

TANGLED

MYSTERY LAKE BOOK 8



TAMSEN SCHULTZ

Tangled

MYSTERY LAKE SERIES

BOOK 8

TAMSEN SCHULTZ

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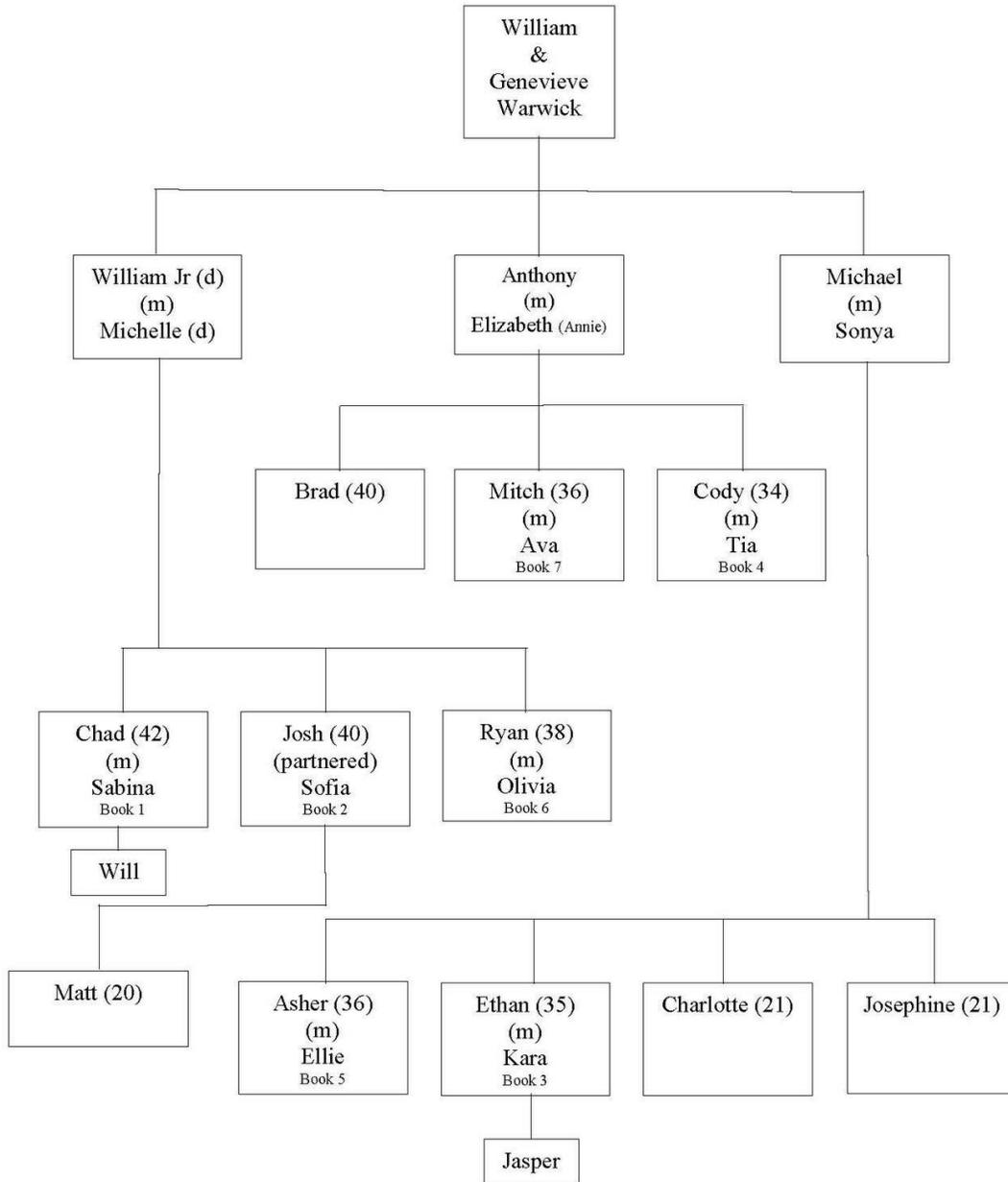
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Warwick Family Tree

Ages of cousins are as of the start of the series



CHAPTER ONE

SCARLETT MITCHELL SCOOPED HER LONG BLACK HAIR AWAY FROM HER FACE AND SETTLED IT behind her shoulders. Her tight curls wouldn't stay back for long; they were far too springy for that. But for now, she could see with her peripheral vision.

Taking a sip of her Negra Modelo, she glanced around. Her date was five minutes late, but she didn't mind. It gave her time to scope out the small burger joint located a couple of miles from LAX airport. Popular with the airport crowd, she spotted a few cleaning staff and food service workers still in their uniforms. Although she'd wager that the four men sitting at the table opposite her were pilots. She'd flown enough in her life that she could spot one a mile away, even out of uniform.

At the end of the bar, one man sat alone. Two women in a booth nearby kept eyeing him and giggling. Scarlett didn't blame them—well, not for the eyeing part; the giggling was a little over the top. The man was...more than attractive. Physically, he checked all her boxes. Tall, lean build, dark hair, sharp jawline, and the kind of eyes that were hard to look away from. She couldn't tell their exact color, although she knew they weren't blue, and their striking light shade contrasted with his dark lashes and tanned skin. The stark difference between the light and the dark reminded her of a young Gary Cooper, despite their different color. So did the twinkle she glimpsed in them.

His appearance might have been what caught her attention. It wasn't what kept it, though. No, what kept it was the steady way he held his drink, the flash of the smile he offered the bartender, and the "thank you" he gave the waitress when she delivered his meal. He wasn't a man looking to hook up or impress or portray an image. He seemed, from her vantage point, a man comfortable with himself, kind, and based on the tiny tilt of his lips every time the women behind him giggled, easily amused. All good qualities in her book.

Then again, maybe she was attributing far too much to him because, in many ways, he reminded her of her best friend's husband. In the eighteen

months they'd been married, she'd only met Ethan Warwick once. But she'd seen enough pictures and heard enough stories from Kara that Scarlett adored the man. And their four-month-old son, Jasper. She hadn't met the baby yet, but as soon as she finished her current "project," she planned to head up to Mystery Lake and visit. It had been far too long since she'd wrapped her friend in a hug.

A person slid into the other side of her booth, and she jerked her attention away from the man at the bar. Then did a double take at the one now sitting across from her. The man she'd met online, and had arranged the date with, had billed himself as a forty-year-old fitness trainer. The one across from her, holding out his hand and introducing himself as said trainer, had to be at least fifty-five. And if he'd seen the inside of a gym, or any physical activity in years, she'd eat her hat.

"It's nice to meet you, Scarlett. I'm Cole," he said.

She blinked, then held out her hand. "Nice to meet you too, Cole," she replied. If she cared at all about this "date" she'd be pissed about his misrepresentations. But as she didn't, she found herself mildly curious as to what kind of person felt so free to lie about themselves.

He flashed her a chagrined smile. "I know, I'm not what you were expecting," he said. She lifted her shoulder and glanced away, looking for a waiter. The dark-haired man at the bar—the man she now thought of as Cooper—turned his head and their eyes caught. He held her gaze for a moment, maybe two, then it dropped to Cole, who was explaining something about his profile that she was paying no attention to. Cooper frowned, then seemed to catch himself. His gaze lifted to hers again, then he turned away. She could all but hear the internal dialogue in his head, reminding himself that whatever was happening in her booth wasn't any of his business. Pity that. If it were a different sort of night, she might not mind being his business.

"Don't you think?" Cole asked.

"I'm sorry," Scarlett said, returning her attention to her *date*. "I was looking for a waiter," she added.

Cole smiled. Despite not being at all how he described himself on his profile, he had a nice smile. Still not her type. But again, hooking up wasn't the purpose of the evening. Not for her, anyway.

"Reverse aging," he said. Confusion had her furrowing her brow. "I know I said I was forty, and I'm not. Not biologically. I've been doing a lot

of reverse aging work, though, and I think it's really paying off."

Scarlett stared at him. She tended to keep up with medical research, even if 99 percent of it wasn't relevant to the work she did as a nurse with an international aid organization. And reverse aging was not a thing the Average Joe—which Cole definitely was—could do. Sure, he could have light treatments and all sorts of cosmetic procedures—although, judging by his appearance, he hadn't. But reverse aging at the molecular or cellular level? Well, she hoped, for his sake, he hadn't been sold a bunch of modern-day snake oil.

Still, his obvious enthusiasm could serve her well.

She leaned forward, fingering her beer bottle. "That's fascinating, Cole. I've heard things, of course. What woman my age hasn't been told how to look younger? I'd love to hear all about it."

She knew for a fact she looked younger than her thirty-seven years, but whatever. Women over the age of thirty were *supposed* to be paranoid about keeping their youthful appearances. Her interest would be easy for Cole to believe.

And believe her, he did. As he launched into a monologue about his treatments, she let her attention skim across the growing crowd. Four young men had walked in two minutes earlier, and she'd pegged them as college kids out for a late-night snack of the locally famous burgers. Two older women, cleaners at one of the local hotels, if Scarlett had to guess, followed.

As the women removed their coats, chatting away in Spanish, her gaze darted to Cooper. Again, their eyes caught. A fluttering of something started in her stomach as they continued to stare at each other. His gaze, not quite predatory, held a keen but quiet curiosity. Instinctively, she knew he wouldn't try to pick her up. Not while she appeared to be on a date. He couldn't, nor did he try to, disguise his interest, though.

Inside, she sighed. If only tonight were different. If only tonight allowed her to ditch Cole and explore the chemistry arcing between her and the man at the bar.

But she had much bigger plans. Plans she had no intention of wavering from.

The door opened, and three more men walked in. Her breath caught, and she drew back in both surprise and relief. She'd hoped, but hadn't been sure, they'd show up tonight. An instant later, she forced herself to relax. She had no interest in drawing attention to herself. Although, judging by the way

Cooper watched her, it might be too late for that. At least where he was concerned.

Counting her breaths in and out, she took a sip of her beer and looked at Cole. Who she promptly tuned out again as he continued to espouse his knowledge of molecular biology in a way that told her he hadn't studied it himself but was happy to own whatever information he'd been fed.

Out of the corner of her eye, she watched the three men walk across the room. She only recognized one—his white-blond hair making him hard to forget—and she cataloged the features of the other two as they passed by the bar. None of them looked at the crowd or seemed to assess their surroundings as they headed toward the hall leading to the restrooms. And beyond that, to a storage area in the back of the building. A storage area with an industrial-size walk-in freezer that, if her sources were right, wasn't used for food.

A tiny smile touched her lips. The layout of the building was a convenient bit of luck. Excusing herself to go to the ladies' room wouldn't raise any flags. And since she'd nearly finished her beer, the timing worked.

She dragged her attention away from the hall and back to Cole, stopping when she noticed Cooper watching her, studying her. A small line appeared between his brows as he lowered them. The left side of his mouth tightened, and his eyes burned into her. As if asking what she was up to.

Until now, she hadn't considered the possibility that he might be with the three men who'd disappeared down the hall. That he might be an advance scout who'd noticed her interest. Her chest squeezed at the thought. Was it possible? Yes. Was it likely, though? She didn't think so. Her instincts were honed from years of good situational awareness determining the difference between life and death. And those instincts were telling her that he was just a man having a burger and a beer and eyeing a woman he found interesting. But could she risk it? Should she still move ahead with her plan?

Cooper's gaze swiveled toward the hall, lingered there, then returned to her. A heartbeat later, one of the older women who'd entered earlier bumped into him, and his attention jerked away. The woman's voice was too low for Scarlett to make out the words, but she recognized the cadence. To her surprise, he answered back in Spanish. The woman laughed, and they bantered for a bit before he shifted over a stool so that the two women could sit beside each other.

"Drink?" Cole asked.

Scarlett flickered her gaze back to her "date" and the waiter standing

beside the booth. She smiled. “Another Modelo, please,” she replied.

“Water for me,” Cole said. “You hungry?”

She hadn’t eaten since lunch and it was close to ten, but she shook her head. Cole let out a sigh of relief and shook his head at the waiter.

“I don’t eat meat. Or anything fried. Or really, anything cooked. The doctors recommended only raw foods while I’m working through the process. It’s not as bad as it might sound, but it does make it hard to eat out.”

It sounded like hell to Scarlett. Some people needed special diets for life-threatening medical reasons; she understood that. But as she wasn’t one of them, she couldn’t fathom giving up any food just for the sake of giving it up. She’d worked in enough dire conditions all over the world not to appreciate any and all food she was offered—from a nutrition perspective, but also as a way to connect with people.

“I’m sure it does,” she said. “So how long will you be in treatments?” she asked, knowing it would send him off on another monologue that she wouldn’t need to pay attention to. Predictably, he launched into a detailed story of when he’d started and what the process was.

She glanced at her watch and noted five minutes had passed since the three men had disappeared into the back room. She’d give them another five, then excuse herself to go to the restroom. Settled on that plan, she smiled as the waiter set the fresh beer in front of her.

Taking a sip of the dark lager, she darted another look around the room. And almost choked when Cooper glanced at her one more time, frowned, then slid from his stool and started toward the hallway.

Well acquainted with adrenaline, the familiar, almost painful, rush burst through her body as he disappeared from view. It was entirely possible he was simply visiting the men’s room, but she didn’t like it. She didn’t want him near whatever might be happening in the back of the building. And even if nothing was happening in that industrial freezer, the three men weren’t the sort of people the kind, confident, easygoing Cooper should be anywhere near.

“Excuse me,” she said, interrupting Cole. He paused, mid-word, his mouth open. “I need to use the restroom.”

He blinked. “Oh, of course,” he said, sitting back. She smiled in response, then grabbed her purse and slid from her seat.

Ignoring the rapid tattoo of her heart and the urge to run, she walked as casually as possible across the bar and toward the hall. Bypassing the

women's restroom, she approached the door to the men's. With a look behind her to make sure no one was watching, she leaned against it and listened.

Nothing. No sounds of anyone urinating. No sounds of anyone washing their hands or moving about.

With another glance over her shoulder, she inched the door open and peeked inside. The unexpected, and uncomfortable, plot twist to her night held her still. But only for a moment. Whoever Cooper was, he'd followed the three men into the back. Whether as a friend or something else, she didn't know. Although if someone forced her to choose, she'd wager he'd chosen to step into something he knew nothing about solely because he'd perceived her interest. She wasn't sure what to make of that, but she had to admire his attention to detail. Not even Cole, sitting two feet across the table, had noticed her distraction.

For a hot second, she considered walking away and ditching her plans. Only she might not ever get the opportunity again; it had taken a lot of cajoling to learn her target's location tonight. And then there was Cooper. Maybe it was because he reminded her of Ethan, or maybe it was the way he looked at her—curious and concerned—but she wasn't going to let him walk into the lion's den alone. Or at all. Not on her watch.

Letting the bathroom door close, she took the two steps needed to bring her to the back of the hall. Pausing, she again listened. Hearing nothing, she slung her purse across her body, then opened the door enough to slip through. Closing it behind her, she leaned against the cool, smooth wood and let her eyes adjust to the dark. The unusual darkness. Being close to the kitchen and bar area, she'd expected more light. As it was, the hall in front of her was lit only by an exit sign at the end and a strip of light under the single door halfway down.

Removing a hairband from her wrist, she pulled her hair back and tied it in a low ponytail as she eyed the end of the hall. Her contacts had provided her with a layout of the building, but it had been a rough one. If they were right, the exit door led to another wide hallway with two more doors. One led to a large pantry, and the second to the room with the freezer.

Not giving herself time to think about her own safety, she started forward. Using the precious seconds that it took to make her way to the exit door, she adapted her original plan. Following the blond after he left for the night was no longer an option. Which meant she'd lose the opportunity to find the person she desperately wanted to find. But such was life. Her

priorities had shifted the moment she'd realized Cooper had gone after the three men. Now she needed to get him out and far away.

As she approached the door, she toyed with the idea that he might be a cop or some other undercover agent. That would be easier to believe than that he was a part of the threesome, but she couldn't bring herself to buy that story, either. She didn't know why she felt so certain that he'd inserted himself into the situation because of her. She knew nothing about him other than what she'd observed in watching him for twenty minutes. She wouldn't second-guess herself, though. She'd learned the hard way that when she did, she usually regretted it.

Reaching the door, she took a slow breath and prayed the hinges didn't squeak. Opening it barely enough for her to slide through, she then eased it closed and released the handle slowly.

Again, darkness met her. Another exit sign lay at the end of the hallway—the exterior door—and the two doors her contacts had assured her would be there sat opposite each other halfway down the hall. The space itself would give a fire inspector a heart attack. With boxes stacked haphazardly, reaching the ceiling in some places, only a narrow path lay between her and the exit.

A low rumble of voices filtered to her, and she strained to hear even as she searched for Cooper.

Unable to make out either the words or the man, she inched forward, keeping an eye on the boxes—and the nooks and crannies between them—for hiding spots, should she need one.

As she neared the freezer room door, the voices grew more distinct. She could hear the words now, although she had no idea who was saying what. One man expressed his disappointment in the decision another had made. A second defended the decision, saying he'd had no choice. A third grunted something she couldn't catch.

Keeping her ears open, she turned her attention to locating the man she needed to save. Well, maybe not save, but certainly one she needed to get out of the building. The good news was that she didn't think he'd revealed himself or been spotted. She suspected a little bit of hell would have broken loose if he'd been caught. And the conversation happening to her left would have an entirely different tone. Still, her heart thudded heavily in her chest, and despite the AC in this part of the building, a bead of sweat rolled down her back.

Scanning the hall as she walked, she forced herself to breathe deep and steady. A task that grew harder and harder with each passing second that she found no evidence of Cooper. Two feet from the entrance to the freezer, she flattened her back to a stack of boxes and studied the floor for any shadows. Not an easy task in the dimly lit space.

