



ASHER'S WATCH



TEAM WATCHDOG

LEANNE TYLER

ASHER'S WATCH
BROTHERHOOD
PROTECTORS WORLD

TEAM WATCHDOG

BOOK TWO



LEANNE TYLER



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Guarding Leah - Regan Black

Brotherhood Protectors Yellowstone World

Team Eagle

Booker's Mission - Kris Norris

Hunter's Mission - Kendall Talbot

Gunn's Mission - Delilah Devlin

Xavier's Mission - Lori Matthews

Wyatt's Mission - Jen Talty

PROLOGUE



LIBERTY KILLION PARKED her rental car outside of the small house her younger sister Justus and her four other college roommates shared in Colorado and hurried up the walk with her suitcase in tow, eager to see her again. Early summer flowers were blooming along the walk and the grass needed to be mowed, but she had to admit it wasn't a bad little yard. It had been only two weeks since they talked on the phone, but she hadn't seen Justus since she flew out after Christmas break four months ago. She rapped on the door several times before a frizzy-headed girl half-awake in a pair of shorts and a tank top cracked open the door, yawning.

"If you're selling something, we ain't buying," she mumbled.

"Is Justus here?" Liberty asked, placing the toe of her expensive pump in the doorway before the girl could slam it in her face.

"Justus? Uh—" The girl disappeared but returned a few moments later with another girl wearing an oversized T-shirt that went down below her knees.

"Are you looking for Justus?" She blinked several times then shielded her eyes from the sunlight.

"I'm her sister. Liberty. We had plans for a shopping trip," she explained. "I flew out from New York."

"Well...Uh..." the t-shirt girl stammered.

Another girl dressed and fully awake came to the door and pushed the other two out of the way. "Please forgive them.

They were up all night, partying. We just finished finals. Justus and Chaney went hiking with her boyfriend Kurtis over the weekend and didn't return. We assumed they were having a good time and decided to extend the getaway."

Liberty frowned. "My sister went away with Chaney and her boyfriend?"

"No. No. Kurtis is Justus' boyfriend. And he had a friend that went with them for Chaney. I'm sure there is nothing to worry about. They'll be back when they are ready to return," the girl said.

"Yeah," the two sleepy heads said, leaning against one another.

Liberty wasn't waiting around for her free-spirited sister to come back whenever she wanted. Something didn't feel right about this situation. Justus wouldn't go off when she knew she was coming for a visit.

"Tell me about this Kurtis. What do you know about him or his friend? Justus never mentioned him to me."

"Probably because they hadn't been seeing each other that long," one of the girls said.

"And she went away with him for the weekend? What was she thinking?" Liberty asked.

"Come on, you sound like her mother, not her sister," another one of the girls said.

"I should. I've raised her since our parents passed. You still haven't answered my question. What do you know about Kurtis? Do you even know his last name? What about his friend? What's his name? Do they even go to Colorado State with you?"

The girls shook their heads in response and shrugged.

"Perfect. So, going to the Dean of Students' office would do no good or even visiting campus police?"

"Probably not," one of the sleepy heads yawned.

"Does she have her cell phone with her?" Liberty asked.

“Sure.”

“Do you know where they were going to hike?” she asked.

The girls mumbled together for a moment and one of them yelled, “The Garden of the Gods.”

“And Seven Falls, I think,” another one said.

“Thank you. I advise you to take better care of yourselves,” she said. “What is Chaney’s last name?”

“Daniels,” the three said in unison.

“What’s her cell number?” Liberty asked, pulling out her own to put it in her phone. “Do you have a photo of her you can send? And how can I reach one of you if I find the girls?”

“I’m Moni, I have a recent photo of both Justus and Chaney together, and you can call me,” she said and gave her number.

Liberty sent the girl a text. “Send me that photo, please.”

“What about Kurtis and his friend? Do we have a photo of them? Maybe a photo of at least Kurtis with Justus?”

The girls all shook their heads.

“Look, I think you’re overreacting,” Moni said.

“I don’t. I’m a civil liberties lawyer and I’ve seen things the three of you haven’t even imagined in my line of work. How can I reach Chaney’s parents?”

The girls looked at one another and then they shrugged again.

Liberty took a deep breath. “Lock your doors, ladies.”

CHAPTER 1



TWO DAYS LATER...

LIBERTY DROVE through the Ute Pass into what was called Fools Gold Colorado as the sun was coming up. She'd already searched the Garden of the Gods and Seven Falls without any sign of Justus or her roommate. Calling either girl's cell had resulted in the calls going straight to their voicemails. She'd finally resorted to reporting them missing to the Colorado Springs Police Department and spoken directly to Captain Thompson. He'd been very compassionate about the whole situation, listening to her and reassuring her that he was going to do everything in his power to find Justus and Chaney.

Now she was coming into this little town to search the ghost towns and trails in the surrounding areas on the off chance that they might have decided to check them out too while hiking. She was hoping they had left Colorado Springs and ventured this far in their explorations. But the one thing she couldn't get off her mind was the fact that she hadn't been there for Justus the way she should have after they lost their parents. Perhaps if she had, then this wouldn't have happened. Justus would have shared more about her personal life with her than she did, and she would have known about Kurtis and her going away with him on a hiking trip.

The twelve-year age gap had always made things a little awkward for them. Liberty had been going into her teenage years when Justus was a toddler. She didn't have time for a baby sister tagging along behind her. She was all about boys by then and dating before going off to college to pursue her

own career as a lawyer, following in their parent's footsteps. They were workaholics and Liberty had become one too. It was no wonder that Justus had always been a latchkey kid, independent, and a free spirit. She'd practically had to raise herself.

Then a heart attack and a sudden stroke had taken their parents within a few months of one another, and it had been up to Liberty to look after Justus while trying to establish herself on the partner track at her first law firm. Reliving the teenage years had been rough because she hadn't had the time to give to her sister like she knew their mom had given her. She didn't know how their mom had juggled being a successful civil liberties attorney and raising a family like she had. Of course, having a surprise pregnancy at forty had not been in the plans either. If that hadn't happened, Liberty wondered if she'd still have her mom today. Or if the stroke would have still taken her from them? Sure, Liberty liked to claim she had raised her sister after their parents passed away, but that hadn't been true.

Tears threatened to spill from her eyes, and she blinked them away quickly. She wasn't a crier, and she wasn't going to start now. Not when she was so mad at Justus for being naïve enough to go off with this boy that she hardly knew that Liberty could see red.

The car bounced and bumped along the paved road, and she looked in the rear-view mirror to see if she'd run over anything, like a dead animal's carcass that she hadn't noticed coming upon. She'd seen many along the way on this journey. But there wasn't anything there.

Dismissing it, she continued traveling for a short distance when the car jerked and began to sputter. Then a loud pop blew from the exhaust like the vehicle was backfiring.

"Oh no," she muttered. "No. don't you dare break down on me. Not out here in this deserted place."

She pumped the gas pedal, as the car began to slow to a stop. She checked the gauges and noticed the fuel hand was on empty which didn't make sense because she'd just filled up before she left Colorado Springs less than half an hour ago.

There was no way she'd driven far enough to go through a tank of gas already. "Damn it."

Coasting over to the side of the road, she pulled off onto the desert-like landscape and shut off the engine, putting it in park. She released the hood of the car before she opened the door and got out, holding up her cell phone to see if she could get a few bars for reception. But it was no use. "There must not be a cell tower for miles around."

She kicked the tire and hurt her foot, hopping in place. This was just her luck. If she hadn't wanted to come out and see where Justus was going to school and where she had been living for the last two years, they could have had their shopping trip in New York. But she'd known if she was still in the city her boss would have found a way to break into her time away from the office to pull her back into a new legal case. And she had been determined for once she was going to spend her vacation with her sister as planned.

Maybe that had been the reason Justus had gone away with Kurtis. She'd figured Liberty would cancel their plans at the last minute because of work. It had happened when she'd brought Chaney with her for a long weekend, but instead of spending time with the girls she'd had to spend it preparing for a new client's court case.

She finally walked around to the hood and raised it. That's when she heard a loud repetitious pow, pow, and then a whizzing ping hit the metal. She ducked as another pow sounded.

What in the world was happening?

ASHER HEADED BACK toward Fool's Gold from his morning climb near the Ute Pass. He enjoyed climbing and watching the sun rise when everything was peaceful. That had been one of the perks of moving to Colorado with his teammates and friends after they'd left the Air Force. Serving for twenty years had been a dream fulfilled, but doing reconnaissance work was a young man's job and he was pushing forty, hell, they all were. They knew when it was time to get out before they were pushed to a desk job and that was no place for them.

When Mason Quinn arranged with Hank Patterson for them to start working with the Brotherhood Protectors and this job became available in Fools Gold it seemed ideal for the team to move to Colorado. Now he was trying to find the perfect rental spot so he could move out of his temporary lodging at the Lost Valley Ranch Inn next to Gunny's Watering Hole. The accommodation was great, but he really wanted something he could call his own. It would also be nice to have the privacy of living alone for a change.

A car off to the side of the road caught his eye. That wasn't good, especially this time of the day with the hood up. Cell reception wasn't the best out in these parts. It was a good thing that all the brotherhood protectors who worked in the area were equipped with satellite phones.

He slowed his Titan truck, gave Three Guys Garage a call before he even got out, and went to help the stranded motorist.

"Good morning," he called. "Having a bit of car troubles today it looks like. I've called the local garage. They're sending someone out for you."

"Get down!" a voice called.

"What?"

"Take cover."

"Cover?" He looked around but didn't see anyone else in the area, but this mysterious voice coming from somewhere on the other side of the raised hood.

Pow.

Whiz.

Ping.

He ducked, ran back to his truck, and backed it away from the stranded vehicle, making a U-turn to come around on the opposite side. He leaned over and opened the passenger door. "Get in."

The woman taking cover crab-crawled in her expensive-looking pantsuit and heels to his truck and climbed up into the cab. She pulled the door closed behind her as he sped back

onto the road more shots were fired at his truck and he headed toward Fool's Gold.

He traveled a safe distance in silence before pulling off to the side of the road again and turning to look at her. "Are you okay? You weren't hit, were you?"

"No. Thank God!" she exclaimed. "I have no idea why anyone was even shooting at me."

"Where were you going?"

"Into Fool's Gold," she replied. "What about my things?"

"They'll be fine. We'll go back for them."

"I don't understand how you have cell reception and I didn't," she held out her cell phone, her hands shaking. "There is something wrong with my rental car. I filled up before leaving Colorado Springs, but my gas gauge is now sitting on empty."

"There has to be more to your story or someone wouldn't be taking target practice at your vehicle. I do reconnaissance for a living and I have these six senses when something isn't quite right," he explained.

She crossed her arms over her chest and leaned back against the seat. "Is that right? And what are those tingly senses of yours telling you is my problem?"

He grinned and shook his head. "I haven't figured that out yet, ma'am, but I know you haven't slept much, if at all in the last twenty-four hours from the looks of it by your clothes. As nice as they are, they're showing you've been in them for a while now. Are you on the run from somewhere or to somewhere?"

"No. I'm not. But I'm not from around these parts either. The car was a rental and I've been in it for two days now."

"Ah. A rental. Well, then, I'm sure the garage can reach out to the company you got it from and get you a new one in no time if it isn't anything major," he said. "There's Sam and Lillie's Bed and Breakfast in town. You might see if they have a vacancy if you're looking for a place to stay. In the

meantime, I'll take you to Mattie's Diner and get you some breakfast while you wait."

"You don't have to—"

"I was going there myself. It's next door to Sam and Lillie's so you'll be right there when you're done eating to check on that vacancy," he said.

"You're being very helpful," she said.

"You'll find most of the residents of Fool's Gold are," he said. "Where are you from? I can't place your accent."

"New York."

He nodded and his phone rang. He held up his finger before he punched the answer button on his steering wheel and the call came through his console. "Hey, Joe, what's your ETA?"

"I'm about five minutes away."

"Okay. We'll see you there. Be careful. Someone was shooting at the car I told you about. We had to escape for a few minutes, but we're driving back now. See you in five."

"Roger that."

He ended the call and smiled at her before making another U-turn and heading back in the direction they'd fled. They arrived a few minutes before the tow truck lumbered along, bouncing to a halt, and pulled off the road. Then Joe made a wide swing before he backed up toward her car. Asher watched as she assessed the rickety old rust bucket of a vehicle.

She looked in his direction. "My bag's in the trunk, but my purse is upfront in the passenger seat."

"Sure. I'll get those for you. Just stay here where it should be safe," he said.

"I'm Liberty Killion, by the way," she offered.

"Asher Nolte, Colorado Division of the Brotherhood Protectors."

“Brotherhood Protectors?”

“We’re a group of former military men and women and other agency personnel who provide protective and other services to government officials and civilians alike.”

“What branch did you serve?” she asked sounding interested in what he had to say for the first time.

“Air Force.” He left her sitting there mulling that over to go retrieve her suitcase and purse and put them in his truck.

LIBERTY WAITED in the cab of his truck as the AC hit her full blast to cool down the interior.

“It’s going to be a hot one today. Don’t you agree?” he said opening the door briefly as he handed her purse up to her and put her suitcase in the crew cab area.

“Definitely.” When he climbed up behind the wheel, she fastened the seat belt and adjusted the shoulder strap. There was a new vehicle smell about the interior that she couldn’t deny. “How long have you had your truck?”

“Three months.”

“I can tell. The newness hits you in the face.”

“Yeah. I hope it lingers for a long time. So, New York, what brings you out to these parts?”

She should have expected he’d want to chit-chat on the ride into town, but she hadn’t really expected he’d come right out and ask her what she was doing in Fool’s Gold so quickly. It really wasn’t any of his business why she came here, but hadn’t he said he was in reconnaissance? And didn’t he say he provided services for government and civilians alike? What if he could help her find Justus and Chaney?

Looking out the window, she debated whether she was overreacting to their going away with Kurtis and not returning like the roommates had said, but Captain Thompson had not felt she was especially when there hadn’t been any signs that they’d ever been at the Garden of the Gods or Seven Falls. And now that there had been shots fired at her after her car ran

out of gas suspiciously, she was beginning to wonder what was going on.

What the hell? It couldn't hurt. He had been more than helpful so far, and she didn't know anyone else in this place. She took a deep breath.

“I'm looking for my sister and her roommate. They're missing.”

CHAPTER 2



ASHER HADN'T BEEN sure he'd heard her correctly over the sound of the AC blowing, so he adjusted the fan down a notch or two. "Did you say they're missing?"

"Yes. My sister is twenty and goes to college at Colorado State. The spring semester just ended, and I came to visit. We'd been planning my trip for weeks, but I arrived to find she'd gone on a hiking trip and never returned. Her other roommates informed me that Justus' new boyfriend and his friend went with her and Chaney. I have never heard of this boy, and it turns out they haven't been dating that long. So, she doesn't know him well enough to go off with him somewhere either. I've already been to the two locations where they were going hiking, and they weren't there. I've tried both girls' cell phones and it goes straight to voicemail. I've reported them missing to the Colorado Springs Police Department and now I'm here in Fool's Gold to check out the ghost towns thinking they might have ventured this way if they were out exploring with these boys and have not been abducted."

He listened as he drove, assessing everything she was saying. "I can tell you are concerned and believe me I'd be worried too if I flew across the country to find my sister gone. Keeping calm is essential in a situation like yours. I know people who can help you. And I know the local sheriff too. Let me put you in contact with them."

"So, you don't think I'm overreacting?"

"Not at all, especially in the world we've come to live in," he said.

“Thank you. Captain Thompson in Colorado Springs didn’t make me feel as if I was either, but Justus’ roommates tried to make me think I was jumping to the wrong conclusions just because she nor Chaney hadn’t returned. But I got a bad feeling, and I don’t usually get those,” she explained. “And now that I’ve run out of gas and been shot at I don’t know what to think. Is it connected or a crazy coincidence?”

“I don’t believe in coincidences. You must trust your gut instinct. There could be a logical explanation as to why your calls have gone to voicemail like their battery has died and they forgot their chargers at home, or they are out of cell tower reception. That does happen often out here. But if you give me their numbers, I’ll have my co-worker with the Brotherhood Protectors do a search and see if he can locate them. Swede is a complete genius at the computer, a tech guru. I was amazed as soon as I was introduced to him, and we worked on our first case together. Trust me, if their cell phones are working, he’ll be able to locate them. And even if they aren’t, he might still be able to triangulate to the last cell tower they connected.”

She nodded slowly, tucking her hair behind her left ear as he talked. “Thank you, again. I am beginning to think my car ran out of gas so that you’d be able to help me. I don’t normally believe in fate, but maybe in this instance, I should.”

He grinned. “Let’s wait to see if we get results before you go giving me thanks. I’ll do what I can.”

“Of course,” she said.

The town became visible up ahead and the sheriff’s office was on the right side of the road.

“Are we going to stop in there?” she asked.

“No. First thing we’re going to get you some breakfast and then we’ll see the sheriff. Besides, if I know Sparrow, she’ll probably be at Mattie’s diner anyway picking up her morning coffee. So, we might just get lucky and kill two birds with one stone.” His grin widened and then he laughed.

“Why is that funny?”

“Her husband’s name is Stone.” He glanced at her. “Stone Bishop is on the Team Trojan unit of the Brotherhood Protectors.”

Liberty nodded again. “It sounds like there are a lot of these Brotherhood Protectors living here in Fool’s Gold.”

“Yeah. About seventy-five or so now. Maybe more.” Asher slowed his truck as they passed Peak Realty pointing to the right. “There’s the bed and breakfast I was telling you about and beside it is Mattie’s Diner.”

He turned onto Bear Paw Trail and found a parking spot on the street, and they got out, walking back to Main Street. “There’s also Team Falco, the firefighting five brothers who pull double duty working for the Colorado Division as well as the Fool’s Gold Fire Department. Then there is Team Raptor who runs The Centre on the outskirts of town. It’s this great place to work out, take yoga classes, and train. If you get a chance while in town, you should really check it out.”

“Are you part of a team?” she asked when he opened the door to the diner for her to enter.

“I am. My buddies from service and I compose Team Watchdog.”

She giggled. “Watchdog? Are they all lean and mean like you?”

He arched his brows a few times at her. “Honey, I’m far from mean. I might be bad, but that’s when I’m at my best.”

“Modest, are you?”

He chuckled. “We were dubbed that because we do recon and are watching over everything.”

He walked into the dining area and looked around. “Looks like we’re sitting at the counter. Do you mind?”

She shook her head and followed him over to the vinyl stools where Mattie, the owner, was wiping it down where two spots had just opened.

“Morning, Asher, how are things out at the Lost Valley?” she asked.

“Fine.”

“I’m surprised you’re in town instead of eating there,” she filled their coffee cups and placed two menus in front of them.

“I was out early scaling the rocks at Ute Pass when I came upon Ms. Killion stranded. Her car broke down, so Joe from Three Guys has it checking it out. We’re going to get some breakfast while we wait.”

“Deanna’s got a breakfast casserole this morning, buttermilk biscuits, and a side of ham, bacon, or sausage, your choice as the special. Or you can order off the menu. I’ll give you a few moments to look it over.”

Once she was gone to help another customer, Asher laid the menu down and looked at Liberty, “I’m partial to the hotcake platter.”

“I had a feeling that’s what you’d order,” she said. “You can get away with eating like that and not worry about where those carbs go.”

“I burned up a lot of calories climbing this morning.”

“I’m sure you did,” she said, not once looking up from her menu. “There’s not a single healthy option on here.”

“Don’t let Mattie hear you say that. She prides herself on serving a good variety of food. Eggs are healthy. The bacon is lean, and so is the sausage.”

“Turkey sausage would be better for her customers and an egg white omelet option wouldn’t be a bad choice either.”

“At least you aren’t a vegan,” he muttered.

“No. I’m not. I like my meat.” She laid down the menu and sipped her coffee. Then she gave a sigh. “What if I can’t find my sister? What am I going to do?”

He laid a hand over hers. “Let’s not worry about that just yet. Getting you something to eat is our priority right now.”

Mattie returned. “Are you ready to order?”

“I want the hotcake platter, eggs scrambled, covered, and smothered. Bacon crisp.”

“And for you?” Mattie asked.

“Toast with two eggs over easy. Do you have yogurt?”

“No. But we have a fresh fruit cup.”

“I’ll take that,” Liberty said.

“Bacon?” Mattie asked.

“I’ll just steal a piece of his.”

“Hey now!” Asher objected.

Mattie laughed. “I’ll be back to refill your coffee cups.”

“I’ll be right back as well.” Liberty got up and looked around. “Um... which way to the restrooms?”

Asher rotated his stool and pointed her in the right direction. “Hurry back.”

She smiled and made her way through the maze of tables to the powder room as it was called on the door. The décor was quite chic for such a small town, and she was shocked by her reflection in the mirror. She quickly dug in her purse and found a comb, running it through her shoulder-length blonde hair so it didn’t look so stringy from the heat. Her hair was one area she always had trouble with, but Justus didn’t. Her hair had body and was easier to manage, just like their mothers had been.

Damn it.

Hot tears threatened to spill forth and she closed her eyes to keep them at bay, but it did no good. They fell down her cheeks and she was sniffing like a child when the door to the restroom opened, and a brunette entered.

“Are you okay? Would you like me to get someone for you?” she asked.

Liberty shook her head, unable to speak, as she tried to stop the tears. “I—I’m sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry for. Sometimes we must cry,” the woman said, grabbing tissues from a nearby box and handing them to her. “I saw you were with Asher when I came in with

Simon. I'm Jocelyn. Simon is a Brotherhood Protector like Asher, but he works at The Centre on the outskirts of town."

Liberty wiped her eyes and then she blew her nose, tossing the used tissue in the trash. Then she washed her hands, splashing cold water on her face before blotting herself dry with a paper towel. "He mentioned that to me, but he didn't tell me about the individual members who worked at The Centre or their girlfriends."

"Wife." Jocelyn held up her left hand, wiggling her fingers to show off the lovely diamond band on her fourth finger. "We haven't been married long. I have my own PI office in town at the other end of Bear Paw Trail here. I guess he didn't tell you that either?"

"Actually, he did say something about introducing me to the local PI."

"He did?"

She nodded. "I'm Liberty Killion. My younger sister is missing. That's why I'm blubbering in the bathroom. I guess I held it together as long as I could. It didn't help getting shot at this morning out at the pass after my car ran out of gas."

"What? Oh, honey, you have been through a lot. I'd be falling to pieces right now. Tell me more and maybe I can help."

She retraced her story from arriving in Colorado until meeting up with Asher and arriving at the diner for breakfast. "He thinks I should just focus on getting some food down first and then looking for her."

"I can understand his reasoning. And those circles under your eyes tell me you haven't slept much since you got off the plane either. I don't want to give you false hope, but I believe that between the brotherhood, my services, and our tapping into Chambers Search and Rescue we might be able to get you one step closer to having your sister back with you. And I'm sure Asher would have told you about Rita once you'd eaten breakfast."

"Rita?"

“She owns Chambers Search and Rescue. Of course, we don’t know that we need her services, but we can alert her team and they can be on the lookout for Justus and Chaney when they are out on the trails around here and in Colorado Springs. But as for figuring out who was shooting at you, that is a tough one. Have you reported it to the sheriff’s office yet?”

“No, but Asher is expecting to see the sheriff when she comes here for coffee.”

“True enough. Sparrow does visit Mattie for that,” Jocelyn said. “I’m sure he has you covered.”

Liberty nodded, tucking her hair behind her left ear, and smiled, feeling better hearing this possibility. “Thank you for talking with me. I think I can go back out and eat my breakfast now.”

“Good. I’m glad to hear it. Have Asher bring you to my office once you’re finished. We’ll map out a search plan to find your sister and go from there,” Jocelyn said. “I’ll definitely have him bring me by.”

She returned to the counter and took her seat beside Asher as Mattie placed her food in front of her. “Thank you.”

“Perfect timing,” he said, leaning toward her, drowning his hotcakes in syrup.

“I ran into Jocelyn, the PI, she’s married to Simon from The Centre.”

“Sure. I wanted to introduce you to her after we left here. That’s great.”

“She mentioned we should head over to her office once we finish here to start a search plan and she wants us to contact Rita from Chambers Search and Rescue.”

“Another stop on my list of to-dos today,” Asher said.

Liberty buttered her toast. “Jocelyn thought it might be.”

“I already talked to Sparrow while you were in the powder room. She came in to pick up coffee to go for the station and I filled her in while she waited. She’d like to speak to you about

the shooting when we have time. I promised to bring you by later for her to ask you a few questions and file an official report.”

“Of course,” Liberty agreed. “So, the word is getting out to those who need to know, what do we need to do now?”

“Be patient, stay calm, and keep a clear head as we work the plan that is drawn up to try to find your sister and her friend. That’s really all we can do.”

CHAPTER 3



ASHER DIDN'T REALLY WANT to worry Liberty any more than she already was, but he was afraid that the window on finding her sister was growing narrow. She'd been looking for Justus and Chaney on her own for forty-eight hours already before he met up with her. The normal window to find someone who had been abducted was 72 hours and that meant if she'd been taken within that time frame there were less than twenty-four hours left to find her before the case went cold. From what she'd told him, Captain Thompson in Colorado Springs had been very supportive of her search, which he should have been. Sparrow had promised to reach out and follow up with the man because she'd had dealings with him on another case.

"You're quiet," Liberty said as they walked down Bear Paw Trail toward Lassiter Private Investigations.

"Just thinking about everything you told me this morning dealing with finding your missing sister and whether there is something else we need to do. I want to call Swede and give him the cell phone numbers to ping. I don't think we should wait for that."

"Okay." She pulled out her phone and brought up the girls' numbers for him.

Asher dialed Swede and got him on the line. "Hey buddy, it's Asher Nolte out in Fool's Gold. How's it going?"

"Not bad. What's up?"

"I've got two cell phone numbers I need you to trace if you have the time. The girls are missing, and we are trying to find

them. The window is closing so if you can get us a location that would be awesome,” he explained.

“I’ll see what I can do. Just send them my way,” Swede said.

“Great. Thanks,” Asher said.

“What do you mean the window is closing?” Liberty asked, tucking her hair behind her left ear.

He winced. He’d hoped she wouldn’t pick up on that, but she had. And he realized she had a nervous habit of tucking her hair behind her left ear. He’d seen her do it several times already that morning.

“Seventy-two hours is the typical time frame to find a missing person alive. I estimate that you’ve been searching around forty-eight on your own already. We don’t know how long it was before you discovered they were missing that they actually went missing. So, you see what I’m getting at when I say that the window is closing because it already could have closed.”

She nodded, staring blankly past him. “You think she could be dead?”

“No. That’s not what I’m saying. We don’t know that. We only know she isn’t where she said she was going. Let me finish my text and let’s go inside and talk to Jocelyn.” He quickly sent the information to Swede and then ushered her into the investigator’s office before she jumped to any more wrong conclusions. He knew it was her worry for her sister’s safety that was causing her to do that.

“Good morning,” Jocelyn said as they entered. “I’ve got a pot of coffee brewing. It should be ready shortly. I’ve tried to prepare a folder with everything I thought we’d need for when you arrived to save time. Do you have a recent photograph of your sister and her friend that has gone missing?”

“I do,” Liberty said. “I got it from their roommates before I left the Colorado State campus when I arrived two days ago.”

“Good thinking,” Jocelyn praised. “We need to post pictures and send these out to social media groups. I have

contacts at the FBI who will send these on to other organizations to alert them that the girls are missing. Have you been able to get in touch with the other girl's parents?"

"No. The roommates didn't know how to do that. Captain Thompson was going to try to reach out to the Dean of Students office at the university and do that. But I haven't heard from him whether he succeeded or not," Liberty explained. "He felt he'd have better success getting that information being in law enforcement than I would."

"I know him. He helped me when the hotel where I was head of security had a bomb threat several months ago before I became a private investigator. I'll give him a call and follow up. See what I can find out on the progress with the Daniels being located. In the meantime, Liberty, have a seat at the table here while I get you that coffee. Can you text me that photo?" Jocelyn handed her a card with her cellphone number on it. "Also, if you can jot down a description of each girl on this form for me and any of the other details that are asked for, it will help with the investigation I am going to open into their disappearance. I'm a former FBI so I have a background in missing persons. I don't want to alarm you, but local authorities do have task forces set up for human trafficking if we should need those services."

Liberty slowly nodded understanding what the woman meant. She knew that was a likely outcome for both Justus and Chaney. Why else would both girls go missing together?

The thought that her sister and Chaney could be at this moment be forced into prostitution ran across her mind and she felt so ill she thought she might lose her breakfast. She clutched her stomach and took several deep breaths to steady her nerves before she was able to speak again.

"I'm beginning to think coming to Fool's Gold was the right move on my part," Liberty finally said.

"I know it was." Asher laid a hand on her shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. "You take your coffee black, right?"

"Yes."

He went over to the counter where the coffee pot sat, and Jocelyn was already getting the mugs ready. "Thank you for this."

"My pleasure. Besides, the brotherhood was there when I needed help. I'll keep her busy with the paperwork on this end if you want to head out and round up a few of the guys to start searching. I know she was worried about the supposed new boyfriend of her sister's and his friend no one knew. That didn't sit well with me either. What about you?"

"No. But I didn't want to go there immediately. They could just be reckless twenty-year-olds out having a good time like the roommates suggested."

"Have you contacted Swede?" Jocelyn asked.

"You know him too?" Asher asked.

She put her thumb and forefinger together leaving a small space of distance apart. "This much, but I know that Simon used him on that project of mine that I was talking about earlier and he did some fancy computer work cracking into hard drives. I bet he could get into those girls' cellphones and find their locations if you gave him their numbers."

