat a little faster.

Instead, he produced an envelope, one I recognized since I'd left it on his desk the previous week.

"Found this."

"I was returning your house key."

He held it out. "Maybe you should keep it."

Baffled, I took the envelope. "You're... giving me the key to your house?"

"Yeah. I kind of like the idea of coming home on late nights and finding you curled up in my bed. I want you there more often."

I stared at the envelope.

Aslan reached out and brushed his knuckles along my jaw. "It's too soon to propose marriage, talk about kids, or move in together. All things I know you think about constantly. You have the future on your brain all the time."

"I don't."

"Quaid, please. Give me some credit. I know you. I like that about you. I don't think it's too soon to give you a key to my place, do you?"

"No."

"I want you to learn to trust me, Quaid, and don't say you do already. We both know that isn't true."

I ducked my chin, but Aslan bumped it up again. "Don't be ashamed."

I leaned into his touch and fell into his dark gaze. "Dad has my extra key, but I'll make you one for my place too."

"Do you want to spend more nights together? Maybe sleep alone less?"

"Yes. I'd like that."

"Me too."

He leaned over the console and joined our mouths, stealing my breath. I closed my eyes and savored the moment.

We came apart a short time later, and Aslan chuckled against my mouth. "You taste like ketchup."

"Gross."

"For the record, in case you think I've forgotten about my runaway mouth back at the farmhouse, I haven't."

My eyes widened. I held my breath. Was he going to say it again? Confirm it was true and tell me he meant it?

Aslan studied my face. He wet his lips. "It's kinda scary being in a real relationship, feeling all these things I've never let myself feel before."

"I know."

"I think we have a lot of potential, Quaid. We're gonna be all right."

"I hope so. I want to make this work."

"Me too."

Instead of saying more, he leaned in and kissed me again as the snow fell outside. It was soft and lazy. We didn't stop for a long time, caught up in a moment of bliss.

When he pulled away, he stroked my cheek, peered deep into my eyes, and said, "Come on. Let's go buy a car."

Continue with Inevitable Disclosure

ear reader,

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# Note from the Author

This series takes place in Toronto, Ontario, and I've taken great pains to ensure I stuck as close as possible to the geography of the area and surrounding areas. Any mistakes are my own and I take full responsibility. That being said, although many of the locations discussed in this series are real places, there are an equal number of locations that I made up for creative purposes, so not everything can be found on a map.

Thank you for reading!

# Meed More Romantic Suspense?

#### Not What It Seems

Also available in audio!



# They say I killed them. They say I'm sick. They're wrong. Nothing is as it seems.

Renowned psychiatrist Dr. Cyrus Irvine takes his job and his life *very* seriously. He is well-respected in his field and has worked hard to get where he is.

# But he's lonely.

When called in to evaluate a murder suspect, the last person he expects to find is the man he slept with a few months ago.

The man who ghosted him and wounded his fragile heart.

Ethically, he should turn around and walk away, but he doesn't. For as much as Cyrus understands the human brain,

he can't understand the pull he feels toward the patient.

One session with River Jenkins and Cyrus is sure of three things: River and everything about his preliminary diagnosis is a lie, his feelings toward River haven't gone away, and despite his professional code, he isn't going anywhere.

Someone needs to get to the bottom of this.

Cyrus's world is turned upside down as he and River team up to find the truth.

During their quest for answers, Cyrus discovers the hardest part of his decision isn't the risk to his career, it's the risk to his heart.

\*\*Not What It Seems is a 115k MM romantic suspense with doctor / patient, forced proximity, and age gap themes.\*\*

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Love Me Whole

Long Way Home

The One That Got Away

Not What It Seems

Owl's Slumber

Shades of Darkness

Touch of Love

Fearless

Lost in a Moment

Cravings of the Heart

Heal With You

No Regrets

New Beginnings

**Clashing Hearts** 

**Confused Hearts** 

Forgetful Hearts

**Concealed Hearts** 

Until the End of Time

**Temporary Partner** 

**Elusive Relations** 

## **Standalone Contemporary**

**Trusting Tanner** 

Twinkle Star

Love Me Whole

Rocky Mountain Refuge

The Christmas I Know

Long Way Home

The Devil Inside

The Endless Road to Sunshine

The One That Got Away

Radio Static

Not What It Seems

## **Valor and Doyle Mysteries**

Department Rivals (prequel)

**Temporary Partner** 

**Elusive Relations** 

**Unstable Connections** 

Inevitable Disclosure

#### **Rail Riders**

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Lost Soul: AJ's Burden

#### **Taboo**

Sinfully Mine

Secrets & Lies

End Scene

Risk Takers

Rule Breakers

# <u>Historical</u>

Until the End of Time