The conversation in the room continued. The voices remained calm, but she knew men like the blond, and the tone didn't fool her. He was the sort who could kill while casually sipping a cocktail. No hesitation, no remorse, no humanity.

A shift in the air had her lifting her attention from the floor to the other side of the door. A beat later, Cooper stepped from behind a stack of boxes. Meeting her gaze, he raised his finger and placed it over his lips. He didn't need to tell her to stay quiet, but she nodded anyway.

With his eyes glittering in the light filtering into the hallway from the freezer room, he motioned to the exit behind him. An unspoken plan formed between them, and she nodded again.

His gaze remained locked on hers, then he dragged it away and inched forward to peer around the boxes and into the freezer room. Keeping an eye on the activity, he lowered his left hand and spread his fingers, wagging his hand to get her attention.

Dutifully, she dropped her gaze. To his ringless fingers. Something she shouldn't notice given the tenuous situation, but an observation she tucked away, nonetheless.

Her heart pounded as his pinkie curled up, starting the countdown for when she'd dart across the opening. From there, they'd make their way to the exit together.

His ring finger curled up, and she shifted her weight to the balls of her feet. The distance to his side wasn't far, less than six feet, but she'd need to be both fast and quiet.

His middle finger curled, and she bunched her muscles.

Then his pointer finger.

When his thumb began to move, so did she.

Her fingers had just brushed Cooper's when she heard the unmistakable sound of a shot being fired through a silencer.

CHAPTER TWO

SCARLETT SLID HER HAND INTO COOPER'S AND, USING HER BODY, PUSHED HIM BACK BEHIND THE BOXES as she closed the gap between them. He froze, no doubt shocked at what had happened, then his hands came to her hips, and he pulled her close as they tucked themselves against the wall.

"We need to call the police," he said, ducking his head so his lips brushed her ear as he spoke.

She turned her head to respond, her cheek brushing his. "Yes, but we can't do that if we're both dead. We need to get out first." She could feel his heart beating against her hand as it rested on his chest. It matched the rhythm of hers. She'd like to say that the events in the freezer room surprised her, but they didn't. Her anxiety—and her racing pulse—was solely for him. She needed to get him out.

"Did you hear something?" one of the men in the freezer asked.

A pause followed. Scarlett stopped breathing.

"No, but check it out," another responded.

Cooper's body went rigid, his hands locked at her waist. Neither of them so much as fluttered an eyelash.

Heavy footsteps crossed from the metal floor of the freezer to the cement foundation of the room.

Scarlett kept her head turned, her cheek against Cooper's button-down shirt, and her eyes locked on the box beside her. So long as the man didn't walk too far into the hallway, he wouldn't see them hiding in the makeshift alcove.

A shadow swept through the hall as he moved in front of a light source. Three steps closer and they could hear the rustle of his clothes and the nasal sound of his breathing as he leaned out the door.

Scarlett closed her eyes and mentally crossed all her fingers and toes. Her apprehension mingled with Cooper's, and between the two of them, the heat their bodies threw off had to be over a hundred degrees.

The man shifted, maybe squaring up his stance as he checked out the

hall. The swish of fabric as he swiveled his head sounded, to her ears, as loud as a cannon going off.

Finally, after a million years passed, the man moved again, and everything happened in reverse. His footsteps faded, the shadow slid through the hall, then he stepped from the concrete onto the metal as he returned to the freezer. Neither she nor Cooper twitched an inch, although they each took a single slow, deep breath.

“There’s nothing there,” the man said.

“Good, we need to clean this up,” his colleague replied.

“I’ll get the door,” the first said, followed by the best thing Scarlett had heard in ages: the sound of the freezer door squeaking on its rusted tracks as someone pulled it closed. A beat later, it clicked shut. What they intended to do inside, or how they’d clean up, wasn’t her concern. Not at the moment, anyway.

“Exit?” Cooper asked. She glanced up, and he jerked his head to the exterior door fifteen feet away. She almost nodded but stopped herself. If the door were unlocked or could open without triggering an alarm, wouldn’t the men have come in that way rather than walk through the bar?

She shook her head. “I know another way.” Taking his hand in hers, she cautiously stepped from the shelter of their alcove. When no one jumped out and yelled, “Gotcha,” she tugged him toward the other door in the hall. He hesitated, holding her back, but when she shot him a pleading look, he thinned his lips and nodded.

Gesturing with her head toward the freezer, she silently tasked him with keeping watch. For the third time that night, she set her ear against a closed door and listened. On the other side of the thick wood was a large pantry that connected to the kitchen. Once they were in the general vicinity of the grills and ovens and dishwashers, she’d wager they’d find another exit. She’d been in enough commercial kitchens to know that staff often propped a door open to help cool the heated space. Or to make it easier to slip out for a smoke.

When she heard nothing, she cracked the door open, confirmed the room was empty, then pulled Cooper in behind her. Holding fast to his hand, she tugged him toward the main part of the kitchen, where she spotted what she’d hoped to see. Not three feet from the exit of the pantry was a wide utility door propped open with a chair.

Taking her first normal breath since Cooper had slipped down the hallway, she smiled. They weren’t safe yet, but they were a far sight closer.

“When we get through that door, smile and laugh,” she whispered. Cooper’s brow furrowed as he looked at the door before dropping his gaze back to her. “I don’t know if there are cameras out there,” she said. “If there are, and our murderer goes looking for any witnesses, I’d rather appear as two people enjoying a clandestine tryst in the back parking lot than two people who witnessed a murder.”

Cooper’s hand tightened around hers and his jaw ticked, but he nodded.

“Did you leave anything in the bar?” she asked. He shook his head. “Okay, ready?”

“More than,” he muttered. Then, moving in front of her, he pulled her the last few feet to freedom as he also reached around and tugged her hair tie out. Her curls sprang free as they stepped into the crisp night air and, with a laugh, he wrapped his arm around her shoulder and tucked her to his side.

Leaning close to her ear as they walked, he spoke. “Sorry about the presumption,” he said, handing her the tie. “I thought it would hide your face better. Now smile,” he added.

Despite what they’d witnessed less than ten minutes ago, or maybe because of it, she laughed. The night had descended into the absurd and gallows humor had long been her go-to. Again, Cooper tugged her closer, and she stumbled into him. His hand slid under her cropped sweater and settled on her belly, the heat of it seeping through the thin camisole she wore underneath.

The shock that went through her body at his touch drew another laugh from her—this one more rueful, though. She worked in disaster zones around the world—sometimes natural disasters, sometimes man-made, but always brutal. She’d seen villages wiped out from disease or warlords. She’d seen women and children brutalized in the cruelest of ways. She’d seen cities destroyed by earthquakes and bombs. Sex, for her, had always been about connection, a reminder of her humanity in conditions that were almost never humane.

But even in those situations, when adrenaline ran hot and emotions churned, she’d *never* felt anything like the shock that had gone through her when Cooper’s large hand spread across her belly.

And the irony of the situation wasn’t lost on her. Cooper wasn’t a man she could pursue—wasn’t a man she *would* pursue. She didn’t even know his name, nor did she want to. In fact, the less she knew about him the better. Her hunt for the blond man in the bar and his boss wasn’t over, not by a long shot,

and she refused to bring anyone else into the mess. She couldn't afford to have that kind of weakness. Nor, more importantly, did she want him anywhere near the danger she expected to find herself in. Not that she was intentionally looking for it. But having grown up in South Central LA, then worked in the places she'd worked, she knew when it was brewing.

"The cops," Cooper said. Damn, even his voice sent a wave of goose bumps across her skin.

She cleared her throat and shifted away from him. The bar was a block behind them, and they didn't need to keep up the farce quite so realistically. "Is your car at Roxy's?" she asked as she dug a burner phone from her purse.

He shook his head. "My flight from Paris was delayed six hours. By the time I got here, it was too late to drive home. I'm staying at that hotel"—he pointed to one of the nicer chains in the area—"and I walked."

Not the nicest place to go for a walk. Especially not at night. But she understood his decision. She'd sat on enough long-haul flights that fresh air was never anything she took for granted.

The call connected, and without conscious thought, she continued toward his hotel as she talked.

"911 dispatch, what's your emergency?" a man asked.

Infusing her voice with fear and hesitation, she answered. "I was at Roxy's, you know the burger joint by the airport?" She didn't wait for the man to respond. "And my...my boyfriend and I, well, we kind of sneaked into the back...and, and we saw a man get shot."

"Are you somewhere safe, ma'am?"

"Yes, my boyfriend and I booked it out of there."

"But you believe there's an active shooter at Roxy's?" the man clarified. She could hear his rapid typing in the background.

"I, I don't know. We saw one person in the back, like I said."

"I'm sending cars now. Can you stay on the line until they arrive?"

Now was the tricky part. Not for her, but because Cooper didn't seem to miss much.

"I can't," she said, then hung up. Then, as discreetly as possible, she removed the battery from the burner and slid both parts back into her purse.

"Are you an undercover agent of some sort?" Cooper asked.

She should say yes, but she found herself not wanting to lie. She had no intention of revealing everything, but she didn't want to lie.

She shook her head.

“But you were tracking those men.”

She hesitated, then nodded. “How did you know?”

They walked a few steps in silence before he answered. “When they came in, your eyes, they sort of zeroed in on them. And your body went, I don’t know how to describe it, because it wasn’t like you were fidgety before, but you went still. Like the energy around you quieted with a focus.”

Wow. She was damn good at reading people, but he might have her beat.

“Anyway,” he continued, “I noticed who you were looking at and while I don’t have any training, I have a lot of exposure to spotting people who might be trouble.”

“And they spelled trouble to you?” she couldn’t help but ask. She really shouldn’t engage in too much conversation with him, but she couldn’t stop herself.

“Three men, walking with a purpose into a bar, and that purpose isn’t to drink? Yeah, they spelled trouble. And then when they went straight to the hall and didn’t come back out?”

When put like that, their behavior was pretty obvious. If someone bothered to look. “Why did you follow them, though? Are *you* undercover?”

He chuckled, a warm sound that reminded her of cozy nights in front of a fireplace.

“No, I work in hospitality. I followed them because I had a feeling you would and I didn’t think it was a good idea for you, or anyone, to fly solo into an unknown situation. It *was* unknown, wasn’t it? You didn’t know that was going to happen?”

They reached the entrance to his hotel, and a van filled with a flight crew was unloading in front of the door. She glanced behind her and could see the reflection of the police lights in the parking lot of Roxy’s.

She shook her head. “No, I didn’t know that was going to happen, not specifically. I recognized one of the men, though. I don’t know his name, but he’s not someone you want to invite for dinner.”

“So you didn’t know someone would get shot, but it didn’t surprise you?”

Somehow, he’d ushered her into the lobby, and they were nearing the elevators. She’d only meant to see him safely to his hotel.

“Come up for a drink,” he said, no doubt sensing her hesitation. Her eyes flitted to the elevators, then back to him. She held his gaze as she tried to read his intentions. A drink could very well lead to more. For her at least. She

didn't know about him, though. He was attracted to her; she'd known that the first time their eyes connected at the bar. But was he a one-night-stand kind of guy? Because that was all she'd be able to offer him—if she offered anything at all.

His eyes glinted with amusement. “Just a drink,” he said. “Anything else we can discuss later. I have questions. You don't owe me answers since I inserted myself into your situation without your consent, but I'd like to ask. You can respond as you see fit.”

She narrowed her eyes. “You're very accommodating.”

A smile pulled at his lips. “Charming, is what I'm usually told. But I can go for ‘accommodating,’ too. I suppose it comes from working in the industry that I do.”

She wasn't entirely sure about that. She suspected he'd been charming, and accommodating, long before he'd entered the workforce.

Studying his expression, more to give herself time to weigh her options than because she thought she'd find something, her attention snagged on his eyes. Not blue, as she'd known. And not amber like hers. But a sort of pale brown, almost beige, with flecks of bright emerald green.

His patience with her answer tipped her over the edge, and she nodded. His shoulders relaxed, almost imperceptibly, and he, too, gave a single sharp nod in response.

The door slid open, and he held out his arm, gesturing her to precede him. “Thank you,” he said as it slid closed. “Now, for my first question, what's your name?”

CHAPTER THREE

BRAD WARWICK WATCHED THE WOMAN BESIDE HIM OUT OF THE CORNER OF HIS EYE. WHO SHE WAS and what she was involved in, he hadn't a clue. And instinctively, he knew she'd want to keep it that way. As his mother always reminded him, though, nothing ventured, nothing gained.

In his mind, he'd been calling her Magi, after the Ethiopian model Mearg Tareke. A woman he'd had the pleasure of meeting when she'd done a shoot at the resort that he ran. Only *his* Magi's eyes were more arresting, more experienced. As if she saw more of the world—the good and the bad—than most.

When she continued to stay silent, he spoke. “Fine, I'll start, my name is ___”

“Don't,” she cut him off.

He snapped his mouth shut and stared at her amber-colored eyes. The fact that she didn't want to know his name sent alarm bells ringing in his head. Not that they hadn't *stopped* ringing since he'd seen those three men walk into the bar.

Those three men. Unbidden, his mind turned to them. And the events of the evening.

He'd never seen anyone get shot before, let alone murdered. But as appalling and brutal as it was, it still felt...distant. As if it wasn't really *him* who'd heard the shot or seen the body of the man slump forward in the chair he'd been sitting in. He supposed it was shock. But this no-man's-land of emotions was damn uncomfortable. Shouldn't he be either hysterical or numb?

“It hits people differently,” his Magi said, as if reading his mind.

“Death?” The doors opened, and he gestured her ahead of him before directing her to his room.

“Violence,” she answered as she stepped inside the mini-suite. It wasn't the biggest one, but it had a sitting room, small kitchen, and separate bedroom. The thought flitted through his mind that the separate bedroom was

a good thing. Not that he thought they'd fall into bed, but the attraction between them had been there before their little adventure. With the added adrenaline and heightened emotions, it was a temptation best left alone. At least for now.

"Drink?" he asked.

"Yes. Tequila if you have it."

He opened the minibar and pulled out a tequila for her and a bourbon for him. "Straight or on the rocks?"

"Rocks, please," she answered, sinking onto the overstuffed sofa.

He handed her a tumbler, then took a seat on the opposite end. The headache he'd been able to forget for the past thirty minutes came roaring back, and he pinched the bridge of his nose to relieve the pressure.

"Are you okay?" Magi asked.

He inhaled, willing the throbbing pain away, then looked up. "I will be. Me and any sort of medication stronger than ibuprofen don't really get along. I took an over-the-counter sleeping pill on the flight, failed to sleep, and now feel like a twenty-one-year-old the morning after their birthday regretting the celebration."

She stared at him, then set her drink down and rose. Crossing the room, she grabbed a glass, filled it with water, and brought it back to him. Taking it from her hand, he watched as she dug into her purse, then pulled out a bottle of Advil.

"Here, take these," she said, shaking three out. "Then turn around and I'll rub your head."

His brows shot up at that suggestion even as he took the tablets and downed them. The offer seemed awfully personal for someone who wouldn't even give him her name.

She gave him a lopsided smile. "I know a thing or two about migraines. You have my sympathies."

He eyed her as she took a seat, then set a pillow in her lap. She motioned with her hand for him to turn around and lie down. He considered his options, then realized that her offer wasn't even close to the weirdest thing that had happened that night. Setting his drink down, he shifted on the couch and settled his head on the pillow.

The second her cool hands touched his temples, he was a goner. He never wanted this moment to end. She smelled of amber and orange, and her fingers, moving over his head, sinking into his hair, and massaging his scalp,

were nothing short of magic.

“After what happened tonight, it doesn’t seem like I should be enjoying this so much,” he murmured. “Why didn’t you tell the police your name?”

He wasn’t sure she’d answer, and at this point, with her hands buried in his hair, he wasn’t sure he cared. But to his surprise, she did.

“I don’t want to get on anyone’s radar, especially not of any of those men,” she said. “If I’d given my name, it would have been captured in the recording of the call. I know you may want to stand witness, and I won’t ask you not to, but I’d wait to see if there’s a police report before you contact them. If there is, and you want to come forward, you can claim to be the boyfriend.”

Her words settled into his sleep-deprived brain, and he opened one eye. “You say that like you don’t think there will be a report.”

She rolled her lips, then shrugged. “I wouldn’t be surprised if there isn’t. Let’s just leave it at that.”

He studied her with his one eye, then let it close again as she rubbed his temples. “Who are they?”

“Again, I don’t know. Not their names, anyway. The blond one was the one I was looking for. He works for someone that I want to know more about.”

“Why?”

A long pause followed his question. Then she sighed. “A friend of mine died recently. It was ruled an accidental overdose, but I’m not convinced it was accidental. The man that the blond works for was her supplier.”

“And what happens when you know more?” He knew next to nothing about the drug world, but he couldn’t see one vigilante woman bringing down a dealer big enough to have killers on his payroll. If he’d been some two-bit corner dealer, he could imagine it. But a man who had both the means and need to hire people, like the blond and his sidekick, spoke of power. The kind of man who’d have an organization behind him.

The ice clinked in her glass as she took a sip. When her fingers returned to his forehead, they were cooler and felt blessedly perfect. “I don’t know,” she said. “I know what I want. I want to figure out if her death was accidental or something more. And if it was more, I want the person responsible for it to pay. But beyond that, I’m kind of winging it.”

At the wry humor in her voice, he opened his eyes and stared at her. “Seems a kind of dangerous thing to wing.”

She gave him another lopsided smile. "I'm drinking in a hotel room with a man I just met, whose name I don't know, and with whom I witnessed a murder. I think we've established that *winging it* might be my MO."

"Throw in the chemistry between us and I'd wager it's not only *winging it* that you like. I think you might even like things a little turbulent." He'd taken a gamble on putting their attraction out there. He shouldn't be thinking about such things given what they'd just been through. But adrenaline still coursed through his blood, and the feel of her hands on his body had his attention turning to much more primal things. He'd heard sex and violence could go hand in hand. Now, for good or for bad, he had proof of that.