Asher nodded. "Already on it. Just waiting for his return call."

"Good." Jocelyn leaned back, glancing in Liberty's direction. "I feel for her. If you could have seen her crying in the powder room at Mattie's."

"She was crying?"

Jocelyn nodded, reaching for the brewed coffee, and poured mugs for them all.

"I didn't realize."

"Don't say anything then. I'm sure she didn't want you to know she broke down, that's the reason she went to the lady's room."

"Damn it. I told her to stay strong. I must have come across as insensitive to what she was going through right before she went there."

“I’m sure she knew your heart was in the right place. You just wanted her to stay focused because time is of the essence right now.” She handed him a mug and then carried two over to the table where she sat down with Liberty. “How are you doing here?”

“Good. I’ve almost got this form filled out,” she replied. “I’m sorry that I don’t know much about Chaney Daniels other than what her photo is telling me. I have only met her one other time and that was extremely brief.”

“No problem. We can fill in the holes as we go on this. The main thing is we know her age, name, hair, and eye color to go with the photo and that the girls were last seen together on a hiking trip. You finish up while I go call Captain Thompson,” Jocelyn said. “By the way, do you have a photo of the guys they went on this trip with?”

“No. The girl’s other roommates had nothing. Not even their last names.” Liberty hung her head.

“Asher, send the photo I just texted you to Swede please.”

“You got it.” Asher sat down at the table beside Liberty, squeezing her shoulder. “I need to head out in a few minutes to meet up with my team. I should have already reported for work. I’ll be back to get you and we’ll head over to meet with Rita Chambers this afternoon. Okay?”

“Of course. I’m sorry to have detained you,” Liberty said. “You’ve been more than kind.”

“Don’t worry about it. I won’t be long. If you need me, here’s my card with my number on it,” he said. “That goes for you too, Jocelyn.”

“Thanks, Asher,” the PI called from her desk.

HE DIDN’T MAKE it to his truck before his phone rang. It was Mason.

“Hello.”

“Dude, where are you?”

“Leaving Lassiter Private Investigations in Fool’s Gold. I ran into a woman who broke down near Ute Pass where I go

climbing in the mornings when I stopped she was being shot at from somewhere nearby and I saw her into town while Joe at Three Guys worked on her car. Then I brought her to see Jocelyn. Mason, her sister is missing. I've got Swede tracing cellphone numbers. I know I'm late, and I should have called you already, but time got away from me."

"How pretty is she?" Mason asked.

"Extremely. But that has nothing to do with it. She's a civil liberties lawyer. She could eat me for breakfast if I got out of line."

"That might be fun for you," he kidded him. "I'll tell Jake you're on your way. He wanted to call an impromptu meeting but some of the team's members weren't around. We're trying to round everyone up. Something big must be going down."

"I'll be there as soon as I can get back to where I parked my truck and head toward Lost Valley."

"Don't get a speeding ticket. Apparently, Sparrow has a few new deputies on the force and they are writing them left and right. Jake said he won't pay them for us if we get them, even if we're on duty."

"Gotcha."

He ended the call and hurried to his truck careful not to jaywalk as he crossed the street. Then he pulled out and drove up Bear Paw around the block passing by the elementary school and coming back down Ridgeline Rd to head back out of town toward Lost Valley Ranch. Traffic was light and he made it to LVR within half an hour.

Simon was pulling up in his Range Rover as he got out. "Did you just leave my wife?"

"I did. She's working with the woman I had breakfast with," Asher said.

"Good. Thanks for letting her run with that. I haven't seen her happier since we got back from our honeymoon. She doesn't get much business around here," Simon said.

“I’d say not with all of us around. Who needs a private investigator when the Brotherhood Protectors can do the job.”

Simon winced. “Don’t let Jocelyn hear you say that.”

“Sorry man. The truth hurts.”

They walked around to the back of the building and took the stairs down to the headquarters entrance. The room was filled with men of various sizes and muscle mass. Some with tattoos, others without. He spotted Team Trojan huddled together near the Colorado Division guys. Simon was representing Team Raptor it looked like because he didn’t see any more of his teammates there. Nor did he see anyone from Team Falco. They must all be on call at the fire department. Which left Team Watchdog huddled over to the side, standing together, still feeling like the odd men out being the newest members of the brotherhood to join the ranks.

Mason Quinn and Ryker Callahan were standing tall together while Cruz Lacerda and Kent Palmer leaned against a desk. Cruz looked like he had the weight of the world on his shoulders. Asher hated that for his pal, but the marital trouble within the Lacerda household was only something that Cruz and Ayla could solve together.

The door opened and Marcus Falco slipped in wearing his firefighting uniform. His face was smudged with soot and his hair was a sweaty mess from wearing his helmet. The stench of something burning quickly filled the room. A couple of the Colorado Division men began to cough and he flipped them a bird which caused a roar of laughter to follow.

Jake walked to the front with a limp and when he got there the room instantly went quiet. “Thank you all for coming out. I know it was hard to get all teams together on such short notice and believe me, if I could have planned for this meeting better, we would have, but when information of this nature comes down the pike, it’s best to get it out as quick and as fast as we can. I won’t beat around the bush here or keep you in suspense. We’ve received intel of a crime ring that has moved into the area. At this time, we know that there are drugs involved, but we also believe that it involves sex crimes as

well. To what extent, we're unsure. But we need to be vigilant to keep our eyes and ears open. Fool's Gold is not the kind of town where something like this goes on. Sure, there have been gangs, gambling, extortion, etc. but nothing like what is believed to be involved here. We also need to keep this under wraps as we work to prevent news of this from spreading throughout the town and alarming the citizens prematurely."

"How can we do that when it sounds like we're going in blind here?" Stone Bishop asked. "Even the sheriff doesn't know anything about this yet."

Jake nodded. "That's true. She doesn't and we need to keep it that way until I get more confirmed intel on what activity has been spotted in our neck of the woods. Is that clear? Like I said, I hate to be vague, but this is what I have been given and I've been asked for us to keep our eyes open and our ears to the ground for anything that might give us a clearer picture as to what is going on here."

"When you say there could be sex crimes involved, do you think it could mean a sex ring? Or simple prostitution? Or are you talking about sex trafficking?" Asher asked.

"All are possible," Jake said. "To give you a better understanding of what I have been told. Swede Svenson picked up internet chatter about it and dug deeper. He went to Hank Patterson with what he gathered. All he knows is it's somewhere near the Ute Pass."

"Do you know if he was tracing the cellphone numbers I sent him this morning when this happened?" Asher asked.

Everyone turned to look in his direction when he asked that.

"Hank didn't relay that to me," Jake said. "But it sounds like you may know some details that could help clear things up whether they are related or not. Care to share?"

Asher stepped forward. "A woman showed up in Fool's Gold today looking for her younger sister and college roommate who have been missing since they went on a supposed hiking trip in the Garden of the Gods or Seven Falls

area. They were believed to have gone with the younger sister's new boyfriend and his buddy who showed up out of the blue. Neither girl knew much about this second guy. Or the first for that matter. The other three roommates believed the girls were having a good time when they didn't return after their weekend trip. I called Swede to see if he could ping the girl's cellphone numbers and get us a location on them or at least the last cell tower they were near. I left the woman with Jocelyn Lassiter who is devising a search plan with her. The kicker to this is when I found the woman she was stranded on the side of the road because her car which she'd just filled up before leaving Colorado Springs was out of gas and she was being shot at from above the Pass. I got her out of there as fast as I could and when we returned five minutes later so Joe from Three Guys could tow her, whoever had been shooting at her was gone as well."

"That is a twisted occurrence," Jake said. "Have you discovered why she was being shot at?"

"Not yet and she doesn't know why anyone would be doing it either."

"Then you need to find out. And the missing girls?" Jake said.

"I have a photo of the two missing girls that I can share with everyone so if you were to run across them you could get word to me or Simon, and we could let Jocelyn know. We're also going to contact Rita Chambers and make her team aware when they are out doing their searches to keep an eye peeled for the girls. We figure the more eyes open the better. The seventy-two-hour window is closing fast on this one."

"Asher is right," Jake agreed. "Does anyone have questions about anything he's mentioned? Whether it's related to what I have told you or not, we need to be looking for these two girls if they're in the area. And we need to be aware that there is a sniper on the loose taking shots at parked cars on the side of the road. We can at least proceed with this in mind."

"I've just sent their photo out to the Colorado Division list so everyone should have it now," Asher said. "Their names are

Justus Killion and Chaney Daniels. They are twenty years old and go to Colorado State University.”

Low murmurings around the room began to flow as the men got the pings on their phones and they began discussing the case among themselves.

“Does Sparrow know about these girls?” Stone asked.

“She does. I spoke with her at Mattie’s diner this morning when I saw her and made her aware of the situation,” Asher explained. “That’s where we ran into Jocelyn and Simon.”

“What about the shooting?” Stone asked.

“That as well,” Asher assured him.

“I think you should take the lead on this, then,” Jake said. “Whatever your team is working on together or individually, you should continue looking into these two missing girls as well as the shooting and make it top on your list right now.”

Asher nodded. Then he looked over at Mason who was their unofficial team leader, and he gave him a go-ahead nod as well. “I can do that, Cog,” he said.”

“Alright then. Does anyone have any further questions?” Jake asked. “If not? Then, back to work. And thank you again for coming. I’ll be sending out updates as I get them. Be watching the division text line for news.”

Simon came over to talk to Asher again. “I have a feeling this is all connected. I don’t buy into coincidences. Swede wouldn’t suddenly hear chatter about this crime ring in the area around the same time that these two girls go missing if they weren’t connected.”

“You can say that again,” Kent said. “If you need my help, you just give me a yell on this. I’d go with you now, but I’ve got to go out to Chambers Search and Rescue. There’s something going on out there that I’ve been sent to look into.”

“Thanks, buddy,” Asher said.

“Is anyone heading back into Fool’s Gold?” Marcus Falco asked from across the room.

“You need a ride?” Asher asked, walking toward him.

“Yeah. The engine dropped me off as it passed this way so I could make the meeting and represent Team Falco. It’ll be at least an hour before one of my brothers can make it back here to pick me up otherwise.”

“No problem. I’m going there,” he said.

“Thanks. I’ll even shuck off my smelly gear for ya,” Marcus said.

“Much appreciated. If you think it will help?” He said as they headed out to his truck.

“Believe me, it will make a difference.”

“If you’re sure. I’d hate to ask you to sit in the truck bed,” Asher said.

Marcus chuckled. “Whichever you prefer. I don’t mind as long as I get to hit the shower and get cleaned up.”

RJ ran out of Gunny’s Watering Hole and caught up to them before they reached his truck. “Here Marcus, Jake asked me to bring you this wet towel and a bottle of water so you could get cleaned up a little and hydrate after fighting that fire.”

“Thanks.” He took the towel and wiped his face, neck, and hands before giving it back to her. He took off his gear and tossed it into the back of Asher’s truck until he was only standing there in his sock feet, a pair of shorts, and a Fool’s Gold FD t-shirt. Then he took the bottle of water and drank it down in a couple of swallows. “I didn’t know I was that thirsty. Thank him for thinking of me.”

“You’re more than welcome. It’s good to see you again. You and Charli don’t get out this way much anymore,” RJ said.

“Her schedule and mine are opposite right now. Plus, she’s got a job clear in Colorado Springs that her crew is working on that’s keeping her out of town most of the week. So, it’s hard to get together when I’m off to even come hang out,” Marcus explained. “We’d love to come kick back and relax at the

Watering Hole real soon if we're ever in the same place at the same time."

"I hear ya," RJ said. "Well, I better get back. I'm sure my tables are calling my name. Good seeing you again. I'll see you later, Asher."

"You know it," he said.

Marcus grinned. "Sounds like you're still living at Lost Valley then?"

"Yep. But I'm actively trying to find a place of my own."

Marcus climbed up into the truck. "Sweet ride. It still smells new. Maybe I better rethink climbing in the truck bed."

"You'll be fine," Asher said, getting in on the driver's side. "Have you seen anything out your way for rent? I know most of my team is either living outside of Fool's Gold or subletting from another brotherhood member who has moved in with his girlfriend."

Marcus shook his head. "No. Unless you'd want to take a look at the small apartment in my helicopter hangar out at Paradise. Charli built it with an apartment for me, but then my brothers voted for us to get the house she built on the property. Seth got the original house and remodeled it, but Troy and Trent turned the barn and stables into houses and Heath converted the bunkhouse into a home for him and Tessa."

"Thanks for the offer. Can I come by and look at it?" Asher asked. "I'd want to see it and think about if I'd want to live so close to the five Falco brothers before I agree to anything."

Marcus laughed. "I get it. Boy, do I ever get it. There'd be little privacy. When you were at your apartment you'd be alone, I promise. But there are communal meals at Seth's for breakfast or dinner all the time. And I know you'd get invited to them whether you want to partake or not. So, I'll warn you ahead of accepting the apartment. And now that all of my brothers have babies there is someone crying at all hours of the night. Not that I'm losing any sleep over at my place."

"How many babies are we talking about?" Asher asked.

“Four. Within a few weeks to a few months of one another. Charli and I haven’t taken that plunge yet. Not that we haven’t tried, but we’re not sweating it either.”

“Again, that’s something I’d need to think about.”

Asher looked both ways before he pulled out onto the highway and headed back toward Fool’s Gold.

“The apartment is a sweet deal. State-of-the-art kitchen, Charli designed it thinking she’d be spending time there with me. I know she did. The master bedroom and bathroom combo are spectacular for such a small living space. There is also a loft area with an office space and a living room dining room combo on the main level. Lighting comes through tall windows, sliding glass doors, and solar panels from the roof.”

Asher grinned. “You really are making me want to see this apartment. When are you off work?”

“As soon as I grab a shower and check in with Troy. I have the next forty-eight off, but Charli is stuck in Colorado Springs.”

“It sounds like you miss seeing her.”

“I do.”

“Then why don’t you go down there and stay with her?”

“Because she says I’m a distraction from her work. Which I get. We do get a little crazy together sometimes and lose total track of the world around us, but that’s a good thing in my book. Besides, just because I’m off from the fire department doesn’t mean that the brotherhood won’t need me in the meantime. You won’t believe how many times I’ve ended up on a BP case on my FD days off.”

“Okay. I’ll try to get by there this evening then. I’ll text you before I swing by,” Asher said.

“Cool. I forgot to mention it’s furnished. So, it’s move-in ready.”

“That makes it even more perfect then,” Asher said

CHAPTER 4



ASHER DROPPED Marcus at the fire department and then headed back to Bear Paw Trail to Lassiter Private Investigations. He'd just parked in the little lot beside the investigation's office and Jackson Architecture when he received a text message from Jocelyn that she'd walked Liberty to Sam and Lillie's Bed and Breakfast to get a room. He pulled out and drove back toward the bed and breakfast, parking in the lot behind the establishment before going inside.

Sam was working the front desk when he entered. "Can I help you?"

"I have Ms. Killion's luggage for her. I believe she just checked in."

"She did," Sam said. "Let me call her room."

Asher waited while he made the call. He hadn't been in the bed and breakfast before, but it was a nice large home. The foyer served as the lobby because it had ample space for the front desk and a small seating area for guests as well as bookcases. A curved stairwell with a spindled rail and polished wood steps led to the upstairs floors.

"Ms. Killion said you can come on up to her room. It's on the second floor, room three."

"Thank you."

"We'll be serving lunch soon."

“I’ll be sure to let her know,” Asher said. He rolled the suitcase over to the stairs and then let the handle down before picking it up and carrying it up the flight to the second floor. There were only a few rooms on that level and he found room three before knocking.

Jocelyn answered. “Hi again.”

“Hello.” He stepped inside. “Sam said they’ll have lunch soon if you’re hungry.”

“I’m so glad you got here. I’m dying to take a shower,” Liberty said. “I’m not sure I want to eat lunch as much as I want to lie down and take a nap.”

“That’s the reason I brought her to check in,” Jocelyn said. “She was nodding off at my office. The more we talked the more she kept drifting. I could tell she needed a shower and a nap.”

“Then that’s what you need to do,” Asher said. “I’ll see if they can send a tray up to you once you wake.”

“Thank you. You both have been so wonderful,” Liberty said.

“You’ve got my number. Just call me later and we can plan on what our next move will be even if it isn’t until tomorrow,” Asher said. “But don’t forget you need to reach out to Sparrow sometime today. And if there is still time, I’d like to go over to Chambers Search and Rescue.”

“Okay. I won’t forget.”

“Same with me. You have my number. I’ll keep working on my end making phone calls and following leads. I’ll be in touch,” Jocelyn said.

She walked them to the door and bid them goodbye.

They went downstairs and Asher stopped by the front desk to talk to Sam about sending a tray upstairs to Liberty’s room later in the day once she woke up from her nap if she wanted one. Once that was taken care of, he headed outside with Jocelyn.

He waited until they were on the outside before he told Jocelyn there was a crime ring in the Fool's Gold area. "We have to keep this to ourselves. Jake was very explicit about it, but since you're working on this case with me to help Liberty, I thought you should know about it. Also, let's not tell her just yet. I don't want her jumping to conclusions thinking that this is where her sister has ended up. We don't know anything yet. We just know there was chattering on the internet and the girls went missing. These could be two totally separate cases."

Jocelyn nodded. "I agree. Was Simon at this meeting?"

"He was. He represented Team Raptor."

She smiled. "That's my man. He probably was the only one not offering training this morning, so the guys sent him."

"You want to grab lunch at the diner, and you can catch me up on any new information you've gathered while I was at that meeting?" he said.

She glanced at her watch. "Might as well since we're right here." They walked toward the diner. "I did talk to Captain Thompson. He was able to reach Chaney Daniels' parents. They're on their way to Colorado Springs to meet with him. He'll reach back out to me once they've arrived."

"That's good that he was able to contact her parents. I know Liberty was happy about that."

"She was."

They entered the diner and found a booth. Mattie came over and her brows arched. "Twice in one day. I feel special. What's going on? Where's the blonde you were with earlier, Asher?"

"Sleeping. We got her checked in at Sam and Lillie's."

"Levi said there was a big meeting out at LVR earlier. Were you there?" Mattie pulled out her order pad.

"I was and before you get any ideas, I can't tell you what it was about. I'm sure your husband already told you that." Asher took the menu Jocelyn handed him. He opened it up and

glanced at it quickly. “Give me the meatloaf special and a glass of iced tea.”

“He mentioned that it was top secret. Not too many of those types of meetings that go down out there,” she said, scribbling on her pad. “And for you, Jocelyn?”

“Burger with rings. American cheese and medium well on the patty.”

“You got it. Do you want a soda or a malted with that?” Mattie asked.

“Water with lemon today. Thanks.”

“Are you sure? That’s not your normal.”

Jocelyn leaned across the table toward her. “I know, but my jeans are getting a little tight from overindulging. No one makes a malted like you, Mattie.”

She laughed and patted her hand. “I gotcha. Sorry for that, but not.”

“I didn’t hear that,” Asher said.

“Of course, you didn’t,” Jocelyn said. “Because if you did, I’d have to kill you and hide the body. I’m a former FBI. I know how to do it too.”

They both laughed. When they sobered, Jocelyn put the menus back behind the napkin dispenser.

“In all seriousness, what do you think our next move should be?” Asher asked.

“Nothing without Liberty. She made it clear to me she wanted to be involved every step of the way.”

He nodded.

“I’m going to also follow up with Sparrow about the shooting,” Jocelyn said. “That is, if you don’t mind?”

“No. Not at all. I appreciate you jumping in on it. Jake’s made me lead on this other, so I’m trying to juggle it all.”

“Glad to help.”

“I’m going to head about to Paradise Ranch once we finish lunch and look at an apartment while we wait for her to wake up. I’ve got to find my own place to live. Gunny and Jake are being nice letting me stay at LVR for as long as I need, but my whole team has already found places and I’m still there. It shouldn’t be so hard to find a spot.”

“I have no words of wisdom on that. Simon had a place already when I came to Fool’s Gold. I guess I could ask him how long it took him to find one. If you think that would help. Do you think you really want to live out at Paradise with the Falco clan?”

“I’m really debating about that. Besides five firefighter brothers, I’d be dealing with their wives and their newborn babies who are very close in age according to Marcus. He swears I’ll have privacy, but I’d be expected to join in communal meals when I’m available over at Seth Falco’s place. Not sure I’m ready for that expectation.”

She smirked. “At least Marcus was upfront with that. It would be worse if you took the place and then found out. Don’t you agree?”

“Sure, it would.”

“So where is this apartment on the ranch anyway?” she asked.

“Apparently, it’s in the hangar with his helicopter. Charli built it for him with a pretty impressive kitchen from what he told me. It has a bedroom, loft office area, and dining/ living room area.”

“It sounds interesting and worth your time to take a look at. If I didn’t need to send a few feelers out to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children and the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System about Justus and Chaney I might ride out with you,” Jocelyn said as Mattie returned with their drinks and plates. She also set a bottle of ketchup on the table.

“Can I get you both anything else?”

“Everything looks great,” Asher said. “I think I’m good for now.”

“Same. Thanks.”

Mattie nodded. “I’ll be back to check on you. Enjoy.”

“Why do you need to contact those agencies?” Asher asked.

“Because they will broadcast pictures of the girls on national news and social media networks across the country which can aid in our locating them,” Jocelyn explained.

“But if they have been taken by this crime ring wouldn’t that make them try to get rid of them?” Asher asked. “It could lead to harm coming to the girls.”

“The benefit outweighs the bad,” she insisted.

“I hope you’re right. I’d hate to have to explain otherwise to Liberty.” He dug into his food.

When they finished, he texted Marcus to make sure he was at the ranch before he headed out there as he walked back to the parking lot of the bed and breakfast with Jocelyn. Then he hopped into his truck and headed down Ridgeline Road toward Lost Valley and Paradise ranches. If he did take the apartment, at least if he had to be at an early morning meeting at the LVR he’d not have far to go. Just a few miles. That would be a plus over his other teammates who had taken residences outside of Fool’s Gold.

MARCUS WAS SITTING on the wrap-around front porch of his home when he drove up. He waved and took a few steps down to the walk, motioning with his hand for him to keep driving toward another structure on the property.

Asher drove slowly toward the newest-looking tall building that looked to be a hangar. It was brown with a high-pitched, slanted roof on one side and several windows of different sizes, width, and shape on the other. He immediately recalled how Marcus had mentioned the apartment had ample lighting.

He finally parked and got out. "I hope I didn't wake you up by calling."

"No. I haven't been here that long. We had lunch and then cleaned up after before I was officially off duty. I'm glad you decided to come on out and look at the place. I talked to Charli, and she agreed that if you wanted to rent it she'd be happy to have you stay here."

"Thanks."

"Come on in and let me give you a tour. I think I already mentioned it's furnished. Besides the hangar where my helicopter stays, there is a one-vehicle garage on the other side where you can park your truck to keep it out of the heat in the summer and the cold in the winter. There's a garage door opener for that unit."

"Sweet."

"Yeah, Charli thought of everything with this hanger, apartment combination. I told her she really should have entered the designs into a national design competition or something, but my wife can be a little modest about her work." Marcus unlocked the door and led him through the living room into the dining area to show him the kitchen. "It's small, but very efficient and state of the art for a bachelor to use. The island has a sink in it and there is a dishwasher. All stainless-steel appliances. Even counter space at the island to eat with bar stools for quick meals, leaving the table for longer."

"Are these sliding doors or just floor-length windows?" Asher asked.

"They are sliding, but they also push out if you want to open them to bring the outdoors in. We were going to create a patio area there, but when we got the bigger house that changed that. So, if you decide you want to do anything like it, I'll be happy to help as time permits."

"Don't get ahead of yourself. I haven't said yes, yet," he cautioned. "It's a great place so far, but we haven't talked price. And we haven't talked more about these communal meals that I might be asked to attend. What if that isn't my

thing? Would the others get bent out of shape if I didn't do it...all of the time...maybe once or twice?"

Marcus chuckled. "I'm sure they'd understand. Charli even mentioned it was one thing to love the Falco brothers the way she did, but not everyone was going to do that. So, I get you, man. We have a lot to handle. And just because you move in here doesn't mean you're going to become part of the family. Although I've found most of the brotherhood guys feel like an extension of family to us. You might feel different."

"I get you there. We are brothers for sure. I just don't want to walk in there and it feels all awkward like the odd man out," Asher said.

"Sure. Sure," Marcus led him into the living room and pointed up. "There is the loft office area."

"How do you get to it? I don't see any stairs."

Marcus walked over to the wall where there were four little diamond-shaped windows in a square pattern and he pressed a button. The wall moved revealing a four-person lift. They stepped inside and pressed the up button. The door closed and they were transported up to the loft.

"That is the coolest thing I've ever seen. What made Charli decide to put it in her hangar?"

"There wasn't space for stairs without it intruding into the living room area. And yet she wanted to utilize this space above the master bedroom for an office. Not that I spend much time on the computer, but I think she was thinking of when she was here with me and would need her own space."

"I love it. How long were the two of you dating when she was drawing up these plans?" Asher asked.

"That's the thing, we hadn't really started dating when she started. We were just flirting with one another and then I had to start protecting her because someone was trying to harm her. That really helped bring us both together because I had my eye on her from the time she'd started working on renovations for the ranch and she apparently had her eye on me too. She kept calling me Marine."

“You were her protector?”

“Yeah. I had to stay with her and her cousin, Melanie out at the Jackson ranch until it was destroyed.”

“Damn. You lost your place and she lost hers.”

“Yep.”

“Where did you both go?”

“Lost Valley Ranch where else.”

Asher laughed. “The home for lost souls.”

“You can say that again.” Marcus led him back to the lift and they went back down to the master bedroom. “This room is pretty standard. The bathroom is what is great. The shower with three shower heads and the automatic steam feature.”

“I bet she must be sick with regret that all of these upgrades that she put into this apartment are just sitting here not being used.”

“She had lamented over it, but then we talked about using it for when family come to visit and using it as a guest house.”

“Then maybe I shouldn’t take it,” Asher said.

“No. Remember, I told you I talked to Charli and she loved the idea of you renting it.”

“But after seeing the place I really am doubting I can afford it,” he said.

“We think five hundred a month is reasonable.”

“That’s way too low. What’s the catch?” Asher asked.

“You have to live with the Falco brothers.”

ASHER THOUGHT he was crazy as he drove back to Lost Valley Ranch to pack up his things, but he couldn’t pass up such a deal. So, what if he had to live with those crazy brothers? It might actually be nice having that comradery around again. It couldn’t be any worse than what it had been like when he lived on base.

He popped into Gunny’s and found RJ waiting tables and informed her that he was moving out.

“Okay then,” she said. “Leave your room key at the front desk when you get cleared out.”

“I will. And thanks for everything.”

“You know you always have a place here,” she said.

He hurried over to the lodge and up to his room where he quickly packed up his things. Then he drove back to Fool’s Gold and did a little grocery shopping before swinging by Sam and Lillie’s to see whether Liberty was awake from her nap.

Sam was still working the front desk when he came in.

“Hello again. Are you here to see Ms. Killion?” Sam asked.

“I am. Has she been down?” Asher asked.

“Not since you left.”

“Okay. Can I leave her a message then? I don’t want to call her if she is still sleeping. She hadn’t gotten much rest in the last forty-eight hours because she was traveling. But I want her to know where to reach me.”

“Sure.” Sam laid stationary and a matching B&B envelope on the counter for him to use.

“Thank you.” Asher thought for a moment before printing a short note with his cell number on it even though he was certain he’d given her that already, but it didn’t hurt to do it again. He folded the note and placed it in the envelope, wrote Liberty Killion room #3 on the outside, and handed it to Sam. “I appreciate your help.”

He left noticing two older men sitting on the front porch playing checkers. He realized they’d been there earlier in the day doing the same thing.

“Who’s winning?” He asked.

“He is,” they said in unison pointing at the other man.

“Are you staying here?” One of the gentlemen asked. “My niece and her husband run the place. I’m Silas March and this is Frank Corum.”

“No. I have an acquaintance staying here. I dropped her things off earlier and then I came by to check on her, but she was sleeping. Now I’m heading out for the night,” Asher explained.

“We see all sorts of things sitting here on the porch playing checkers. Hear things too,” Frank said. “If you need us to keep an eye on your friend for you, we could do that.”

“Thanks for the offer,” he said. “I’m sure she’ll be fine. Unless you know something, I don’t? Should I be worried? Is there danger lurking in Fool’s Gold?”

The men laughed.

“If only!” Silas said. “Then we’d have something to talk about.”

“See you around,” Asher said.

He turned and headed to his truck.

LIBERTY WOKE late in the day and felt disoriented, unsure where she was at first. Then she smelled the heavenly scent of blueberry pie and recalled checking into the bed and breakfast and Lillie telling her there would be blueberry pie for dessert. She decided it must be close to dinner time since she’d slept through lunch and the afternoon. Slowly, she rolled over and reached for her cell phone to check for the time. Then she got up and put on clean clothes before fixing her hair and going down to inquire about the evening meal. Asher surely had left town by now, deciding she wasn’t going to wake before nightfall.

The closer she got to the bottom of the stairs the stronger the aroma of food cooking in the kitchen greeted her and her stomach rumbled. If she was this hungry after skipping one meal what could Justus be feeling about now? That thought hit her like a wet dish rag and she faltered on the stairs, stumbling. She grabbed for the banister to catch herself and sat down on the next step before her legs gave out from under her. She couldn’t stop feeling as if this was all her fault. That she was to blame for this happening to her sister. It was irrational, but she still felt responsible.

“Ms. Killion, are you okay?” Sam called, rushing to her. “Did you fall?”

She stared at him but shook her head. “No. Where’s Asher?”