She stared down at him, her black curls creating a curtain around them. He held her gaze, his blood rushing in anticipation.

"You were in Paris. It's like eight in the morning there, and you've been up all night," she said.

A smile tugged at his lips. He was more than ready for whatever she might be willing to offer him. "I can assure you, that's not a problem," he said, with a pointed look at the bulge behind the zipper of his jeans.

Her attention lingered there. She licked her lips, and his body jerked at the unintended seduction.

"It's entirely your call," Brad said, wanting to be very clear on the subject.

"So if I wanted to finish my drink and walk out, you'd be fine with that?" Her gaze dropped back to his eyes, but her fingers now brushed his shoulders.

"I'd regret the missed opportunity, but I wouldn't stop you," he replied. "Even though I don't think that's what you want to do," he added. Her breathing had grown shallow, and even through her sweater, he could see her pert nipples all but begging to be touched, to be tasted. The thought had his body straining against the denim even more.

He shifted to relieve some of the pressure, and she licked her lips again as a shadow of anticipation danced across her features. Then, leaning over, she ran her hands down his chest, her breasts centimeters from his face.

"Here," she said, slipping the button open on his jeans. "Let me help you with that."

Brad didn't need to open his eyes to know he was alone. It came as no surprise that his Magi had sneaked out. Still, he kicked himself for not

waking up. But after thirty-six hours of no sleep—and several rounds of sex that shouldn't have been as good as they were considering his fatigue and the fact that they'd met only hours before—he'd slept like the dead.

Cracking an eye open, he looked toward the window. Bright sunlight fought to make its way through the small gaps in the curtain, telling him that morning had come and gone. Rolling his head, he caught sight of the clock and confirmed his suspicion. Ten minutes after twelve. At least he'd had the foresight to ask for a late check-out. Which meant he had fifty minutes to get his shit together—mentally and physically—before he got on the road.

Closing his eyes again, he allowed regret to sink its claws in. Not for the night he'd had, but for not pressing harder for her name. Or any information that would let him identify her. Sure, he could ask his cousins to pull the CCTV from Roxy's and run facial recognition on her. But she hadn't wanted him to know who she was, and as much as he hated it, he had to respect it.

In hindsight, he should have slid his card into the pocket of her jeans the night before. Or given her some way to contact him. At least then he could hope.

He hadn't, though, and now, even if she wanted to find him, she couldn't. Not unless she had the same resources he had, which he doubted.

He took a deep breath and exhaled as he ran his hand over his face. Knowing that the night would be one he'd never forget, a wave of melancholy stole over him. Physically, it had been more than memorable—she'd been both generous and demanding, and he'd loved every moment. But it had been more than that. When she looked into his eyes as he slid inside her, or when she cried out with pleasure, he'd had flashes of a future with her. Of what it could be like. Like memories of things that hadn't yet happened. A vision of her in his kitchen, smiling and laughing as she passed by him, dropping a kiss on his shoulder. A glimpse of the two of them on his couch, her head in his lap, his fingers in her hair, as they watched a winter storm roll in. And the strongest image of them all had been one of them at Christmas, of her laughing at something his dad said as she set a plate on an elaborately decorated table.

He had no idea why those pictures had flashed into his head last night, like premonitions of things that would never happen. Maybe he was going crazy. Or his jet lag and the residual effects of the sleeping pill were messing with his mind. Or more likely, the shock of having witnessed a murder was finally settling in.

That thought had the squirrels in his mind slowing. He'd witnessed a murder last night. He hadn't seen the man who'd pulled the trigger, but he'd seen the man who'd been killed. Three of them were in the room; with one dead, the murderer could only be one of the other two. Both of whom he could describe.

He wanted to know what had happened after the police arrived, and he needed to give his name as a witness in case it was needed. Reaching for the phone, he started to look up the non-emergency number for the local precinct, then hesitated. Magi's comments about the murder going unreported bubbled up in his mind. Was she being dramatic, or could there have been some truth to them? And if there was some truth to them, was he better off not calling and giving them his name?

He suspected the answer to that latter question was "yes," so instead of looking up the number, he typed in the name of the bar, the date, and the word "shooting" into the search engine.

Less than ten seconds later, the page populated. But as he read through the headlines, not a single one mentioned the events of last night. In fact, the only articles that appeared were from four years ago when a woman had walked into Roxy's and shot her philandering husband while he'd been on a date.

Frowning, he tried another search string only to see the same results.

He'd seen the cop cars at the bar, or at least their lights reflecting off the building, so he knew they'd responded. Why had nothing been reported? Sure, LA was a big city, but a shooting at a popular bar wouldn't go unreported.

On a whim, he dialed a familiar number.

"Hey, Charming. How was your flight?" his soon-to-be sister-in-law answered. She'd once called him Prince Charming, but Mitch, his brother and her fiancé, had put an end to that. Now she only used the full name when she wanted to get a rise out of his younger brother. Which happened quite often and was wicked fun to witness.

"Hey, Ava. Flight was fine. I'm going to leave in about an hour and will be home by dinner. But I was wondering if you could look something up for me. Discreetly."

"Please tell me it's a woman," she begged. "If it's a woman, it might distract your dad."

Brad chuckled. About a month ago, Mitch had informed the entire family

that he and Ava were a couple by announcing, via text, that she'd agreed to have a baseball team's worth of kids with him. She hadn't. Nor, to his knowledge, had they even started trying. But his dad, Anthony, was ever hopeful.

"Not a woman," he replied, although he tucked that offer into the back of his mind in case he decided to track his Magi down. "Can you look up the police activity at Roxy's bar last night? I went there for a burger and a drink after I checked in and when I left, there were a bunch of police cars. I looked online but couldn't find anything reported. I guess I found that weird."

Ava hmm'd, but he could hear her typing already. "It could be anything," she said. "The cops get called out for all sorts of things that wouldn't make it into the paper."

He agreed. But a murder wasn't usually one of those.

"Huh," she said.

"Did you find something?"

"Yes and no. I found the call. Apparently, someone called in a potential shooting. That's what the 911 records show."

"But?"

"But nothing. No evidence of a shooting or of anyone being shot, which is what the caller reported. So, yes, I found something, but that something was nothing."

An uneasy feeling slid down his spine. "Did it say what might have happened that could explain the caller's claim?"

"No. Only that one of the workers had dropped a large pot around that time. It apparently landed on his toe, and he sat down to look at it. Depending on how fast he moved, I suppose it could look like he'd been felled by a bullet," Ava mused. Though by the tone of her voice, he could tell she found it odd that someone could mistake a shooting for a dropped pot.

"Well, no worries then," he forced himself to say. Because he was worried.

"You want me to look into it some more?" she asked.

"No," he said, with a definitive shake of his head.

Who were those men that they could make a murder disappear? And within minutes? He hadn't been timing them, but he estimated that less than fifteen minutes passed between the time he and Magi had heard the bullet and when the police had arrived.

Suddenly, Magi's desire to stay off the radar took on a whole new

meaning.

CHAPTER FOUR

BRAD SPUN HIS CHAIR AND LOOKED OUT THE WINDOW BEHIND HIS DESK. ACROSS THE ROAD, THE mountain rose, and five ski lifts dotted the landscape. They'd had another storm yesterday, and skiers were taking advantage of the new powder. After a slow start in December, January had been their strongest ever, and February was shaping up to be a record-breaker as well.

And yet dissatisfaction coursed through him. He didn't need to dig deep to figure out why. For over two months, he'd second-guessed his decision not to track his Magi down. With the exception of his twenty-four-year-old twin cousins, all of his other cousins and his brother, Cody, had married or partnered up in the past two years. And Mitch would join their ranks after his and Ava's blowout wedding in July.

He didn't feel left out or as though he needed to keep up with the Joneses. Those would be easy emotions to manage. What he felt was much worse. He wondered, nearly every day, if he'd let a chance at happiness, at contentment, pass him by. Pass them both by. Had they had a chance to have the kind of life his cousins and brothers and their partners had found, and they'd let it slip through their fingers?

He didn't know. Although he suspected yes. He didn't have a lot of evidence to go on; he'd only been with her for less than twelve hours. But when a Warwick fell, they tended to fall fast and hard. And generations had proved that worked for them.

He could always ask Ava to track her down. His soon-to-be sister-in-law could be discreet. And if she found Magi then, at the very least, he could put these demons to rest. Magi would either be in or out. And if she was game to explore what was between them, then they'd figure the rest out. If she wasn't, he'd lick his wounds and move on.

Or try to, anyway. He didn't know if he'd actually be able to do it. These past two months of questioning himself—of wondering—had started to eat away at him. Sleep was getting more and more elusive, and his attention wasn't what it should be. Especially not as they moved into the second-

busiest time of the ski season.

Not giving himself a chance to second-guess the decision he should have made weeks ago, he grabbed his phone and dialed her number.

“Charming.”

He could tell by the tone of her voice that she was in the middle of something. He hated bothering her, but it would work to his advantage. She’d be less likely to ask him questions.

“Can you pull CCTV from the back parking lot of Roxy’s the night I stayed in LA after I got back from Paris? Between ten and ten thirty that night, you’ll see me with a woman. I want to know who she is,” he said.

Ava hesitated. “Okay,” she said, drawing out the word. “But don’t think you’ll get away with not telling me the whole story.”

“I would never think that.”

She snorted. “Right, sure you wouldn’t. If I do this, I get first dibs. No telling the story to anyone else before me,” she added.

He chuckled. “Deal.”

“Excellent. I’m in the middle of something right now,” she said, confirming his guess. “But I’ll look into it as soon as I can.”

“You’re the best,” he said.

“Yes, I am,” she agreed before hanging up.

Setting his phone down, he lost himself in the meditative movements of the ski lifts as they ported skiers to the tops of various trails. For the first time since he’d woken up alone in the hotel room, he felt right. He had no idea how things would unfold once he found her, but that didn’t stop a frisson of anticipation from taking root in his body.

“Brad?” someone said as they knocked, then walked in.

Startled from his reverie, he spun around. Detective Mari Cheng stood in the doorway. Beside her was his cousin Ryan, the chief of police.

“Come in,” Brad said, waving them in. “Is everything okay?”

Ryan wagged his head, and Mari pulled out a notebook.

“We found the body of a woman this morning in the woods between the lodge and town. She had no ID on her, but we ran her prints, and she came back Maria Abel. She was on your housekeeping staff.”

Brad frowned. “What happened?”

“She’d been strangled. The ME is working on a more precise time of death, but we think it happened as she walked home from work yesterday evening.”

“That’s terrible,” he said. “Does she have any family? Is there anything I can do?”

“No family that we’ve been able to find,” Mari said. “But we were hoping to interview whoever she worked with yesterday and any of her friends.”

“Of course,” Brad said, pulling up the housekeeping schedule. He found yesterday’s assignments, then sent the list to the printer.

“Did you know her?” Mari asked.

Brad shook his head. “I’ll pull up her employment file as well. I don’t know all the staff, but her manager is Dean Travers. He’s probably the best person to…” He paused, then frowned again as he studied the schedule.

“What?” Ryan prompted.

“Maria wasn’t supposed to work yesterday,” he said. “I don’t know if that matters or if it’s important, but there’s a Scarlett Nesanet who usually works that shift. She called out sick, and Maria was brought in.”

“When you say she usually works that shift, how ‘usual’?” Ryan asked.

Brad scrolled through the last four weeks. “Every day except Mondays, which is her day off. She’s had that schedule for at least a month,” he replied.

Ryan and Mari shared a look. “You want to take the staff interviews and I’ll take Ms. Nesanet?” Ryan suggested.

“You got it,” Mari said, shuffling through the papers she’d grabbed from his printer. “Where would I find Dean?”

“His office is in the main block. It’s the middle one on the east side,” Brad replied. The administrative and operations staff worked in cubicles and offices on the top floor of the hotel down the hall from his own office.

“Got it, thanks,” she said. “I’ll see you back at the station,” she said to Ryan before exiting the room.

When she was gone, Ryan turned to him. “Do you have an address for Ms. Nesanet?”

Brad glanced at the file on his computer and nodded. “She’s in the seasonal housing. The Aspen building, unit 210. Do you mind if I go with you? I don’t know anything about her, but some of our staff aren’t comfortable with police.” Ryan arched a brow, and Brad rolled his eyes as he rose and grabbed his winter jacket. “A few did serve time for petty things years before coming here. But mostly, a fair number of them are from areas

where the police aren't the good guys, and you make them nervous."

Ryan inclined his head. "Fair enough. Are we walking?"

Brad wished, but he didn't have the time. Instead, he led them to one of the enclosed ATVs the staff used to move around the property. As they made their way to the block of four buildings on the west side of the resort that housed seasonal workers, they caught up on Operation Baby-watch. With three Warwick wives due within the month, and two with twins, the family had gone into high alert. Ryan's wife, Olivia, was due first but everyone expected either Tia, Cody's wife, or Ellie, Asher's wife, to go into labor any day. Apparently, early births were more common with twins than singles. A little something that he'd learned after Cody had spent four hours pacing his living room in a panic after hearing that stat from Tia's doctor.

They parked in the open-air garage, then made their way to the corner unit, where Ryan took the lead and knocked.

"Who is it?" a voice came from behind the door. A vague sense of familiarity rippled through Brad, and his body tensed.

"Mystery Lake Police," Ryan responded. "We're looking for Scarlett Nesanet."

Footsteps shuffled across the floor, and Brad found himself holding his breath. The door inched open enough for her to look out. "I'm Scarlett," she said.

And Brad's knees nearly buckled.

"Magi," he said, his voice coming out in a harsh whisper.

Her gaze swung to him, and a heartbeat later, her eyes widened.

"Cooper," she replied as her hand fell from the door.

No longer held shut, the door swung open. Revealing her. The woman he'd been thinking of almost nonstop for months. The woman he'd been wondering about, worried about. The woman he'd only minutes earlier had asked Ava to track down.

Standing there in a pair of flannel pants, wool socks, and a thick sweatshirt, she looked as beautiful as he remembered. He wanted to reach out and take her in his arms. He wanted to pull her to him and feel her body against his.

But he didn't know if he'd be welcome.

A throat cleared beside him.

And they had an audience.

He ignored Ryan for one more moment as he asked, "Are you okay?"

Can I, can we come in? I mean, I don't want to..."

The choice to let them in or not was taken from her when the color leached from her face and her body started to collapse. In a flash, he scooped her up and strode to a small couch in the sitting room. He was dimly aware of Ryan following him in and shutting the door, but he remained focused on the woman in his arms as he set her down.

He started to tell his cousin to call 911, but Scarlett's lashes fluttered. She opened her eyes and stared at him.

He knelt beside her, brushing a curl from her forehead, as he stared back. She reached up and traced a finger over his cheek, then along his jaw. With that single touch, any questions he'd had about the two of them vanished. He had so much to learn about her. They had a lot to learn about *each other*. But there wasn't a shred of doubt in his mind that this woman was his future.

"You *are* one of them," she said.

He wrapped his hand around hers and brought her fingers to his lips, placing a kiss on the tips. "One of who?" he asked.

"Warwicks," she said. "You reminded me of Ethan when I first saw you."

"My cousin," he replied. "How do you know Ethan?"

A tiny smile touched her lips. "Kara is my best friend. We used to work together."

Brad racked his brain, then it clicked. "Scarlett Mitchell," he said.

She nodded. "Nesanet is my maiden name. I had a brief and ill-advised marriage while in nursing school." His eyes narrowed at the thought of her being married to someone "ill-advised," but she slid her hand from his and cupped his cheek. "Ill-advised because we were young, not for any other reason. He's a good man, we were just too young," she said.

Tension eased from his chest. As unreasonable as it was, even in his own mind, he didn't want Scarlett to ever experience anything bad. He wanted to bundle her up and take her home and start learning all the things he wanted to know. He wouldn't, of course. Not yet. But he wanted to.

"I'm Brad, by the way," he said with a rueful smile.

She smiled. "It suits you. Although so does Cooper."

"Cooper?"

"Gary Cooper. Your eyes shine like his. And Magi?"

"Mearg Tareke, the model. You remind me of her. She goes by

Magi.”

Ryan cleared his throat again, and Brad looked over his shoulder. Ryan arched a sardonic brow. “I take it you two know each other?”

Brad looked back down at Scarlett, then they both burst out laughing.

“You could say that,” she said, lifting herself up and swinging her legs off the sofa.

“Are you okay?” Brad asked, shifting to sit beside her. “Can I get you some water or tea or something?”

Her eyes searched his, then she waved to a mug sitting on the side table. “If you could throw that in the microwave for a minute, I’d appreciate it.”

Ryan took a seat in a wooden chair as Brad grabbed the mug and headed to the small kitchenette.

“So you two know each other,” Ryan repeated.

Brad glanced at Scarlett, who nodded, giving him leave to tell his cousin whatever he needed.

“We met in December,” Brad said as the microwave started. “We witnessed a murder at Roxy’s, then sort of ended up together the rest of the night.”

Both of Ryan’s brows rose this time. “A murder?”

Brad nodded before removing Scarlett’s drink. “Only according to police records, it didn’t happen,” he said, handing her the mug and taking a seat beside her.

“What do you mean it didn’t happen?” Ryan pressed.

“It means if you look up the police report of the incident,” Scarlett said, “you’ll find no mention of a murder, despite the fact that Brad”—she stumbled over his name—“and I both saw it. Although I don’t think either of us can identify the killer.”

Ryan’s gaze shifted to him.

“We were in a back hall,” Brad continued. “They—there were three of them—were in an industrial freezer that wasn’t used for food. The killer was standing out of our line of sight, but the man they shot was sitting in a chair we could see through the open door.”

“And you reported this?” Ryan asked.

Both he and Scarlett nodded.

“And no body was found? No blood?”