“He...he came by to check on you, but I told him you were still in your room resting, so he left just a few moments ago. He gave me this note for you. I heard him talking to my wife’s uncle on the front porch not long before you came down. Maybe he’s still here?”

Sam handed her the envelope and hurried to the front door.

She got up and followed him, noticing how neat and clear Asher wrote. That was rare in a man, in her opinion. She wondered where he’d gone to school. Maybe a boarding school that had taught penmanship.

A nice breeze greeted her when she stepped outside and she glanced up spotting the source. An outdoor ceiling fan stirred the otherwise hot summer air keeping the older gentleman nice and cool as they played their game of checkers.

“Did you see a young man come out?” Sam asked them.

“Sure did,” one of the men said without looking up. “Just missed him.”

“That’s his tail end fading in the distance,” the other said, pointing down the street.

Sam sighed. “I’m sorry, Ms. Killion.”

“It’s okay. He left his cell phone number in this note. I’ll give him a call after dinner,” she said. “When will that be? I’m starving since I slept through lunch.”

“Anytime now,” Sam said. “Are you staying for dinner, Frank?”

“You darn right, I am,” the gentleman with his back to her said, pushing back from the checkerboard. “You don’t have to ask me twice.”

“We’ll just finish our game after dinner,” the other said, standing. “Ms. Killion, will you join ole Frank and me at our table?”

“Uncle Silas...” Sam started to protest.

“I’d love to,” she said.

“Excellent!” Frank offered her his arm and escorted her inside. “We’re former reporters from Colorado Springs. We weren’t always checker players.”

“Is that right? I’d have never known. You do it so well.”

“What do you do when you aren’t visiting Fool’s Gold?” he asked.

“I’m a Civil Rights attorney in New York,” she explained.

“Fancy that. And what brought you all the way out here?”

“I came to visit my sister,” she said.

“And how did that go?”

“Not well. She wasn’t here when I arrived. I don’t know where she’s at. That’s what Asher is going to help me figure out,” Liberty said.

CHAPTER 5



LIBERTY WOKE FEELING MUCH MORE like herself. She dressed in jeans and a t-shirt prepared to take on the day. She pulled her hair back in a French braid, then put on her athletic shoes for walking and climbing. After eating dinner with Silas and Frank last night, she'd finally met up with Sparrow at the Police Station about the shooting. When she returned to her room, she'd called Asher, sharing how the two men were supportive of her situation and eager to help in any way they could.

"They're old men, Liberty. We don't want to get them injured. Besides, they must have done a number on you if you're eager to get them involved."

She laughed. "First of all, they are sixty-nine, not ancient. Second, Silas and Frank remind me of my grandfathers, so maybe that is why I warmed up to them so quickly. But if they can help out without putting them in harm's way—"

"We'll see," he said. "You have a good night. I'll see you in the morning."

"Okay."

Now, she couldn't wait to get downstairs to breakfast so she'd be ready to go when Asher picked her up. She felt good about today and knew they would find Justus and Chaney. It was the way she knew she'd win a court case before she walked into the courtroom.

To her dismay, Lillie served much the same kind of breakfast as Mattie had at the diner. The other guests were

eating without complaint. She knew she shouldn't make special requests when she didn't know when Asher would arrive, so she made herself a plate from the buffet and settled at an empty table. Silas came through refilling coffee cups. He stopped by her table to have a chat.

"I didn't know you helped out," she said.

"Normally I don't, but the little gal who does have an appointment this morning asked off. So, Lillie asked if I would pitch in," he said. "I thought why not if it gave me a chance to talk to you again? After we had dinner last night, I got to thinking so I called a former colleague at the paper in Colorado Springs and asked him about doing a story on your sister and her friend. He said yes."

"That's wonderful," Liberty said. "Captain Thompson is spearheading the search there and has been in touch with Chaney Daniel's parents. Your friend should contact him about when they will arrive so he can interview them."

"I'll do that. Let me go refill more coffee cups and I'll be back to talk to you." He moved on to another table and she went back to eating her breakfast. Before long, Frank Corum sat in the chair across from her.

"Good morning, Sunshine," he said with a to-go cup from Mattie's diner.

"Good morning to you," she said. "I see you eat at Mattie's and not here."

"Habit. Besides, Sam and Lillie get enough of me the rest of the day hanging out with Silas," he said. "I see he's playing waitress."

"I hardly call filling a few coffee cups being a waitress."

Frank shrugged. "No good deed goes unpunished."

Her phone buzzed and she looked at the screen. She texted that she'd be out in a few minutes, then she reached for her coffee cup and drank the last of it. "I hate to leave you, but Asher is waiting on me outside. The two of you behave today."

“What kind of mischief can we get into playing checkers?”
He arched a brow.

“I have a feeling you’d find a way.” She stood and pushed her chair in. “I’ll see you tonight if you’re still here when I return.”

She hurried upstairs to her room and grabbed her crossbody bag and phone charger for his truck before making a pitstop in the bathroom. While in there, she checked her hair one last time tucking her hair behind her left ear before going downstairs again and heading out to Asher’s truck.

“I hope I didn’t keep you waiting too long,” she said, climbing inside. “I was finishing breakfast.”

“Nope. It gave me time to give Jocelyn a call and see if there had been any updates since we spoke yesterday. But there were none. We’re going to take a drive out toward Ute Pass and explore some of the residential area roads out that way. I’m following a lead from some chatter our computer guru Swede picked up on over the internet to see if it pans out to anything. There are a few hiking trails out that way that locals know about. It’s a long shot, but if this guy the girls hooked up with is from around these parts, he might know about it.”

“Kurtis,” Liberty said.

“Right.”

“I’m willing to try anything if it will help us locate my sister,” she said.

“Good to know. I’ve been thinking about that. If you’re going to be hands-on in this investigation, we might encounter dangerous situations. I’m not saying we will, but we could. How are you handling a gun? Have you ever shot one?”

“Never.”

“I don’t want to put you in harm’s way. But I want you to be safe just the same, especially since someone was shooting at you. I think we should take a trip out to the gun range and let me show you how to fire a gun and use one properly. If you’re up to the task,” he said. “You don’t have to give me an

answer right away. You can think about it before you give me your answer.”

“Do you think I might have to use one?” she asked.

“I’m not sure you would, but have you ever taken a self-defense course?” he asked.

He saw her nod her head out of the corner of his eye.

“Back in college, but I’m sure I could use a refresher course.”

“Spencer Barnes does classes on that at The Centre. You should take a few sessions while you’re here. That would come in handy even if you couldn’t bring yourself to shoot a gun in a sticky situation.”

She laughed. “You’re making me feel nervous here.”

“That wasn’t my intent bringing this up. I just want you to be prepared for what we could be walking into if you’re going to be tagging along searching for your sister because anything is possible. It’ll make me feel better knowing you can handle the situation that we’re faced with if something should happen while we’re out there.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? That sounds like you think I can’t take care of myself. I beg to differ. I’ve been living on my own for over a decade and doing just fine, thank you very much. I was also able to keep myself safe from getting shot yesterday until you came along if you have forgotten.”

“Whoa now. Where did that come from? I was talking about us being armed with knowledge of the situation and you go to jumping to the wrong conclusions thinking I don’t believe you can handle yourself. Far from it or I wouldn’t be taking you along at all. Is that understood, Ms. Killion?”

“Understood.”

“Good.”

They drove in silence for a while then Asher’s phone rang through his console showing it was Three Guys Garage and he answered it.

“Hey Joe, what do you know?” he said.

“Lots and you aren’t going to like it. Ms. Killion ran out of gas because someone made puncture holes in the gas tank with what looked like a Phillips head screwdriver. If she got gas right before she left Colorado Springs then the distance is about right for her to run out where she did in my calculation. I’m just wondering how the holes got there. I’ve called the rental company and they are sending a replacement, upgrading her to the next level at no extra charge and docking three days of rental off her lease for the trouble. They were very apologetic, Ms. Killion. They also have approved me to fix the car before they pick it up.”

Asher pulled his Titan off on the side of the canyon road and parked. “You bring up a good question how those puncture holes got in her gas tank? Liberty, let’s retrace what happened once you stopped in Colorado Springs.”

“I went to the police station to report Justus and Chaney missing. I had to wait to speak to Captain Thompson because he was already in a meeting with someone.”

“Did you encounter anyone other than officers at the station?” Asher asked.

“Not really, other than the businessman who met with Captain Thompson and that was just in passing. He was one of those Good Ole Boy types if we were from the south. I’ve dealt with a few of them in New York in my line of work when they come to town. I’m not sure if the man was a politician or what, but I got the feeling he was there to stay in the captain’s good graces and butter him up. It was the vibe he gave off. Kinda like your six-sense feeling you get about things.”

“Hmmm. Interesting. Was why you were there ever mentioned in front of him?” Asher asked.

“Not that I recall, but that doesn’t mean that the desk sergeant wasn’t on speaker when he called back to tell Thompson I was there to see him and why.”

“And when you stopped for gas, did you leave the car unattended?” Joe asked.

“I filled up and paid at the pump, but then I pulled around to the convenience store and parked to run in and use the restroom and pick up a coffee to go. I was in there less than ten minutes.”

“Were you right in front of the store?” Asher asked.

“No, those spots were full, it was a little off to the side, but still visible from the inside.”

“The Gas ‘n Go as you leave the Springs, right?” Joe asked.

“That’s right,” Liberty said.

“I’ve been there. Those parking spots wrap around the side. If you parked there then it would be easy for someone to slip between two cars and go underneath hers, puncturing holes in the gas tank without anyone being the wiser.”

“But why?” she asked. “And why shoot at me once I run out of gas in the Ute Pass?”

“That is the million-dollar question,” Asher said. “Why indeed?”

“I’ll get the repairs done on this car and let you both know when the rental company arrives with the replacement car,” Joe said. “Good luck. I’m out.”

“Thanks, Joe,” Asher said.

“Do you think the shooting was random?” Liberty asked.

“Maybe. That’s what we have to assume for now, but we’re also keeping our eyes open for other possibilities because we can’t be sure,” he said checking his mirrors before pulling back onto the road.

Liberty watched the scenery as they drove along and she almost missed the ding of her phone alerting her that she had a text message coming in. “Can’t believe I have a signal up at this altitude.”

“Crazy how that works,” he said.

She dug her phone out of her crossover bag and almost dropped it when she saw who it was from. “It’s her!”

“What?”

“It’s Justus.”

“What does she say?” he asked.

Liberty swallowed, quickly pushing her hair behind her left ear. “Help!”

CHAPTER 6



ASHER SLAMMED on his brakes and turned to look at her. “Is that it?”

She nodded, biting her bottom lip as her face scrunched up like she was about to burst into tears, but she didn’t. She blinked and her visage cleared as she took a jagged breath.

Asher immediately called Swede. “Hey, buddy. I know you’re busy, but one of the numbers I gave you just texted us. Can you trace it? The number was—”

“I got it, no need to tell me,” Swede said. “The text was Help. It wasn’t just sent. I’m sorry to burst your bubble of hope. The timestamp shows it was actually sent the day that the girls left for their hiking trip, but due to lack of network connection where they were it couldn’t be received.”

“Then why did I just get it?” Liberty demanded.

“I don’t know. Unless the cellphone was near a network again,” Swede said. “Another possibility is that you passed by their location?”

They looked at one another and then began looking around their surroundings, but they had not traveled by any side roads since they spoke to Joe at the garage.

She tucked her hair behind her left ear again. “Do you know what this means? If that text was sent the day they left for the hiking trip that means they never reached their destination. They were in danger immediately. She tried to reach out to me before I even left New York.”

She laid her hand on her chest and held it there slowly breathing in and out to keep from crumbling at the thought that if she'd gotten that text then she might have alerted the authorities days earlier than she had.

"Thanks, Swede," Asher said. "Anymore chatter that you've been following about the Ute Pass area?"

"Actually, I can now confirm it's not just chatter. There's a video I'm going to send you since Jake said you're taking the lead on this. Let me know if you have trouble viewing it. I've cleaned it up the best I can, but Hank said the background looked familiar to him, he couldn't one hundred percent place it, but he thinks it's in Fool's Gold. Maybe you can, living there. Especially since Hank has only been there a few times."

"Will do. Thanks."

"Catch you later," Swede said.

Asher drove on for a short distance until he came to a place where he could turn around. "I think we should head back to town. I can drop you off at The Centre and see about those self-defense classes before I head over to headquarters and check out the video that Swede sent me."

"If you think that is best," Liberty said. "I think I just want to go back to the bed and breakfast. This is getting to be too much. The thought that Justus is out there needing my help and I can't get to her has me all tied up in knots."

"Come on. Shake it off. You can't get bogged down thinking like that. Do you allow your clients to wallow in despair when you're going to court?"

"Of course not," she said. "Is that what you think I'm doing?"

"It sounds like it." *Good, his abruptness had got her thoughts off herself and back on track.*

"Well...maybe, but I have this sour feeling in my stomach over this news. I'm afraid I'm going to be sick if I don't lie down," she said.

“That’s different. Could you have eaten something at breakfast that didn’t agree with you? What did you have?”

“I ate off the buffet. Eggs, bacon, a biscuit with white gravy which was good.”

“Was it your first time having it? The gravy? Maybe it was the milk, flour, and grease combination not setting well with your digestion system. I’ll get you back to the bed and breakfast as fast as I can. We’ll get you a ginger ale so you can get your stomach settled and you can lie down. I’ll call and check out the self-defense class schedule for you and set something up for tomorrow when you’re feeling better.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

FRANK AND SILAS were playing checkers when they arrived back at the bed and breakfast. Asher parked and helped Liberty to the house.

“What’s wrong?” Frank asked, stopping in mid-jump when he saw them coming up the steps.

Silas got up out of his chair. “Are you okay, honey?”

“She’s sick to her stomach. We got a text from her sister that only said help, but the timestamp was from a few days ago. It just didn’t reach her until today.”

“Heavens.” Frank laid his checker chips on the board.

Silas opened the front door. “Can we get you anything from the kitchen?”

“Do you think Lillie keeps ginger ale on hand?” Asher asked.

“I know she does. I’ll bring one up to her room. She’s in three, right?” Silas asked.

“Yes,” Liberty said, holding her stomach. “Go on to headquarters, Asher. I’ll be in good hands here. I just need to go up and lie down.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I really just need a little privacy,” she said. “Silas, leave the ginger ale outside my door. I’ll retrieve it”

“If that’s what you want,” Silas said.

“I do.” She hurried up the stairs to her room leaving them below.

JAKE COGBURN WAS in the Colorado Division office when Asher showed up shortly before noon. “Hey Jake, Swede sent me the video. Did he also send you a copy? I haven’t looked at it yet. I wanted to get it up on a large screen so I came straight here after talking to him.”

“He did send me a copy. I have it on the system here and can project it to our large panel monitor. Let me see if I can get Hank on the line. He’ll be interested in hearing what we have on the intel at this point.”

“Great, because Swede said Hank was certain the background was in Fool’s Gold, but he couldn’t be one hundred percent certain where since he hasn’t been around here that often. Maybe one of us can identify it since we live here,” Asher settled in one of the high back chairs at the conference table and waited for Jake to join him.

Soon Hank was on video calling into their meeting.

“Asher hasn’t seen this yet, so let’s let him watch before we discuss it,” Jake said.

“Alright. I’m ready on my end,” Hank said.

The video started with a desert scene that transitioned into a ghost town that was definitely one of Fool’s Gold then there was a makeshift stage with a new building in the distance and four girls walked on stage in skimpy attire with their backs to the camera. There was no way to tell who they were or how old they were other than they were young and developed. Two were blonde, one was brunette, and the other was a redhead. There was no way to tell if two of these girls were Justus and Chaney. Asher hoped to hell they weren’t. That was the last news he wanted to have to deliver to Liberty that her sister had been abducted to be sex trafficked. It was bad enough that she was missing.

“That building looks very familiar to me,” Hank said. “I’ve tried and tried to remember where I saw it when I was in

Fool's Gold, but I can't."

"It's the Lucky Strike Casino. The outline of the sign is a dead giveaway for me," Asher said. "I remember the first time I saw it in the distance it struck me as an odd shape."

"It is odd," Jake said. "It's supposed to be a hammer hitting an anvil, but it looks all wrong on the back side."

"Swede wanted me to point out that the background was filmed first and projected onto a greenscreen before the girls were filmed on stage. It was a two-part process," Hank explained.

"I was beginning to wonder about that," Asher said. "It would have drawn attention if they had actually been filmed out there."

"Clever, but not as smart as they thought they were having that identifying building in the background," Jake said. "Once we discover their location, we will have to move carefully not to spook them. The last thing we want is for him to move his whole operation before we can bust his nest."

"Swede is watching the dark web for any more chatter or videos about an upcoming auction and will keep you updated," Hank said.

"Auction? Do you think that's what's going to happen to these girls?" Asher asked.

"That is normally what these traffickers do if they don't put the girls straight into prostitution," Hank explained. "My sources tell me that traffickers who do videos of this nature are posting for their buyers to get a taste of what is yet to come. It's sickening, I know, but there are predators out there and we need to stop this before it escalates further in Fool's Gold."

"Roger that," Jake said. "We'll start combing the area with more patrols looking for signs of any nefarious activity."

"Keep me posted," Hank said.

"Will do," Jake replied before Hank ended his video call with them.

“Damn. I just hope that Justus and Chaney are not part of this,” Asher said. “The text for help that Liberty received today which Swede said was sent the day the girls were supposed to have left on their hiking trip really has me worried these two cases are connected, but we can’t be certain yet.”

“No. There isn’t proof of it, but if your gut is telling you they are, then there is a good chance your instinct is right. You’ve done reconnaissance work long enough to know how to follow the signs. Let’s play it by ear keeping these two cases separate until we know for sure they are one. Still, no need to worry Liberty unless we have to on this,” Jake said.

“Absolutely.” Asher stood. “I better get back out there. I left her at the bed and breakfast dealing with an upset stomach. I want to take her to the gun range this afternoon to give her some training on using a weapon. If she’s hellbent on being part of the search I want her to be prepared for any situation she might be faced with, even if that means she finds herself being captured despite my best efforts.”

“Have you put it to her that way?” Jake asked.

“Not in those terms.”

Jake grinned. “Good luck. RJ and I might swing by the gun range this afternoon too between the lunch and dinner shifts. I’d like to meet Liberty.”

“Sure. See you then.”

LIBERTY WAS FINISHING a baked potato when Asher walked into the bed and breakfast dining room. She waved for him to come join her.

“Are you feeling better?” he asked.

“Yes. Lillie has chicken pot pie for lunch if you are interested.”

“That sounds good,” he said, pulling out a chair at the table where she sat.

“I’ll let her know.” Liberty got up.

She walked to the kitchen door and pushed it open halfway, spoke to Lillie, and then returned. “How did things

go at headquarters with that video Swede sent you?”

“Good. We got an excellent visual and are going to start patrolling the area more heavily because of it. I was hoping you were feeling up to going to the gun range this afternoon so I could show you how to shoot a gun before I get tied up with patrol duty and can’t do it.”

“I am. I called Sparrow while you were gone and updated her on what Joe found out about the fuel tank damage. She was going to go over to Three Guys and get some photos of it for her police report. And see if she has any priors that match that MO.”

“That’s good. Thanks for following up with her. I suppose we should also check in with Jocelyn today and give her an update as well,” Asher said.

“Yes. I probably already should have done that, but getting my stomach settled took top priority I’m afraid,” she said.

“No problem. Nothing is worse than an upset stomach, especially if you don’t know if it is going to cause things to come from one end or the other.”

“Asher! I can’t believe you said that at the table,” she scolded.

“It’s true.”

“I don’t care. There’s...there’s proper etiquette.”

“Okay, Ms. Manners, I’ll try to do better to please you then.”

The kitchen door swung open and Lillie came out carrying a tray with two chicken pot pie dishes. One was a regular size and the other was a petite version. She sat them on the table in front of them with two glasses of ginger ale. “Let me know if you need anything else, honey.”

“I will. Thank you,” Liberty said.

They ate in silence for a few moments enjoying the food until Asher looked up and smiled, pushing back his empty dish. “That was amazing.”

“The vegetables were so tender and the thickening was savory for lack of a better description,” Liberty said. “I know I only had a small portion, but it was very good.”

“I’m glad I found you having lunch.”

“I’m glad you did as well,” Lillie said, coming to their table with a tea pitcher to refill glasses. “I have a lemon pie for dessert if you have room.”

“As tempting as that sounds, I better pass for now. Maybe after dinner,” Liberty said.

“I’ll pass as well,” Asher said. “I love lemon pie, but I’m stuffed. You’re a very good cook, Lillie.”

“Thank you,” she said.

“Don’t tell Deanna over at the diner, but I think you are even better than she is,” he added.

“Well, now, that is a compliment,” Lillie said, flushing, and she hurried back to the kitchen. “Sam, did you hear that.”

“While you finish your drink, I’m going to run upstairs and get my crossover bag and phone. I’ll be back in a minute,” Liberty said.

When she was gone, Lillie returned to clear the table. “My uncle Silas and Frank really have taken a shine to Liberty. I’ve never seen two older men more enamored by a young woman than those two have become. They haven’t stopped talking about her since they met her.”

“She finds them special too,” he said. “The first thing she told me this morning was how she spent her night talking to them last night. And how Silas wants to help her find her sister.”

“Promise me you won’t allow him or Frank to do anything dangerous and get hurt. I know they think just because they were newspapermen and Marcus allowed them to play undercover spies for him when Charli was in danger that they’re like Woodward and Bernstein, but neither one of them is invincible. I much prefer they spend their days sitting on my front porch here playing checkers and shooting the breeze.”

“I hear you,” Asher said. “I promise to keep them out of trouble.”

Lillie stacked up the used dishes on the table and headed back toward the kitchen.

Liberty returned and they headed out, stopping briefly to say hello to Silas and Frank who were eating a sandwich and drinking lemonade on the porch while playing a round of checkers.

“Don’t Lillie allow you to come inside during the day?” Liberty asked.

“Sure, she does, but we prefer to stay out here and enjoy the action,” Silas said. “There’s more that goes on in the street here than you would ever imagine.”

“Really?” Asher said.

“You don’t know how many times we almost see a wreck about to happen, not that we wish ill to the drivers or one of the sheriff’s new deputies write a ticket to someone for jaywalking. Those newbies are always trying to show off their power of authority.”

“I’ve heard about them. They are writing speeding tickets too,” Asher said.

“You haven’t been on the receiving end, have you?” Frank asked.

“No, but my buddy warned me that our boss wouldn’t be paying the fines if we got one,” he explained.

“Sounds fair enough,” Silas said.

“We better get going. See you two later,” Liberty bid them farewell.

“Not if we see you first,” Frank called.

Silas hooted.

Asher used his key fob to unlock the doors to his truck and then he opened the passenger door for Liberty to climb inside.

They were on their way to the gun range in no time at all and she enjoyed the ride, feeling more familiar with her surroundings every time she traveled down the highway with Asher.

“Penny for your thoughts,” he said.

“They would cost more than a penny,” she replied. “Admiring the beauty of the area. I never understood why Justus wanted to come out here to go to school, but she said she wanted to get away from the city and experience nature while she got an education. I think I finally get what she was talking about.”

“It is a pretty special place I agree with you there and I have seen lots of places being in the Air Force.” He turned off the main road and drove for a few miles until he came to The Centre.

“I thought you said we were going to the gun range,” Liberty said.

“We are.”

“But...this is where you said they have the self-defense classes.”

“They do. And yoga classes. Weight training. Just about anything you can think of and you can find it here at The Centre.” He parked and turned off the motor. “Ready to give it a go?”

She nodded, opening the door and getting out.

Several cars were parked at different buildings on the grounds and Asher waved to a few of the people he saw walking from one location to another. Then he stopped and shook hands with a man and a woman who came over to him. He turned and looked at her. “Liberty, I’d like you to meet Jake Cogburn. He’s the head of the Colorado Division of the Brotherhood Protectors. This is RJ.”

“Nice to meet you both,” she said.

“Jake was telling me you are a civil liberties attorney from New York,” RJ said.

“Correct.”

“What do you think of Fool’s Gold? Nothing like New York, I’m sure.” RJ smiled.

“I like the slower pace and the people are wonderful. So helpful. Everyone has made me feel welcome,” Liberty replied.

“Shall we go inside and shoot a few rounds?” Asher asked.

Liberty nodded and he led the way. They went into the building, filled out some paperwork, and picked up protective glasses, and sound headgear to protect their ears before they went out to the gun range, which was actually outdoors.

Jake and RJ went to individual bays at the opposite end to shoot, but Asher took her to one where he showed her what to do.

“Let’s go over some basic gun safety before we start. Always treat all guns like they are loaded whether they are or not because you never know if a bullet has been left in the chamber or not. That is why you never want to point a gun at anyone unless you’re prepared to shoot them. When holding the gun, keep your finger off the trigger until you’ve made the decision to shoot. This is the hardest step for new gun users. Because you immediately want to put your finger over the trigger when you pick up the gun but don’t. Always have the safety on until you’re ready to shoot. Then you can let it off, and put your finger on the trigger.”

He showed her where the safety was on the handgun they were going to be using for their practice session. He also popped out the magazine of bullets. “As you can see it is full so no bullets have been preloaded, but you should never assume one was not left in the chamber from the last time I fired, even though I have cleaned my gun and it was cleared.”

She nodded.

“Go ahead and put on your safety glasses and headgear. I’m going to lay the gun down here on the shelf in the bay and let you pick it up. Get a feel for holding it for a moment and see if you have been listening to what I said.”

She swallowed and put on the glasses and earphones before she reached to pick up the gun. It was much heavier than she imagined, which made her think of the power it held in that small package. Despite her effort, she put her finger through the trigger hole and he corrected her right away. Placing it on the side of the gun, near the safety.

“What do you think? Do you feel comfortable holding it?” Asher asked.

“Should I?” She wanted to know. “It makes me feel nervous knowing I hold someone else’s life in my hands when I shoot this at them.”

“That’s a good approach to having a firearm,” he said. “Do you think you’re ready to try and shoot?”

“I don’t know.” She laid the gun down on the shelf in front of her and rubbed her sweaty palms on her jeans. “What am I going to be shooting at?”

He chuckled and pressed a red button on the bay above her head. A target slowly came closer from down the range and when it got closer and was at a good distance, Asher pushed the button again to stop it. “That.”

It was a white form with a black silhouette on it and red circles ran through it making a target. She swallowed again and took a deep breath before she picked up the gun. This time she managed to keep her finger out of the trigger hole and on the side of the gun, resting where the safety was located.

“Good job,” he praised. “Now line up the target in the sight. And when you are ready to shoot, you can slip your finger onto the trigger.”

“Right. Easier said than done.”

“Support the gun from the bottom with your other hand if you need to do that until you get used to the feel of it, it will help steady your hands.”

She tried that, released the safety, and pulled the trigger. The force behind the shot caused her to jerk back and she didn’t hit the target square on, but she’d fired the gun.

“Not bad. I’m going to step up behind you and help you with a few techniques if that is okay,” he said not waiting for her to agree.

She was immediately aware of the warmth of his body at her back and his strong, muscular arms reaching around to guide her in the proper way to hold the gun. He even used his legs to nudge her legs in the right stance for the next series of shots and by the time he was done, she was shooting the gun like she had been doing it for months instead of just picking it up today.

Despite the headphones at her ears, she could hear him speaking clearly and she could still feel his hot breath on her face and neck as he spoke, which sent shivers down her spine having the oddest effect on her. It was literally driving her crazy, making it hard for her to concentrate on the gun in her hand when all she found she wanted to do was put it down and have him wrap those strong arms around her body and pull her against him for a toe-curling kiss.

Where were these thoughts coming from? She was here to find Justus and Chaney, not get into the sheets with this man. And yet, right now, that prospect was very appealing to her. Which she didn’t understand because she never had time for a relationship, her life was all about work. Maybe taking time off was affording her to realize her own needs over work as much as her desire to find her sister.

Tramping those thoughts away, she finally put the gun down, removed the glasses and headphones, turned in his arms, and found herself inches from his face. Totally caught him off guard by the surprised look on his face.

She suppressed a grin. “How did I do?”

“Good.” He removed his own protective gear. “Very good actually.”

“Excellent. Another session or two and I should be good to go?” she said.

“Maybe more, but you’re getting there,” he replied. “The more you practice the easier it will be when and if you have to

shoot a gun. But I like your optimism.”

“It comes with my line of work,” she said.

“I can imagine,” he said.

“Uh-hum,” Jake cleared his throat behind them. “How’s it going over here?”

They both turned to see Jake and RJ standing there, looking expectantly at them.

“It went well,” Liberty said. “I think I got a good grasp on the gun.”

“I’m going to take her up to The Centre and get her signed up for a few self-defense classes now. She needs a refresher class or two from those she had in college,” Asher explained.

“Great.” RJ bounced on her toes. “I’ve been wanting to do that myself, but I can’t get Jo Jo to join me. Mind if I tag along? I think it will be more fun to do it together and maybe we can cajole her into signing up too. I guess I could have done it by myself, but if I’m going to make a fool of myself I’d rather have the support of someone I know in the room than only someone I might have seen come into the Watering Hole to eat.”

“Sure,” Liberty said.

Asher grinned. “That will work out perfectly. If the two of you do that together then I won’t have to worry about Liberty traveling back and forth to The Centre since we still don’t know who was taking shots at her car when she arrived in town. It could have been a random thing, but we haven’t determined that yet.”

“Gee, thanks for bringing that up,” she grumbled. “I’d almost put that out of my mind, not.”

RJ and Jake chuckled.