Brad glanced at Scarlett, his gaze lingering, still not quite believing

she was there. She gave him a soft smile, and he reached over and took her free hand in his. They had a lot of things to talk about, but based on the way she touched him, and looked at him, he didn't think she'd object to holding his hand.

"Nothing," Brad confirmed. "At least that's what was in the police report Ava pulled." He paused, brushing his thumb over Scarlett's skin. "What I keep getting hung up on when I think about that night, though, is that less than fifteen minutes passed between the time we saw the murder and when the police arrived."

"Which means the remaining two men were either *very* efficient in disposing of the body," Scarlett said.

"Or the police were in on it," Brad finished.

She nodded, then took a sip of tea before turning to Ryan. "But if you didn't know any of this, why are you here?"

Ryan's lips thinned. "Do you know Maria Abel?"

Scarlett nodded. "She works with me. Lovely woman."

"She filled in for you yesterday when you called in sick. She was killed, likely on her way home. We found her body this morning," Ryan said.

Scarlett went pale again. Brad reached over and took the hot tea from her hand. He didn't want her spilling it on herself if she passed out a second time.

"That's terrible," she whispered. "Does she have any family? Is there anything I can do?" she asked, echoing the questions he'd asked.

Ryan held her gaze, then reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. "She doesn't have any family, but I do think there's something you can do."

"Anything," she said.

Ryan tapped his phone screen. "I'm beginning to think Maria might have been a mistake. I think they might have been after you. If that's the case, I'd like to know why."

Brad's stomach pitched at his cousin's matter-of-fact delivery. Reaching out, he took the phone. On the screen was a picture of a woman, presumably Maria Abel. Although older than Scarlett by a good ten years, the two looked similar enough that in the evening light and if the killer hadn't looked closely, they could easily be mistaken for each other.

Beside him, Scarlett went still.

"What?" he asked, turning to her.

“I was getting close,” she said to him. To information on her friend’s death, he knew. “But then a contact of mine, a friend from where I grew up, told me he’d heard rumblings that the supplier had figured out someone was looking for him. He was looking for me. I didn’t hesitate. I left.”

“You can’t call the police if you’re dead,” he said, recalling her words from that night at Roxy’s. Not exactly the same thing, but close. She wouldn’t be able to bring her friend’s killer to justice if she were dead.

“And you came here?” Ryan asked, his tone bordering on disbelief. “Even though you claim you didn’t know him,” he added with a jerk of his head to Brad.

“Ryan,” Brad said in warning.

Scarlett squeezed his hand. “It’s fine. He’s right. It seems too convenient. The truth is,” she said, facing Ryan head-on, “I wanted to be close to Kara. She’s the closest thing to family that I have. And Mystery Lake always seemed so idyllic when she talked about it. But I didn’t want to bring my trouble to her doorstep. So I came for the comfort of being near her even though she has no idea I’m here. No one does.” She paused. “Or at least I thought no one knew.” She took the phone from his hand, looked at the picture again, then handed it back to Ryan.

Scraping her hair away from her face, she sighed. “I don’t know if they found me. I don’t know if Maria died in my place. I don’t want that to be the case, but...” Her voice trailed off as she gazed at the phone in Ryan’s hand.

Brad caught Ryan’s eye, and his heart sank at the resolve he saw there. He understood the reasons behind what his cousin was about to do. But Scarlett was sick and had just passed out. She needed to go to the doctor. Or at the very least, rest.

“I think you need to come down to the station,” Ryan said, not without sympathy. “Whatever it was you were doing down in LA that caught the attention of a drug dealer—and I assume that’s what you meant when you referred to a supplier—may have followed you up here. I need to know everything you know, and everything you don’t. It may help us find Maria’s killer, but it’s also easier for us to protect you if we know what we’re protecting you from.”

Brad flickered a grateful look at his cousin. Ryan wanted answers, but he understood that whatever else might be going on, Scarlett was important to him. And to Kara. And therefore, that made her important to the family.

“Can you give her a couple of hours?” Brad asked.

“I’m fine and he’s right,” Scarlett said.

“You may be in danger,” Brad said. “I want you to stay with me until we know what’s going on. I have a guest room.” Ryan snorted, and Brad shot him a glare. “I have a guest room,” he repeated. “And the building is more secure. I also think you need to rest. You were sick enough yesterday to call out, and you just passed out. I’d like to call Asher or Kara to come have a look at you.”

Her gaze darted to Ryan, who rose and grabbed his jacket that he’d draped on the back of the chair. “I’ll wait outside,” he said. “My wife is due with our first child, a girl, in three weeks, and I’d like to check in with her.”

Brad frowned at that odd bit of personal information Ryan offered. Then again, if Scarlett stuck around, if he could convince her to, she’d be all up in the Warwick family business, because that’s how the family operated. Very rarely was anyone ever able to keep a secret.

Scarlett nodded, then watched him as he departed.

“Please come stay with me,” Brad said. “I swear there’s a guest room, two actually, if that’s what makes you most comfortable. I know we barely know each other, but...”

“I may be bringing a killer to your door,” she said.

“Better mine than this one,” he countered with a nod to hers. They had security all over the lodge. But it was much stronger on the fifth floor where his apartment and the offices were located.

She hesitated, then nodded. “I’ll come, but not so much for me,” she said. Confused, he waited for her to explain. “I want to find out what happened to my friend and, as you said, I need to stay alive to do that. But...” She hesitated, her eyes searching his. “There’s another reason. A more important one.”

He couldn’t imagine anything more important than her staying safe. Staying alive. But he nodded, encouraging her to continue.

She paused again, then took a deep breath. “I’ll come because I want to keep our baby safe.”

CHAPTER FIVE

BRAD BLINKED AT THE BOMB SHE'D DROPPED. SHE'D NEVER INTENDED TO KEEP IT FROM HIM, BUT until twenty minutes ago when he'd knocked on her door, she hadn't known how to find him. Or even his real name. But now that he was here and, as improbable as it was, sitting right beside her, she felt no hesitation. Especially now that she knew he was a Warwick. She'd never doubted her instincts about him from that night two months ago, but now she had the added benefit of knowing from Kara that family was everything to them.

"I, I'm not sure what to say," he stammered, his color a shade lighter than it had been a minute ago.

They'd used protection, so she hadn't expected him to accept the news without skipping a beat. And she didn't blame him for his hesitation. She'd had her own moments of wondering whether having a baby was a good idea. But she'd heard the rumor about the supplier looking for her the same day she'd confirmed her pregnancy, and her first and only thought had been to protect their baby. The memory of that emotion, of that fierce need to shield their baby from any harm, far outweighed any doubts she'd had since. She still wanted to find the truth about her friend's death, but her priorities had shifted when she'd seen those two little lines.

With another blink, she all but watched Brad's resolve snap into place. Taking her hand, he met her gaze—direct and unwavering. "You're ill. You passed out. I've seen my sister-in-law and four of my cousins' wives go through the early stages of pregnancy. None of them passed out. Ever. We need to get you to a doctor."

If she hadn't been holding his hand, he probably would have shot up from his seat and started pacing. Kara *had* mentioned that the Warwick men tended to get a little worked up when their wives got pregnant. Not that she was his wife, but she doubted that mattered. Not right now.

"My morning sickness is severe," she said. "Hyperemesis gravidarum is what it's called."

“Have you passed out before?” he demanded with a look of both horror and terror.

She shook her head. “No, that was the first and hopefully only time. I think it was the surprise of seeing you,” she said. Then she paused, knowing her next words were important and wanting to get them right. “I want you to know that I wouldn’t have kept this from you,” she said. “I didn’t know your name or how to find you. But I’d planned, once I felt better, to reach out to Kara and Ethan and ask for Ethan’s help.” She paused again, then let a little chuckle out. “I figured HICC could get into the hotel logs and find out who’d checked into the suite that night. Then, in full disclosure, I was going to have him investigate you before I reached out. You deserved to know, either way, but I wanted to be prepared if you weren’t the man my instincts told me you were.”

She hesitated, rolling her sweatshirt material between her fingers. Then, taking a deep breath, she finished what she needed to say. “I also want you to know that while I’d like you to be a part of our baby’s life, if that’s not a role you are willing to step into, then I’d rather you figure that out before he or she is born. I don’t want anyone yo-yo-ing in and out of their life.”

Brad’s eyes narrowed, and his jaw ticked. “There will be no yo-yo-ing. Ever,” he said. “That baby is mine. It’s ours. And not only does he or she deserve to have everything that it means to be part of my family, I *want* to give him or her that.” He paused, then smiled at something. “And you should know, my dad is going to freak out. In a good way. He *loves* babies. He and my mom are already starting a renovation on their house in the spring so that all the grandkids have a place to stay when they come over.”

Now it was her turn to blink. Kara had talked about how close the family was, but building a wing for grandkids? “How many does he anticipate?” she asked, not sure if she wanted to know the answer.

“Cody’s wife, Tia, is due with twins. Then Mitch and Ava are getting married in July and Mitch claims Ava agreed to have enough kids to field a baseball team. Although she says she only agreed to consider a basketball team.”

Her stomach churned, only this time, it wasn’t due to her morning sickness. “Um, okay.”

He eyed her. “Are you going to pass out again?”

Honestly, she was feeling a little woozy. She didn’t think it was from the baby, though. “Maybe some fresh air would help,” she said, rising. Brad

hopped up and held his hand out for her. She slid her fingers into his palm, and he steadied her.

“I need to gather a few things if I’m going to stay with you. I don’t need much. Not right now, but a few things.”

“Anything I can help with?” he asked.

“Can you grab my bag from the top of the closet?”

“Are you good?” he asked, looking at their joined hands. She nodded and stepped away. He watched her for a beat, then, once he seemed satisfied that she wasn’t going to collapse, he made his way to the closet.

A few minutes later, they walked down the stairs to a waiting ATV. Ryan sat in the front, talking on his phone as he futzed with the heater. Brad helped her into the front seat, then climbed into the back. She hated feeling so weak, but it was what it was. She’d been told by the doctor whom she’d seen in LA before she’d fled that it would eventually pass. She looked forward to that day.

“Are congratulations in order?” Ryan asked as he started them back toward the main lodge.

Scarlett flickered a glance in the overhead mirror to see Brad give her a look that let her know it was up to her what they told people.

“Yes,” she said on an exhale. If she was in, she was going to be all in with the Warwicks. She and Brad would figure their relationship out, but no matter what, Ryan and all the others would always be the baby’s family. “But we’d appreciate it if you didn’t spread it around. I think Brad and I have a few things we need to work through first.”

“Of course,” Ryan said. She looked in the mirror again, and Brad gave her another nod. She knew from Kara how much the family talked, but Brad’s gesture assured her that Ryan would be true to his word.

“How did you know?” she asked.

“Olivia was pretty sick in the first trimester. I don’t think she was as sick as you, but you have the same sort of gaunt, exhausted look she did. No offense.”

She chuckled. “None taken. Believe me.”

“So how far along are you?” Ryan asked.

Scarlett heard the question, but another telltale wave of nausea was currently having a debate in her stomach as to whether to erupt. “Um, would you mind if we turned the heater down?” she asked, leaning closer to the window and resting her cheek on the cool glass.

“December fourth,” Brad answered as his hands reached over the seat and he started massaging her temples.

“So about eleven weeks,” Ryan calculated. “Yeah, that’s a sucky time. Or at least it was for Olivia.” As he spoke, he adjusted the heat and slowed down to little more than a crawl. For which she was very, very grateful.

She managed to keep the minimal contents of her stomach inside for the duration of the trip. But the second she stepped into Brad’s apartment she made a beeline for the first bathroom he pointed her to.

Tuning out the voices of the men, she heaved into the pristine toilet. She wanted this baby. She really did. But sometimes she wondered if it was trying to kill her.

By the time she felt that brief moment of wellness that immediately followed a purge, Brad was at her side. She didn’t love the idea of him seeing her like this, but she felt too crummy to care too much.

“I put your stuff in a room and brought you this.” He knelt beside her and held out a toothbrush and toothpaste. The sight of the toothpaste had her stomach clenching again, but she managed to breathe through it.

“Thank you,” she said, reaching for both. “This isn’t pretty.”

“I wish I could take some of it from you. I have no idea how you’ve been managing it while working full-time,” he said as he helped her up.

She didn’t miss the guilt in his voice. But even if he had been around, there wasn’t much he could do about it.

She brushed her teeth, then let him lead her to the guest room. “I think the only way I managed is because I clean hotel rooms all day. Lots of bathrooms nearby,” she said with a smile. Although admittedly, probably a wan one.

“I know you’re a nurse. Why work here?” he asked as he pulled the blankets back.

“I grew up in a part of LA that most people never leave. Because I managed it, people tend to know my name. They know Scarlett Nesamet Mitchell, the girl who became a nurse and made it out.”

“And whoever is looking for you would be looking Scarlett Nesamet Mitchell, the nurse, the girl who made it out. Not someone on the cleaning staff of a hotel,” he finished. She nodded as she lay down.

“I just need a few minutes to rest, and then we can talk to Ryan,” she mumbled, her eyes already drifting closed.

“Ryan can wait,” Brad replied, pulling the comforter over her. “Rest as

long as you need.” She thought he might leave, but she heard a rustle, then felt his fingertips brushing her hair from her face. She opened her eyes to see him kneeling beside her. She recognized the concern in his expression, but sleep called to her, and her eyes fluttered closed.

“Can I call Kara?” he asked. “Please.”

She opened her eyes again and studied his. There was more than concern there. He was worried. Very worried. Yet he was asking, not assuming. After a beat, she gave a tiny nod. She hadn’t meant to stay hidden from her friend for so long anyway. And she could use Kara’s company, not to mention her medical advice.

Her lids closed again, and she felt the soft brush of Brad’s lips across her forehead, followed by the sound of him rising and leaving the room. After that, she slipped into a sleep so deep she didn’t even dream.

“Brad, what’s going on?” Kara asked as she walked into his apartment. He’d called her the moment he’d shut the door on Scarlett’s sleeping form. She’d promised to come over with her medical kit, but he hadn’t told her anything more. While he waited, he’d paced and paced his living room as he read every article he could find online about hyperemesis gravidarum. He needed to know everything about it because Scarlett was miserable, and he wasn’t physically capable of letting her be miserable. Although a small part of him also recognized that his obsessive researching was a diversion—a diversion from facing the fact that he, *they*, were having a baby.

When he didn’t answer, she set her bag down on the sofa table and studied him. “You’re starting to worry me,” she said.

He ran a hand through his hair, something he’d done at least a dozen times in the forty-five minutes he’d been waiting. “It’s, um, not me,” he said. “I need to show you something, and I need you to not freak out.”

Kara cocked her head as her eyes searched his. “Okay,” she said, drawing the word out. Normally, such a lukewarm response would have him doubting whether she’d keep her word. But Kara was tougher than she looked. He knew from listening to her talk about her time working for the aid agency that she’d seen far more of the world than he had.

“Come,” he said, gesturing with his head toward the hall that led to the bedrooms. He paused outside the guest room and listened. He believed Scarlett was still sleeping, but he wanted to be sure.

When he heard nothing, he put a finger to his lips to tell Kara to stay quiet, then eased the door open enough for her to peek inside.

A tiny sharp inhale was all the recognition she showed, although she lingered for a moment, watching her friend. Finally, she pulled back, and he shut the door again before leading her back to his living room.

“What is Scarlett doing here?” she demanded, keeping her voice to just above a whisper. The walls and doors in his apartment, in the hotel, were thick, but he appreciated her caution.

“It’s, um, kind of a long story.”

Kara’s eyes narrowed, and she crossed her arms. “We have time.”

He wanted a glass of whiskey, desperately, but he wouldn’t have one. Not only was it not quite noon, but he didn’t intend to let himself off easy with some false courage. Plus, he’d also heard Ellie and Olivia complain in the early days of their pregnancies about the smell. The last thing he wanted to do was give Scarlett another reason to vomit.

He sank into a chair and rested his head in his hands. When he looked up, Kara hadn’t moved.

“I met her in December. Randomly in a bar. Some bad shit went down that I don’t know if I can talk about, at least not until after we talk to Ryan. Afterward, we ended up in my hotel room.” Kara’s eyebrow shot up. “And yes,” he continued. “What you think happened happened. And now she’s carrying my, *our*, baby and has that morning sickness that seems like it’s trying to kill her. Can you *please* help her feel better?”

Kara stared at him. Then, abruptly, she sank into the chair across from him. “Scarlett is pregnant?” she asked. He nodded. “With your baby?”

“Technically, it’s *our* baby, but yes.”

She stared at him again before slumping back in the seat. “And by ‘bad shit,’ what can you tell me?”

He hesitated, truly not sure if he should tell her. Then again, the family might gossip like magpies among themselves, but they were a vault with outsiders. “It’s not relevant to her condition now, but we saw a man get murdered,” he said before briefly recalling what they’d told Ryan.

When he finished, Kara continued staring at him. Then a wisp of a smile touched her eyes. “Well, not that there were any bets going, but if there were, you’d definitely win the weirdest way you two met.”

That drew a smile from him as well. The first in what felt like a long time, even though it had probably only been a couple of hours. “You would

have made a mint if you'd wagered on that," he agreed. She chuckled, then he sobered. "Can you help her, though? She's really sick. She called out yesterday—and yes, before you ask, she was working here. I didn't know that, nor did she know that I am who I am. I'll leave it to her to tell you that story. Then Ryan and I went to see her this morning and she passed out. Not for long, but she was definitely out. And she barely made the short ride here from the seasonal housing before she lost the contents of her stomach in the bathroom. I'm worried and I don't know what to do."

Kara arched her brows. "And you found out you're going to be a father. That's a lot for a day."

He wagged his head. "This isn't about me. Can you help her?"

"I can. Are you going to make me wait to hear why you and Ryan stopped by this morning? I can't imagine you make house calls for all your staff when they call out."

He nodded. "Another story, another day. What can you do?"

She studied him some more. "She's why you seemed out of sorts, different, when you got back from Paris, isn't she?"

He let out a huff, then rose. "Coffee?" She nodded, and he walked into his kitchen.

"Witnessing the murder had something to do with it. But yes, it was her," he said. He let that information percolate while he made them both an Americano.

"I can't explain it," he said when he returned and handed Kara her drink. "I noticed her right away and couldn't seem to stop looking at her. She's beautiful, yes, but it was more than that. Then I discovered she's brave and smart and keeps a cool head under stress. And that she gives amazing head massages." A wicked glint flickered in Kara's eyes. "The big head, Kara. I had a headache. Get your mind out of the gutter," he added with a chuckle.

"Given the night ended up with your sperm and her egg having a little party, I think I'm perfectly justified in having my mind in the gutter. How do you feel about it?"

He half laughed at that. "It sounds stupid, I know, but it feels like kismet. Just this morning, I asked Ava to track her down. I wanted—I needed—to find her. If she didn't want me around, then I would have walked away. Not easily, but I would have. But I couldn't let that night be the end of us."

"And with a baby on the way, it most definitely won't be." She took a sip of her coffee, then gestured for her medical bag. He reached behind him,

snagged it, and handed it over. “Selfishly, I hope you two work out. She’s my best friend. We’ve lived through *a lot* together. Not only would I love to have her here in Mystery Lake, but she deserves the strength and the safety that your family—our family—can give her. She hasn’t led an easy life.”

“And that’s her story to tell,” Brad said, cutting her off.

He wanted to know everything there was to know about Scarlett. But he wanted her to choose what and when to share with him.

And now that she was in his life, he intended to give her all the opportunities—and reasons—to do exactly that.

CHAPTER SIX

“HOW ARE YOU FEELING, SCARLETT?” RYAN ASKED AS HE ENTERED THE APARTMENT CARRYING A laptop. A woman with shoulder-length black hair followed behind him. He introduced her to Detective Mari Cheng, who, after shaking her hand, promptly took a seat in the chair to the left.

“A little better now that Kara gave me some IV fluids and an anti-nausea prescription,” she said. In truth, she was still barely keeping her body under control. Even after her three-hour nap, she felt she could crawl back into bed for another ten years. But she could hold a conversation and, more to the point, it was time *to* hold that conversation.

Between her nap and Kara’s visit—a visit she’d sorely needed—she and Brad hadn’t had much of a chance to talk. Kara had assured her, though, that regardless of what happened between the two of them, the Warwicks would help in any way they could—both with the baby *and* in finding out what happened to her friend. Leaning on others didn’t come naturally, but other than putting a target on her back, she’d gotten nowhere in her own investigation, and she accepted she couldn’t—shouldn’t—do this on her own anymore. Not with the baby involved.

“Have you eaten anything today?” Ryan asked, sitting on the chair to her right. Curled up on Brad’s comfortable sofa, with a blanket tucked around her, she held her second cup of tea. She hadn’t managed any food yet, though.

Shaking her head, she added, “The IV Kara gave me included some nutrients. I might try some crackers or bread a little later.”

“Are you okay to do this?” he asked, patting his bag.

“Here,” Brad said, entering the room and setting a plate of saltines on the side table. Once he’d assured himself that she could reach them, he took a seat beside her, close enough to touch, but not actually touching her. “Just in case,” he added. She flashed him a smile. They had a lot to talk about, but he’d taken the news of his impending fatherhood in stride, easing some of the worry she’d been carrying.

“Thank you,” she said to Brad. “And yes,” she said to Ryan. “I’m ready. Thank you for coming over here, by the way.”

“Not a problem,” Mari said. “When Ryan mentioned your condition, there was no question. My cousin had it. I know how brutal it can be. Well, not firsthand...”

“It’s not something I’d wish on anyone. Now, what do you want me to look at?” she asked.

“We’ll get to that, but I think it would be helpful for you to tell us what you know first,” Ryan prompted.

She looked down at her tea. She’d known they’d ask this question, had been prepared for it. She wished that made it easier to answer, but it didn’t. Movement to her left caught her attention, and she looked over to see Brad’s hand resting beside her. An offer of comfort should she want to take it. She stared at the lines of his palm and his fingers, slightly curled toward her. Then, setting her mug down, she reached over and twined her fingers with his.

“In October, my friend Graciella Lopez died of what the coroner’s office declared an accidental overdose. Gracie wasn’t an angel. She lived a complicated life. An overdose wasn’t out of the realm of possibility. But she called me a few days before it happened. I was out of the country and missed the call, but I have the message.”

“What did she say?” Mari asked.

“She said that she was going to get clean. She said she’d found a way to do it and that she’d stick with it this time.”

“She’d tried before?” Ryan asked.

Scarlett glanced down at her fingers twined with Brad’s, then nodded. “Twice. I know what I’m about to say sounds naive, but I assure you I’m not. She sounded different this time. She said she had a reason, even though she didn’t say what that reason was.”

“How did she sound?” Ryan pressed.

“Not like someone going to rehab because they’d been sent there. Or because they were using it as an escape. She sounded like someone who knew the road in front of her would be hard. She sounded resigned, but strong. And utterly certain.”

Both Ryan and Mari nodded. “Then what?” Mari asked.

“I returned stateside about a week later and stopped by her place. I didn’t expect her to be there. I expected her to be in rehab.” She paused,

remembering that day. The day she walked into Gracie's empty apartment and knew, just *knew*, something wasn't right.

"I was going to check on her plants. For as many bad decisions as Gracie made in her life, she loved plants. Had dozens of them in her apartment. But I knew when I walked in the door that something was wrong."

"Were things out of place?"

She couldn't help but smile at that. "Gracie wasn't tidy. It would have been hard to tell if the place had been tossed or not. But no, it didn't look much different than it usually did. The air felt different, though. I know that sounds strange, but when you've been around death as often as I have, it's a thing. I could almost feel it."

"Did you find her?" Brad asked, his voice gentle.

She shook her head and reached for her tea with her free hand. "No. Her neighbor had noticed the unique smell and called 911. By the time I arrived, two days later, the paramedics had come and gone. And a known drug user dead from an overdose didn't warrant an investigation, so they'd already closed the case."

"But they didn't know about the phone call," Ryan said.

"Even if they had, it probably wouldn't have mattered," she said. "Gracie was a stunning woman, but she was still a Latina druggie from South Central LA who sometimes prostituted herself to make money for her next fix. She's not the sort of person the LAPD spends a lot of resources on."

"But you have," Brad said, giving her hand a little squeeze.

"Yes, but I'm a nurse," she said. "I may have gotten out of that neighborhood as soon as I could, but I'm not an investigator. I didn't get far. Not far enough."

"Far enough to get on someone's radar, if Maria's death was really a case of mistaken identity," Ryan pointed out.

She sucked in a breath. She couldn't stand the thought of a woman dying because of her. She'd experienced enough violence to know that she wasn't *responsible* for Maria's murder, but that didn't ease the guilt. Still, the best thing she could do was help Ryan and his team find the person who committed the crime. In fact, it was the *only* thing she could do.

"Apparently, I did," she agreed. This time, she was the one who squeezed Brad's hand. He responded by rubbing his forefinger along the tiny muscle beside her thumb, also a pressure point that helped relieve nausea.

"Are you ready to look at the video that the lodge's security picked up?"

Ryan asked. When she nodded, he pulled the laptop from the bag, booted it up, then handed it over.

After setting it on her lap, she clicked Play and watched the feed. One minute in, Maria entered the frame. She wore black pants, as required by the lodge, winter boots, and a blue jacket with the hood pulled up. Peeking out from underneath the hood, Scarlett could see a bright pink scarf similar to one she owned.

“She walked home every day,” Ryan said.

“Like me,” Scarlett muttered as she continued watching. “Did she live far?”

“About a mile past your place. The apartment block on the right side of the road,” Ryan said. “She was found about a half mile from the lodge.”

Maria exited the screen and a minute later, a man entered the picture. “Is he the person you want me to look at?” she asked, flickering a glance at Ryan, who nodded.

Returning her attention to the screen, she waited until the camera got a good angle, then paused the footage. After a quick glance at the controls, she zoomed in.

“Oh crap,” she muttered.

“What?” Ryan asked as both he and Mari sat forward.

She stared at the image. It was a bit grainy, but she was 98 percent certain she knew who had followed Maria.

“I’d like to see a cleaner picture, but I believe that’s Alexei Petrov. He’s a thug for hire.”

“Russian,” Mari asked.

“Descent,” Scarlett responded. “He’s third- or fourth-generation LA. From my old neighborhood”

“Was he there the night you and Brad witnessed the murder?” Ryan asked.

She and Brad each shook their head. “No,” she said. “Alexei is new to the picture. The man I wanted to follow is blond and looks a bit like one of those round-but-square Lego people. He was Gracie’s connection to the supplier. I don’t know his name.”

“So it’s unlikely that Alexei has anything to do with the drug connection you were chasing before coming up here?” Mari asked.

Scarlett pursed her lips. “He wasn’t on my radar. But Alexei has a reputation. Anyone, including Gracie’s supplier, could have hired him.”

Ryan shot Mari a look, who nodded. “I’ll put an APB out on Alexei Petrov and canvass the area with his photo.”

“Is there anything else we should know?” Ryan asked, taking his computer back.

Scarlett started to shake her head, then stopped. “For some reason, Gracie had gone to a lawyer in her neighborhood—you know, the kind of lawyer who was probably shocked to do something as mundane as the will Gracie asked him to draw up? Anyway, she left everything to me. I donated her clothes and those sorts of things, but I have her phone and all her notebooks and diaries. I’ve gone through everything, of course, and didn’t find anything, but I’m not that savvy. From what Kara has said about her sister, maybe Sabina could? You’re welcome to it all.”

Ryan glanced at Mari. “Do you have a copy of the will, too?” she asked. “She might have said something to the lawyer that would explain her change in behavior.”

“I doubt it. Gracie was tight-lipped. Even with me, and we’d known each other for nearly our entire lives. But you’ll find the will in one of the two boxes of her stuff. Both are under my bed.”

Scarlett started to rise to grab her purse and keys, but Brad tugged her back down. “I’ll get it,” he said.

Five minutes later, Ryan and Mari were gone, and she was eyeing the crackers, debating whether to try one.

“What about some chicken noodle soup?” Brad asked, then cringed. “I should ask if you even eat meat,” he added with a rueful smile. “Kind of weird that we’re having a baby together and I don’t know what you like to eat or if you have any allergies or anything like that.”

It was, she agreed. She had the benefit of having heard from Kara over the past few years about the Warwick family. And while she might not know things like Brad’s favorite food or what kind of movies he liked, she at least knew he was a man of integrity.

He didn’t have such a luxury.

Sure, as Kara’s best friend, that meant something. But she doubted Brad had heard as much from Kara about her as she’d heard about the Warwicks.

She smiled, grateful for his efforts to ease the awkward reality they both found themselves in. “For the record, I eat everything,” she said. “I grew up too poor to be picky. And when I started working, well, some of the places we traveled to, the places we worked in, we were simply lucky to have food.

Any food. Chicken soup sounds good.” She paused, then smiled again. “And I mean that. I think I’m hungry for the first time in weeks.”

Brad didn’t hesitate. Picking up his phone, he called down to the lodge kitchen and ordered two soups, two helpings of mashed potatoes, and two slices of apple pie with ice cream. When he hung up, he flashed her a sheepish smile. “I did a little reading while you were asleep and while every woman is different, the articles said that bland things, like potatoes, were often tolerated. Now the lodge’s mashed potatoes aren’t exactly bland, but I figured it’s worth a try. If you don’t like them, I’ll eat them later.”

“Deal,” she said before an uncomfortable silence fell between them. Not a bad silence, but an awkward one.

“This is a little weird, isn’t it?” Brad asked.

She couldn’t help but laugh. “Yes, it is.” She hesitated. “Look, I know that night I said that winging it is kind of my MO, and it is. But that doesn’t mean it’s yours. I’m grateful for all this”—she gestured to his apartment—“because I’m smart enough to know that Alexei was likely here for me *and* that you and your family are uniquely positioned to help protect both me and the baby. Once we’re both safe, though, I don’t expect you to keep housing me. I can get a job at the hospital here in town and find a place to rent. Kara’s been trying to get me up here for over a year anyway.”

Brad leaned back in his chair, his hands resting on his stomach and his eyes glittering in the soft glow of the lamps. “You want to stay here in Mystery Lake?”

She looked down at the mug she still held and wished it were wine. A wave of nausea instantly followed, making her regret even thinking about it.

“What do you need?” Brad asked, leaning forward.

She grimaced. “A few seconds to breathe through it. And some ice water?” It was below freezing outside, but ice water tended to relieve her nausea a tiny bit.

A minute later, Brad handed her a tall glass. “Thank you,” she replied as he sat back down. After taking a sip, she let the cool liquid settle her stomach, then returned to the conversation. “I only stayed in LA because it has an international airport and it’s all I’ve known. But as I said, Kara is really the closest thing to family that I have. If she’s here and you’re here and I can get a job here, it’s the right thing to do.”

“Your parents?”

She shook her head. “They were caught in the middle of a gang

confrontation when I was eighteen. A month before high school graduation. They were both killed.”

He stared at her. “I’m sorry. Were you close?”

She smiled. “In some ways, yes. In others, no. They both emigrated from Ethiopia when they were seventeen with barely a high school level education. They landed in South Central LA and somehow were able to make a place for themselves. Not a big place, they ran a small international foods store and we lived in the apartment above.” An apartment a quarter the size of the one she currently sat in. “We had a lot of the usual issues that immigrant parents and first-generation kids have. But even when they didn’t understand me, they loved me. And even when they drove me crazy, I respected them. I respected their bravery and the life they’d built when so much had been stacked against them. So we loved each other and were close in that sense. But I’m not sure we ever really knew each other that well.”

A knock at the door sounded, and Brad swiveled his head around, then looked back at her. “I don’t think we should let it be known you’re here,” he said. She’d been thinking along the same lines and had already started to rise. “Pop into the hall, no one will see you.”

Without a word, she did. Leaning against the wall, she listened as Brad let the delivery man in—one of the perks of living in a hotel, she presumed. Dishes clinked as they were set on the table. A few minutes later, Brad thanked the man and closed the door.

“You still hungry?” he asked.

Despite her recent bout of nausea, the thought of chicken soup had her stomach gurgling, in the good way. Stepping out of the hall, she joined him in the breakfast nook. His apartment was one large rectangle, divided in half, lengthwise, with the bedrooms off a hall on one side and a formal dining room, kitchen with nook, and living room on the other. The dining room had views of the mountain while the living room had views of the lake. It sounded utilitarian, but in truth, it was homey. Decorated in warm colors and materials, with family pictures all over the place, it was hard to believe they were in the middle of a resort.

“Water still good?” he asked. She nodded, and he took a seat. She inhaled the steam rising from the soup and for the first time in a very long time—or what felt like a long time—her mouth watered in anticipation.

She closed her eyes as she took her first spoonful, the salty broth hitting her tongue. “So good,” she said after swallowing.

Brad grinned, and her heart tripped a little. They had far more at stake now than they had the night they'd met. And she'd have to remind herself to be more cautious in how they moved forward. But damn the man was handsome.

"I'm glad you like it. Our chef is kind of a genius. Thankfully, not a temperamental one, but a genius nonetheless."

"Hats off to him," she said, then took another bite.

"Her. Luna was born and raised in New Orleans and learned to cook there. Her company was catering some industry event I attended, and we got to talking. It turned out she hated the heat of the South, and her wife is from Sacramento. Seemed a no-brainer to offer her a job. That was seven years ago. And not to brag on myself, but it was one of the best decisions I ever made." He smiled again before taking a sip of his drink.

"She's won a bunch of awards, hasn't she? I think I remember Kara telling me that."

He nodded and dipped his spoon into his soup. Silence fell as they finished, then Brad slid two plates in front of her. One with mashed potatoes and the other with a slice of apple pie.

"Can I save these?" she asked, pointing to the potatoes. "They look good, but I'm not sure I should put that much food in my stomach right away. And I definitely want that," she said, pointing to the pie.

He chuckled. "Of course. I'll throw them in the fridge, and you can reheat them tomorrow."

She reached for the pie, pulling it in front of her. "I did mean what I said earlier. I want you to know that," she said.

He looked up as he forked a huge bite of pie into his mouth, making her laugh. When he finished chewing, he asked, "About what? Moving to Mystery Lake?"

"That, but also not expecting you...us." She paused, then sighed. "Look, we barely know each other. And yes, there's a connection between us or we wouldn't be here in the first place. But I want you to know that I have no expectations of you in that way. We can co-parent without being together. I've seen enough bad relationships—marriages—that start out this way"—she waved between them—"that I want to be conscientious about *not* doing that."

"You mean get married because I knocked you up?"

She arched a brow. His delivery had been flat, but amusement danced in

his eyes. “Exactly,” she said.

He considered her for a moment, then rose. “Tea? Or coffee? I have decaf.”

She shook her head, then watched him make himself a cup of coffee. When he returned to the table, she eyed him.

“Nothing to say to that?” she asked.

He cocked his head and gave a little shrug. “I can assure you, Scarlett, we won’t be getting married because of the baby.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

BRAD STOOD AT THE WINDOW BEHIND HIS DESK, HANDS IN HIS POCKETS, AND WATCHED THE SKIERS make their way down the mountain. A rueful smile touched his lips. A day ago, he'd watched the same scene, but his mind had been lost in thoughts of Magi. In a way, it still was. Only his Magi now had a name. Scarlett.

He chuckled.

Damn, a lot had happened in the past twenty-four hours.

He couldn't believe Scarlett was here. He may not have *found* her, but what had transpired was even better. She was in his home. And planning to stay. At least for the short term. He'd change her mind about that, though.

And they were having a baby.

He was going to be a father.