“I love how the two of you mesh with one another as if you have known each other longer than a few days. There’s chemistry there. Have the two of you noticed it?” Jake said.

Asher and Liberty looked at one another wide-eyed for a moment and shook their heads.

“You got to be mistaken.” Asher picked up his gun and cleared it before putting on the safety and holstering it. He reached for the rake and proceeded to rake up the spent brass from around their bay before he took down the shot-up silhouette and tossed it in the nearby trash bin.

“I agree with Jake. I haven’t seen the chemistry between two people like this since Marcus and Charli stayed at the LVR.”

“I saw it between Simon and Jocelyn but they were already together when we met them,” Jake said.

“True,” RJ agreed. “Speaking of which, there they are now.”

“Where?” Liberty said.

RJ pointed toward the main parking area where two people were hugging. “It looks like she finally told him the good news.”

“News?” Jake said.

RJ nodded.

“And how did you happen to know this before he did,” Jake questioned.

“I guessed it by her order. She came in more than once and had the same thing during the week. No one does that unless they are craving it and I had talked to Mattie and found out she’d been eating the same thing at her place too.”

“Burger and onion rings?” Asher asked.

“And a malted,” RJ added.

“I had lunch with her and she left that off because she said her jeans were getting too tight from Mattie’s malts.”

“That’s not the reason. That couple will be a family of three in a few months,” RJ said.

“That’s wonderful. She’s such a lovely person and I bet he is too even though I haven’t met him yet,” Liberty said.

“Come on, let’s remedy that,” Asher said, holding out his hand and she took it. They walked back toward the parking area where Jocelyn and Simon were still standing, talking.

When the couple saw them coming, Simon raised his arms wide in the air and said, “I’m going to be a dad!”

LIBERTY LAY in bed that evening reliving the day’s events, trying to fall asleep, but she was having a hard time. She was tired, but it was a good tired, not the kind of weariness she got from working on her law cases. The fresh, dry air and warm sunshine on her skin felt good during the day and the food she had been eating was so different from what she normally consumed in New York that even with an upset stomach and digestive issues she was still feeling great.

She yawned and rolled over onto her side, closing her eyes and remembering how it had felt when Asher had come up behind her at the gun range. The thought of him had her wishing she wasn’t alone in her room, however, there wasn’t much she could do about that right now. Even when Jake had mentioned the chemistry he’d noticed between them Asher had made it clear that there was nothing between them. And even though she’d asserted the same, she wished for the opposite.

Yet he’d reached out and offered her his hand when they went to congratulate Jocelyn and Simon. Didn’t he realize that was sending mixed signals?

Taking a deep breath, she snuggled under the sheet she pulled over her and thought about what it might feel like to kiss him. That was the last thing she remembered before her alarm blared, waking her the next morning.

She turned it off and rolled over, wanting to sleep longer, but the sun was already up, shining in the window and it made going back to sleep impossible. So, she hurried and got dressed because she was supposed to be ready to go when Asher got there to take her out to The Centre for her first self-

defense class with RJ. Then RJ would bring her back to the bed and breakfast later in the day.

Asher was waiting in the dining room for her when she got downstairs which surprised her because she didn't think she took that long to get ready.

"Am I late?" she asked.

"No. I'm early. My climb was cut short this morning because of a call I had to go out on for BP and that got me here sooner than expected."

"Have you had breakfast?" she asked. "I was about to eat."

"Lillie is whipping me up a batch of pancakes."

Liberty rolled her eyes when he said that. "Do you eat those every day?"

"No. I had an omelet yesterday. Tomorrow I think I'll have a waffle."

"Same as a pancake. Just a different form."

Lillie came out with a tray and set a plate of pancakes in front of Asher and a plate with two over-easy eggs and buttered toast for Liberty on the table.

"Thank you," Liberty said.

"I figured after yesterday you didn't need to eat off the buffet today," Lillie said. "Enjoy."

Liberty shook her head. "Everyone is treating me with such kindness."

"Fool's Gold is a special place to live."

"I'm seeing that," Liberty said.

They ate and were soon on the road to The Centre. The drive didn't take long she was getting used to the area one because they started talking about gun safety and before they finished running through what she'd learned the day before they had arrived at their destination.

Asher parked and he walked her inside on the pretense that he wanted to chat with Simon if he ran into him, but she had a

feeling it was because he was still concerned about her being shot at the day she arrived. And she got it. He was a brotherhood protector. How would it look if he allowed something bad to happen to her on his watch?

Once they found the self-defense training facility and he chatted with Spencer for a few minutes, Asher said goodbye and left.

“Are you two an item?” Spencer inquired, quirked a brow.

“No. He’s helping me find my sister,” she explained. “Why?”

“A vibe I got from him as he talked and the way he kept glancing your way.”

“Someone shot at me the other day. He’s still concerned about that,” she said. “I’m sure that’s what you were sensing.”

“If you say so,” Spencer said.

RJ came into the room then and she hurried over to talk to her. “Sorry, I’m late. I had to prep for lunch before I came. These morning sessions are going to be a killer for me, but I am looking forward to them.”

“You aren’t. We haven’t started,” Liberty said. “I see you’re alone. You couldn’t convince JoJo to come?”

“Nope.”

“Would she give you a reason why?” she asked.

“It’s a long story that I will have to tell you about later,” RJ explained. “The short version is she doesn’t like being touched and these classes would cause lots of laying on hands as we work with and against one another.”

“Yeah. I can see how this wouldn’t be a good situation for her.”

“Okay, ladies, can we all gather around here on the mat,” Spencer called. “I’d like to talk before we get started with the session today.”

All the women who had signed up for the class walked over and stood in a semi-circle around him.

“Go ahead and sit down where you’re standing. Get comfortable, but not too comfortable. I don’t want anyone falling asleep on me. Spread out if you need more room. Okay. I want to thank everyone for coming today. I’m Spencer Barnes. I’m a former Navy Seal. I teach karate and self-defense classes here at The Centre among other things. I’d like to start off by talking about why we need self-defense.”

He stood with his legs spread shoulder-width apart in his camo-style pants, his feet were bare and he wore a camel colored t-shirt. His arms were very muscular and Liberty was certain he’d have no trouble bench pressing five-fifty or eight hundred pounds easy.

“There is danger around every corner in the world we live in. That is a simple fact. It’s sad, but true. That is why we need self-defense. An attack can come at you at any moment of any day because situations can change in a quick second. So, you need to be prepared. The best way for you to do that is to follow these simple rules. First, realize that time is not on your side, an attack is going to be fast. How do you prevent this? It’s by having your head up and paying attention to your surroundings at all times. You can’t be walking down the street with your head engrossed in your cell phone like I see so many young people doing these days. That is like waving a red flag and saying come and get me, I’m an easy target.”

He swallowed. “Second, an attack is most likely going to happen in close quarters. For example, between two parked cars in a shopping center parking lot when you’re trying to get into your car. Or when you don’t have a large amount of space to get away. Third, there is likely going to be a weapon involved. That could be a gun or a knife and you need to know how to block those. Fourth, there may be multiple attackers. The best mode of protection is to use your hands and fists and target the head and the throat area. You don’t want to kick which will put you off balance, you want to be steady on your feet so you can get away. Hit from the neck up so the attacker will try to cover up so you can get away. Also, never throw just one punch. You want to throw multiple punches until that threat is down, just like you would shoot a gun until the threat is no longer coming at you if you were shooting.”

He took a few steps on the mat and turned back. “In review, an attack will come on fast because time is not on your side. Always keep your head up being aware of your surroundings because an attack will come in close quarters with a weapon and multiple attackers. You will handle this with multiple punches from the neck up because it will hurt the attacker and give you time to get away. Any questions?”

Several hands went up.

Liberty had a few of her own, but she listened as others asked theirs and Spencer patiently answered them before she decided whether she needed to ask hers. It was answered so she decided no need to repeat it.

He asked for a volunteer and he demonstrated a few moves that he wanted them to work on in class today.

“Okay, let’s pair up and one of you will be the aggressor and the other will be the victim. Don’t be shy. I don’t expect anyone to be perfect at this.”

She worked with RJ and they switched back and forth being the victim and the aggressor until he called time.

“I’ll see everyone back here tomorrow. Good job today, ladies,” Spencer said.

RJ helped Liberty up off the mat where she’d landed on her bottom after one of the moves they’d worked on. “You want to come back to the Watering Hole for some lunch? Asher might be at headquarters with Jake working.”

“Or he could be out doing rounds,” Liberty pointed out. “Lunch sounds great. I’m interested in trying that burger and onion ring platter that you mentioned Jocelyn likes to order. It sounded good.”

“It is. Have you ever had a malted?” RJ asked unzipping the small tote bag she brought and pulling out a hand towel for Liberty. She handed it to her. Then she gave her a plastic baggie with a wet washcloth inside.

Liberty frowned.

RJ held up a finger and opened up her own baggie with the wet washcloth inside and she wiped her face, and then the back of her neck with it. “Trust me, you’ll thank me for it.”

Then RJ put the used washcloth back in the baggie and used her hand towel to dry to neck and face.

Liberty mimicked RJ and she let out an appreciative sigh. “You’re my hero.”

RJ laughed. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Sounds good to me,” Liberty agreed, gathering her things.

They were halfway to the Lost Valley Ranch when RJ’s tire had a blowout, sending her car tail spinning on the highway. She immediately regained control of the car and pulled off on the side.

“Damnation that was a close call,” RJ said. “Are you okay?”

Liberty had her hands braced on the dash, but she nodded. “Yeah. Do you think it was an accident or was your tire shot out?”

“What?”

“It’s a legit question. My car was shot at on the side of the road the first day I drove into Fool’s Gold.”

RJ dug her phone out of her purse and called Jake. “Hon, my tire blew out. We’re okay, but Liberty’s afraid it wasn’t an accident.”

Liberty watched her nod and her skin pale.

“Okay. We’ll wait here for you,” RJ said.

“He’s coming?” she asked.

“Him and JoJo. She used to be a mechanic in the military. Asher wasn’t there. He’s out checking out a lead. He wanted us to stay in the car, but I don’t like the prospect of us being sitting ducks here. And if we get out, we might be moving targets if there is a sniper out there,” RJ said.

Liberty turned in the car seat looking at their surroundings, but she didn't see anything other than landscape. But she suspected that a good sniper would not make themselves visible to their prey. "What should we do?"

"Well, we could use Spencer's self-defense tactics he taught us. We know that an attack would come on quickly so we need to be prepared for it. I have the doors locked to the car so unless the windows get bashed in on us, there is no way anyone is getting in on us. But that doesn't mean that the car couldn't be shot at like yours was the other day, which is why I feel like we are sitting ducks. With the tire blown we can't get away."

"Right. Our power of escape has been compromised." She rubbed her sweaty palms on her shorts and then she tried to tuck her hair behind her left ear, but she'd French braided it again today for the class so it wouldn't be in her eyes. So instead she rubbed her ear and let her hand run down her neck.

"Open up the glove compartment there," RJ instructed.

Liberty did as she said and was surprised to find a handgun among some paperwork.

"It's loaded. Safety is on. But you have it if you need it."

RJ pulled one out of her purse and laid it on her lap. "Now the odds are in our favor."

Liberty gave a nervous laugh. "I had no idea you carried one with you at all times."

"My dad's a former gunnery sergeant. I've been around guns all of my life," RJ explained.

"I hate to ask, but he didn't name you after a gun, did he?"

RJ chuckled and then she shook her head. "No, but I can see why you might think the R stands for Ruger. It's Rucker. And the J is for Julia. How'd you get the name Liberty and your sister Justus?"

"Our parents were civil liberty attorneys."

"Were?"

“Yeah. They’re gone. Dad had a massive heart attack and mom passed from a severe stroke a few short months after he did. They were dedicated to their work, almost a little too much, but I got to spend the most time with them. Justus was a late-in-life baby, mom was forty. I was twelve when she was born. When she was a toddler I was a teenager. Then I was dating, graduating high school, and off to college while she was starting school.”

“That must have been hard on your parents to have a child that young at their age,” RJ said.

“They were always so busy it didn’t really affect them.”

“Until it did. It sounds like their work ethic and busy life finally caught up to them by the way they passed away,” RJ pointed out.

Liberty nodded. “Yes.”

“And that left you to take on the responsibility of Justus?”

“I was not there for her like my mom was for me. I don’t know how she juggled it all. Looking back, I think I could have done so much more for my sister. If I had we wouldn’t be trying to find her now.”

“That’s remorse talking. You don’t know that for sure, Liberty. This could have still happened even if you had given her your every waking moment. So, don’t second guess yourself.”

The sound of a vehicle approaching cut their conversation and they watched as the truck pulled to a stop near them. Jake and JoJo got out and walked over to them.

Liberty closed up the glove compartment and RJ put her gun back in her purse. Then she unlocked the car doors and they got out.

Liberty hadn’t got too far from the car when a shot rang out and she hit the ground. And another round fired, busting out the tail light on RJ’s car.

“Damnation!” RJ called, crawling toward Jake and JoJo who had also hit the ground.

“Liberty? Liberty, are you okay?” Jake asked.

CHAPTER 7



LIBERTY SLOWLY TURNED her head and looked at Jake, JoJo, and RJ. “Yeah, I don’t think I was hit. Although that shot was close.”

“Stay down. I’m calling Sparrow. If the shooter believes he hit his target, then he may stop,” Jake said.

“Were there any shots fired before we arrived?” JoJo asked.

“None. Unless that is why my tire blew,” RJ answered. “We didn’t even see anyone in the distance as we watched and waited.”

“But we didn’t expect the shooter to show themselves either,” Liberty added. “This really puzzles me as to why someone is after me. What have I done to cause their wrath?”

“That’s a good question,” Jake said when he got off the phone. “Sparrow is on her way. She’s not far as she was making rounds in the vicinity anyway.” He opened up his truck and took out his shotgun, walking to the edge of RJ’s car with it allowing whoever was out there to see him with his weapon.

JoJo and RJ started looking at replacing her tire.

“I feel silly lying here like this,” Liberty said.

“Better to feel that way than to be dead,” Jake replied.

Asher’s blue Titan pulled off the highway a few moments later and parked near Jake’s truck. He jumped out and walked toward Jake. “What’s happened?” Then his eye caught Liberty

lying on the ground. He hurried to her side and dropped to his knees. "Liberty!"

"She's okay. We've had her stay down so the shooter would believe he hit his target and she's dead."

"She's been shot at again?" Asher questioned, looking up and scanning the distance with his eyes. "Where in the hell is this guy's nest?" All he could see was rocks, dirt, and more rocks.

"We can't tell," Liberty finally said.

"We're going to get you out of here safely," he promised.

"I know you will."

Sirens sounded in the distance before the blue lights flashing appeared and a police cruiser became visible on the highway. Sparrow parked and got out with a white sheet draped over one arm. "Asher, help me cover the body. The medical examiner is on the way to take her away. We want to make this crime scene look real if we want the shooter to believe he really killed his target."

"You thought of everything, Sparrow," Jake said.

"The ME won't put her in a body bag," Asher said. "That would be going too far."

"We'll have to see what the ME decides." Sparrow handed him one end of the sheet and they covered Liberty from head to toe, leaving her head uncovered a small amount so she could get air.

"Let me see that blown-out tire," Sparrow said.

RJ and JoJo had finished changing the tire and had the damaged one lying by the car when Sparrow walked over. "Jake, these tire treads look like they were slashed. Not deep, but just enough so that when RJ was driving the tire would blow."

He examined the tire and shook his head. "You're right. I'm calling The Centre and have them send me their surveillance footage from the parking lot. If it was done

outside the training facility where the self-defense class was held this morning then it should have been caught on camera.”

“That means whoever did it was watching us yesterday and knew Liberty and I were taking that class together today,” RJ said. “They knew I’d be driving her home after the class.”

“Either that or they got lucky,” JoJo said.

“I don’t think luck had anything to do with it. What if they somehow bugged her phone? We did leave her things unattended that first day after she was shot at long enough that the shooter could have made his way to her unattended car before we drove back. We drove almost five minutes away because that is the time frame that Joe said he was away when he contacted me and we turned around and headed back.”

“Good point,” Jake said. “Technology being what it is, he wouldn’t have had to do that even, he could have used a scanner and picked up her signal, and used a program to infect her phone and then cloned it. We should have Swede do a diagnostic on her phone to make sure it’s clean.”

“I don’t think that’s exactly how it works, but I get what you’re trying to say,” Asher said.

Jake made a sour face at him. “I’m not as tech-savvy as you and Swede.”

A shot rang out through the canyon and they all hit the dirt again.

“Damn,” Sparrow said. “I guess the plan the pretend Liberty was dead didn’t work.”

“Or it confirms that her phone was bugged and the shooter could hear everything that was being said,” Asher pointed out.

“We have no way of knowing which,” Jake said. “So, let’s continue as planned sending her back with the medical examiner when he arrives. What was his ETA?”

Sparrow checked her watch. “He said he was ten minutes out when I talked to him so he should be arriving anytime now unless he was ambushed on the way here.”

As if on cue, the ME van pulled off the highway and swung around on the opposite side of all the other vehicles coming to block the view of Liberty's body covered with the sheet. The driver got out wearing his field jumpsuit and the medical examiner exited on the passenger side.

"Did we miss a party?" the man asked.

"If you call being shot at a party, then yeah," Sparrow said, getting to her feet. "I'd stay on this side of your van to protect yourselves."

"Mr. Blakemore, get the gurney so we can transport our victim back to town." Then he turned to the white sheet and looked thoughtfully down to the ground. "I promise you, my dear, we'll be gentle," the medical examiner said. "So sorry you are having to go through this."

Asher grinned. This medical examiner was funny in his own way. And the way he spoke was unlike others. "Are you British?"

"Although I have lived in the States since my youth you can still hear my accent," he said, sticking out his hand to him. "Millard Palmer and you are?"

"Asher Nolte, Brotherhood Protector."

"Ah, one of those," the medical examiner shook his hand. "We are always getting new ones in Fool's Gold. That's the reason we haven't met yet. Mr. Blakemore, do you need assistance with the gurney?"

"No, Dr. Palmer," the younger man said pushing the bed toward them. He put on the brake, and they lifted the covered body of Liberty onto it. Then he fastened a strap across her and unleashed the brake and rolled it back to the van.

"Asher, be a good lad and help Mr. Blakemore lift the gurney into the van," Dr. Palmer said. "Sparrow, where would you like the body taken?"

"Your office is fine. Asher can meet you there," Sparrow replied. "Is that good for you, Asher?"

"Sure."

“As long as you come back to the LVR,” RJ said. “We had lunch plans.”

Jake chuckled. “You did?”

“Yes. That is where we were headed when this whole mess happened.”

He walked over to her and wrapped his arms around her waist. “And was I invited to this lunch of yours?”

She shook her head. “Unless you wanted to hear lots of girl talk.”

He looked pensive for a moment. “I think I could handle it.”

RJ laughed, raised up on her toes, and planted a kiss on his nose. She turned in his arms and leaned back against him. “What about you, JoJo? Are you up for some girl time? You want to join us too?”

“If I do, then who is going to serve the food?” She arched a brow. “I’m sure your father is wondering how long it takes to change a tire by now. We’ve got to get back to the Watering Hole the lunch crowd has to be picking up.”

Jake nodded. “You’re right.”

“Sparrow, you want to join us for a burger and rings?” RJ asked.

“You know that’s my favorite, but I really can’t get away in the middle of the day right now. Not with this shooter on the loose. I need to take your slashed tire to the lab and have our guys see what they can tell me about it. I doubt there will be fingerprints other than RJ and JoJo since they removed it from the car. But it’s worth checking out.”

“Maybe another time then,” RJ said.

“You got it,” Sparrow said. “Ready to roll?”

“Sure thing,” Asher said walking back from the medical examiner’s van and opening up his truck door.

“See you at the LVR as soon as you can get there then,” RJ said. “I’ll go ahead and put your orders in for the burgers and

rings. That way it will be ready when you arrive.”

“Thanks,” he said.

LIBERTY WAS thankful that the medical examiner’s assistant had uncovered her head once they had the gurney inside the van so she could breathe easier. He’d even unloosened the strap around her middle so she could move her arms out from under it before he fastened her in again. Since there was no place to sit in the back of the van her best option was to lie on the gurney. The ride wasn’t too bad and she tried not to think of how many dead bodies had taken a similar ride where she was because that gave her a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach.

She still didn’t understand why anyone was determined to shoot her. What had she done that was so awful to warrant this? Was it a simple case of mistaken identity? Could they think she was someone else? Had they spotted her at that gas station in Colorado Springs and believed she was that person, punctured holes in her gas tank so they could kill her once she ran out of gas, but then when Asher came along and saved her they had to try again today?

In all her cases as a civil liberties attorney, she’d never angered anyone to the point that they’d want to do her harm, but could she have an opponent out there who wants her gone? Wouldn’t she have gotten death threats at the office first if that was the case before things escalated to this level?

She reached for her phone but realized it wasn’t in her pocket. It was in her bag in RJ’s car. She’d have to wait until after arriving in town and Asher took her back to the LVR to get it. Then she could call into the office and see if there had been any threats made against her that hadn’t been reported to her. Surely, her boss wouldn’t keep something like that a secret. But then, maybe he would if he didn’t want it to affect her work.

But what if this had nothing to do with work?

What if it had everything to do with Justus and Chaney being missing?

That would make more sense to her. What if she'd stumbled onto something without even knowing it? Or gotten too close?

That thought made her anxious. She wanted to get to Fool's Gold right away and out of this van and into Asher's truck so they could get back to the LVR and discuss these possibilities with Jake and RJ and contact Swede to see if he'd been able to trace Justus or Chaney's cell phones. It had been three days now. How long did it take?

She became restless and she squirmed on the gurney. It dislodged from the groove in the floorboard of the van and when the vehicle bumped along the road, the bed bounced, sliding toward the back doors. Then the bed, despite the brakes being on slid toward the front and once again toward the back doors as the van traveled down the road.

She screamed afraid the momentum of the bed slamming against them might cause the doors to open, propelling the bed out of the van. Being strapped in, she couldn't get off the bed, even with her arms free, the strap buckle was positioned underneath instead of being on top. She struggled trying to undo it, but it was no use because every time she got it going the gurney would start to slide again and she'd lose her grip on the strap.

She screamed for help as loud as she could, hoping the driver would hear her and stop as the gurney continued to slide back and forth, back and forth crashing repeatedly into the back door. She continued trying to undo the strap in between the slides, thinking she'd finally got it going enough before losing it as the slide would start again.

As a last attempt to get the attention of the driver and medical examiner, she started hitting the van wall when the gurney slid toward that juncture thinking they'd surely hear the banging and stop the vehicle. But even that didn't work. Were they deaf?

Frustrated beyond words, she twisted at her middle even though it caused a terrible crick in her side and she worked furiously at one last attempt to get the strap unbuckled and get

herself freed from the gurney. She didn't care if she had to sit on the floor of the van for the rest of the ride as long as she could get the bed back in its proper locked position so it wasn't banging back and forth anymore.

She was finally free when the van stopped for good.

“Holy hell!”

Wiping the sweat from her brow with the back of her hand she moved the gurney out of her way and was waiting for when the back of the van opened. It was Mr. Blakemore and he looked surprised to see her free from the gurney. She slapped him hard across the face.

The medical examiner appeared to stand beside him. “I told you I heard someone yelling and you should stop.”

ASHER ARRIVED at the back of the medical examiner's van in time to see Liberty slapping the assistant and she looked disheveled, but she was free of the gurney she'd been strapped onto when they'd put her inside. Something must have gone wrong during the ride over.

“Are you okay?” He felt silly asking that question, but what more could he say?

She jumped down with the help of Mr. Palmer. “I'm so sorry, my dear.”

“Now I am. That van is a death trap. The gurney came unlogged where it was locked and went sliding back and forth during the ride. No matter how loud I yelled or how hard I banged on the wall of the van when I was down near the cab, no one would stop.”

“I'm afraid Mr. Blakemore likes to listen to his music very loud when he drives and I wear earplugs to protect my ears. I can still hear things with them and I thought I heard screaming and banging, but Mr. Blakemore said it was part of the music. It's his music so I had to defer to him on it.”

“Like hell it was,” Liberty muttered.

Asher pulled her to him and rubbed his hand up and down her back. “I'm sorry. I should have made them stop a few

miles down the road instead of coming all the way into town with you.”

“How’d you get out of that strap?” Mr. Blakemore asked, still holding his cheek with his hand.

“It wasn’t easy,” Liberty said.

“I’m sorry,” Mr. Blakemore said. “I won’t play my music so loud anymore, Dr. Palmer. You’re right. It’s a hazard when we drive.”

“Why does the strap buckle underneath instead of on top?” Liberty asked.

“We got the gurney from the jail transport because ours was damaged and we’ve ordered a new one and it hasn’t arrived yet. It makes sense you wouldn’t want a prisoner to be able to unbuckle it and get lose.”

“Unbelievable.” Liberty shook her head.

“Thank you for helping out today,” Asher said. “Regardless of how this turned out.”

“It was our pleasure,” Dr. Palmer said. “I am really sorry, my dear, that you had to go through all of this today. I can see that the ride was more traumatic for you than the shooting at you. For that, we are truly sorry.”

“Thank you, Dr. Palmer. I do appreciate your apology. You seem to be a lovely man. Is there a Mrs. Palmer?”

“Unfortunately, no. She passed away a few years back.”

He sighed and nodded. “There is always hope of finding love again, but in my line of work, talking to the dead, who do they know to introduce me to?”

“I see,” she said.

“We better be going, we have lunch plans.”

“See you around,” Liberty said, waving to them. “I need to get my phone and bag from RJ.”

“You can do that when we eat lunch. She has already put our order in for burgers and onion rings so it should be ready

for us when we get there.”

At the mention of the food her stomach rumbled and she felt embarrassed. “That sounds great.”

“How was your self-defense class?” he asked as they drove to the LVR.

“Good. RJ and I made good partners. We worked well together and we were able to put tips given in class today to use as we sat in the car waiting for Jake and JoJo to arrive.”

“How so?” he asked.

“Well, we knew that we were sitting there in the open just waiting to be attacked if we were going to be again. So, we began looking at our surroundings and made sure that no one could easily approach us. RJ carries a gun and she also has one in her glove compartment. That meant we were both equipped if we needed one.”

Asher whistled. “Sounds like I left you in good hands when RJ decided to take that class with you.”

He soon turned off the main highway toward the LVR and parked outside Gunny’s Watering Hole. They went inside and joined Jake and RJ at the booth where they waited for them.

“JoJo will be bringing the food out any minute now. She was waiting until she saw you walk in before doing it,” RJ said as they slid into their seats. “Honey, you don’t look so good.”

Liberty quickly told her about the ordeal with the gurney and received laughter for her tale. “It wasn’t funny.”

“No, it wasn’t,” Jake agreed, “but I sure would have loved to see you slap that assistant when he opened up the back of that van.”

“So, would I,” Asher said.

Liberty hung her head. “Not my proudest moment, but I was so angry with him for not stopping.”

RJ reached out and squeezed her hand. “I totally understand.”

“RJ, do you have my bag?” Liberty asked.

“I sure do,” she reached it across the table to her.

“Thanks. I like to be able to check my phone regularly on the off-chance Justus should send me a text,” she explained.

“Sure.”

Liberty dug in it and found her phone, checking her messages, and began to tremble. She pushed the phone at Asher. “Look.”

He did and looked back up at her. “Can I open it?”

She nodded.

He did and it was a video of Justus in a two-piece navy bikini to accentuate her porcelain skin. She wore high heels and walked across a stage and then back again. The look on her face was blank like she wasn't there, but drugged. He wondered how this video got sent to Liberty.

“I'm sending this to Swede to trace,” he said.

“Is it bad?” she asked.

“It's similar to a video we saw earlier for another case which confirms my worst fear for your sister and Chaney.”

“And...that is?” Liberty asked staring at him.

“That they are being sex trafficked.”

CHAPTER 8



LIBERTY FELT as if the room suddenly began to spin at Asher's words. She blinked several times and gasped for breath. Grabbing hold of his arm to ground herself, she finally said, "What?"

"After seeing this video that you were sent. I have to believe they are both being sex trafficked. Why else would you get a video of Justus wearing a bikini and walking across a stage looking like she's been drugged to get her to do it?"

He showed her the telephone screen while the video loop played. Jake and RJ leaned across the table so they could see it as well.

"Damn. I was hoping this was going to play out differently," Jake said. "Get that to Swede right away and tell him to drop everything else and find out where that message came from."

"You got it." Asher sent the message to himself and then he forwarded it to Swede asking him to do a rush job tracing its origin per Jake's orders.

JoJo brought the food and malts. But Liberty was unable to eat.

"Come on, you have to keep your strength up. Not eating is not going to make this go away. And if you are weak, you won't be able to fight if you have to get her back," Asher reasoned with her.

Liberty reached for the malt and took a sip, then she took an onion ring and bit into it before devouring the whole thing.

“That is amazing.”

“Best rings this side of town,” RJ said.

Finally, Liberty took a bite of her burger and she groaned. The others started eating once they saw she was not going to have an issue with her food from that point on.

Before they finished their meal, Asher received a text from Swede with the information he needed. He and Jake excused themselves and went down to the Brotherhood Headquarters office to have a conference call with Swede and Hank Patterson.

Liberty hurried and finished her malt. “I don’t like being left out of the loop on this. It’s my sister they are discussing. I feel I have a right to be there too.”

She started to scoot out of the booth, but RJ reached a hand across the table and stopped her. “Hold on. I wouldn’t go down there if I were you. There is a line between being involved and getting in the way of Brotherhood business and going down there would be doing just that. If you were welcome there, Asher would have asked you to come. He didn’t because he was either afraid of what Swede might have found out and wanted to protect you or it was because they were talking with Hank Patterson.”

“Do I know who Hank is?” Liberty asked.

“He’s the man who created the Brotherhood Protectors. I’m not sure if Asher has mentioned him to you or not,” RJ explained. “He’s the man that tapped my Jake to be the head of the Colorado Division. If he hadn’t, we never would have met.”

“Is he here in Colorado?” Liberty asked.

“No. He’s in Montana.”

Liberty rubbed her stomach. “I think I ate too much.”

“Come, help me clear the table and I’ll put you to work bussing tables while you wait for Asher to finish his business. It’ll work lunch off you in no time. I need to get to work myself.”

Liberty giggled but saw that RJ was serious when she scooted out of the booth and started clearing the table.

“Okay, sure,” Liberty finally said, following suit.

RJ took her into the kitchen, got her an apron and an empty dishpan and they went back out and started clearing empty tables, making room for the next round of lunch customers that would be making their way into the Watering Hole soon. JoJo seated them as soon as they bussed the tables and then RJ left Liberty sitting at the bar to go take orders of the new customers.

Gunny came out of the kitchen and worked the bar area for a few minutes then went back into the grill. RJ came over and took over to fill drink orders. “We’re shorthanded at the bar ever since all the brotherhood guys have been put on alert to patrol the area for this new crime unit that has moved into Fool’s Gold. One of the guys normally takes a turn working a shift here during the day and night to help out.”

“How long has this been going on?” Liberty asked.

“The last couple of days since you came to town I guess. That’s when Swede picked up on the chatter on the dark web,” RJ explained. “Didn’t Asher mention it to you?”

“No, he didn’t.”

“Hmm...I wonder why?” RJ wiped the bar with a wet cloth. “Anyway, if you think you might want to help behind the bar, I could show you how.”

“I think I’ll stick to bussing tables.”

“Okay. I appreciate that. But filling a mug of beer isn’t that hard, even if you do have to make sure the ratio of foam is right,” RJ filled four beer mugs and then a pitcher before placing them on a tray and heading toward a table.

“Liberty, tables 3 and 6 are ready to be bussed,” JoJo said.

“Got it,” she headed to the kitchen for a dishpan and returned to take care of them. Another table had been vacated by the time she finished and she moved to do it before taking the pan back to the kitchen and loading them into the washer.

When she came back out Asher and Jake had returned. And Jake had taken over behind the bar.

“I see you have a new gig,” Asher said.

“Just helping out,” she replied.

“Do you have time to talk?” Asher asked.

“Sure.”

Jake motioned with his hand toward the private dining room. “Take her in there so you can talk without interruptions.”

“Will do,” Asher said. “Come with me then.”

Liberty removed the apron from around her waist and handed it to Jake before she followed Asher into the private dining room, closing the door behind her. He immediately pulled her to him and held her for a moment. This caught her off guard and she froze, afraid of what he was about to tell her.

Asher recalled the video conference call in the Brotherhood Protector’s office downstairs between him, Jake, Hank, and Swede not more than an hour ago. It had been a grim discussion as Swede had laid out the details of the upcoming auction that was planned. A date had not been disclosed yet, but he had confirmed it was going to happen because a strange save-the-date message had been issued with the time, date, and location to be announced for those partaking in the event. Eight young and healthy females were up for auction with the promise of possibly more by the date. Only vetted and approved buyers would be allowed into the auction the message said.

“How are we going to find where these girls are being held before this auction if we don’t know when it’s happening?” Asher asked.

“You need to get someone on that approved list,” Hank ordered. “That would be the wisest move.”

“What?” Jake said. “Who? How? We’ve never dealt with this type of mission before at least not in Colorado.”

“Swede can create a fake profile for whomever you get. Do you think we can tap Gunny to go in and do it?” Hank asked.

“Gunny as a rich perv?” Jake smirked. “I can’t see that happening. He’s too gruff and rough around the edges.”

“I don’t like using a civilian on a mission, but there is a guy in Fool’s Gold who has already offered to help us if we need him,” Asher said. “He’s older, a retired reporter. He might pull it off. We could use the communications angle as to where he made his money. The publishing industry? He’s become very chummy with Liberty since she arrived in town.”

“Who are you talking about?” Jake asked.

“Silas March.”

Jake nodded. “Yeah, I could see him doing just that. He could ad-lib himself out of a paper bag if needed.”

“Hmm...” Hank narrowed his eyes and pressed his mouth tight. Then he nodded. “It might work at that. You check it out and get back to us. Get Swede a photo of him in a nice suit.”

“And someone else if we need to send in another, not sure if we want to go that far risking two civilians. And I don’t know if he’d even want to do it because I just met the man today, but he’s the medical examiner. He’s posh sounding. Has the slightest British accent. If we need him and could convince him and Sparrow to go along with us...”

“He’d be perfect for a second buyer,” Jake agreed.

“Okay. This is sounding more promising by the minute. Swede, do you think you can create two profiles on the fly if needed?”

“Of course, I can,” Swede replied. “I just need photos, a little background info on them to make it easy to be consistent for them and I can have it out there for them as well as the bank rolled accounts to prove their worth to play in this high roller auction.”

“Then Asher, Jake, I want you to set up meetings with each of these men and discuss them working on this with us

and get their consent and explain how if they agree this has to be kept hush-hush. No one and I mean no one other than Sparrow can know what is going on. If I thought we could do it without bringing her in on it I would, but the last thing we need is for the local FGSO getting in the middle of gunfire if it came down to it.”

“What about Liberty?” Asher asked. “How can I keep it from her that Silas is helping out? After all, she is the one that let me know he had offered to help us out and I had nixed the idea.”

“That’s how you keep it from her,” Hank said. “I know you don’t like to keep secrets like this, but the fewer people who know what is going on the better it is for us.”

Liberty pulled away from him and the sudden movement and questioning brought him back to the present. “Is she dead? Is Justus dead?”

Asher sighed. “No. But what we’ve found out I’m sure she has wished she were. I know it has only been a few days that you know she has been missing, but it’s been much longer that these people have had her and Chaney. I don’t know who leaked that video of Justus to you. Maybe one of them found it and sent it as a way of getting help. But Swede has now confirmed that the video is connected to that other video we had found earlier in the week.”

He led Liberty over to the large family table and pulled out a chair for her to sit down. “Swede has also found confirmation that there is going to be an auction of girls to the highest bidder happening soon and if that happens then we may never get Justus or Chaney back again. Do you understand what I’m telling you?”

She licked her lips. “You mentioned sex trafficked earlier? And now you’re saying the girls are going to be auctioned off? Does that mean that this guy Kurtis that Justus was seeing wasn’t her boyfriend at all?”

“He probably wasn’t. For all we know it was Kurtis and his friend’s job to go in, find, and extract the girls for this purpose all along.”

Liberty covered her mouth with a shaky hand before looking away. But she removed it and tried to tuck hair behind her ear even though her hair was in a French braid. “Why do I want to be so angry with Justus right now? Why do I want to scream and yell at her for being so stupid? Why do I want to be angry with her when it’s me I should be angry with for not teaching her better? It was my job to protect her after our parents died. It was my job and I failed. Oh, how I’ve failed.”

He grabbed her hands with his and held them tight. “We’re going to find her.”

“You don’t know that. You can’t promise me that. It’s clear now we’re facing a lost cause.”

“Don’t be so negative.”

“What if she’s been raped already? How am I going to get her through that?”

“I don’t think they’d allow that to happen, not if they want their goods to sell at top dollar. They’d protect it. They’ve only drugged her from what we gathered from examining the video closely.”

Liberty stood and walked around the room, taking deep breaths. “I think I’m going to be ill. I never should have eaten lunch. You shouldn’t have cajoled me into eating when I didn’t want to.”

She hurried to the closed door and opened it, fleeing as fast as she could to the lady’s room on the other side of the restaurant. Asher followed on her heels stopping outside of the closed bathroom door. He leaned his head against it.

“Liberty, are you okay?”

RJ came over. “I’ll go check on her.”

She went inside. Liberty was splashing cold water on her face and looked pale when she rose from the sink and stared back at her from the mirror.

“Are things that bad?” RJ asked.

She nodded and closed her eyes.

RJ hugged her from behind. “I’m sorry. But we have to have faith that it will turn out okay. The Brotherhood Protectors have never lost a case yet. I don’t believe Justus and Chaney will be the first ones for them too.”

“I hope you’re right.”

CHAPTER 9



ASHER WAITED until Liberty had gone upstairs to the bed and breakfast before he approached Silas alone about meeting him the following morning to have a conversation in private.

“Why can’t Liberty be a part of this?” Silas asked.

“It’s complicated, but the man I work for out of Montana believes it’s best all-around if she nor Frank don’t know about this conversation,” he explained to him.

His eyes grew wide at that. “Okay. Where do you want to meet then? I was going to say the diner, but we both know that’s where Frank has his breakfast every morning. We can’t meet here because then Lillie would know what I’m up to and she has already been hoovering since she thinks I’m going to get myself into hot water.”

“How about the Coffee Bean? It doesn’t serve breakfast other than pastries and the coffee is a little pricey compared to the diner, but it’s a decent location to meet up.”

Silas nodded. “Okay. I’ll see you there at seven-thirty. That way I can slip off before Lillie notices I’m gone.”

“I’ll see you then.”

Asher was going down the steps to his truck when he heard Frank come out of the bed and breakfast. “I thought he was going to play checkers with us?”

“He had stuff come up,” Silas said. “Young people are always too busy for the fun things in life.”

“Ain’t that the truth.”

ASHER PULLED into Paradise and saw Marcus flagging him down from his front porch. He had a sinking feeling tonight was going to be the first family dinner invitation he was going to receive. He slowed and rolled his window down. “Hey, what’s up?”

“We’re grilling out at Seth’s if you want to join. No pressure. Charli’s back and she’d really like to meet you.”

He’d been about to decline, but after hearing that Charli was in town and they hadn’t actually met yet, he felt obligated to go. “Would I have time to grab a quick shower before coming over?”

“Sure. How do you like your steak?”

“Medium.”

“I’ll tell the grill master how you like it then. Come on out when you get ready.”

“Can I bring anything?” Asher asked.

“Just yourself.”

Asher drove over to his rental and went inside. Took a quick shower, and changed into a pair of shorts, a T-shirt, and sandals before walking over to Seth’s house where the Falco family was already gathered. Marcus met him with a very pretty brunette by his side.

“Asher, I’d like you to meet my wife, Charli,” he said.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. Marcus has sung your praises as he showed me around the place,” Asher said.

“I’m sure he did,” she said, smiling. “Come join the family. Seth is almost finished grilling. It’s the only thing he can cook.”

“I heard that,” Seth called from the grill. “But it’s true.”

Asher laughed noticing the adults lounging in the shade minus the babies he’d been warned might cry at night, were they sleeping? “It’s all good man. I’m not handy in the kitchen either.”

Marcus opened the cooler and handed him a long neck from it. “How’s that situation Jake was telling us about the other day progressing?”

“It’s here in Fool’s Gold. Swede’s intel was spot on,” Asher replied.

“Damn. I was hoping when Marcus told us about it the guru had it all wrong,” Seth said.

“He keeps gathering more details about it confirming what he first told us.”

“I heard there was a murder out on the highway this morning,” Troy Falco said. “Do you know anything about that?”

“Yeah, we got word that Sparrow called for the medical examiner to meet her there,” Heath Falco agreed.

“There was another shooting, but no one died. Sparrow called the ME to make the shooter believe he’d hit his target and him off track. Hopefully, it worked,” Asher said. “Which reminds me, I need to give that man a call. I wonder if he’s left the office yet?”

“Do you have the number?” Troy asked. “If not, as Fire Chief, I’ve got it.”

“I don’t. Thanks.”

Asher walked over to him and got the number then he walked away from the group to call Dr. Palmer. As luck would have it, he picked up after the fourth ring.

“Dr. Palmer, Fool’s Gold Medical Examiner. How can I help you?”

“Hi. It’s Asher Nolte with the Brotherhood Protectors. We met earlier today. Is this a good time to chat?”

“Ah, Mr. Nolte, what can I do for you?”

“I have a big ask, Dr. Palmer, the Brotherhood Protectors would like you to go undercover for us on a mission if you feel up to the task. Would you have time tomorrow to meet at our headquarters to discuss the details more thoroughly before you

decide? Were out at the Lost Valley Ranch at Gunny's Watering Hole. And you can't tell a single soul about this. Especially not Mr. Blakemore."

"This does sound intriguing," Dr. Palmer exclaimed. "What time tomorrow shall we meet?"

"What's good for you?" Asher asked.

"I have an autopsy scheduled first thing. I could meet you at say ten?"

"I'll look forward to seeing you then. Thank you for taking the time to meet with us."

"Thank you for thinking of me for this mission," Dr. Palmer said.

The line went dead, and Asher put his phone back in his pocket before walking back to the group of people who were preparing to eat their evening meal. They'd saved him a spot at the end of a large picnic table beside Marcus, and he sat down as each of the men introduced him to their wives. Then they started passing the food before they began to eat.

When he cut into his steak and took the first bite, he knew that if Seth Falco couldn't cook anything else he could make one hell of a good steak. The meat was flavorful and it melted in his mouth with each chew like it was a pat of butter.

By the time he left the Falco's, he was so glad he'd come to dinner. He called Jake before it got any later and let him know he was meeting with Silas at the Coffee Bean to discuss his possible involvement in the sting operation at seven thirty in the morning. And that Dr. Palmer would be coming to Brotherhood headquarters to talk to them about their plans for him at ten. Once that was settled, he decided to call Liberty to check in on her, but her phone was off because it went straight to voicemail. He wondered if she had already turned in for the evening.

"Hey Liberty, it's Asher. Just checking in to see how you're doing this evening. Was thinking about you and everything that has happened today. I'm tied up with things in the morning so I won't be able to see you until sometime in

the afternoon. I don't know when your next self-defense class is scheduled. We didn't discuss that before I dropped you off today. Sorry for not thinking about it. I guess we both had loads on our minds after our conversation at the Watering Hole. I hope you're okay and are not still blaming yourself for what has happened to Justus because you aren't responsible. She's grown and she made the choice to go with Kurtis. A bad choice, but it was her choice. I hope you can see that. Don't be angry with me for saying it. Text or call me if you need me and I'll be there," he said before ending the call.

Leaving that message instead of getting to talk to Liberty left him feeling conflicted and he knew he wouldn't be able to sleep if he went to bed. He'd much preferred getting a response from her about what he'd said than knowing his message was sitting in a voicemail waiting for her to listen and possibly get upset with him.

Instead of undressing, he picked up his truck keys and headed out, locking up behind him. He drove to the bed and breakfast, parked out back, and walked up the steps to the front porch where he found Liberty sitting with Silas sipping lemonade as soft music played from a small radio on the table where the checkerboard normally lay.

"I told you that was that young man of yours," Silas said.

"He isn't my anything." Liberty's hair hung in waves from her unbraided hair framing her face. Then she looked at Asher. "Is something wrong? Why are you frowning?"

She wore a loose-fitting sundress, showing off her tanned skin. "I called, but it went to voicemail and I left you a message and I didn't like the idea of you listening to it and getting upset over what I said when you heard it."

"Was it bad news?" she asked.

"No. I was reminding you that you weren't responsible for decisions your sister made and then I got to thinking that might make you upset, more than you were this afternoon when we talked," Asher said.

Liberty stood and reached for his hand, squeezing it. “You’re a very thoughtful man, Asher Nolte. How many men would drive across Fool’s Gold just to make sure he hadn’t upset a woman by something he said in a voicemail?”

Silas stood, picked up the two tumblers they’d been drinking out of and started for the door. “I think I’ll turn in for the night. Have a good evening.”

Asher started to tell Silas he didn’t have to go, but Liberty tugged him toward her. “Dance with me.”

“Huh?”

“This music is so lovely. Don’t you think? It just begs to be danced to,” she said.

He caught a whiff of vanilla, caramel, honey, and sherry on her breath. He’d thought they’d been drinking lemonade, but maybe he was wrong. “Have you been drinking?” he asked.

“Silas made us an after-dinner cocktail. It was very smooth tasting.”

“And relaxing?” he asked.

“Yes. I feel like the events of today have just washed away.”

Asher swayed with her for a few moments to indulge her before he led her over to the porch swing and they sat down, enjoying the quiet night together.

“You couldn’t do this in New York. Maybe out in the suburbs somewhere, but not in the city,” she said. “Too much traffic.”

He rested his arm on the back of the swing and she scooted up against his side. It felt nice for her to be there which shocked him. He’d only known her for a few days and it was a purely business relationship, wasn’t it?

Yet he’d rushed over here because he was afraid he’d have upset her with the message he left her. If it was business he wouldn’t have cared one way or another.

He looked down and noticed Liberty had closed her eyes.
“Liberty?”

“Hmm?”

“Just making sure you hadn’t fallen asleep.”

“No. Just listening to the stillness and how I can hear you breathe and your heartbeat.”

He smiled, leaning down and kissing the top of her head. The action seemed natural, but it shocked him all the same. Why had he done that?

If Liberty objected, she didn’t show it. She only reached for her hand and held it in his.

“I’d have been lost when I arrived in town if I hadn’t met you,” she said.

“I doubt that. You’re a very capable attorney. I’m sure you would have figured things out on your own,” he replied.

“Of course, I could have, but with everything that has happened to me,” she scooted around in the swing until she was facing him. “I just don’t think I could have held it together without you by my side, Asher. I know I couldn’t. I sure wouldn’t have met the people I have or made the connections.”

As she rambled trying to explain herself, he found she had the cutest expression on her face and it made him want to kiss her full lips and taste that cocktail she’d been drinking instead of breathing it in when she talked. Without thinking it through, he leaned in and kissed her.

She responded warmly, wrapping her arms around him and smiling when he pulled away. “What was that for?”

“I don’t know which is more intoxicating, you or that cocktail you had.”

She laughed. “I hope I am.”

He pulled her to him and kissed her again, lifting her onto his lap as the kiss deepened. When they broke apart this time

he admitted, “I’m glad I was the one who came along and found you broke down on the side of the road.”

“Why is that?” she asked.

“Because I’ve looked forward to seeing you every day. And even though I am busy tomorrow morning and can’t take you out looking for Justus until sometime in the afternoon I know I’m going to wish I was with you than what I’m doing.”

In the moonlight, he could see her smile. “Was that something you told me in your voicemail too?”

He nodded. “Yeah. That I’m tied up in the morning. I don’t even know if you have self-defense class and need a ride out to The Centre or not.”

“It’s the day after tomorrow, but don’t worry. I would have called RJ to come pick me up if I needed a ride. I can’t expect you to always be there. You have a job and even though you have been tasked to help find Justus with me, I know you have other things to do besides keep me safe.”

“I trust RJ to drive you, but after what happened today, I much prefer driving you because I know I can keep you safe,” he said.

Liberty laughed. “Short of a tank, if someone is going to shoot me, it’s not going to matter what I’m traveling in, they’re going to shoot at me.”

Asher shook his head, leaned in, and kissed her quickly again. “If you hadn’t had that cocktail, I know you wouldn’t be so calm about what you just said.”

She sighed and started to yawn, but covered her mouth with the back of her hand. “I think that is my cue to go up for the night.”

She moved off his lap to stand but found she wasn’t steady on her feet right away. “Asher, do you mind walking up with me? I think that drink is having an effect on me now.”

“Sure.” He got to his feet as well and wrapped an arm around her waist to steady her. Then he turned off the radio on the table before they went inside.

The bed and breakfast still held savory smells from dinner that evening and he found himself wishing for more of Seth's steak as he helped Liberty climb the stairs to the second floor.

She pulled her room key out when they got there and gave it to him to unlock, leaning her head on his shoulder.

"You could stay if you want. I have a king-size bed. Plenty of room for two."

"I don't think that is a good idea," he said.

"Why not? Didn't you have sleepovers as a kid?" she asked.

A sleepover?

Who was she kidding? She'd be out like a light once her head hit the pillow and he'd be tossing and turning the rest of the night if he stayed.

Voices carried up the stairs from below and her eyes grew large. She put a finger to her lips and looked mischievous. "Oh no," she said. "That's Sam and Lillie turning in for the night. They've locked the door. You'll have to stay now."

He'd unlocked the door and held the key in his hand. She took it from him and yanked him inside with her before closing the door.

"Liberty—"

She covered his mouth with her hand. "Sh-h-h. Do you want them to hear you?"

"You need a cold shower."

"No, I don't."

"Strong coffee then to see this isn't a good idea."

She giggled and shook her head. "Asher Nolte, do you always protest so much when a woman invites you to her room?"

"When she's had too much to drink."

"But I haven't. I just had that one cocktail."

“Which was clearly too much if you were light on your feet and it’s impairing your judgment.”

“Who says my judgment is impaired? I know exactly what I’m doing. I’m going to bed to sleep.”

He looked around the room and noticed there wasn’t a sofa, but a loveseat in the room. He grimaced. It would have to do. “I’ll sleep over here.”

“Nonsense. I told you it’s a king-size bed. Plenty of room for two.” She went into the bathroom and was gone for a few minutes. When she returned she had on a pair of Capri PJ bottoms and a matching sleep shirt. She turned down the bed and crawled in, patting the spot next to her.

“Turn out the light when you come to bed.” She pulled a sheet up over her and turned on her right side, leaving her back to him. She was asleep shortly after she laid down.

He shook his head feeling like he had no other choice but to stay here tonight. Unless he wanted to get Sam and Lillie out of bed and he had no idea which room was theirs or Silas for that matter. So, he turned out the light and waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness before he tried to walk. He removed his shirt, draped it over the back of the armchair in the room, and kicked off his sandals before going over to the bed and lying down. At least his shorts were wrinkle-free material so he wouldn’t look like he slept in them when he met with Silas in the morning.

Silas.

He had to be at the Coffee Bean at seven thirty so that meant he’d need to be up no later than seven if he wanted to sneak out of there without running into him or Lillie when she went down to the kitchen. Right?

He set the alarm on his cell phone and laid it on the bedside table next to him before trying to get comfortable on the bed. He really should have made his presence known when Sam and Lillie came up the stairs instead of being so enamored by the way Liberty was behaving. The thought of staying here with her was tempting. He was overthinking it too

much. Like she'd said they were going to sleep, have a sleepover, like when they were kids. Except he'd never had sleepovers with girls when he was a kid. Had she had them with boys? He doubted it.

Liberty shifted position and rolled over onto her other side and was now facing him as she slept. Moonlight from the window in the room drifted across her face, bathing her pretty features in a soft glow, and turned on his side to face her, staring at her until he too fell asleep.

When he woke the next morning to the sound of his alarm, he found Liberty's head on his chest, one arm slung over his torso, and her legs entwined with his under the sheet. He grabbed his phone and shut off the alarm as he assessed how the heck he was going to slip out of bed without waking her up. Surprisingly enough, he wasn't annoyed to find she'd crossed her side of the bed in her sleep and had invaded his space.

He gingerly rolled her off of him onto her back without a change in her breath pattern. Then he carefully got off the bed and went into the bathroom to splash water on his face and run his fingers through his hair. He also searched among her toiletries sitting on the counter for mouthwash and found a travel-size bottle that hadn't been opened. He took a glass and poured a small amount into it and then gargled with it. Then he rinsed the glass out and went to put on his shirt and sandals before leaving.

Opening the door to her room, he looked out to make sure no one was in the hallway before he stepped out. He was closing it back when Silas appeared and gave him a questioning look.

"That cocktail you gave her made her unsteady last night and so I helped her upstairs, but then Sam and Lillie locked the house up."

"Uh-huh. You could have come and got me," he said.

"I didn't know which one was your room. And she fell asleep immediately or I'd have asked her."

The older man shook his head. "Follow me."

Asher did and was surprised to see that Silas showed him a room not far from Liberty's that had a placard on the door with his name on it where a number should have been. "I had no idea."

"Of course, you didn't. Sam and Lillie have a room on the next floor. Come and get me if this happens again, but hopefully, there won't be a next time. I must have made her cocktail stronger than mine."

They headed downstairs.

"What was in it?"

"Maple whiskey, amoretto, crème de cacao, cherry bitters, Grand Marnier. I know it's a feminine drink, but I had a lady friend at one time who loved them and I would make them for her, especially when she was stressed. Liberty really seemed like she needed to relax last night."

"Maple whiskey. Is that what gave it the light color and made me think you were sipping lemonade when I walked up?"

"It was the color of the tumblers I put the drinks in. Are we taking your truck or walking?"

"I'd planned on driving since I need to head to the LVR as soon as we're finished. I have another appointment this morning out there. I can give you a ride back to the corner and you can cross at the light if that is okay."

"Sure. I don't mind walking either one. It's good to stretch my legs before I spend the day playing checkers with Frank."

They headed to his truck and he unlocked the doors. Silas climbed up into the passenger seat. Asher drove them the few blocks down the street to the Coffee Bean. He found a place to park on the side street and they came back onto Main Street to the establishment to get their cup of coffee. Then they found a table in the corner away from anyone who might come in that morning and overhear their conversation.

“What is this secretive thing you want to talk to me about?” Silas asked, pouring some sugar into his black cup of java.

“You already have a pretty good idea. Justus and Chaney are missing, but we’ve located them, sorta. We don’t have a precise location, but we know they’re close by. They’re being sold at auction soon and we need to have someone pose to be a buyer. Liberty said you were willing to help and your age and background can fit a profile that our tech guy can beef up to make you look promising to the man in charge of this operation and get you an invitation, at least we’re hoping it can. That is if you’re willing to go along and participate.”

“Yeah, I am. As long as we keep this hush hush from Lillie.”

“We will and we’ll do everything we can to keep you safe during the operation,” Asher promised. “You’ll be wearing an untraceable wire and label camera so we can watch everything that is going on through live video feed.”

“It sounds like you’ve thought this all out. What do I need to do to prepare for this auction?”

“Swede, he’s our tech guru, will need to get some information from you to create the profile. He’ll need a photo of you in an expensive suit. We can go into Colorado Springs and get you all set up with hair, suit, and shoes. It won’t cost you a dime.”

“I’m not worried about that. I made some sound investments while I was working so money isn’t an issue for me,” Silas said.

“But you live with Sam and Lillie,” Asher said.

“True. She’s my niece and she wanted me to come and stay here when I retired. It wasn’t because I had to, there is a difference,” Silas said. “Wanting to be near family and having to be with family are two different things.”

Asher smiled. “Did Frank invest as well?”

“He sure did. We were rivals in the newspaper business, but we both knew what we were doing. And when we decided

to retire I told him about Fool's Gold and told him to come here. He has a nice little place and he goes to Mattie's every morning to be with people and socialize."

"It seems I underestimated you both."

"Easy to do since you thought all we did was sit on the front porch and play checkers all day." Silas grinned, raising his coffee mug to him in a nod before taking a sip.

The door to the Coffee Bean opened and Jake walked in. He came straight over and pulled up a chair to their table.

"You're hard to get a hold of. You really should keep better track of your cell phone," he told Asher.

"What?" Asher stood and started feeling in his shorts pockets for his phone, but discovered it wasn't there.

"Sit down. Your phone is at the bed and breakfast with Liberty. I woke her up. She couldn't figure out how it was in her room, but then remembered you helped her upstairs last night because she was dizzy. You must have laid it on her bedside table she said."

Silas snorted. "I really must have made that cocktail stronger than I thought if that is all she remembers."

Jake glanced at him and then back at Asher. "What's he talking about?"

"I got locked in last night after taking her upstairs and had to stay with her, but she apparently doesn't remember asking him to have a sleepover."

"A sleepover?" Jake said and then chuckled.

Asher shot him a glare.

"Did you sleep?"

"Yes. We both did."

"Okay. I'll take your word for it. How are we set on the mission?"

"We're good to go. I'll take Silas to Colorado Springs and get him set up with photos and clothes so we can get that part

out of the way.”

“Okay.” Jake nodded. “And we’re meeting with Dr. Palmer for our second buyer at ten. So, we should be set if he agrees.”

“He sounded like he would.”

“Let’s not consider it a done deal until we know for sure,” Jake warned. He turned to Silas. “I appreciate your willingness to do this for us.”

“I’d do anything for Liberty,” Silas said. “She’s a special person.”

Asher thought that was very astute of him to say especially after only knowing her for a short time. But he’d known her the same amount and he’d come to feel the same. Maybe more. More than maybe. He knew he did. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have found himself staying in her room last night. He’d have been more adamant about letting Sam and Lillie know he was there so one of them could have let him out. He had to be honest with himself about it in the light of day even if he had tried to play the victim of circumstance. Deep down, he knew he’d been exactly where he’d wanted to be last night.

That’s the reason he hadn’t been annoyed when he woke up to find Liberty’s head on his chest, her arm slung over his body and her legs entwined with his. Thinking about that made him regret being here now with Silas and Jake.

“I better run back to the bed and breakfast and pick up my phone then,” he said, cutting in on what Jake was telling Silas.

The two looked at him and nodded.

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll finish my coffee and head back there later,” Silas said.

“I’ll see you at the LVR,” Jake told him.

“Right.” He picked up his mug and took it over to the dishpan sitting on top of the trash receptacle for self-bussing of the tables.

Leaving the Coffee Bean, he got to his truck as soon as he could and traveled down Main Street back toward the bed and breakfast. He parked and went inside, glad that Sam wasn’t at

the front desk which meant he could make his way upstairs unnoticed.

Liberty was making up the bed when he entered the room and she looked surprised to see him. But then she smiled. “Did you come to get your phone?”

“Yes.”

She picked up it off the bedside table and handed it to him. Their fingers touched and she blinked, her head jerking up to look him in the eye. “You stayed here last night.”