He grinned. The news had shocked him. Knocked the air from his lungs when she'd first told him. But now? Now he couldn't wait. They had a lot of getting to know each other to do, but at least they had a decent foundation to grow from. Knowing she was Kara's best friend made it easy to move past some of the early questions or doubts that might come up in a relationship. He suspected it was the same for her. She'd heard enough about his family from Kara that she didn't have to come into the relationship wondering about the basics—like whether he was honest or had integrity.

It seems they had a history with each other without even knowing it.

He glanced at his watch. Almost ten o'clock. He'd left Scarlett sleeping in the guest room, but they'd agreed to have a late breakfast after he got through a few meetings.

Assuming she could eat.

He frowned at that. He'd been listening for her all night and hadn't heard her get up and be sick. But he'd been gone for three hours. Had she slept through? Would she want to eat?

He turned away from the window and was reaching for the phone to call the kitchen when Ava knocked and walked in.

“I found her!” she exclaimed, holding up a piece of paper. Judging by the quick glance he got, it appeared to be a photo. “And you, my soon-to-be-brother, have some explaining to do. You look awfully cozy with this woman.”

She smacked the paper down on his desk. It was indeed a picture of him and Scarlett in the parking lot of Roxy’s. He remembered the exact moment. He’d set a hand on her stomach, steadying her. She’d looked up at him in surprise, a wry but intimate smile on her lips. That was the image Ava had chosen to download.

“Her name is Scarlett Mitchell and, as luck would have it, she worked with Kara for years. You definitely have an in if you want one. I’m assuming you do, or you wouldn’t have wanted me to track her down, right?” She paused, expecting him to answer, no doubt. He was too lost in the smile on Scarlett’s face to oblige, though.

“Although I will say, I think Roxy’s has gone downhill. Do you know who came walking through the parking lot a few minutes after you?” she asked. He looked up. “Jason Katz.”

“Should I know who that is?” he asked.

She made a face. “He’s a top dog in one of the LA drug cartels. That’s not really your scene, so probably not.”

Brad stilled. “Blond guy. Kind of a square head?”

Ava hesitated. “Maybe it’s more your scene than I thought. Is there something we need to be worried about?”

He rolled his eyes and scowled at her. “Come with me,” he said. She eyed him, then followed him out. After telling his assistant, Tana, that he’d be back before his next meeting, they made their way to his apartment.

Ava looked at him funny when he knocked on his own door, but he wanted to give Scarlett a heads-up before he walked in. He didn’t even know if she was awake, but the last thing he wanted to do was startle her.

“I’m here,” she said as he pushed the door open. He looked to his right to see her in the kitchen holding a mug, likely tea.

“I brought someone,” he said, stepping in with Ava following. Scarlett watched with quiet curiosity, but Ava, not surprisingly, wasn’t so sanguine.

“Oh my god, you found her!” Ava exclaimed. “You just asked me yesterday to track her down. How did you find her? Wow, I’m Ava,” she said, marching forward, her heels clacking on the hardwood. “Has anyone ever told you that you look like Mearg Tareke?”

Scarlett's gaze flickered to him as she took Ava's outstretched hand.

"Ava works with Ethan at HICC," he said. "She's Sabina's second-in-command. Less than thirty minutes before Ryan and I found you, I'd asked her to track down the CCTV footage from Roxy's and find you. I couldn't let that night be the end of us," he added quietly, repeating what he'd told Kara.

Scarlett studied him. A hint of a smile appeared, more in her eyes than on her face, then she switched her attention to Ava. "Nice to meet you, Ava," she said. "I've heard great things about HICC."

"She's also my soon-to-be sister-in-law. She and Mitch are getting married in July," he added.

Ava huffed. "For all my sins," she muttered.

Brad chuckled as he ushered the women to the small breakfast table. Scarlett was up, which was a good sign, but she still looked exhausted. "What's he done now?" he asked.

Ava rolled her eyes. "He took Eleanor sledding yesterday. He liked it so much that in the middle of the night, the furry nugget dragged all our snow boots, jackets, hats, and gloves up from the mudroom to our bedroom, and I damn near broke my neck tripping on them this morning."

Brad laughed as he started making a pot of coffee. "Eleanor is their pet raccoon," he explained to Scarlett.

"We rescued him after a fire killed his family—or at least we think that's what happened," Ava said. "He was ten weeks old, a little singed from the flames, but otherwise okay. He's been with us ever since. He's almost six months old now."

"You have a raccoon as a pet, and his name is Eleanor?" Scarlett asked.

"There's a story there," Brad said, joining them at the table and setting a mug in front of Ava. Scarlett glanced at the coffee and blanched. He left his own mug on the counter and took a seat beside her.

"A story for another time. Now, what's this story?" Ava said, wagging her finger between him and Scarlett.

"Did Sabina get a call from Ryan last night or this morning?" he asked.

She frowned. "She did, actually. Something about bringing in a few boxes of personal items belonging to a potential murder victim. I figured it was stuff from the woman they found yesterday, but he hasn't been by yet, so I don't know."

"It's not," Brad said as Scarlett took a slow, deep inhale beside him. As if fighting a bout of nausea. He wanted to ask her how she was feeling but

didn't want to call attention to her state. Ryan, Mari, and Kara knew, but they hadn't discussed telling the rest of his family.

"First things first, though. Can you tell Scarlett what you told me?" he asked.

Ava eyed him, then reached into her bag and pulled out another photo. "His name is Jason Katz," she said, sliding the picture over. Front and center was the man they'd both seen at Roxy's. The man who, Brad would wager, had been the one to pull the trigger.

"Do you know who he works for?" Scarlett asked, looking less peaked than seconds before.

Ava shook her head. "Well, to be clear, I know he works for someone unimaginatively called 'the Wolf.' But who the Wolf is, other than one of the heads of an LA drug cartel, I don't know." She paused, and Brad sensed she was putting two and two together. She wasn't Sabina's second-in-command for nothing. "He killed someone that night. It wasn't a dropped pot, was it?" she said, directing her question at him. "The police report you asked me to look into at Roxy's? You were there. You both were," she said, her gaze darting to encompass Scarlett.

Brad glanced at Scarlett. She nodded, then set a hand on his, letting him know she'd answer.

Ava's gaze zeroed in on Scarlett's hand resting on his and she let out a little squeal. "It *was* a woman!" she said, all but bouncing in her chair. "Are you two a thing? Please tell me you're a thing."

Brad didn't know what they were, not yet, but given they were having a baby together, he figured that at least qualified them as being a *thing*. "We are," he said, turning his hand over and lacing his fingers with Scarlett's. "But as we only found each other yesterday, it's new," he added.

Scarlett studied him, her amber eyes searching his. He squeezed her hand, and she gave a little nod. They'd talk more later.

Ava silently clapped her hands together, her long nails clicking. "I'm so glad. This should sufficiently distract Anthony for at least a month as he gets to know you," she said. "Oh, in case he hasn't told you, Anthony is his dad and is a cross between a mother hen and a teddy bear. Once he learns his oldest son, the last of the three, is entering coupledness, his life will be complete. Well, to be fair, *grandchildren* will make his life complete, but you two being together is a good start."

Scarlett choked on her tea as Ava said those last words. Thankfully, Ava

misinterpreted the reason and assured her that Anthony wouldn't press too hard on the issue. At least not at first.

"They don't know about her yet," Brad said to Ava. "And Scarlett and I haven't talked about when to tell them. If you could not say anything for a day or two, I'd appreciate it."

Ava narrowed her eyes at him. "As much as we all like to be the first in the know, when you tell your parents about Scarlett is your decision and your story to tell. I won't crow about knowing before them until *after* you tell them yourself," she said.

Brad inclined his head, accepting the slight rebuke. Then he turned to Scarlett. "You want to tell her? HICC will be involved, and she'll hear it from Ryan later today."

Scarlett nodded, then proceeded to tell Ava everything she'd told Ryan and Mari the evening before, leaving out any references to the baby. When she finished, Ava let out a low whistle and leaned back in her seat.

"Wow, you caught the eye of someone who'd hire Alexei Petrov and, potentially, the Wolf. I'm thinking Gracie might have been into more than you knew," she said.

Scarlett made a face. "Entirely possible. Like I told Ryan, she held her cards close to the vest, even with me. I knew she had addiction problems, and she let slip that she sometimes sold her body for her next fix. But I don't know who she bought from, whether she had a pimp or a madam, or even who she spent her time with." Scarlett paused, rolling her mug as she looked into its depths. "I was out of the country ten months a year. Sometimes more. I don't know that she would have let me into her world more if I'd been around. Knowing Gracie, probably not. Still, it feels like I could have been a better friend."

To his surprise, Ava leaned across the table, peeled Scarlett's hand from the mug, and held it in hers. "I think you were the friend she needed," Ava said. "You were the one she called and told about going to rehab. You were the one who had the key to her apartment. You were the one she left all her things to. She wanted you to have them. You. Not someone else. I don't know what we'll find in them, but I'll bet you that we'll find something. And you were the one she trusted, the one she knew would go looking."

Scarlett blinked, and a single tear fell down her cheek. Brad reached behind him, snagged a tissue, and handed it to her.

"I'm not one to cry—"

“Oh, pish,” Ava said, letting go of her hand and sitting back. “Cry all you want. Your childhood friend is dead, possibly murdered. If you’re not going to cry about that, I’d worry about you.”

Scarlett gave a watery laugh and wiped her eyes again. “You know, you’re right. When I’m working, we—the nurses and doctors—have to be so in control all the time. People look to us for that, for assurance that everything will be okay, even when they know it’s not. But I’m not working right now, and I’m allowed to mourn my friend. As complicated as she was.”

Ava gave a decisive nod of approval. “On that note, I’m going to head into the office and see if Ryan’s dropped the stuff off yet. He’ll want to know about this as well,” she said, pointing to the picture of Jason Katz before swiping it up and slipping it into her bag. “Now you two be good, but not too good. If you decided to go the same route as Ryan and Olivia and have a baby a hot minute after getting together, I wouldn’t be sad. Between the imminent arrival of the twins and that, it would keep Anthony off my back until at least after the wedding.”

And with that, she gathered her things and left. The second the door closed, Brad chanced a glance at Scarlett. She met his gaze, then they both started laughing.

“I have to admit, I’m a little worried about telling your parents,” she said when they quieted down. “Not because they’ll wonder who this hussy is who moved in on their oldest son, but because of, well, I’m not exactly sure. I guess I’m having visions of drowning in baby stuff.”

Brad chuckled. “Not far from the truth,” he said. “Although I can assure you, they won’t think you’re a hussy. First, Kara’s talked about you. They know you’re a good person. They know you’re smart and dedicated and were Kara’s anchor during some pretty dark times in her career with the aid agency. Second, they trust me. If I’m happy, they’ll be happy. And over time, you’ll get to know each other, and they’ll like you for you. Not just because we’re together or because you’re the mother of their grandchild.”

She ran her fingers through her hair, brushing the curls from her face. “I hope that’s true. Although I’m not sure how you can be so certain when *you* and *I* barely know each other.”

He regarded her, taking in her concerned expression. She had a point. But one that, to his mind, was easily addressed. Sure, certain types of knowing could only come with time, but other types? All it took was a conversation. Or a look.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

She cocked her head at his question. “Better than yesterday morning but not as good as last night.”

“Have you eaten?”

She shook her head. “I took one of the pills Kara gave me right before you got here. It’s starting to kick in.”

“Good,” he said, rising. “I have thirty minutes before I have to be in a meeting. How do pancakes sound?”

“Um, good. But you don’t have to do that.”

“Maybe not, but I’m going to,” he said, starting to pull the ingredients from the cabinets. “And then after you eat, please go rest again. Once I’m done with my last meeting, I’ll take the afternoon off, and we can talk. Really talk. You’re right, we don’t know each other well. I’d like to change that. If you’d like to, and you’re game, that is?”

She studied him, her expression a mix of wariness, amusement, and curiosity. Then a small smile tugged on her kissable lips. “I think we’ve already established that I’m game for almost anything,” she said. “And yes, I’d like that.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE NAUSEA CHURNING IN SCARLETT'S STOMACH HAD VERY LITTLE TO DO WITH HER PREGNANCY and everything to do with the fact that Anthony and Beth Warwick would be arriving in a few short minutes. True to his word, Brad had taken the afternoon off and between her naps, which had been minimal, they talked. About so many things. Yes, they were barely touching the tip of the iceberg, but so far, she liked what she'd seen. And heard. Other than the fact that he was a Warriors, Forty-Niners, and Giants fan. In that, he was plain wrong because everyone knew the Lakers, Raiders (she was old-school), and Dodgers were better.

"How are you feeling?" Brad asked as he walked into the room, phone in hand.

She inclined her head. "Between the drugs, the sleep, not having to work, and knowing that Sabina—who I'm looking forward to meeting soon—and HICC are looking into Gracie's death, I'm feeling a lot better. I've only barfed four times today," she added with a slightly wobbly smile. She didn't tend to have much of a filter when it came to bodily functions. It was hard to stay modest while living and working in the conditions she'd worked. Especially in areas often rife with giardia and other gastrointestinal viruses and bacteria. Still, she felt oddly embarrassed by sharing her bouts of nausea with Brad, even though he'd insisted on knowing. He'd claimed that since he was half responsible for her condition, the least he could do was try to help her feel better, which he *couldn't* do unless he knew how she was doing.

"I'm sorry it was four, but I think that was better than yesterday?" he asked, dropping a kiss on her forehead as he passed the couch on his way to the kitchen. They'd been holding hands since they'd first seen each other the day before. But this afternoon, it had progressed to other gentle touches and, yes, even a brief kiss or two.

Despite the chaste nature of those subtle encounters, each one reminded her of their single night together. Reminded her of his bare skin under her fingertips as she traced the lines of his back. Reminded her of the feel of him

inside her and the way he held her. Reminded her of the deep and lingering kisses they shared.

Jumping back into bed wasn't a good idea—and not only because she wasn't sure how her stomach would take it. But she hoped they'd get there soon. He was too tempting for her to ignore for long, and she had no desire to hide the fact that she wanted him. Although right now, one day after they'd reunited and a few minutes before she met his parents, probably wasn't the right time to be thinking about it.

“Yes, definitely better than yesterday,” she said, following him into the kitchen to find him loading a platter with cheese, crackers, and fruit. “I think the fact that I've slept eighteen of the past thirty hours has helped.”

“And not working,” he added, handing her a glass of ginger ale.

She inclined her head in agreement. After a call from Ryan in the early afternoon asking her to continue remaining out of sight, they'd agreed she wouldn't work until they were certain she wasn't in danger. If she'd felt better, or been her usual self, she would have protested. Or chafed under the restriction. But after almost three months of being violently ill, she wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth.

“Ryan and Sabina want to come over after my parents leave,” he said, pouring himself a glass of sparkling water. She started to suggest that he have a cocktail or wine, but even the thought of smelling it had her swallowing down an urge to heave.

“Do they have something?” she asked as they made their way to the living room. The sun was setting over the western mountains, and a long shadow stretched over the lake. The edges had frozen over, but the middle was still a deep, dark blue. A beautiful contrast to the pristine white of the surrounding snow.

“I assume so,” he replied. “But I didn't ask. I figured if they had something, you should hear it before me or at least at the same time.”

Before she could respond to his consideration, the doorbell rang, and her body seized. Brad smiled. “It will be fine. Trust me,” he said. Then, rising, he dropped another kiss on the top of her head before answering the door.

Anthony Warwick was the first to enter. Not surprisingly, he looked like an older version of his son, whom he greeted with a big hug. Beth followed next. She was tall and lean, with hair as dark as her husband's, and Scarlett saw where Brad's unusual eye color came from. Beth's didn't glitter quite as much as her son's, but they were the same pale brown. She, too, embraced

her son, although her gaze landed on Scarlett even as Brad kissed her cheek.

“We were summoned?” Anthony said, his voice jovial as he threw his arms akimbo. He hadn’t noticed her yet, and Brad’s gaze darted over his dad’s shoulder. Obviously catching on, Anthony turned and spotted her. A beat of silence passed, then the tall man grinned. “Yes, we were definitely summoned. I’m Anthony Warwick,” he said, striding over, his hand held out.

“Scarlett Mitchell,” she replied, rising and reaching for his hand.

Anthony froze. “As in Kara’s Scarlett? The one who is like a sister to her?”

Scarlett nodded and before she knew it, she was engulfed in the most all-encompassing hug she’d ever experienced.

“We’ve heard so much about you from Kara,” he said. “Thank you for being there with her—and *for* her—all those years you worked together. You’re a sister to her, and I’m so glad we finally get to meet.”

He released her, although he kept his hands on her shoulders. Then with another grin, he gave her a quick second hug before stepping away and motioning his wife to his side. “My wife, mother of my children—bless her—and my best friend, Scarlett, meet Beth. Although I call her Annie.”

Brad’s mom was more reserved than her husband, although she seemed happy to indulge his gravitas. She smiled and held out her hand. “It’s lovely to meet you, Scarlett. We *have* heard so much about you.”

“Thank you,” Scarlett replied, and to her dismay, her voice sounded a little shaky. At least to her. Although, neither of Brad’s parents seemed to notice as they each took a seat in the chairs. Leaving the spot beside her on the couch open. They might know her as Kara’s friend, but they hadn’t missed the fact that they were meeting her in Brad’s apartment.

“Drink, Mom? Dad?” Brad offered. When they both asked for a glass of wine, he glanced to her. She gave him a tiny nod. His parents were sitting far enough away that the smell shouldn’t get to her.

“So, how did you two meet?” Anthony asked her as Brad retreated to the kitchen to pour the wine.

Thankfully, she and Brad had decided that complete honesty was the way to go with them, and so knowing how to answer wasn’t hard.

“In a bar in LA the night he landed from Paris,” Scarlett said. “We didn’t know who each other was at the time.”

“That was, what? Almost three months ago?” Beth asked.

“Just about,” Brad responded, returning to the living room and handing

each of his parents a glass of red wine.