“Because you insisted. You don’t remember, do you?”

“I did?”

“Silas made you a cocktail and you were very relaxed when I arrived here last night. We sat on the porch talking for a while. Then when it was time to come upstairs, you were a little tipsy, but you wanted to have a sleepover you said.”

She giggled. “A sleepover? I actually said that?”

“You did. Like when we were kids. Which brings up the question. Did you have co-ed sleepovers when you were a kid?”

She laughed even harder and shook her head. “No. No, I didn’t. What did I do when we got up here?”

“You got your PJs on and fell asleep.”

“And you stayed because you’re a gentleman and you didn’t want to disappoint me?” she asked.

“I stayed because Sam and Lillie locked up the house and I didn’t know Silas was just down the hall and he could have let me out and locked the door behind me,” Asher explained. There was no reason she needed to know how he really felt. “He let me know that this morning when I ran into him when I was going to my morning meeting. Then Jake showed up and told me I left my phone here.”

“Ah...so that is how you knew and why Jake was calling you and woke me up. He was running a few minutes late,” Liberty said.

“Right. But I do have a question for you about last night. When we were on the front porch, do you remember anything that happened there?”

“What do you mean?” She tilted her head to the side when she asked him that and he noticed the waves from her French braids had been brushed away from the day before.

“We danced to the music on the porch and we sat in the swing talking and ...”

“Did I say something embarrassing?” she asked.

“No. Nothing like that. You obviously have no recollection. Which is too bad.” He looked away. “You did tell me you don’t have self-defense class today, is that still true?”

“Yes.”

“Okay then. I will call when I’m free later to go out searching for your sister. Take it easy after yesterday and last night.”

He turned to leave, but she reached out, placing her hand on his arm to stop him.

“Wait, now you have my curiosity aroused. What happened last night that I don’t remember?”

He turned back around and they were face to face. He slipped his arm around her waist, drawing her close with one arm, and with his free hand he cupped her cheek before he kissed her gently. She looked stunned when he stepped away. “We kissed several times. And you enjoyed it.”

LIBERTY STARED at the back of Asher as he disappeared out the door of her room. They’d kissed several times last night and she didn’t recall a single one of them, but she sure wouldn’t forget the kiss he’d just given her. Man, what kind of a cocktail had Silas made for her? She didn’t think she was a lightweight when it came to drinking. She could handle a glass of wine or two with dinner easily. But clearly, there was something about that cocktail she hadn’t expected. It made her a little too relaxed and free of her inhibitions if she invited him back to her to spend the night with her. A sleepover! Good heavens and then she promptly fell asleep.

Still embarrassed thinking about it, she grabbed her cell phone, stuck it in her pocket, and went downstairs for breakfast. She expected to see Silas buzzing around since Asher said he'd run into him earlier, but there was no sign of the older gentleman anywhere. She didn't see him until after she finished breakfast and went out onto the front porch. He was there with Frank setting up for their checker game.

"I missed you at breakfast," she said.

"I ate with Frank at the diner this morning," Silas said.

"Surprised me," Frank said. "But it was nice having his company."

"How are you feeling this morning?" Silas asked.

"Fine. I've got nothing to do today so I'm going to enjoy the morning sitting in the swing while you two play."

"Sounds like a good idea," Frank said.

"Why do you look so glum?" Silas asked.

"Do I?" Liberty replied.

"Yes." He came over and wrapped his arm around her waist and walked her over to the swing, sitting down with her. "Tell me what is on your mind that is weighing so heavily. Did you and Asher have words over last night?"

"Why would you think that?"

"I know you were a little tipsy after my cocktail and you did ask him to stay the night. Did you feel embarrassed about it this morning?"

She shook her head. "I didn't even remember any of it. That is what has me so concerned. Could I have done something that he didn't tell me about?"

"I doubt it. I trust that young man," Silas said. "I don't think he'd keep anything from you."

"No more cocktails," Liberty said. "I apparently can't handle them like I can wine."

Silas chuckled and patted her hand. "Deal."

CHAPTER 10



“THANK you for coming to talk with us, Dr. Palmer, and agreeing to do this mission for us.” Jake stood, shaking hands with the man. “Asher will take you and our other gentleman to Colorado Springs to meet with a photographer tomorrow. Will that work?”

“I’ll check my schedule and clear it if there is a conflict. I know we’re on a tight time frame here,” Dr. Palmer said. “What time should we leave?”

“We appreciate it,” Asher said. “We’ll leave by nine. I’ll pick you up then. We have a little shopping to do first, hair appointments, and a consultation with a makeup artist before the photographer. You should plan to be gone all day. Will that be a problem?”

“Yes...well...I better be going. I left Mr. Blakemore holding down the fort. And we know that may be a problem in itself,” the medical examiner said.

Once he was gone, Jake and Asher reviewed the plan for the items that needed to be purchased in Colorado Springs for both men.

“Since I’ll be tied up doing this, would you mind taking Liberty and RJ to their self-defense class tomorrow and picking them up?” Asher asked. “After that tire blowout and Liberty being shot at, I don’t know if there will be another attempt or not. I’m hoping we fooled the shooter into believing he’d succeeded.”

“I was already planning on taking RJ that spare of hers isn’t reliable and Three Guys has to order a new set of tires for her car, so getting Liberty won’t be a problem.”

“Good. That makes me feel better knowing she’ll be in your hands while I’m gone.”

His phone buzzed and he checked his messages, Mason, Ryder, Kent, and Cruz were upstairs having lunch. He hadn’t seen them since the impromptu meeting several days ago.

“Are we finished here? My teammates are upstairs. They saw my truck outside so they know I’m on the premises.”

“Yeah, we’re done.”

“Cool. I’ll check in with you again once I get back from the Springs tomorrow and let you know how things went,” Asher said. He texted he was on his way, then headed up the stairs.

“Hey guys,” he said when he found them sitting in the one circular booth for large parties.

“Were you downstairs with Jake?” Mason asked.

“Yeah, we were working on that project I’m heading up. But your timing was perfect because we were finished for today. It’s good to see you. How are things? I’ve been so busy keeping Liberty safe this week that I haven’t had a chance to touch base.”

“We’ve heard,” Ryder said.

“How?” Asher asks.

“There’s talk,” Kent said.

“Lots of talk,” Mason added. “The other groups have been keeping a close watch on what’s going on as they are searching for this ring. They’re concerned about them being in our territory. We all are.”

“Things could be better,” Cruz grumbled.

Asher glanced at his buddy. He was talking about his personal life and not what the rest of the Watchdog team was commenting on, but no one seemed to notice. If they did, they

let it ride, which was probably for the best at the moment. “It’s good to know everyone is out there watching. It makes our jobs easier with all that manpower behind us on this one.”

“What can we do to help?” Ryder asked.

“Nothing. Simply nothing,” Cruz said.

Asher reached on and laid a hand on his shoulder, squeezing.

RJ came over and took their drink order.

When she walked away, Asher leaned in and said, “RJ and Liberty are taking self-defense classes from Spencer out at The Centre. Their next class is tomorrow. Jake is driving them because of what happened yesterday, but if one or more of you could watch that area that would be good because I have to be in Colorado Springs.”

“Sure. We can swing through there as we patrol the area,” Cruz said, finally on the same page with them.

RJ returned and they ordered.

“That’s great. I appreciate it. Anything big that I’m missing out on?” he asked.

They shook their heads.

“How’s things out at Rita’s, Kent?” he asked. “I still haven’t gotten out there with Liberty yet. Maybe we’ll head out that way this afternoon.”

“I was only out there that one day to check on an issue we’d heard about in the vicinity, not actually at Rita’s.” Kent drummed his fingers on the tabletop. “Sorry if I misled you.”

Cruz laid a hand on his, stopping him. “You’re getting on my last nerve doing that.”

“Testy. Testy,” Kent said.

RJ brought out a basket of bread and some small plates and sat them in the middle of the table. “I’ll be back with your salads.”

“Who ordered salads?” Ryder asked.

“Not me,” Kent said.

Cruz shook his head.

“She must have the wrong table,” Mason said.

“Why do we need bread?” Asher asked. “I ordered a club sandwich. The rest of you ordered subs or burgers.”

“I don’t know, but I won’t refuse,” Kent reached for a roll and a plate.

They each followed suit and were about finished with the bread by the time RJ returned with the large tray of their food.

“I bet you think I’m losing it today. You don’t have salads coming at all. It was my other Brotherhood table of guys who had ordered lasagna. And you didn’t need bread. But I see you enjoyed it.”

“We sure did,” Kent said. “Why so haggard, RJ?”

“It’s just me and JoJo since the normal Brotherhood rotation behind the bar is out on patrol these last few days. If this keeps up much longer, we’re thinking we might need to hire another waitress.”

“That’s the reason Liberty was helping out yesterday,” Asher said.

“Right.” RJ sat the food on the table and removed the empty basket and the small plates before leaving them to eat their meal in peace.

There wasn’t much chatter after that as they ate in companionable silence. And as soon as they finished, they paid the bill and parted ways.

Asher headed back to town to see if Liberty wanted to head out to Rita’s to see if her team might be able to help search for Justus or not. He thought it might be a long shot now that he was certain that she was in the hands of the sex traffickers, but if they were able to find her and Chaney before the auction it would save them much trouble in the end.

He parked and walked up to the front porch where he was greeted by Silas and Frank who were once again in the middle

of a checkers match.

“She isn’t here,” Silas said.

“Where is she?” Asher asked.

“Over at the PI office. The woman invited her to lunch at the diner and then she went back to her office with her.”

“She’s with Jocelyn,” Asher said.

“Isn’t that what I said?” Silas asked him.

Frank chuckled as his red checker triple-jumped his friend’s black. “King me.”

“Dag dab it!”

Silas shot him a glare and Asher decided to slip right back off the front porch before the older man said anything more to him. He ran to his truck and headed over to Jocelyn’s.

When he walked into the PIs office Liberty and Jocelyn were chatting quietly together and they stopped as if they’d been caught red-handed. He had a feeling they’d been talking about him.

“Asher.” Liberty jumped up and came toward him. “I didn’t know when you’d be back in town. I’m sorry if you had to come hunt me down.”

“No problem. I thought we might take a drive out to Chambers Search and Rescue this afternoon. We haven’t made it out there yet. I know we probably don’t need to involve their services now that we know your sister is going to be auctioned off, but it probably won’t hurt. If we can find her location before then and get her out, that might save us the effort of our sting operation.”

“Sting operation?” Liberty said.

“I can’t go into the details with you, but we have a plan to rescue Justus and Chaney,” he explained.

“Rita’s on her way over now,” Jocelyn said. “I ran into her this morning and arranged a meeting with Liberty. I hope you don’t mind?”

“Thanks, that works too,” Asher said.

The door to the office opened and a blonde with a braid down her back to her tailbone walked in. Rita Chambers was of average height and average build. Her skin was tanned from where she spent so much time out on the trails with her rescue teams and dogs. She wore a short-sleeved shirt, cargo shorts, and hiking boots and looked prepared to hit the trails at any moment.

“I hope I’m not late?” she said.

“Right on time,” Jocelyn motioned for her to take a seat at the table. “Would you like some coffee? A bottle of water?”

“Water. I try to avoid the caffeine in the afternoon. I need to stay hydrated for when I go out on the trails,” Rita said. “So, your sister is missing?”

Liberty nodded. “We thought she was taken to the Garden of the Gods and Seven Falls, but we’ve recently learned that they may not have gone there at all. She was supposed to have gone away with one of her roommates and a new boyfriend. Now the information we’re getting is that something more sinister has happened.”

Jocelyn returned with the bottle of water and sat it in front of Rita.

“Thanks.” Rita looked from Liberty to Asher. “You’re one of the Brotherhood Protectors, aren’t you?”

“That’s right. I’m Asher Nolte. We believe that Justus and Chaney have been taken to be sold on the black market by sex traffickers. We’re hopeful to try to locate the nest before the auction that our tech guru has gotten chatter about. If your group could be on the lookout for any houses near trails that were not inhabited recently but are now that might be where these girls are being held. Our guys are out patrolling, looking for clues as well. But we need to keep this quiet. We don’t want the people of Fool’s Gold to get alarmed that this type of activity has moved into the area.”

Rita nodded. “I can tell my people we are looking for some missing girls and that we are searching for signs of houses that

might be lived in now that weren't before. That is all they'd need to know. Do you have pictures of these girls I can take with me to share with my team?"

"Sure," Jocelyn said. "I can send you a photo of the girls together."

"Good. And who should I contact if we find anything?"

"Contact me. I'm lead point on this operation," Asher said. He reached into his pocket and pulled out one of his business cards and gave it to her. "We appreciate your help, but I must stress that your team shouldn't try to extract the girls if you come across them. Call me and let the Brotherhood Protectors do it. We don't want you to get injured in the process."

"We can handle ourselves in dangerous situations, but we'll call you if we run across them and let you handle it. We don't want them to take off and you lose the girls because we acted on our own," Rita said. "I don't want to risk my people any more than you'd want to risk yours."

"Thank you for your help," Liberty said.

"I'm sorry you are going through this," Rita said, unscrewing the cap on the bottle of water. She took a long drink. "My teams are good. We find out people when we go out looking for those who have found themselves lost or stranded on trails. But I can't give you a prediction on this one."

"I understand," Liberty said.

"I better be going so I can brief my team and we can start searching." Rita put the cap back on the bottle and stood, taking it with her when she left.

Jocelyn smiled. "That went well."

Liberty nodded and stared at Asher. "Why can't you tell me about this sting operation?"

"There are some things you just don't need to know about," he said.

"If it involves my sister, I think I deserve to know," she said.

“No, you don’t. If you knew and were to be abducted before it went down the knowledge could put you as well as the operation in jeopardy,” Asher explained. “I can’t risk something happening to you.”

The way he looked at her made Liberty grow all warm inside as if he cared about her. Hadn’t he told her they’d kissed last night? Maybe it had been more than her being tipsy as she’d first thought. Maybe he’d kissed her because he’d wanted to kiss her? Had she invited him back for that sleepover because she’d wanted him to spend the night? Did she have feelings for him too?

No. That couldn’t be possible. They’d just met. She was here trying to find her sister. Justus was the most important thing right now. She shouldn’t be getting involved with Asher.

Jocelyn was saying something, but she was so consumed with her thoughts that she missed it.

“Liberty, did you hear me?”

“Hmm?”

“Simon and I would like you and Asher to come for dinner one night soon.”

“Sure,” she said. “If that is okay with Asher.”

“Yeah, we can do that.”

“Okay. I’ll check with Simon about his schedule and give Liberty a call to see if that works with you,” Jocelyn said.

“Are you ready to go?” Asher asked. “We could check out a few more side roads before it gets dark.”

Liberty nodded. “Thanks, Jocelyn for lunch and the talk.”

They walked out to his truck and he opened the door for her while she climbed inside. He shut it and walked around to the driver’s side. Then he drove out of town to the same area they searched the day before but he took a different road and went up to a different peak.

“This is where I normally come to climb in the mornings. I haven’t had the chance to do that the last two mornings

because I've been tied up, but I think you'll agree it is beautiful up here. There is a plot of land that I'd love to buy and build a house on one day. Of course, it would have to become for sale for me to do it."

They parked at the summit and got out, walking toward the edge. The view was breathtaking in Liberty's opinion. She could see why Asher liked it so much.

"Where do you go climbing?" she asked.

He pointed to the rocky cliff not far from where they were. "Do you think you'd like to come with me one morning?"

"I'm adventurous, but that much," she said.

"I promise not to let you fall," he said.

She shook her head.

"Come on. It would be nice to watch the sun come up together. Think about it. We danced in the moonlight on the porch, we could dance as the sun comes up on the peak."

"We danced on the porch?" she said.

He sighed. "You don't remember that either?"

She tucked her hair behind her left ear. "Is there anything else that happened on the front porch that you haven't told me?"

"I don't think there is. Nothing bad happened."

"We kissed. We danced. I invited you back to my room."

"All true."

"And I don't even remember any of it."

"Your loss, but I can assure you that it was all good. And I can give you a replay if you'd like?" he stepped toward her and pulled her to him.

Before she could protest, he lowered his head, capturing her mouth with his. It was a gentle kiss at first but grew stronger and she parted her lips to him, welcoming his tongue when dared explore her mouth. He tightened his hold on her, pressing her body against his and heat surged all over her

before pooling between her legs. She suddenly wanted him in the worst way.

She realized then and there she had been wrong. She indeed had the time to get involved with Asher even while she searched for Justus and Chaney.

“Come back to my place?” he said

She nodded, closing her eyes and she kissed him again. “Yes.”

“I’m not much of a cook, but I’ll make you dinner.”

“I can cook,” she offered.

He led her back to his truck, kissing her one last time before she got up into the passenger seat.

He hurried to the driver’s side and got in again. He backed up and turned to head back down the summit toward the bottom of the road they’d traveled earlier so they could then take the highway out toward where he was living.

“Did I tell you I’m living out at Paradise Ranch? I just moved out there this week. It’s a nice place. You’ll like it.”

“I’m sure I will,” she said. She wasn’t sure if he had mentioned his move or not. So many things had happened since she arrived in Fool’s Gold.

“Marcus Falco’s wife Charli Jackson is the architect who designed the place where I’m staying. She did it for Marcus to live in before they were married, but they moved into a house that she had built on the property for one of the brothers. Did I tell you the five Falco brothers are firefighters who work for the Brotherhood Protectors?”

“Yes. You did tell me that,” Liberty said. “Wait, Charli Jackson? Jackson Construction is right next to Jocelyn. Is that her office?”

“I believe it is,” Asher said.

“I love her motto. The house that she built. Short and to the point. Not flashy. But you know that a woman did it.”

He reached over and pulled her hand up to his mouth and kissed it.

“Why’d you do that?” she asked.

“You. I love the way your mind works.”

She smiled and he turned off the main road to another side road that was a long drive. About two hundred feet or more off the main road they came to a wooden archway with the name Paradise worked into it. It was about another two hundred feet before the houses, stables, barn and other buildings became visible.

Asher drove his truck over to the building with a slanted roof and he used a garage door opener to raise the door before pulling inside. In the bay next to where he pulled his truck was a yellow helicopter.

“What is that?” Liberty asked.

“A helicopter,” he said.

“I know, but...”

“It belongs to Marcus. He flies it into fires when necessary.”

“I—I had no idea. And you live in a hanger?”

“There’s an apartment attached. Come one I’ll show you. As I said, Charli designed and built this apartment for Marcus. It has a state-of-the-art kitchen in it. The master bathroom shower has three shower heads and a steam setting. There is even an elevator that goes up to the loft office.”

“What?”

Asher came around the front of the truck and took her hand, leading her inside. He showed her around.

“This is amazing. A true hidden gem. You should get Charli to design that house you want to build up on that piece of land,” Liberty said.

“I think I’ll wait a little before I go planning that,” he said. “I believe I need to make sure I know what I want in a home before I do.”

“True. But after seeing all of these things I think this is a good starting point.” Liberty walked over to look at the kitchen. He had not been exaggerating when he’d said it was state-of-the-art. It was smaller than she would have imagined, but it looked very functional. “Should we begin dinner?”

“There is still more to see,” Asher said, taking her hand again and leading her toward the master bedroom. The room was your normal bedroom, but when he led her into the bathroom and he showed her the shower with the three heads and the steam setting she nodded in approval.

“Wow. Just wow. I’m not sure I’d ever get out of that shower, especially after a long day in court.”

“Maybe we’ll try it out later,” he said and led her back to the bedroom.

“I like the bathroom better,” she said.

“So, do I. This room looks pretty ordinary at first glance, but there is one thing that is special about it.”

“What’s that?”

“It has me.”

She giggled, nodding, and wrapped her arms around his neck. “True. It does have you.”

“Let me show you the elevator,” he said.

“Okay.”

He took her hand and led her back to the living room and took her over to the wall where there were mirrors on the wall and pressed. The wall slid back, revealing a four-person lift. They stepped inside and he pushed the up button, the wall slid closed and it rose to the next level with them in it.

“Whoa,” Liberty said when they arrived in the loft office area. “What are you going to put up here?”

He shrugged. “I haven’t had time to set this up for work yet. But if I were to set it up as a work area I’d put a printer and a desktop with two or three monitors as well as my laptop.”

“Do you have all of that here?”

“No. I’d have to buy it. As I said, I haven’t had time to set it up yet. Since I moved to town I’ve been living at the Lost Valley and just moved out here this week,” he explained. “Why?”

“I thought I could help you if you wanted. You’ve been so helpful to me this week. It would be the least I could do,” she said.

“I’ll make you a deal, if you are still in town when I finally get my equipment I will let you help me if you want, but you don’t have to feel obligated to repay me for anything I’ve done this week. I’ve wanted to do it.”

“If you say so,” she said. She went back over to the lift area and he went back there too and pushed the button to lower them down again. “Charli is a pretty amazing architect to even put an elevator in a place like this.”

“Marcus said it was because stairs would have taken up too much space from the living room.”

“I can see that,” she agreed.

“Let’s see what I have in the refrigerator to make for dinner,” he said.

They walked to the kitchen and he opened up the refrigerator. The options were limited. “Maybe we should have swung by the store before coming out here,” he grumbled.

“Let me look,” Liberty said. She pulled out the carton of eggs, cheese, peppers, and a stick of butter. “Do you have an onion?”

“Yeah.”

“What do you say to an omelet?”

“That sounds better than nothing. I’ll get the frying pan for you.”

While he did that she found a bowl and began chopping the onion and pepper, then she graded the cheese. Melting the butter in the pan she sautéed the onion and pepper together to

cook them to tender before she poured in the beaten eggs, then sprinkled in the shredded cheese.

As she did that, Asher put bread in the toaster and buttered it as it popped up. “I have water, beer, and a bottle of wine. Take your pick.”

“Water is fine,” she said serving up the omelets onto the plates he’d gotten out for them and had already placed the buttered toast on.

They sat at the dining table where Asher had gotten out two wine goblets and poured their water into them.

“Not bad for a throw-together meal,” he said.

“I do it when I’ve had a hard day and don’t feel like cooking much. When you live alone it is easy to eat small meals,” she said.

“I’ve never enjoyed living alone. I guess because I lived with my parents then joined the Air Force and was in the barracks for so many years before moving to military housing. After that, I lived with my teammates when we were on assignments overseas. So, the few times I’ve been on my own stateside were short-lived between deployments. And now that we have finally retired out it’s the first time that I’m going to be on my own.”

“I’ve been on my own since I graduated college, went to law school, and started working. Living at home wasn’t an option. My parents were workaholics and Justus was a child growing up. The twelve-year age gap between us was enough to make me want to get away as fast as I could back then. Looking back now I wish I had stayed at home to be with my parents longer. To have had more time with them, but how could I have imagined we’d have lost them when we did?”

“Do you ever imagine yourself getting married and having a family of your own?” he asked her.

She shrugged. “I supposed it could happen. But I’ve been tied to my job since I started working at the firm making it hard to have a personal life. This trip has been the first time I’ve had time to myself in forever.”

“And how does that make you feel?” he asked.

She took a sip of her water. “Good. I’ve felt better being here than I have in a very long time. I’m more relaxed. I feel happier, which is conflicting because I’m also worried about Justus. Is it wrong to be happy while I’m petrified about where she might be?”

He laid his hand on hers. “No. It isn’t wrong. I know what you’re saying.”

“I made a vow when I left Colorado Springs while searching for her that I would make her my main focus from now on. I’d put her first in my life over everything else, but I’m not so sure that was such a realistic vow. I want to make her more important in my life, but I also think I need to make myself more important than my day job as well. Life can’t all be about work. I don’t want to end up like my parents, dead in their early fifties. That means I need to change my lifestyle now and start focusing on myself more.”

“Sounds like you’re assessing your life plans positively,” he said getting to his feet and clearing the table. “You sit. I’ll clean up. You cooked.”

“You helped. At least let me help put things away.”

“You go relax on the couch.”

She went to the entrance of the kitchen. “Are you sure I can’t help?”

“Positive.”

She held up her hands, walked over to the sofa, and sat down noticing the stereo system she checked out the music selection he had, picking out something to listen to.

Asher came to join her a few minutes later and he offered her his hand, pulling her to her feet. “Since you can’t remember our dance last night.”

They slowly danced to the song that played and she had to admit that he was a very good dancer.

“Did you take lessons?” she asked.

“No. My mother was a dance teacher so she taught me the proper form from the time I was a kid.”

“I bet you could teach me a few moves then,” she said.

“I could, but not dance moves,” he said.

Her cheeks heated and she looked away. “My self-defense class is at ten tomorrow.”

“Jake and RJ are going to pick you up and take you. I’ll be in Colorado Springs all day tomorrow on business.”

“Oh?”

“I’m sorry. I know I said I wanted to take you and keep you safe, but it’s part of this sting operation I’m leading. I have to be there.”

She nodded. “I understand.”

“RJ’s car needs a whole new set of tires after that blowout and the garage has the tires on order. So, they’ll swing by to pick you up on the way to The Center and then drop you back off at the bed and breakfast afterward unless you go back to the Watering Hole with RJ to help out again. That is totally up to you. I know she appreciated your help yesterday.”

He twirled her which made her laugh and pulled her back against his hard frame. “But that doesn’t mean we don’t have tonight if you want to see where things go.”

Her cheeks warmed again and she swallowed. He knew how to get her flustered with a few suggestive words. It didn’t help that the music playing was *Fever*. And her body agreed that it would be a *lovely way to burn*. But did she dare take that leap with him so quickly? After a few short kisses? When their time together was limited?

She’d be going back to New York soon. Her job wouldn’t wait forever. Her vacation days were almost over and if she hadn’t found Justus by the time they ended then she’d have to reach out and extend her stay, but how long would her boss allow her to be gone and keep her job?

“Liberty?”

The song had changed to *Moondance*. She looked up at him. What was it going to be? Was she going to be reckless and seize the day or was she going to play it safe?

He pulled her to him for another slow dance as *Kissing a Fool* played and she felt like one for not being able to make up her mind. And then the lyrics talked about not taking my heart and she knew that was what she was afraid of. She was afraid of losing her heart to him. It wasn't about her job or leaving him behind. It was losing her heart because she knew this was more about a physical attraction between them. She'd come to care about it.

She looked at him and nodded.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

CHAPTER 11



ASHER SCOOPED Liberty up in his arms, she buried her face against his neck, and he carried her into his bedroom. Sitting down on the side of the bed with her on his lap, he said. “Tell me again that you’re sure you want to do this because we don’t have to at all.”

“Are you having second thoughts now?” she asked.

“No, but you seemed to be hesitant at first.”

“That’s because I’m eventually going back to New York. If we start something what will it mean for us? One or both of us could get hurt and I don’t want that for either one of us.”

“I understand. But do you have to go?”

“Do you have to stay?”

He grinned. “I work for the Colorado Division of the Brotherhood Protectors. In this instance, my job is here. It isn’t transferrable to another location. There isn’t a New York branch, yet. That doesn’t mean that one day there won’t be one.”

In the living room, she could hear the refrain *You’re gonna miss my love, you’re gonna miss my lovin’, you’re gonna miss my love*. Her stomach twisted at the thought.

She nodded and leaned in to kiss him placing her hand on his cheek. “Then that is our answer. We’re stuck. We either agree to take advantage of what time we have together and live in the moment or we put the brakes on.”

“You can’t consider leaving New York? I’m not asking you to, I’m asking whether that isn’t an option for you.”

She sighed. “It would be difficult and keep my current job. I have clients and obligations. My boss is very demanding and I am doing important work just like you,” she said. “It wouldn’t be impossible but...”

Asher sat her beside him on the bed and stood up. “I think you’re right. We shouldn’t do this tonight. Not until we know for sure where things are going with us. It’s clear we both want to, but in the end, one or both of us could get hurt if we did.”

“I’m sorry,” Liberty said.

“No. Don’t be. I value your honesty with me. I knew when you said you were an attorney I didn’t stand a chance with you anyway,” he said. “I’ll be right back and drive you back into Fool’s Gold.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Just because I’m an attorney you didn’t have a chance with me? You have every chance with me.”

He closed the bathroom door on her words and a few moments later heard her pounding on it.

“Asher, that’s unfair. You can’t judge me like that. My work is important to me just like yours is.”

He opened the door. “Didn’t you just say you wanted to start putting your life first so you didn’t end up like your parents? It sounds like you aren’t ready to do that if you aren’t willing to take a leap of faith with me.”

Her mouth opened, but then closed and she turned on her heels and stalked out of his room. He followed her and saw her turning off his stereo system.

She grabbed her cross-over bag, slipped it on, and headed to the door. “Okay, let’s go.”

He caught up to her arm and stopped her. “I can’t believe you’re just going to give up so easily. I’d have expected more of a fight out of you. Aren’t lawyers more ruthless in getting what they want?”

“Why should I when you’ve already made up your mind?” she tossed at him.

“Then prove me wrong,” he demanded, pulling her to him and kissing her. She struggled against him at first but gave in as he deepened the kiss. That luxurious heat flooded over her once more and she felt it pool between her legs like it had earlier when he’d kissed her and she silently cursed, wrapping her arms around him. There was no denying it, she wanted him and she wanted him bad.

“You don’t play fair, Asher,” she murmured breathlessly as his kisses moved from her mouth along her jawline, down to her neck.

“I don’t plan to play fair, not if I have to convince you that you belong here with me instead of back in New York.” His voice was husky and breathy against her ear. And the hot heat against her skin made her squirm in his arms.

“You win.”

He chuckled. “What’d I win?”

“Me.”

He lifted her and she wrapped her legs around his waist. Their bruised lips met again in another frenzied kiss as he carried her back to his bedroom. He kicked the door shut behind him this time before walking over to the bed with her. Flinging the covers back, he lay her down, and then he leaned over her. Their lips met in heated kisses once more and she pulled him down on top of her.

Her crossover bag got in the way and he leaned up long enough to remove it from between them before he tossed it across the room. Then she helped him remove his shirt and her top.

“I knew you were muscular, but I didn’t realize you were so sculptured too,” Liberty said, running her hands over his torso. She unfastened his jeans, but he stopped her from doing anything more.

He took her hands from his waist and held them above her head as he kissed her, rolling her slightly onto her side so he

could fumble with the clasp of her bra to take it off. Once that was accomplished he let go of her hands so he could use his to fondle and tease her breasts before suckling one nipple and then the other as heat flooded through her body from his touch and a guttural moan escaped her.

“You like that?” he asked.

“Uh huh,” was as she was able to get out before he was once again kissing her. She speared her fingers through his hair and arched her back gasping for air as he moved lower with his onslaught of kisses. Then he was slowly removing her jeans and panties down her legs at the same time.

When he returned to the bed, he'd removed his jeans as well and he quickly covered her body with his own. Their legs entwined and she wrapped her arms around his strong, broad shoulders enjoying the feel of his hardness to her softness as they held one another.

“I think I could stay like this forever,” she murmured.

“We haven't even gotten to the good stuff yet,” he whispered.

He was gentle as he caressed her and they kissed, exploring each other. They took their time getting to know each other before she felt Asher finally shift on the bed and reach toward the nightstand for something.

In the early evening light, she could see he had a condom packet in his hand, and he tore it open with his teeth before fumbling to get it out and put it on. Even after doing this, he didn't rush. He slowly kissed her again, and he made a trail of kisses down her stomach before reaching between her legs and teasing her to make sure she was ready for him, almost bringing her to the brink with his finger before he even entered her.

“Asher!”

“Hold on. You're so wet and warm,” he said, finally moving into position as he squeezed one of her breasts and thrust into her.

He filled her so completely in that instant that they became one. Their eyes locked and they never lost contact the whole time that he thrust repeatedly taking her over the edge not once but twice before he found his release with her.

“You’re amazing, Liberty,” he whispered. “Absolutely amazing.”

He rolled onto his back and pulled her to him. Holding her while their breathing slowed from their passion.

“You’re not bad yourself,” she said, running a finger around his nipple before trailing down his chest to his stomach.

He grabbed her hand before she went too low. “I need to remove the condom. I’ll be right back.”

While he was gone, she searched for her crossover bag but had to get out of bed to get it. She knew it was useless, but she wanted to check her cell phone for a message from Justus. Standing, her legs were wobbly at first and she stood a moment before finally feeling confident in taking a step. It had been a long time since she’d had sex because she didn’t do it casually. She hadn’t had a committed relationship in more years than she could count. Her job took up all of her time, but maybe that was about to change.

Finding her bag on the other side of the room made her giggle. She pulled out her cell and looked at the message icon. There were no new messages. Disappointed, she walked back to the bed and laid her phone on the nightstand, getting back in bed. She pulled the sheet up around her, closed her eyes, and waited for Asher to return to bed.

The sound of water running and Asher rubbing her arm woke her. “Liberty, I got the shower hot, you want to join me?”

“Hmm...” She slowly opened her eyes. “I must have fallen asleep.”

“Come. Let’s get cleaned up,” he urged. “I’ll turn on the steam so you can try it out.”

“You don’t have to entice me. I’m coming.” She scooted to the edge.

As they went to the bathroom, she noticed their clothes were no longer discarded on the floor but were folded neatly on the bench at the foot of the bed. Asher was a tidy person. She liked that about him.

They stepped into the shower and let the water spray all around them before Asher turned on the steam as well. He then began to lather the bar of soap and run it all over her body. She did the same, marveling at the feel of him under her hands and if she played her cards right, he could be all hers.

Was that what she wanted?

“You’ve got a serious look on your face,” he said reaching for the removable showerhead and using it to rinse them all off.

“Just thinking,” she replied.

“Not good. Your thoughts should only be of me right now,” he teased, arching his brows at her, and hanging the showerhead back up. “I didn’t do a good job wiping the world from your mind.”

“You did. I was thinking of you, me, and the future,” she quickly exclaimed as he pushed her back against the tile wall of the shower and pressed his body to hers. She could feel him growing hard against her.

“And?”

“I like that thought.”

“But your expression didn’t convey it.”

“It was what I thought afterward.”

“And that was?”

“The nagging doubt that always creeps into our thoughts when we think we’ve found happiness, that sort of thing,” she said, trying to brush his question to the side without really telling him what she’d been thinking.

He nodded. “Are you happy right now?”

“Very.”

He dipped his head and captured her mouth with his as their tongues danced in a frenzied tango, he squeezed her breast and ran his thumb over her nipple making it pucker. She used her heels to push upward along the tile and he noticed what she was doing, cupped her buttocks on both sides, and lifted her. He held her there at the perfect height for him to thrust into her and she wrapped her legs around him opening as wide as she could for him to go deeper and deeper to bring her to edge as fast and as hard as he could until they came together. He leaned his forehead against her, shutting off the water, and carried her back to bed, with them both dripping wet.

They fell asleep immediately. The next time she woke, she heard the shower running again and the bed empty beside her. It was dark in the room and she checked her phone on the nightstand and saw it was seven-thirty the next morning.

The water shut off and Asher emerged from the bathroom with a towel draped over his chiseled hips. She could honestly look at his naked body all day and not get tired of it, but she knew that was not possible.

“Good morning.” He walked over to the closet and pulled out his clothes, hanging slacks, and a dress shirt on a hook before he reached in for a pair of dress shoes.

“I better go shower so I don’t make you late,” she said getting out of bed.

Asher watched her go, enjoying the way her naked bottom wiggled as she walked. He looked away before he could get a hard-on. He’d started to get one when he woke up that morning with her lying there in bed beside him. He’d thought making love with her twice last night would get it out of his system, but it wasn’t going to do the trick for a while. His feelings for her were deeper than he’d realized when he engaged in this with her. But this wasn’t going to be a problem. He was a professional.

He got dressed and picked out a tie and sports coat to go with his shirt and pants before putting on his dress socks and

shoes. Then he went to the kitchen and started a small pot of coffee for them while he waited for her to finish up.

Two arms wrapped around his middle surprising him. He hadn't even heard her come from the bedroom.

"You're so handsome dressed up," she said.

He turned around and brushed his lips across hers. "Thank you. I'm going to make these to go."

She nodded. "We can eat at the bed and breakfast."

He got down two travel mugs. "Pour them while I go grab my phone. I think I left it in the bedroom."

"Okay."

When he returned with his phone and charger she had the two travel mugs and was waiting for him in the living room. Despite not having makeup on that morning she looked refreshed and beautiful. She'd French braided her hair down the back.

He stopped and stared at her for a moment before she caught him.

"What are you doing?"

"Memorizing how you look for while I'm gone today so when I get to missing you I can remember this morning and waking with her in my arms."

"Who would have thought you were such a romantic," she said walking over to him. She kissed him.

"Let's go. I don't want to be late."

During the drive to town, he kept glancing over to Liberty and watching her as she sipped her coffee.

"Keep your eyes on the road," she teased without glancing at him.

"Yes, ma'am." He turned on the radio to get the weather report and it looked like it was going to be another hot, dry, beautiful day in Colorado.

They arrived at the bed and breakfast soon after and parked before they went inside. Asher began looking for Silas as they entered the dining area and saw him at a table in the corner having his breakfast. He nodded at him. The man nodded back.

“Go ahead and grab something to eat,” Liberty said. “I’ll have Sam put two breakfasts on my bill.”

Lillie came from the kitchen with a plate of hotcakes and a bottle of syrup. “Silas told me you were coming this morning.”

“You’re the best,” he said, smearing butter on the pancakes before pouring the maple syrup on them.

“Do you want some eggs?” Liberty asked. “I can get you some from the buffet.”

“I don’t have time. I have to hit the road once I eat these.”

“Okay,” Liberty sat down with him while he ate. “When will you be back?”

“I’m not sure. It could be late afternoon or early evening before I’m back. If Jocelyn calls about dinner with her and Simon tonight is not a good evening for it.”

“Sure,” she said. “Is this trip anything I should worry about? Are you in danger?”

“No,” he said, putting down his fork and covering her hands with his. “Nothing like that. But it has to be done in preparation for the mission. You shouldn’t worry at all. I’ll be back.”

He leaned over and kissed her. He’d never had to leave on a mission or was deployed when he’d been involved with anyone so he’d never had someone waiting stateside for him other than family. With her looking at him so intently and asking these questions it made him realize once again how lucky he’d been not to have anyone behind on those kinds of trips.

“Hmm. You taste good. Maybe I’ll have Lillie make me some hotcakes.”

“You should.”

Lillie came by with a coffee carafe and filled his mug. “Did I hear you say you want hotcake today?”

“If it isn’t too much trouble?” Liberty said.

“Not at all. I have the batter already made and can have you three out here in a jiffy.”

Asher drank the coffee and finished the last bite on his plate, then he wiped his mouth with his napkin.

“That’s it for me. I need to speak to Silas before I leave. I’ll see you when I get back. Maybe we can go rock climbing together tomorrow?”

“I’ll think about it,” she said. “But that doesn’t mean I’m climbing. I’ll go with you and watch.”

“We’ll see about that.” He stood and leaned down, kissing her one last time before he walked over to talk to Silas.

The older man had been watching his approach and he was grinning like a Cheshire cat. “I see things have progressed between the two of you.”

“They have.”

“Good for you both.”

“Can you get away now?”

“I can.”

“I’m going to pick up Dr. Palmer. Where should I pick you up?”

“Outside the diner. I’m going to go see Frank and we’re going to run some errands today.”

Asher nodded before he turned to leave.

Dr. Palmer was waiting for him outside of his truck when he got outside. “I thought I’d save us time by coming over. I hope that was okay.”

“Sure.” Asher clicked his key fob to unlock the door for the good doctor to climb inside. He backed out and took the long way down by the elementary school before turning on Bear Paw Trail and waiting in a parking spot on the street for

Silas to appear at the corner outside of Mattie's diner to get into the crew cab of the truck.

"If you are not running errands with Frank today where is Frank going to be?" Asher asked.

"He's gone fishing with Marcus Falco. I talked to the lad and told him what we were doing and found out Marcus was off from the firehouse and the Brotherhood Protectors so I asked him to keep Frank busy."

"Quick thinking," Asher said. "Dr. Palmer, have you met Silas March?"

"Yes, I have. It's good to see you again, Silas."

"Good to see you again, Millard." Silas leaned between the two front seats to talk to them. "Tell us what the plan is once we arrive in Colorado Springs."

"We're going to a high-end men's clothing store to get you both a suit, shirt, tie, shoes, then the hairdresser where you have a stylist who will make you over which will include hair, nails, facial before we visit the photographer for a photo session."

Both men laughed.

"What are you trying to do? Make us into something we aren't?" Silas asked.

"Exactly. We have to make you appear to be rich with more money than Midas. You have to be attractive enough to catch the eye of these traffickers to make them invite you to this auction. Otherwise, we won't have a chance at getting to Justus or Chaney. These traffickers want high rollers to come to their auctions. And that is what we are trying to deliver."

Silas and Dr. Palmer nodded their understanding and the conversation turned to a more pleasant topic for the rest of the ride. Then the real struggle started. Getting both men measured and fitted for a suit.

Dr. Palmer wasn't as difficult, but Silas wanted to joke about it all. Asher finally pulled him aside and reminded him

he was wasting time and that this was a life-and-death situation they were dealing with.

“You were the one who told Liberty you wanted to help any way you could. Now I’m sticking my neck out having you do this. If you can’t take this seriously, let’s call this a day.”

“Sorry, I was trying to liven the mood, but I see it wasn’t being effective. I’ll stop,” Silas said. “I do want to help and I promise I’ll go in and be the perfect buyer at the auction if selected.”

After that, an ensemble of clothes was selected for him and they were out and headed for the stylist. By lunchtime, the men were looking fresh-faced and manicured. Alterations were complete and they picked those up before heading to the photography studio.

They had to wait twenty minutes for the photographer, but that gave the men time to dress with ease and relax any jitters. But when the photographer started with them, they were like professional male models in Asher’s opinion. He couldn’t have been more surprised by the way they acted.

Silas stood tall in the light gray Armani suit looking dashing as the photographer had him tilt his head one way or another before snapping a few photos. Then Dr. Palmer in the navy Armani suit was in front of the camera and it was like the man owned it the way he moved and smiled before the photographer even spoke. The man was a complete enigma.

When it was all over, the photographer agreed to email the edited photographs to Swede by that evening.

Silas and Dr. Palmer changed back into their street clothes and put their new suits and shoes in the garment bags before they headed out to Asher’s truck for the drive back to Fool’s Gold.

“Now we just wait?” Silas asked leaning between the front seats to talk to them up front.

“Yes. Once Swede gets the photos he will post your fake profiles on the dark web and we wait to see whether you’re accepted to participate in the auction or not. If you are then

we'll practice and practice your delivery of your performance for the auction until we feel it's perfect before it happens."

"I'll do my best to get away from the medical examiner's office for those sessions," Dr. Palmer said. "But if they are during the day, it might arouse suspicion. Mr. Blakemore is aware of my schedule."

"We can do those in the evening after work for you. And the same goes for you, Silas, we'll figure out a time and place to do it so that Lillie won't be suspicious if you're missing from your normal routine of playing checkers with Frank on the front porch."

The older man sighed. "Yeah, this is going to get complicated."

"If we have to enlist Liberty to engage Frank in a project as a surprise for you we will. That might not arouse suspicion with him if she asked."

He nodded. "That might work if she sweet-talked him. He has a soft spot for her."

Asher grinned. Both men did in his opinion, and it hadn't taken her long to gain it with them either. He could attest to it with him. She'd wormed her way into his life easily enough and now he didn't want to let go."

CHAPTER 12



THREE DAYS LATER...

ASHER WAS FEELING ANTSY. Swede had posted the profiles for Dr. Palmer and Silas but nothing had happened yet. Jake cautioned him that it might take a few days for them to hear something back. They didn't know the exact date for the pending auction. The Save the Date announcement had only said to be announced giving the traffickers all the control to set the time, the place, and who would be there.

Even with this knowledge, it still left him feeling like they'd missed an important step, something that was going to prevent one or both men from receiving an invitation. The thought of that made his stomach knot up and he retraced everything they'd done to make sure he hadn't overlooked anything important that would have sent up a red flag to the traffickers and steered them away from Silas or Dr. Palmer's profiles.

Liberty sat up in bed, rubbed his bare back, and kissed his shoulder. "What's wrong?"

"I'm worried about the mission I'm in charge of, there has been total silence about the upcoming auction. We've found no new leads or clues. We haven't even figured out who was shooting at you. I feel helpless here. I know Sparrow told me she had that under control when I spoke to her this evening, but it still doesn't make me feel better."

"Don't. You've been working so hard to find Justus and Chaney and make your mission work. I don't know everything

that is going on, but I do know that much. I believe it will all come together if you just have patience.”

He twisted at the waist to look at her and she kissed him.

“Let me take your mind off of it all,” she said, pulling him down to her but he shook his head and moved out of her arms, groaning.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I’m not in the mood.” He rolled onto his back. She laid her head on his shoulder and snuggled up against his side, draping one leg over his.

“That’s okay. Let me hold you,” she whispered against his neck as she lightly drew small circles on his skin amidst the fine covering of hair with her fingertips to soothe him.

His breathing eventually slowed, and he closed his eyes. He was almost asleep when his phone rang.

“I’ll get it.” Liberty rolled over to reach for his phone, looking at the caller ID. “It’s Jake.”

He sighed and sat up, taking the phone from her. “Do you have good news?”

“You bet I do. We got it. We got two invitations! Swede’s profiles worked along with those amazing photos that the photographer shot. I just hope we can get those two men up to par by the time the auction is held. So far, their practice sessions haven’t been going too great.”

Liberty squeezed his hand and smiled, obviously hearing Jake’s strong voice coming over the line.

“I know. But I’d rather they mess up with us than it be smooth sailing during practice and then they bomb when it really counts.”

“True,” Jake agreed. “I know you were probably trying to sleep because of the late hour, but we should get started again as early in the morning as possible. I’ve already been texting with Silas to find out when he can get out here for his next session and he responded he’d be here at five.”

“Okay. I plan to be there then too.”

“I’ll get Gunny to serve breakfast so don’t worry about eating.”

“Got it.” He hung up, set his alarm, and handed the phone back to Liberty to put on the nightstand. He took a deep breath and looked at her for a long time before he spoke. “I guess you heard.”

“I did.”

“Damn. I hate how I start to think things are hopeless right before it all comes together.”

“We all do that,” she said. “Look at how many times I was feeling that way when I first arrived in Fool’s Gold.”

He settled back on the bed, and she nestled up against him. “I’m so glad you decided to move out here with me instead of continuing to stay at the bed and breakfast.”

“Me too. Thank you for asking.” She ran her finger down his chest to the light sprinkling of hair on his abdomen.

He caught her hand. “Don’t go any further. I’m already feeling like I could be in the mood, but I must get up early now.”

“Aw, poor baby,” she teased. “We can be quick.”

“I’d rather take our time,” he said.

“So, you’ll lay here and suffer without being able to sleep instead?” She lowered her head and raked her teeth across his nipple.

“Liberty,” he growled before he pinned her on her back with his body. But when their lips met, he was gentle as he kissed her. And he took his sweet time satisfying the hunger she ignited within him.

ASHER’S internal clock woke him shortly before his phone alarm went off. He was already up out of bed and across the room, grabbing his cell phone and heading for a quick shower before it went off. He dried his hair with the towel, then he put his clothes on and slipped out of the room without waking Liberty. He didn’t even take the time to make a cup of coffee

before going out to his truck. He just prayed Jake was going to be kind and have a pot already brewed by the time he arrived.

The drive was quick from Paradise to LVR that time of morning and the morning sky was going from inky black to midnight blue. A little yellow was fading in on the horizon which is something he enjoyed watching wash across the sky before he climbed in the mornings.

He'd not had the chance to do that with all these practice sessions recently. However, once they had Justus and Chaney back, he'd devote more time to getting back on track.

He saw Silas getting out of his little car as he pulled up at the LVR and the two of them walked around to the back-to-end headquarters together. Jake was waiting for them with a pot of hot coffee and they got to work immediately.

Asher was impressed when Silas started with the script they had been working on the last several days and did it flawlessly, not once, but three times. It made getting up so early worth it this morning. Jake had insisted they repeat it with a different scenario each time to keep the man on his toes. But it didn't matter which way they went, he did it as if it were as natural as the truth.

Asher clapped when they finished. "I don't know what changes you have made to get these results, but I am pleased with your hard work."

"I've been watching movies dealing with exploitation instead of playing checkers with Frank. I told him I was thinking about writing a book on the subject. He's been helping me gather research materials."

"How'd you get passed Lillie without drawing suspicion?" Asher asked.

"It's been rather hot lately, so we told her we decided to stay indoors and watch TV for a while in the afternoon to take a break. Then after dinner, I started practicing in the mirror in my room until I felt confident that I was doing it right. I knew my performance before had been lacking and so I had to do something to beef it up."

“I can say you have nailed it down now,” Jake said. “I’m proud of you.”

“Do you feel more comfortable in your role?” Asher asked him.

“I do.”

“You’ve done great,” Asher finally said. “Jake, do we need to continue meeting?”

He rubbed his chin for a moment. “I think if Silas works on his own, running through the possible scenarios he could be faced with now that he has gotten his persona down, we can back off on getting together every morning. Let’s skip tomorrow and come back the day after. I know five works well for you because you can get back to the bed and breakfast by seven before Lillie and Sam realize you are gone. We can still do that.”

Asher nodded.

Silas looked at his watch. “I better go. I don’t want to get caught slipping back inside.”

“No, we don’t want that,” Jake agreed. “If Dr. Palmer can do as good a session today as you have, we will be all set.”

Asher agreed.

Silas looked at Asher. “How’s Liberty? I know it has only been a few days since she checked out of the bed and breakfast, but I miss having her around.”

“She’s fine. It made more sense for her to move out to Paradise so I could keep an eye on her there than her staying in town,” he explained.

“Sure, but what can she do out at that ranch all alone when you are here all day?” Silas asked.

“She’s not alone. There’s Tessa and the Falco babies, plus Tessa’s students who come for lessons.

Silas shook his head. “It seemed like a bad move for Liberty to leave when Frank and I could have kept a watch on her for you during the day.”

Asher grinned. "I'm sorry to disappoint you both, but Paradise has an excellent security system out there. She's completely safe when I'm not there."

LATER THAT EVENING, Asher and Jake met with Dr. Palmer, and they worked on his part of the script but found the man was still having issues getting into the role. He was extremely distracted. More than any other day.

"Okay. This isn't working. Dr. Palmer, we need to figure this out. You are the perfect image for one of our marks, but you can't play the part. Why is that?"

The medical examiner hung his head. "I think about those young women, and it disgusts me so much. How can I possibly pretend to be interested in buying one of them?"

"How can you not?" Asher said. "If you don't, we won't have the second person in there to bid on Justus or Chaney while Silas bids on the other."

"I get that you find this distasteful. It isn't in your nature. But what you'll be doing is role-playing," Jake said. "That is why we have given you this script to practice. Have you been doing that at least?"

"Yes, dear fellow, I have," Dr. Palmer said. "I stand in front of the mirror at night and recite the lines over and over. I pour myself a whiskey neat and get into character. However, I don't think it works."

"Have you imagined what you'd do if this were your child you were trying to get back?" Jake asked. "How would that make you feel? Would you approach this any differently?"

Dr. Palmer nodded.

"Okay. Let's try this. Asher, I want you to take the script and run through it and show Dr. Palmer how to play to role."

"Wh-what?"

"You can do that, right?" Jake said.

"Su-sure." He reached for the script pages and read over them. Thought for a moment about Justus and Chaney and

what they were going through and about Liberty before he took a deep breath and looked back at Jake. “Option one?”

“Yes.”

They role-played that scenario out then they rolled right into options two and three. Asher handed the script to Dr. Palmer.

“Now it’s your turn.”

Dr. Palmer tried again, and his attempt was better.

JoJo came in with some drinks for them and Jake motioned to her, and she bent down, listening to what he had to say. She twisted her hair up onto her head and walked across the room toward the medical examiner seductively. It made the older man get flustered.

Dr. Palmer stammered, stumbling over his words. But he quickly got himself under control and delivered his part of the role flawlessly.

JoJo winked at him and turned to Jake who nodded in her direction before she left them.

“Very good, Dr. Palmer. You handled that well.” Jake stood, handing him a drink. “I recommend you go home and get some rest. Keep practicing in your spare time remembering that you very well that at the live auction, you will see a young woman walking in front of you wearing much less than JoJo did. She was fully clothed. These girls will probably be in skimpy swimsuits.”

“Good heavens.” Dr. Palmer swallowed.

CHAPTER 13



LIBERTY FIRED THE HANDGUN, hitting the paper target once, twice, three times in a row. She was getting the hang of it. Glancing at the next bay, RJ stood with the gun aimed at the target in her lane, ready to fire. She waited to shoot again until after her new friend had finished firing.

Pow.

Pow.

Pow.

JoJo was on the other side of RJ, and she was firing as well. Liberty was glad they had talked her into coming out for some target practice instead of staying at the Watering Hole to clean. Stone Bishop and Clint Manning were behind the bar that afternoon. Gunny had closed the kitchen for two hours to clean the grease traps, so the girls had taken advantage of the time to get out for some target practice.

Liberty aimed and fired another few rounds before reloading the gun and shooting those bullets as well. Then she brought in the target to see how many holes she'd put in the paper target.

Nash Melendez, yogi, and weapons expert in charge of the firing range at The Center came walking by and stopped to chat.

“How’s it going, ladies?”

“Fine, Nash,” JoJo said, holstering her gun at her waist. “How are things with you?”

“Good. I’ve got a new yoga class starting soon if any one of you is interested in signing up. Just thought I’d mention it to you.”

“When does it start and what time of day is it taught?” RJ asked. “Working at the LVR and the Watering Hole has its limitations on what we do.”

“The class starts next week and is at seven-thirty in the morning for early risers,” Nash said. “Will that work for you?”

“It will. What do you think, JoJo?” RJ said.

“Early morning is my time with Max before the day gets started. I try to protect it as much as I can. You know that, RJ,” JoJo said. “Is the class every day?”

“Three days a week for four weeks,” Nash said. “You don’t have to decide today. It’s co-ed. Max can come too. You better believe Darius and Logan will be showing up to a few of these sessions with me. Simon and Spencer too if I can get their lazy carcasses in the classroom.”

The women giggled.

“I’ll see if Max is interested, Nash. Thanks,” JoJo said.

Liberty wanted to join but wasn’t sure if she’d be around next week. It depended on whether they found Justus and Chaney or not. And even if they did, it would depend on whether she was still in Fool’s Gold after that or if she immediately left for other parts of Colorado or New York. The more she thought about going back to New York and her job, the more she was beginning to hate the idea.

How could only a few days in Fool’s Gold change her life like this?

She sighed and studied the paper target where she’d shot holes clean through in several spots repeatedly. She decided to take it back to Asher’s with her and have him show her how to correct her shooting.

Nash walked over, noticing what she was looking at. “Not bad.”

“Really? You don’t think I need to work on my aim?” she asked.

“With those shots long range, you’re going to injure someone. Which isn’t bad at all. Closer range you might kill them.”

“Huh.”

RJ and JoJo had walked over to listen to what Nash was telling Liberty.

“Woo hoo, girl,” JoJo said.

“You’re a badass, Liberty,” RJ praised.

“Good job,” Nash said. “Be sure to rake up your brass before leaving, ladies.”

“We will,” RJ said.

Once they had taken care of bussing the brass, the three of them made sure their guns were unloaded before they walked back to the parking lot.

“Are you coming back to the LVR with us, or should I drop you off at the Paradise?” RJ asked.

“The Paradise. Joe called and said he’d be bringing my replacement rental car out this afternoon. He finally got the other one repaired, so the rental company was making the exchange today. It will be nice to finally have a car to drive again so I don’t have to rely on others to take me everywhere.”

“But...if you are driving around Fool’s Gold that could put you in danger once more,” JoJo said.

RJ nodded.

Liberty took a deep breath. “I know. This means I will have to have a talk with Asher about it tonight and persuade him I can be careful. I mean, it has been days since anyone has tried to shoot me. Not since the medical examiner took my body away in his van.”

“True. That’s a good point. So maybe that stunt Jake and Sparrow pulled did work after all,” RJ said.

The three of them climbed into JoJo's Mini Cooper and they headed toward Paradise. The drive was short and fast. JoJo drove like a race car driver in Liberty's opinion, but maybe it was because she drove a five-speed instead of an automatic. And she had no issue passing another car in front of her if they were going slower than she liked on the highway.

"Do you have time to come in?" Liberty asked when JoJo turned down the gravel drive to the Paradise.

"Afraid not. We will just have time to get back to the Watering Hole before my dad opens the kitchen again. Sorry," RJ said.

"It's okay. Thanks for the lift," Liberty said, opening up the back door and getting out. She waved to them as JoJo whipped the car around and headed back out the drive, dust billowing in her wake.

Digging out the house key, Liberty stuck it in the lock and opened the door before going inside. She smelled a delicious aroma coming from inside and she knew that Asher must be home. She hadn't seen him since last night.

She hurried inside and found him in the bedroom putting together a stealth-looking outfit all in black. Her heart dropped. All she could think about was the fact that he had been preparing for a sting operation in which he was the leader. She didn't understand everything about his position with the Brotherhood Protectors or how his former work with the Air Force doing reconnaissance jived, but it must go hand in hand. Had he received orders to engage his team in the mission?

"When are you leaving?" she asked.

"Tonight. I want you to go to Jocelyn and Simon's and stay with them until I return."

"No. I'll be fine here. I can take care of myself."

"I'd rather you not be alone right now."

"How can I possibly be alone with the Falcoes living all around us?"

He looked at her and studied her a moment before he spoke again. “You’re going to Simon’s and that is final. I’ll take you there myself.”

“I’ve got my own car. I can drive myself. Joe’s bringing it by.”

“He already did while you were gone. I have it parked inside the garage and my truck is out back on the other side of the hangar.”

She held out her hand to him. “Then give me the key. It’s my rental car.”

“No. You’re not driving. I can’t risk you being shot at while I’m otherwise occupied. If it wasn’t for JoJo driving today, you wouldn’t have gone to the gun range with her and RJ. That was a different car so whoever had been watching before wouldn’t have known to follow.”

She balled her fists up. “This is so unfair, Asher. You can’t keep me here like a hostage. When I agreed to come here I did so to be with you, but now I’m thinking that was a mistake.”

“You’re just saying that because you aren’t getting your way. I’m trying to keep you safe, Liberty. Do you think I want to be like this? Do you think I want to worry about you every minute when I’m not with you? I’d much rather be having pleasant thoughts instead of agonizing.”

She crossed her arms and turned away from him. She knew she was being difficult because she was afraid something was going to happen to him on this mission. In truth spending the evening with Jocelyn would be great. Far better than staying here alone.

She turned back around. “Why can’t I go with you?”

“What?”

“You heard me. Why can’t I go with you? I can sit in the truck.”

Asher laughed. “I can’t take my woman on a mission with me.”

She smiled. She liked the sound of him calling her that, but she wasn't backing down. "Why not? Didn't you take me to the gun range, so I'd know how to shoot? Today, Nash told me my target hits would injure long-range but kill up close. I've been refreshing myself with the self-defense classes. I can take care of myself in a pinch."