“And can we assume that since you’re here...” Anthony raised his eyebrows in question.

“Let them tell us their way,” Beth said, admonishing her husband.

“My mother is far less nosy than my father,” Brad said to her with a smile.

“Nonsense,” Anthony retorted. “She doesn’t need to be nosy because I am. But I assure you, if she didn’t have me to take the lead, she’d be all up in your business.”

Both she and Brad glanced at his mom. She dipped her head. “It’s true, I would.”

“See,” Anthony said. “So why don’t you jump to the end of the current story? Are we going to have another wedding?”

Scarlett choked on her ginger ale, and Brad dropped his head. After a beat, he raised it and looked at her. “I’m sorry. I did warn you.”

Laughter burbled up her chest. She hadn’t believed him, but he had warned her about his father. “It’s fine,” she said. “Let’s get on with it.”

“You sure?” Brad asked. She nodded. “Okay, here goes.” He took a breath and faced his parents. “So the thing is, we noticed each other in a bar ___”

“Your eyes caught across a smoky room?” Anthony asked, waggling his eyebrows.

Brad shot his dad a flat look. “No one smokes inside anymore. She was there to track down a drug dealer she thought might have played a part in her friend’s death. I was there for a burger. But then I noticed she was watching three sketchy guys and, well, with all my experience here at the lodge, I knew they weren’t good news.”

“He didn’t know me. We hadn’t even said a word to each other, but somehow, he knew what I was going to do,” Scarlett said, not wanting Brad to carry the burden of telling his parents on his own. After all, she was as much a part of the story as he was.

“And I couldn’t let her follow them on her own,” he said. “So I went after them.”

“I followed him out because I knew they were bad news. I was prepared to ditch *my* plans for the night, but I didn’t want *him* alone with them.”

“The short version is, we witnessed a murder and then ended up in my hotel room and, well, one thing led to another. She sneaked out the next

morning—”

“Oh, don’t say that like it was a surprise,” Scarlett interjected, poking him. “I made it clear I didn’t want you involved because I thought it might be dangerous.”

Brad raised an eyebrow at her. “It might not have been a surprise, but did you or did you not sneak out the next morning?”

She glared at him. Sort of. Then sighed. “Fine, I did.”

Brad lifted his hand in a “see” gesture and continued. “We didn’t know each other’s names, so had no way of finding each other. But yesterday I asked Ava to track her down.”

“Only he didn’t need to. I was here the entire time. I’d heard that the people I was looking into were after me, so I left LA and came up here to be close to Kara. Even though she didn’t know I was here. I got a job as a cleaning lady and have been working at the lodge for two months. But a woman was killed two days ago, and Ryan now thinks it was a case of mistaken identity and the killer was really after me.”

“And when Ryan and I went to talk to her, well, I found her,” Brad said, looking at her with a soft sort of affection that had her smiling back.

“And it wasn’t just me he found,” she said.

He reached over and took her hand. “It wasn’t,” he said. Then, turning to his parents, he dropped the biggest bomb. “Scarlett is pregnant with our baby.”

A deafening silence filled the living room. Scarlett’s eyes darted from Anthony to Beth. She and Brad had gotten so caught up in telling the story that they’d all but forgotten his parents might need a little time to process.

But then Anthony sniffed, and Beth snagged a tissue from the box on the coffee table and leaned over to hand it to him. With a sigh, she flashed her son such a look of disappointment that Scarlett’s heart stuttered.

“How many times do I have to tell you boys *not* to say things like that without a little warning,” Beth said. Anthony sniffed again and dabbed his eyes.

“My dad is a crier,” Brad whispered to her. “I forgot to tell you that.”

“A baby? Another one?” Anthony said. Then, without warning, he jumped up and pulled Scarlett into another all-encompassing hug. “We’re going to have another grandbaby, Annie,” he said. When he released her, he took only one step back, again keeping his hands on her shoulders. “When are you due? How are you feeling? Do you need anything? Tia and Cody

chose pale green for their nursery, not my favorite color, but it's nice. What do you want? That back guest room that overlooks the mountain would make the best nursery. I'd like my grandson or -daughter to get used to seeing the skiers, be inspired by them."

"He also coaches the ski team," Brad said. "Three of his students have gone on to the Olympics. He'd like nothing more than for one of his grandkids to join the ranks."

Her gaze flickered to Brad, then drifted back to Anthony. And in that moment, she saw exactly what Ava had told her. Part teddy bear, part mother hen, Anthony Warwick would be a force in her child's life. A positive force.

She smiled. "You know there are less than a handful of Black Olympic skiers."

Anthony grinned. "That may be, but the world hasn't met my grandkids yet."

CHAPTER NINE

BRAD CRACKED HIS EYES OPEN AND LOOKED OUT THE SLIDING GLASS DOOR TO THE VIEW OF THE lake beyond. The sun was coming up over the eastern mountains, and a halo of light illuminated the peaks.

One of his favorite times of the day because anything was possible.

He glanced over his shoulder and wondered how long it would be before he could invite Scarlett into his bed. She was too sick for anything more than sleeping, but he wanted to hold her, to feel her breathing beside him. A sense of yearning twisted inside him at the thought of the three of them—him, her, and their baby—cocooning away from the world together, and his heart hitched. Someday she'd be beside him. Hopefully sooner rather than later.

With an hour left before he needed to get up, he let his eyes drift closed again. The peace of the morning had nearly lulled him back to sleep when he heard the rush of Scarlett's feet across the floor of her bedroom, followed by the unmistakable sound of her retching. Without thinking, he leaped out of bed, dragged on a pair of sweats, and dashed down the hall.

"Scarlett?" he called, knocking on her door. When the only sound that followed was her being sick, he walked in.

"Scarlett?" he said, making his way to the en suite bathroom.

The toilet flushed. "I'm okay," she said, her voice shaky.

He knocked on the door, then eased it open. Scarlett sat on the floor, beside the toilet, her back against the bathtub.

"What can I get you?" he asked, kneeling in front of her.

She dropped her head to her knees. "A time machine so I can jump forward a month or two and be over this?"

He brushed her hair back. "How about some water and one of the pills Kara prescribed you? Have you taken one this morning?"

"I haven't," she said with a shake of her head. "Thank you. I suppose that's the next best option."

He found the medicine beside the sink, poured her a glass of water, then took a seat beside her.

Silently, he handed her the cup and the pill. She eyed both, then reached for them and dutifully swallowed the tablet.

“How long until Ryan and Sabina get here?” she asked.

The two had intended to come by the night before, after his parents left, but Scarlett had been dead on her feet. Nothing they’d wanted to talk about was urgent, so he’d put them off and they’d both agreed.

“An hour and a half,” he answered. “Do you want to get back into bed?”

She hesitated, then nodded. He rose again, then reached out his hand and helped her up. After tucking her back under the covers, he sat on the edge of the bed. “Can I get you anything else? More water? Ginger ale?”

She shook her head. He hesitated. At close to five foot eight and with a lithe body that had plenty of curves, Scarlett wasn’t a tiny woman. But as ill as she was, tucked under the puffy comforter, she looked small. Not helpless, but definitely vulnerable.

Biting back a sigh of frustration at not being able to help her more, he started to rise and leave her to her rest. Only her hand snaked out from under the blanket and wrapped around his wrist. “Stay,” she said. “Please.”

He didn’t need to be asked twice, and ten seconds later, he slid under the comforter and curled up behind her. “Can I put my arm around you?” he asked.

In response, she reached back and grabbed his hand. Then, curling it in hers, she tucked them both between her breasts and sighed.

Her exhale reverberated through his body, and he relaxed, too. Dropping a kiss on her shoulder, he closed his eyes and drifted back into a peaceful, dreamless sleep.

Ninety minutes later, the sound of his doorbell woke him with a start. Scarlett let out a cute sleepy noise and snuggled back against him. In that moment, he kind of hated Ryan and Sabina. Then again, once they sorted out what had happened to Gracie—and figured out how to get people like Alexei Petrov off her tail—they’d have lots more mornings of lying about in bed. At least until the baby was born.

“Ryan and Sabina are here,” he said, untangling their hands and moving away from her.

“Hmm?”

He repeated himself as he shifted from under the comforter. She stiffened as the words sank in, then threw the covers back. “Oh my god,” she said, swinging her legs over the bed as the bell rang again.

He chuckled, and she tossed a glare at him over her shoulder. "I'll take care of it. Take your time," he said. Jogging to his room, he grabbed a sweatshirt and pulled it on as he headed to the door.

"Took you long enough," Ryan said. Then his gaze dropped, taking in Brad's attire, before it lifted again and came to rest on his head. No doubt he had bedhead. Ryan arched a brow and shook his head as he hid a smile.

"Where is she?" Kara asked, towing her sister in behind her.

Brad stepped aside and let everyone pass. "I didn't know you were coming, too, Kara."

"Aside from the fact that she's my best friend, I want to check on her. She wasn't in good shape the first time I saw her. I want to make sure the fluids and medicine I gave her are helping."

"Something I should know?" Sabina asked, her gaze darting between Kara and Brad.

"I'm going to find her," Kara said, grabbing her sister and dragging her along.

Brad glanced at Ryan, who waited with his characteristic inscrutable expression for an update.

"We told my parents about us and the baby last night," he said. "The cat's out of the bag."

"I know it's all unexpected. Are you happy about this?" Ryan asked.

He appreciated his cousin's circumspection but he wanted there to be no doubt about how he felt. "I am. Scarlett and I need to spend more time together, get to know each other, but we both want this baby."

Ryan nodded. "Then I'm glad for you both. And congratulations, again," he said.

"You guys have twenty minutes," Kara said, reentering the room, Scarlett and Sabina following behind with their heads together. "After that, I'm going to give her more fluids and some intravenous medicine that should help for today at least. Under normal circumstances, I'd recommend a few days of hospitalization. I won't suggest that, though, since I know it's not possible."

"Any chance we can get some coffee?" Ryan asked.

Brad nodded and started a pot. Scarlett, Sabina, and Kara were still by the couch chatting when he poured the first cup.

He carried a mug out to the living room, where Ryan sat, and was about to hand it over when the doorbell rang.

“Are you expecting anyone?” Ryan asked, rising.

Brad shook his head and, after setting the mug down, moved in front of Scarlett. Ryan walked to the door, looked through the eyehole, then chuckled. “Oh, this is going to be good,” he muttered.

For two seconds, Brad had no idea what he was talking about. Then Ryan opened the door to see his brother Cody and his wife, Tia, with Mitch and Ava behind them.

“What the fuck?” Cody demanded, walking in.

His youngest brother was prone to a tiny bit of drama, so instead of answering, Brad looked to Mitch. Mitch shrugged. “I kind of have the same question.”

Ava rolled her eyes at both, grabbed a *very* pregnant Tia’s hand, and dragged her into the room. “Tia, meet Scarlett. Best friend of Kara, vigilante of Gracie, and mother of Brad’s baby. Welcome to this crazy family, Scarlett. It’s cray-cray, but you won’t regret it,” she said to Scarlett before engulfing her in a hug.

“Thank you,” Scarlett managed to get out as Ava hugged her. Then, shifting a hesitant gaze to Tia, she waited for his sister-in-law’s response. Unlike her husband, Tia, an ex-CIA agent, didn’t do drama. Instead, she eyed Scarlett for half a beat, then offered her a smile and opened her arms.

“I’m not so great at hugging these days, but it’s nice to meet you,” Tia said. “Kara’s spoken of you often, and I’m looking forward to getting to know you.”

Scarlett, who seemed a little overwhelmed with the demonstrative tendencies of some of his family members, appeared to appreciate Tia’s reserve as she leaned into a quick hug.

“And this is my husband, Cody,” Tia said, gesturing him forward. “Who, to be clear, isn’t upset at the situation, only that he wasn’t the first person Brad told. Cody does *not* like being one of the last to know.”

“Hush, woman. Don’t paint me in a bad light,” Cody said, gently shifting his wife to the side so he could stand in front of Scarlett. “Although, she’s right. I’m nosy as hell and gossip like an old lady. Fair warning.”

“He’s not lying,” Tia muttered.

Scarlett chuckled and accepted the hug his youngest brother offered.

“We found out from Mom and Dad this morning,” Cody said, turning to face him, his disappointment clear.

“You should have seen how Dad gloated,” Mitch grumbled before

introducing himself to Scarlett.

“It’s been a long time since he won the grapevine wars,” Cody said, referring to the family tendency to see who could share the latest *on dit* the first. “Not since I graduated from college. You have a lot of explaining to do, brother,” he added, fixing him with *a look*.

Brad ignored him and made his way to Scarlett’s side. “You okay?” he whispered as his brothers made more coffee and distributed mugs around.

“Who’s missing?” she asked as he directed her to a seat, then lowered himself beside her. Kara took a seat on her other side.

“Ethan and Chad, of course,” Kara said, referring to her and Sabina’s husbands. “Then there’s Josh and Sofia and Josh’s son Matt, but Matt is at UCLA, and you won’t meet him until Christmas.”

“Josh is Chad and Ryan’s brother,” Sabina said. “The middle one. And Sofia is his partner.”

“Then there’s Asher and his wife, Ellie, and the twins, Charley and Joey,” Brad said. “Asher is Ethan’s brother and the oldest in that branch of the Warwick family. The twins are the youngest.”

“And you haven’t met my wife, Olivia,” Ryan added.

Scarlett nodded, still looking a little, not lost, but slowly taking it all in.

“I was serious about my twenty-minute rule,” Kara said, pointedly looking at Sabina, who sat in the chair closest to Scarlett, then to Ryan, who hovered nearby, coffee in hand. “Which means you have about fifteen minutes left.”

“Fifteen minutes left for what?” Cody said, perching on the arm of the chair Tia had lowered herself into.

Scarlett glanced at Ryan.

“We can do this later,” he said, giving her the choice.

She studied him, then shook her head. “I imagine there are things we might not be able to talk about that have to do with Maria’s murder. Gracie’s murder isn’t a case, though, so there’s no conflict, is there?”

Ryan inclined his head. “I think there will be one, but for now, it’s not part of any official police investigation.” He paused, then smiled. “Even if it were, though, despite how hard it is to keep secrets within the family, no one gossips outside of it.”

Kara and Sabina nodded, then Scarlett swung her gaze to him. “With my grandfather in politics for most of our younger lives, we all grew up watching what we said,” Brad explained. “My mother’s father was a senator as well.

And Michael, Ethan's dad, is a federal judge. As Ryan said, despite how chatty we are among ourselves, we keep the information tight."

"Okay," Scarlett said, then turning to Ryan, she asked, "You should tell them what we need to discuss. That way, if they don't want to hear the details, they don't have to stay." Then turning back to Brad, she added, "Should we schedule a dinner or something together?"

A nice thought, but if the way she set a hand on her stomach at the word "dinner" was anything to go by, he doubted they'd be hosting any meals soon. Regardless, he nodded.

"We have things to discuss," Ryan said to the group. "Some of which aren't pretty. Kara has given us fifteen minutes before she steals Scarlett away to give her some IV fluids and anti-nausea meds. So if you want to stay, stay. If not, take your leave now."

It was nice that Scarlett had wanted to offer, but it came as no surprise to him when no one moved. Well, Mitch moved. He pulled a chair over, took a seat in it, then dragged Ava onto his lap.

"Right," Sabina said, turning her attention to Scarlett. "Here goes. I'm not going to talk about anything involving Maria Abel's murder, so we'll leave that off the table. As Ava told you, Jason Katz, the man likely behind the murder you and Brad witnessed in December, works for the Wolf. The Wolf is a shadowy but powerful drug lord that the DEA has been after for years and who, based on what you've told us, supplied your friend Gracie. The thing is, it's unusual for someone like Gracie to be supplied from the top dog himself. Not unless they had some sort of other relationship."

"A relationship that would give her access to him. Give her the opportunity to learn things about him," Scarlett said with a thoughtful nod.

Sabina inclined her head. "Yes, and maybe the relationship soured. Or she learned something she shouldn't have. In which case, it could be a motive. At the very least, though, she'd be able to identify him."

"How do you know he supplied her directly?" Tia asked.

Sabina shot Scarlett an apologetic look, but Scarlett lifted a shoulder. "I know who and what my friend was," she said. "It doesn't bother me to talk about the more *complicated* aspects of her life." Then turning to Tia, she added, "Gracie once mentioned to me that the Wolf supplied her. At the time, I didn't know who, or what, he was."

"If he's as shadowy as you say, how'd she get so close?" Mitch asked.

Sabina's lips thinned as she shot Scarlett another apologetic look before

answering. “Gracie was an astonishingly beautiful woman and very sought-after by certain men.”

“She was a prostitute,” Scarlett said. “A very selective one, and only when she needed the money. She was raised to believe that her looks and her body were her best—her *only*—assets. She learned how to use both to her advantage at a very young age.”

Scarlett’s gaze darted around the room, no doubt taking the temperature of everyone there. No one looked shocked, or worse, disgusted, though, and her shoulders lost some of the tension she’d been holding. Brad reached over and took her hand as she returned her attention to Sabina.

“Okay, so we need to find out if she pissed him off somehow or knew something he didn’t want her to know,” Scarlett said. “Was there anything in her phone?”

Sabina flashed her an arch look. “Funny you should ask. Were you aware that the device was tampered with?”

Scarlett frowned. “I scrolled through her pictures and texts and didn’t notice anything off. I didn’t find any emails, but I don’t think she had an account.”

“You saw what was left there. I found significant gaps in the memory indicating deleted files and images. I was planning to ask Ava to have a look at it today.” As Sabina spoke, she glanced at Ava, who nodded.

“You think someone killed her, then wiped her device of any evidence that pointed to their motive?” Cody asked.

“How *did* she die?” Mitch asked.

“Accidental overdose, according to the coroner’s report,” Kara said, holding up a paper file she’d pulled from Sabina’s bag. Sabina shot her a look, but Kara grinned. “Don’t even pretend you didn’t want me to see it. You left the file sticking up and facing me.”