Asher let out a breath and shook his head. "I can't risk anything happening to you."

"Neither can I. Do you think I can sit at home and not worry that you won't come back to me?"

He walked to her and pulled her into his arms. "Baby, you don't have to fret over that. I'll be fine. I've always come back from a mission. This should be no different."

"It only takes one time for something to wrong..."

He lowered his head, resting his forehead on hers. Their noses touched. "How did I ever exist without you in my life?"

"I don't know. I've been wondering the same thing." She brushed her lips against his. "So can I go?"

He chuckled and nodded. "Call me crazy, but yes, you can go. You must stay in my truck with the doors locked. Do you understand? And if you see anyone coming toward it, get down on the floorboard and hide. The windows are tinted, but that means if they got close enough to look in, they might not see you."

She nodded.

He went back to his closet and pulled out another set of black pants and a shirt. "Try these on. These have a drawstring waist. I think you should be able to wear them. The shirt may be a little big, but if you tuck it in you should be good to go."

Liberty quickly changed. "What about shoes?"

"Your black Chacos will work."

"Right."

He changed clothes and then grabbed two Kevlar vests out of the back of his closet. "It's a good thing I have an extra one

of these.”

“Should I French Braid my hair?”

“That’s a good idea. While you do that, I’ll go get the pizza I brought home out of the oven. I’ve had it warming for us.”

“So that is what I smelled when I came in.”

“Yeah.”

RIGHT BEFORE DUSK, they left Paradise and headed to the Stephenville Ghost Town. They parked behind one of the buildings and Asher set up his laptop. From their vantage point, she could see several expensive-looking town cars pulling into the location. Even one stretch limousine arrived. When this happened a chauffeur got out and opened the door. Men from the town cars exited and filed into the limousine.

“Wait, isn’t that Silas? Asher, what’s Silas doing getting into that car?” Liberty said.

“Sh-h-h. Keep your voice down.”

She glared at him, but when she looked back, she spotted Dr. Palmer. She grabbed his arm and squeezed. “Oh, my lord. There’s the medical examiner. What is going on here?”

“Calm down.”

“But—” Liberty couldn’t believe what she was seeing. Had she misjudged these grandfatherly men? She looked back at Asher. “I can’t believe I trusted Silas...”

“They’re working for me.”

“Huh?”

“You said Silas wanted to help and we needed two men to attend the auction as buyers to ensure we get Justus and Chaney back, so we enlisted them to do this for us. They fit the profile.”

“But you said you didn’t want to risk Silas getting hurt.”

“Well, I reconsidered once we knew Justus and Chaney were being put up for auction,” Asher said.

Liberty laughed softly. “They’re working for you. Oh, that makes me feel so much better. So, all this time when you’ve been gone for those long hours you’ve been meeting up with those two?”

“Yes. And Jake.”

“But you didn’t tell me.”

“It was better this way.”

“For whom?”

“You.”

She looked at him. Not fully understanding how he could think that. But what was done was done. It wouldn’t change things to argue over it. Everything he did was to protect her because he cared. Hadn’t he called her his woman? No one had ever called her that before. It was so possessive and yet, it made her feel special.

He started the truck again and pulled out from their spot behind the building so they could follow behind the limousine at a safe distance. She wasn’t sure where they were going, but she knew not to ask Asher because he probably didn’t know either.

They traveled out of Fool’s Gold to the Ute Pass. Liberty recognized the road they were on immediately because they had searched that area more than once. This made her get excited as well as feel a little remorse because they had been so close to her sister all along without knowing.

Asher held back, allowing the limousine to travel further ahead of them so they wouldn’t realize they were being followed. A call from Jake came in and he answered.

“Are you following them?” Jake asked.

“Yes. They’re about two hundred yards ahead of me. How far back are you?”

“Turning up the hill now. I’ve got Stone and Clint with me for backup if we need them.”

“Yeah, I think I can smooth things over with Sparrow once she finds out we’ve kept her out of the loop,” Stone said.

“I wouldn’t want to be you, buddy,” Asher said.

Liberty reached over and took Asher’s hand.

“No one would,” Clint agreed.

Asher sped up as the car ahead of them disappeared around a curve so they wouldn’t lose the taillights. Which was good because it slowed and turned onto an unmarked road.

Had that been the reason they had not been able to find Justus and Chaney when they were driving through here?

“Hey Jake, when you come uphill, there is a curve in the road and after that an unmarked road off the main. The limousine turned onto that road. I’m going to put a flare out for you.”

“Okay. Speeding up and we’re ending the call,” Jake said.

Liberty held her breath as Asher stopped his truck, jumped out, and placed the flare. She thought it would be something with sparks flying, but it was only a stake with glow-in-the-dark strips of material hanging from it. Then he jumped back in, and they headed down the road to catch up with the lead car. As soon as they saw the taillights up ahead, he slowed down again and held back, turning off his headlights, to parking lights. Then followed at a safe distance the rest of the way.

“I’m nervous right now,” she said.

“I hear you. I’m anxious about how Silas and Dr. Palmer are going to play their parts. We’ve worked with them repeatedly and feel they are ready, but you just don’t know how it will go when it counts,” he explained. “And here we are. It’s go-time and I’m holding my breath praying they don’t freeze on the spot and screw this mission. If they do, then all hell could break loose.”

Liberty’s heart fell at that thought. If it were to happen what would that mean for Justus and Chaney? Would she ever see her sister again?

Headlights flashed behind them.

“That’s Jake.”

Liberty slid down in the seat, hiding on her side of the truck. She didn’t want to get Asher in hot water for bringing her along, even if she’d insisted that he do it.

“How much further?” she said.

“I don’t know.”

Taillights blinked up ahead, and the car turned. Asher slowed and gingerly approached to see that it was a driveway that the limousine went into. Jake called again.

“What’s going on?”

“The car turned into a driveway. It’s a large house from what I can tell.”

“Be careful. There has to be surveillance around the grounds. No one would be holding an auction at a remote location like this without it.”

“Roger that,” Asher said. “I’m going to see if I can pick up video footage on my laptop.”

Asher opened his laptop that had been lying in the tray of his console between the driver and passenger seats. He plugged in the laptop to his truck for more power and brought up the program to connect him with Silas and Dr. Palmer’s video feeds.

The men were still sitting in the limousine, but the footage was crisp and clear, audio was good too. He turned on record to catch everything that the feed brought in.

“We’re going to pass you and park down the road and see if we can go onto the property around back,” Jake said. “We’ll be in touch.”

Once the call ended, Liberty asked. “Are you going to park here or find another spot to leave your truck?”

He drove slower past the driveway to a turnaround spot and pulled over to leave his truck, turning to head back out for a quick getaway first. It was less than twenty feet away from

the driveway, but at least he could still see the house from there.

Asher sent the link to the cellphone and opened it as well on there.

“Okay. I want you to watch the feed on the laptop. If anything looks like Silas or Dr. Palmer are in danger before I get back text me.”

“Where are you going?”

“To get a closer look. Lock the doors.”

She nodded.

He got out and she pushed the button to lock the door behind him. Then he ran into the darkness, disappearing into the trees. He ran along the driveway, running from one tree to another to make sure he wasn't spotted until he reached the house.

By that time, he was able to watch as Silas, Dr. Palmer, and several other well-dressed men were escorted from the limousine to the house by a man in a tuxedo with a blonde wearing a sparkly formal gown on his arm. He snapped a photo of the couple and sent it to Swede to do facial recognition on them to get identification on them if he could.

He opened a pouch on his utility belt, pulled out earbuds, and fit them into his ears so he could talk to Jake, Clint, and Stone. Then he continued running through the tree line around the house until he found a side door that was unlocked and slipped inside. The door he entered was to a mudroom and he quietly took the eight steps up to the next floor, waiting a few moments to make sure no one was coming before he made a beeline down the hallway of rooms. Each door was locked, but they were numbered. He tapped lightly on one and immediately heard rustling behind the door before a knock was his reply.

Damn. Was this where the girls were being kept?

Footsteps could be heard coming so Asher hurried back down the steps to the mudroom where he'd come from. Peeping around the corner. He could see a beefy man with a

tight dark blue t-shirt stretched across his abs and another man talking outside the doors.

“Mr. Warshafsky wants the girls ready in half an hour. Can you make sure they are prepped and prepared for their debut? The men have arrived and are already asking for them.”

“Sure, Poe. I can do that. Is he wanting them to be given anything special?”

“No drugs for tonight, Bo. But have something ready in case they get out of hand.”

Bo and Poe?

Had he heard right?

The girls were not to be drugged, but there would be something ready if they got unruly. Asher waited for the two men to walk away from the hallway before he contacted Jake, Clint, and Stone letting them know where he was and what he'd overheard. He gave the three men instructions on how to get to where he was in the mudroom if they wanted to enter the house as well. Then he crept back up the stairs to the hallway and listened at the door where he had tapped earlier.

“Hello. Are you okay?” he asked.

CHAPTER 14



LIBERTY WATCHED the video footage from Silas and Dr. Palmer on the laptop amazed at the lies the men were telling about themselves. She realized that must be their undercover persona. She was impressed by the suits they were wearing and the hairstyles they wore. And when Silas got close enough to Dr. Palmer she was certain the medical examiner was wearing makeup. Could that mean that Silas was as well?

She watched closely hoping that Dr. Palmer would get a close enough shot of Silas so she could see his face. After what seemed like half an hour passed before this happened, she finally got a look at Silas and sure enough, the man was wearing makeup.

“Oh my gosh!” she laughed out loud.

As soon as she did, she remembered how Asher had chastised her earlier for making noise. She slapped her hand over her mouth, looking around outside the vehicle to make sure no one had been walking by near the entrance to the drive and could have possibly heard her. Luckily no one was there and she relaxed against the passenger seat once more to watch the video feed.

Finally, the men were asked to leave the reception area and move to the auction area. From where Liberty watched it looked to be another room about the same size as the one they had been in. The only difference is each of the men was assigned a portioned area where they were seated like a box at the opera house for bidding privacy. It appeared there was a

red-carpeted runway that the young ladies would walk down for the men to view.

Liberty sent Asher a text letting him know the auction was about to start. Then she prayed fervently that Justus and Chaney were not going to be harmed during this auction and that Silas and Dr. Palmer would be the highest bidders for them and would be able to get the girls out of that house without incident. They had to be.

As she thought of this, Silas's video feed landed on a man dressed in a tuxedo with a blonde on his arm who was wearing a very sparkly floor-length dress. Was this man one of the buyers? Would he have brought a woman with him to the auction? And why were they dressed more formally than the other guests...unless they were the organizers?

That thought made Liberty angry. Very angry. If that man was indeed the one behind this whole thing... Her hand grazed the gun holstered at her hip and she was so tempted to get out of the truck and run inside at that moment and demand he release her sister at once. But she knew she couldn't do that for many reasons. The most important was she could put her sister's life in jeopardy.

Instead of reacting, she sat there and waited. She stayed in the truck as Asher had requested. And she watched the live feed finding it more and more difficult with each passing moment.

A TIMID VOICE had responded to Asher that she was okay and he worked furiously trying to pick the lock on the door before one of the two men returned. However, despite his lockpicking skills, the tumbler would not turn over and this frustrated him. He heard footsteps returning.

"I'm sorry. I can't get you free. I tried," he whispered against the door before he hurried quietly back down the steps to the mudroom.

Bo returned with two other younger men. He stopped in the middle of the hallway and spoke. "Ladies, blindfolds, please. Step to the doors. I will be opening them in one, two, three."

He pressed a button on the wall and the doors swung open. No wonder the lock had not been able to be picked. The young women filed out and lined up wearing their bikinis and high heels.

“Excellent. Just like we practiced. When we get to where we are going I will collect your blindfolds before you walk down the runway. You will walk down the runway, turn, and walk back. If you are asked to make a second walk you will do that. Be sure to smile pleasantly. Anyone not obeying will be severely punished by Poe is that clear?”

The young women nodded.

Asher watched from the mudroom as the young women followed Bo and the two other men down the hallway. As soon as they were gone, the door to the mudroom opened and Jake, Clint, and Stone entered.

“What did we miss?” Jake asked.

“The girls have just been taken up for the auction,” Asher explained. “I tried to pick the lock on one of the doors but it wouldn’t budge. Turns out there was a button on the wall that opened them all simultaneously.”

“Interesting,” Stone said. “Should I give Sparrow a call?”

“Do it. But tell her no sirens and she’ll need a van to round up all the buyers,” Jake said.

“You got it.” Stone went outside to make the call.

Asher opened the video feed from Silas and Dr. Palmer’s cameras on his phone so they’d know what was going on upstairs before they prepared to make their way up there.

A red-carpet runway was laid out for the girls to walk on and it looked like the men were set up in individual portioned boxes for the auction. However, it was unclear where in the house this room was located.

“Our guys look good and natural in their roles,” Jake said. “Okay, let’s go. We need to find this room before the girls are taken away.”

“Right,” Clint said.

They carefully went down the hallway, turned the corner, and climbed the stairs to the next level where they could hear voices coming from above them. Asher took the lead watching his video feed as they went to make sure they didn't walk into anything dangerous. He held out his arm as a signal for Jake and Clint to stop behind him when he spotted the girls lined up waiting to walk on the red carpet.

Clint pointed over to a half wall with a flower planter sitting on top of it as a place where they could easily hide behind. The three of them scurried over to it before they were spotted by the men guarding the girls. The foliage from the greenery made the perfect cover and Asher was able to see Silas and Dr. Palmer in their respective boxes easily. He also found Justus and Chaney in the lineup of the girls.

He quickly sent Liberty a text telling her that he'd found her sister and Chaney and that he'd have them out soon.

She replied with a heart emoji.

That made him smile and he didn't want to disappoint her.

Seductive music began playing from speakers in the room and the first girl started walking the carpet. Bids from the men in the gallery were placed and the girl was soon sold.

The next girl was up and bidding was fast and furious for her as well. She was asked to walk the carpet a second time due to interest. In the end, she brought triple what the first girl had before they called sold.

"I'm worried we haven't allocated enough funds for Silas and Dr. Palmer to win the auctions," Asher said.

"Their funds are infinite," Jake said. "They can bid as high as they want because no money will ever transfer hands. It will only look like it. Don't worry. We'll get them."

He nodded, peering through the planter as the next girl was up. Justus was after her. She stood there holding hands with Chaney wearing their blindfolds. They looked frightened in their skimpy swimsuits. However, their makeup and hair were flawless as if they were prepared for a beauty pageant. He snapped a photo of them and texted it to Liberty.

She didn't respond immediately like she had before. It took her a few moments this time. And when she did it was with a broken heart emoji.

He texted back xoxo.

When he looked up from his phone Bo was taking the blindfold off of Justus and nudging her to walk down the red carpet. "Smile."

From the video footage, he could see that she obeyed and Silas and Dr. Palmer immediately bid on her. They raised the dollar amount so high that the other man bowed out quickly. Dr. Palmer won the auction. Justus walked over to his box.

Bo took Chaney's blindfold off and wiped a tear away from her cheek. "Give me a pretty smile, baby. That's a good girl. Now, go make me proud."

Asher found his pep talk to her odd, but it seemed to do the trick. She walked out and Silas and Dr. Palmer did their bidding war again. Dr. Palmer surpassed Silas once again and won the auction before Chaney got to the end of the runway.

Stunned, Chaney looked like she wanted to bolt, but Dr. Palmer walked over and collected her, patting her on the hand and speaking softly to her as he led her back to his box.

"Not fair. I was promised a girl," Silas shouted.

"There are still girls. Maybe the next one," the man in the tuxedo said.

Silas sat back down.

Asher moved closer to Jake. "What are they doing? This wasn't part of the script."

"I know. Isn't it great? They came up with it this afternoon and ran it by me before the stylist showed up to make them over. Dr. Palmer is going to try to slip out with the girls and Silas is going to make a ruckus as a diversion."

"Isn't that risky?" Clint asked. "What if it all goes south?"

"That's why we're here," Jake said. "And why Stone has already called Sparrow and got her on the way."

Asher didn't like this at all. He thought it was as risky as Clint did, especially since both men had had such trouble carrying out their simple role-playing lines and now they wanted to go rogue and improvise on the sly.

As the next girl walked to the runway, Silas made a bid and when it lost, he placed another and another, but he lost and he got upset this time. He turned over his chair and acted like a hothead.

The beefy man Poe as well as the two younger men that Asher had seen in the hallway earlier with Bo came over to his box and tried to settle him down. Silas ranted and raved, throwing his arms in the air. He accidentally hit the beefy Poe across the face in the process which made the man angry. He ended up picking him up and shaking him.

Dr. Palmer took that opportunity while everyone was preoccupied with the commotion to lead Justus and Chaney away from the auction area and down the back stairs. No one seemed to notice except Asher, Jake, and Clint.

"Clint, you follow Dr. Palmer out with the girls."

"Got it." He slipped into the darkness of the corridor and down the back stairs following behind them.

"I think we're going to have to help Silas out of this situation he's got himself into," Asher said.

Jake nodded. "I'd hoped to avoid this."

"Me too."

"I'll get the girls still in line out of the way while you go help Silas," Jake said.

LIBERTY WATCHED a beefy dude pick Silas up and the video feed went shaky from there. On the other screen, she saw her sister and Chaney being led out of the room by Dr. Palmer. But where was he taking them? She couldn't sit in the truck any longer. She had to go help the man get them away from the house. She didn't care what Asher had said about staying put.

She got out of the truck, looked both ways before she crossed the road, and ran through the trees to the front of the

house, surprised no one was guarding it. But maybe with the house being so far off the beaten path, they didn't feel they needed to take those measures.

Slipping inside the front door, she leaned against the wall as she caught her breath and listened to sounds coming from the upper floors to determine which path to take.

Something crashed into the wall and then there was a heavy thud, she knew that if that burly man had thrown Silas instead of putting her friend down then he could have been seriously injured. Without hesitating any longer, she followed the sounds up the stairs until she came to a level where the girl's screams were deafening. She unholstered her gun and held it securely between her hands, making sure she did not slip her finger through to touch the trigger. As she walked, she pointed the gun at the ground in front of her, determined to only use it to scare that large man into stepping away from Silas.

Screaming girls in swimsuits and high heels ran passed her. Their arms flailing. She didn't understand why they ran that way. Was someone after them?

Silas cursed and when she got closer she saw him lying on the floor, clutching his shoulder. She looked frantically for Asher, but she didn't see him. Where was he at? Where had Dr. Palmer taken Justus and Chaney?

A gunshot pierced the room and she realized what she'd mistaken for something falling when she was downstairs had been a gunshot up here. That's the reason the girls had been running. She looked around and found Jake throwing punches in one of the private boxes with that beefy man. But there was still no sign of Asher.

She searched and finally saw him at a standoff on the other side of a half-wall partition with a younger man about the age of Justus and Chaney. She immediately wondered if he was Kurtis or possibly the unnamed friend who had tagged along for Chaney. Asher was trying to reason with him to put down the gun, but he wouldn't do it. He had the gun aimed at Asher.

Liberty's heart skipped a beat. She feared he was going to pull the trigger and shoot Asher. She couldn't allow that. She raised her gun, prepared to shoot the gun out of his hand when he fired his gun, hitting Asher.

Before the young man could get off another shot, she swung her arms pointed her gun at his torso, and fired. He fell.

She put the safety back on her gun and slipped it back into her holster before rushing to Asher's side. Falling beside him, she found he was lying there laughing.

"What's so funny?"

"I've been shot."

"I know that."

"I'm wearing this damn vest and I get shot in the arm. Just grazed, but still shot."

"Yeah. You did. But I think you'll survive." She helped him up. "I'm going to go find Dr. Palmer."

"Down the back stairs. Clint's with him."

She nodded and ran down the steps. She found the medical examiner and Clint in a long hallway outside two open doors.

"Clint, they can use your help upstairs."

"Okay," he said and ran down the hallway in the direction she'd come.

"Dr. Palmer, how can I ever repay you for what you've done?"

"Think nothing of it, my dear," the older man said.

"Justus! Justus!" Liberty called. "Chaney? Chaney?"

The two girls came out of their respective rooms dressed in their clothes. Justus carried a brown, squirming bundle in her arms. For the first time in her life, Liberty thought her younger sister looked timid as she stared at her.

She held out her arms as wide as she could to the both of them and both girls ran to her beginning to cry. She pulled them close. "You do not know how hard I have been looking

for you since I arrived and found you gone. Chaney, honey, your parents are in Colorado Springs. As soon as we get out of here we'll call them."

Chaney nodded, sniffing.

"Justus, what is that?" Liberty asked.

"For all."

CHAPTER 15



“FOR ALL?” Liberty asked.

Justus nodded and handed her the squirming little puppy that was just waking up in her arms. “He’s been my companion these last several days and kept me going. I named him that because I knew when you found me it would be Liberty, Justus, and For All together forever.”

Liberty nodded and tears welled up in her eyes at what her sister said. She held the puppy with one arm and pulled Justus to her with the other. “Yes, it will. I promise you that I will be there for you more than I have in the past.”

“Don’t go overboard. Okay. I might not be able to handle too much of you all at once.”

“Deal.” Liberty smiled at her and gave her back her puppy. “I think he will be a nice addition to our family.”

Liberty introduced Justus and Chaney to Dr. Palmer and left them with him while she ran back upstairs to see what was going on with Asher and check on Silas. She found that Sparrow had arrived and was chewing Jake out while she handcuffed the beefy dude. An EMT was bandaging Asher’s arm, while another EMT was checking out Silas who sat in one of the luxurious chairs that had been placed in the temporary private boxes.

Sparrow spotted her and pointed a finger at her. “Stop right there, Ms. Killion. I hear you are responsible for shooting the young man who shot Asher?”

Liberty swallowed and nodded. “I did.”

Sparrow came over and extended her hand to her. “That was a very brave thing you did. If you hadn’t stopped him he may have fired another round at Asher and done more than grazed his arm.”

“I don’t want to think about that possibility. It was bad enough seeing what he did do. We have my sister and Chaney downstairs if you are interested.”

“I am and I’ll be looking forward to a follow-up report from Dr. Palmer tomorrow. But for now, I think we can all call this an excellent end to a horrific evening. Unfortunately, we were not able to capture Leland Warshafsky. According to the man I just cuffed, Poe Polaski, he is the man in the tuxedo who got away and the perpetrator of this ring. We were able to capture Kurtis as well as the man in charge of the girls, Bo. But don’t worry. There is only so far Mr. Warshafsky can go. We will get him.”

Asher walked over and joined them. “Has anyone called Captain Thompson in Colorado Springs yet?”

“I did as I headed over here,” Sparrow said. “He’ll be driving Chaney’s parents out in the morning. I’m going to take the girls into Fool’s Gold to our medical center to be checked out with the other girls. You can follow us there and pick them up after they’ve been examined.”

“Can we drive the girls into town?” Liberty asked. “I hate for them to be lumped into the back of a van after what they’ve been through.”

Sparrow nodded. “Sure. We’ll see you there.”

They went downstairs to get the girls and Dr. Palmer before going out the back door and around the side of the house. Silas was already outside talking with Stone and Clint about what had gone down inside. Jake was limping toward his truck.

Once they got there, Liberty stopped under one of the night lights and introduced her sister and Chaney to Asher.

“Ladies, I’d like you to meet Asher Nolte. He’s been helping me find you. He spearheaded tonight’s rescue

missions. He recruited Dr. Palmer Fool's Gold medical examiner and Silas Corum a retired reporter from Colorado Springs to play their roles tonight to get you free."

"Thank you for your help," Chaney said.

"We couldn't have survived if you hadn't succeeded tonight," Justus said.

He nodded and they continued walking to his truck. He opened the crew cab and the girls climbed in on one side while Dr. Palmer got in back on the other."

"I'm going to ride into town with Jake," Silas called."

"Okay."

Liberty ran over and gave him a big hug. "Thank you for risking your life for my sister. I know you didn't bargain being manhandled like you were tonight."

Silas chuckled. "Yeah. Well...now I have to explain to Lillie how I got injured. Got a good excuse?"

She shrugged. "You and Frank got into an argument? And then you pick one with him tomorrow to cover it up."

"That seems like a lot of work just so Lillie doesn't find out what I've done. No. I think I will just come clean with her. After all, it is in the past now. I've already done it. She can't do anything but be angry with me. And Asher because I think she probably made him promise not to let anything bad happen to me."

"I believe you are right." Liberty hugged him once more. "Thanks again."

She ran back across the road to the truck and climbed inside where everyone was waiting on her. Once she was buckled up, Asher picked up her hand and kissed her fingers before starting his truck and heading back to Fool's Gold.

"Do you think Sparrow was very angry over being left out of the loop on this operation? She was chewing Jake out when I came upstairs earlier."

“He can handle it and you saw how she was with us. She seemed fine. If she was upset she would have let us know,” Asher said. “You shouldn’t fret over it. Besides if this is the only time we do something to upset her it will surprise me.”

Once they arrived in Fool’s Gold, they dropped Dr. Palmer off at the police station to get his car before taking the girls over to be checked out at the medical facility. Then they headed out to Paradise.

After they showered, Liberty gave both girls a clean nightshirt to sleep in and got them settled on Asher’s sectional couch with the puppy. Then she and Asher turned in for the night. Justus didn’t say anything, but she stared at Liberty with a questioning look.

“We’ll talk in the morning,” Liberty said because she was too tired to get into it with her that evening. She fell asleep shortly after she laid her head on her pillow and snuggled up beside Asher. When she woke the next morning, she heard giggling coming from the living room. It made her smile.

She got up, put her clothes on, and fixed her hair while she waited for Asher to come out of the bathroom. Then she went in before she went into the kitchen to fix the girls some breakfast.

“What would you like to eat this morning?” she asked.

“We already ate,” Justus said. “We found leftover pizza in the fridge and had that.”

“Oh. Okay. Do you think you’d like anything else? Asher loves pancakes. I was going to try making some today.”

“You don’t have to on our account,” Chaney said as the puppy ran between her and Justus on the couch.

“Have you taken him out to do his business?” Liberty asked.

“Yes.”

“Just checking.”

Asher came out dressed for work. He held up Liberty’s rental car key for her. “In the event you need to go somewhere

today. I have to go for a briefing with Hank about the mission, but I'll be back as soon as it's over."

Liberty came over and took the key from him and kissed him. "Thank you. How's your arm this morning?"

"It has been better, but the EMT said for me to keep moving it so it doesn't get stiff and I'm going to follow up at the medical center this afternoon."

"That sounds like a plan."

"I'll see you ladies when I return," he said and smiled.

He hadn't left until Justus was on her knees hanging over the back of the couch and verbally pounced on Liberty. "What in the hell is going on here? When does my workaholic lawyer sister start sleeping with strangers?"

Chaney giggled. "Justus, calm down. Liberty is an adult. She knows what she's doing."

"That's right, Justus. I am an adult and I know what I'm doing. Asher is a wonderful man. We might not have known one another for too long, but it's long enough to develop feelings for one another. I love him very much."

At that same moment, the door to the apartment opened and Asher walked back in. "You do?"

Liberty turned, surprised to see him back so soon. "I—I thought you had left?"

"I was so intent on making sure you had your key that I left mine in the bedroom. I got all the way out to the truck and realized I didn't have it. But let's back up here a moment. Liberty, do you feel that way?"

She walked to him and nodded. "I do. I know this might seem fast and if it isn't something you can reciprocate—"

He kissed her before she had a chance to finish her sentence, pulling her into his arms. When he pulled back, he said, "I can reciprocate and have no problem doing so."

Liberty wrapped her arms around his neck, smiling brightly at him.

“They reciprocate each other?” Chaney said.

“Good heavens,” Justus said. “Old people.”

Asher pulled her to him and kissed her again, holding her close. When they came up for a breather, he told Liberty, “We’re not old.”

“No, not at all,” she agreed.

TEAM WATCHDOG

Team Watchdog

Mason's Watch - Jen Talty

Asher's Watch - Leanne Tyler

Cruz's Watch - Stacey Wilk

Kent's Watch - Deanna L. Rowley

Ryder's Watch - Kris Norris

Thank you for reading Asher's Watch. Please feel free to leave an honest review! I love to hear feedback from readers.

If you enjoyed this book, then be sure to check out *Fighting for Charli* in the Team Falco series and *Simon's Promise* in Team Raptor series. Or any of my other Brotherhood Protector World books available on Amazon or through Kindle Unlimited.

Be sure to join my private Facebook group (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/LeanneTylerStreetTeam>) where I post about my books, giveaways, ask members to help name characters, have book discussions, and more on a regular basis.

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- Lonely No More

Team Falco:

- Fighting for Charli

Team Raptor

- Simon's Promise

Team Watchdog

- Asher's Watch

ABOUT LEANNE TYLER

Award-winning and Bestselling author Leanne Tyler writes sweet and somewhat sensual romances whether historical, contemporary, or romantic suspense. Her most recent books are part of the Elle James' Brotherhood Protectors World. Other series include her popular The Good Luck series—a collection of short contemporary romantic comedy romances set in East Tennessee. In addition to her contemporary novels, she writes American historical novels set prior to and during the Civil War.

Leanne lives in East Tennessee with her young adult son and Yorkie-Maltese mix, Willie. For more information about her books and to sign up for her newsletter, please visit her website at leannetyler.com.

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ABOUT ELLE JAMES

ELLE JAMES also writing as MYLA JACKSON is a *New York Times* and *USA Today* Bestselling author of books including cowboys, intrigues and paranormal adventures that keep her readers on the edges of their seats. When she's not at her computer, she's traveling, snow skiing, boating, or riding her ATV, dreaming up new stories. Learn more about Elle James at www.ellejames.com

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