Sabina snorted, then smiled at her sister. After the murder of their mother, the two had spent almost two decades separated. They’d only been back together just over two years. Neither took the other for granted.

“Scarlett, you said she told you in her message that she had a reason to get clean this time?” Kara asked. Scarlett nodded. “I think I know what it was,” she said, handing the file over.

Brad couldn’t see the contents Scarlett scanned, nor would he understand it anyway. After a beat, she raised her head. “Gracie was pregnant.”

“She was,” Kara said, taking the folder back. “About twelve weeks,

judging by her hormone levels.”

“Any chance the Wolf was the father?” Ryan asked.

“I think the first question is whether Gracie would have wanted the baby or not,” Tia said. “I’m sorry to be so blunt, Scarlett, but the father was probably one of her clients or the Wolf. And if *she* didn’t want the baby and he didn’t either, there’d be no reason to kill her.”

Sabina nodded. “But if she wanted it and he didn’t—”

“Assuming she knew,” Ava said.

“At twelve weeks, it would be hard not to,” Kara countered. Ava considered this, then nodded.

“So if she wanted it and he didn’t, then that could be a motive,” Scarlett said. “It also means that while the Wolf may be a viable suspect—for a few reasons—he may not be the only one.”

“*Would* she have wanted the baby?” Ryan asked. An awkward question with two pregnant women in the room and Ryan’s wife expecting any day.

Scarlett took a moment to consider her answer. “I think she would have. When we were kids, she always wanted a family. Life wasn’t kind to her. I don’t know if you figured this out, but she was abused. Both physically and sexually. And at seventeen, she was all but sold to the head of one of the gangs. To be fair, I think she went semi-willingly. Well, not really. The gang threatened her family. She had a thirteen-year-old sister that they said they’d take instead. Gracie agreed to go, but it was hardly a free decision. Before that, though, she’d always dreamed of a family. A healthy one. A safe one.”

The room fell silent, and Cody reached for Tia’s hand as Mitch brushed a kiss on Ava’s shoulder.

Kara let out a small sigh. “I’ll call the coroner’s office tomorrow to see if they kept any samples of the fetus. If they did, which they should have, then we can run a DNA profile,” she offered. “It might not point to a father, but if he’s in the system—any system—it might.”

“Can I back this up a little bit?” Tia asked. Sabina nodded. “Aside from the weirdness with her phone, do you have reason to believe her death *wasn’t* an accidental overdose?”

“The phone is enough for me. That wasn’t a normal download that cleaned those files out,” Sabina said.

“And she died of a fentanyl overdose,” Ryan said.

“Which is, unfortunately, not uncommon,” Ava interjected.

“Agreed,” Ryan replied. “But she had healing track marks on her body,

leading me to believe that injection was her primary method of intake. I know there's an argument that maybe she tried to go clean and couldn't do it, so she experimented with something new. And maybe that's what we'll find. But between the type of drug that killed her and the technology issues, I'm not ready to let it lie."

Sabina shook her head. "Neither am I. In addition to her relationship with the Wolf, she probably also had a pimp who, I'm guessing, wouldn't want her to leave the business to raise a child. And according to Scarlett, she was a high-end call girl, so we can't discount the possibility that the father is someone powerful. Someone invested in ensuring she didn't have the baby."

"Which gives us at least three suspects," Mitch said. "Wolf, the pimp, and the baby daddy. Assuming they aren't one and the same."

"We have one *actual* suspect—the Wolf—and two *categories* of suspects—the pimp and the baby daddy," Ava corrected.

Mitch rolled his eyes. "Then maybe you should get to work and see if you can narrow down those categories to real people?" Ava elbowed him.

"What about what Mitch said? Is it possible that all three are the same person?" Scarlett asked.

Sabina wagged her head. "The Wolf may also be the father, but I doubt he's the pimp. There's no indication in any of the information we have that he's anything other than a drug lord."

Ava exhaled, then rose from her fiancé's lap. "Is the phone at the lab?" she asked Sabina. After Sabina nodded, she shifted her gaze and fixed Scarlett with a look. "We will figure this out," she promised.

Scarlett gave a shaky nod. "Thank you."

"By the time you're feeling better, these two should be here," Tia said, laying a hand on her belly. "So it may be a while before we host a big family gathering. But you are always welcome at our house. Even if you just want a change of scenery. It's very, very secure."

A few minutes and a few hugs later, Brad closed the door on everyone except Kara.

"How are you feeling?" he asked Scarlett.

Scarlett wagged her head as she retook her seat on the couch. "I don't need to rush to the bathroom right now, but I could probably fall asleep right here."

"Do you feel like you can eat?" he asked, hovering at the edge of the living room, ready to bring her something from the kitchen.

After a moment, she smiled and looked over her shoulder at him. “Would you mind making pancakes again?”

CHAPTER TEN

“CAN YOU GIVE US A MINUTE BEFORE YOU START THE MEDS?” BRAD ASKED KARA AS HE CLEARED the dishes from the table. Kara looked to Scarlett, who nodded.

“Why don’t you two head to her room, and I’ll clean up here while you talk,” Kara replied.

Brad murmured a “thank you,” then led Scarlett to her room. “How are you feeling after eating?” he asked.

“Better, but give me one minute.” She disappeared into the bathroom and as the door closed, he cocked his head, listening for any signs of her being sick. All he heard was the flush of the toilet and then her brushing her teeth. She smiled when she walked out, and for the first time since he’d found her a few days ago, the twinkle in her eyes was back. “I have a feeling I’m going to crash after Kara doses me up, and I wanted to brush my teeth before sleeping.”

She climbed into the king-size bed, then patted the spot beside her. He sat down, leaning against the headboard and stretching his legs out. Holding out an arm, a rush of warmth washed through him when she turned and snuggled into his side.

“I’m not referring to your stomach when I ask this, but how are you? My family can be a lot,” he said.

She rested her hand on his chest and absently rubbed the fabric of his sweatshirt. “It’s weird the way they accepted me,” she admitted. “Where I grew up, trust was hoarded—doled out in tiny bits and rarely ever without conditions. Never given wholeheartedly. Then, doing the kind of work I did? Sure, you trust your colleagues to do their jobs, but living and working in disaster zones, where you’re on high alert 90 percent of the time? And your job is to remain the calm, steady one? There wasn’t a lot of emotional space to really connect with other people.

“But here, I basically show up on your doorstep, pregnant and with a killer after me, and your family welcomes me in like I’m already one of them. It’s nice. A little weird, but nice.”

“It’s going to take a while before it settles in, isn’t it?” he asked. She nodded. “They trust Kara and they trust me. That’s why they are the way they are.” He paused, choosing his words. “Family is the safe space,” he continued. “Between both my grandfathers, my mom, Cody, and now Ellie, not to mention the work that Chad, Sabina, Ethan, and Ava do, there aren’t many people in our inner circle. People we really trust. We have lots of friends, of course, but there aren’t many people, other than family, in that inner circle.” He paused, then brushed his fingertips down her arm. “No one expects you to reciprocate in kind, though,” he added. “Don’t get me wrong, they won’t change. They won’t dial it back or start getting more circumspect around you. But they won’t be offended if you don’t act the same way.”

Silence fell over them, and she flattened her hand across his abs as she seemed to mull things over. “Wait, your mom? I know you said her dad was a senator. And of course, I know what Cody and Ellie do—hard not to know that your brother is a country music star or that your cousin-in-law is a mega movie star. But you added your mom in that list as if you needed to protect her privacy as well.”

He ran a hand over his face, then through his hair. “Um, there’s a reason you don’t know about my mom. She invented a few things when she was in college, and they are kind of very valuable things. She’s worth a lot of money. Like, a stupid amount. So are we, her kids, since she put a lot of it into trusts for us. But when my grandfather was president and there were two kidnapping attempts on the grandkids—Chad and Cody—she decided to distance herself from the things she invented. And the money that came with them.”

“Because if people knew how much her kids—the president’s grandkids—were worth, it wouldn’t be good,” Scarlett finished.

Brad nodded. “She set up an elaborate system of companies and trusts and licensing agreements. I was too young to remember, but I remember a lot of hushed meetings with lots of lawyers. She said it was harder at first to keep things quiet and stay out of the limelight, but it’s much easier now. The technology she invented is so embedded and standard now that most people don’t even bother to think about where it came from anymore.”

“But I doubt the fear for her kids, and now soon grandkids, will ever go away,” Scarlett said.

Brad nodded. “Which is why it’s one of the family’s bigger secrets.”

Scarlett patted his stomach, then let out a long sigh. “It seems weird to

say this, but I want to say it. I knew the Warwicks were well off. Not because I had any particular knowledge, other than Cody and Ellie. But the fact that you're all college graduates, some with graduate degrees, and you own businesses and homes. All those things take money, so I knew you had at least a very comfortable living. As to the rest, though, your mother's money? I want to be clear that I don't want it or need it. Once this is all resolved, I do plan to go back to work. I *like* working. And while I won't object to things that help our baby—like help with daycare fees and that sort of thing—my preference is to raise him or her with a healthy respect for money. Not as something that's their birthright. If that makes sense?"

"I agree," Brad said. "For the record, I never for a second thought you'd be after the money. First off, you didn't even know about it. Secondly, if money had been what was most important to you, you would have taken a nursing job at some fancy LA hospital and found a rich doctor or lawyer to marry. Or I suppose you could have worked at a cosmetic surgery clinic and wooed a Hollywood star."

She snorted, making him smile. Then he sobered. "We're very privileged in that we don't have to worry about funding our kids' education or whether we're going to make the next mortgage payment or have food on our table. But even though there's a Warwick family trust, we all live on our salaries. So, yes, I'm on board with raising our son or daughter with a healthy respect for money and an awareness of the responsibilities that come with what he or she will eventually have access to." He paused. "On a related but separate topic, as an engagement gift to Sabina, Chad set up a scholarship endowment for girls entering STEM fields that she runs with Charley and Joey. If you're interested, I'm sure she'd love to have you involved."

She didn't answer for a long moment, and he glanced down, wondering if she'd fallen asleep. She lifted her eyes and smiled. "Once I don't feel like the walking dead, I might like that."

"Ski week is coming up, and I want to get lifts two and three serviced before that," Brad said to Jeanette Falon, his head of maintenance and facilities. He was going through the motions of his day, but his mind was elsewhere. Despite his world having been turned upside down, work still needed to get done.

"We've also offered the staff extra hours if they want to pick up

additional work. For any gaps in coverage, we'll reach out to the community," Jack Nelson, his head of HR, said.

"Do we expect any shortages?" Brad asked.

"Nothing more than the usual," Jack replied.

"And the bar and kitchen?" he asked, turning to his head of food and beverage.

"Lists and inventory are due tomorrow morning. I'll be placing the orders by the end of the day," Sean Calder replied.

"Great, thank you all. Is there anything else we need to cover?" After Christmas and New Year's, ski week—which spread over three weeks—was their busiest time of the winter season. With schools all over California giving the students a week off, many families made their way to the mountains to enjoy the snow.

There was a round of headshakes, and people started to rise. "Thank you for all the great work, everyone. As always, I'm grateful for this team," he said. When his dad had handed over the leadership reins, a handful of people had retired at the same time, and it had taken Brad a few years to rebuild it into the team he wanted. Now, though, not only did his key leadership perform above and beyond, but they loved what they did.

"Oh, Andrea, can you stay for a minute?" he called out to his head of security. She nodded and fell back, shutting the door after the last person passed through.

"Everything okay?" she asked. She'd joined the team four years ago at the recommendation of Ethan, who'd served with her in the navy. She was a dichotomy that he enjoyed, and she'd become one of his favorite people to work with. With her boho, hippie looks—she was often seen in long flowy skirts, chunky jewelry, and tunic tops—people tended to underestimate her. But he'd seen her bodycheck a man twice her size and physically remove him from the bar.

"You heard about Maria?" he asked. She nodded. "I can't get into the details of the investigation, but there's a person of interest who Ryan and his team have put an APB out on," he continued. "He was seen on the lodge's CCTV, and Ryan believes he followed Maria home after work. His name is Alexei Petrov, and I'd like to circulate his photo to the security team along with a picture of another man, Jason Katz, who may or may not be involved. I'll have Ryan email them to you."

She inclined her head. "Want me to increase the patrols?"

He considered the question. Scarlett was safely ensconced in his apartment, but she couldn't stay there forever. He nodded. "Please. They believe the killing was targeted and not random, so I don't anticipate any additional problems. But between preparing for ski week and then the actual ski weeks, it's a good idea."

"On it," she said as she pulled her hair into a ponytail, then tied it in a bun at the nape of her neck, her bracelets jingling with the movement. "And if there's anything else Ryan or the team needs, give me a holler. I knew Maria. She was a good person and will be missed."

A pang of regret hit Brad. He'd been so focused on Scarlett that he hadn't considered Maria's friends here at the lodge. Or what would happen to her body. "She didn't have any family, but if the staff would like to have a memorial for her, then the lodge will be happy to host one whenever you think it's appropriate. We'll also be taking care of her burial or cremation."

Andrea eyed him, then nodded. "The staff would like that. Particularly her colleagues in the housekeeping department. Before I go, is there anything I should know about the Scarlett Nesanel who is now living in your apartment?"

Brad's gaze jerked to her in surprise. Although, he should have known better. He'd hired Andrea for a reason, and she would have noticed something like Scarlett in the ATV with him and Ryan. "This doesn't go anywhere outside these walls," he said. Andrea nodded. "We think Maria was killed accidentally and that Scarlett—who is, coincidentally, pregnant with my child—was the actual target."

Andrea blinked, the only sign of surprise. "Right, so we should definitely increase security."

"I was going to ask HICC if they had someone they could spare. I don't want to take resources from your team."

Andrea chuckled. "We're good and can cover it, but if you feel the need, ask for Teague." Brad cocked his head in question. "He thinks I'm a woo-woo yoga worshipper that's all about peace and love and chakras, and it's hilarious to egg him on."

Brad couldn't help it; he laughed. "I'll see what I can do."

Andrea nodded, then turned to leave as his assistant, Tana, knocked. The older woman stepped aside as Andrea exited, then hovered at the door.

"Everything okay?" he asked.

"There's a young man out front who I think you may want to talk to."

He's one of the lift operators, but he lives in the seasonal housing. Right next to the woman who departed suddenly."

He didn't hesitate. "Send him in." Scarlett had called Dean, her former boss, the evening she'd arrived at Brad's apartment and told him the story they'd agreed on—that she had a family emergency and had to depart immediately. It was the best cover they could come up with to explain her sudden departure.

A few seconds later, a man in his early twenties walked in. He wore the standard—though not uniform—apparel of a snow chaser. Ski pants, snow boots, jacket, beanie, and beard.

"I'm Harlan Jackson," he said, striding over with his hand out. Brad shook it, then gestured for him to sit.

Harlan remained standing. "I won't take long. I've got to be at lift four in twenty minutes. I know the story is Scarlett left for a family emergency, but I saw some cops at her place the other day, so I thought you might want to know I saw someone else there, too."

"When?" Brad said, his mind already jumping ahead three steps. He'd have Andrea review the security footage and get it over to Ryan.

"This morning," he answered. "I liked Scarlett. She was a good neighbor. Quiet, but nice to talk to when we ran into each other. Anyway, on my way back from my early runs this morning, I noticed her door was open. I thought she might be back, so I poked my head in. There was a different woman there, though. She said she was a friend of Scarlett's and was collecting her stuff."

"What made you doubt that?"

Harlan shifted, and his gaze darted down. If Brad wasn't mistaken, he looked a little embarrassed. "She, uh, she didn't look like a friend of Scarlett's. And we, um, ran into her the night before at the Blacksmith."

Brad arched a brow, silently urging him to continue.

Harlan took a deep breath, then exhaled loudly. "Some of the guys go there to meet quick hookups. You know, women in town for a few nights—on girls' weekends or something. Ski instructors and guys who work on the mountain are kind of like, I don't know, candy to them? I didn't talk to this woman, but I think one of the other guys from the apartment block might have gone home with her. She seemed, I don't know, there was something about her that felt...different."

"In what way?" Brad asked, knowing Ryan would ask all the same

questions.

Harlan hesitated. “She seemed practiced. Not some bored woman out for a good time.”

“Like a professional?”

Again, Harlan hesitated. “I hate to judge, but yeah. She looked, and acted, like a professional.”

Brad’s breath caught. They’d wondered if Gracie’s pimp might be a third suspect. It looked like now they might have their answer.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Her name is Kimmie Garza,” Sabina said, handing Scarlett a photo.

Scarlett looked at the picture. Like Gracie, Kimmie Garza was a beautiful woman with long black hair, full red lips, and dark almond-shaped eyes. “I don’t know her, but I didn’t know any of Gracie’s friends,” Scarlett said. “Or her associates,” she added, knowing that Kimmie was the latter, but not sure if she’d also been the former. “She liked to keep her friendship with me separate from everything else.”

“When we’re living a life that we aren’t exactly proud of, it is human nature to keep those we really care about at a distance,” Sabina said, flickering a glance in her husband’s direction. Chad was in the kitchen, holding their son, Will, and chatting with Brad as Brad cooked. Despite Gracie’s death hanging over them, Scarlett felt better than she had in weeks and was looking forward to the roasted chicken, mashed potatoes, and broccoli that Brad was preparing. She’d never been a huge fan of the treelike vegetable, but she’d suddenly had a craving for it. Hopefully, she’d be able to keep everything down.

“Is Brad’s domesticity surprising you?” Sabina asked.

“Hmm?” Scarlett asked, returning her attention to Sabina.

“Is Brad’s domesticity surprising you?” Sabina asked again.

Scarlett shook her head and smiled. “No, I was thinking how weird it will be when Kara and Ethan get here. Chad, Ethan, and Brad look so much alike. And then with you and Kara being twins, well, I’m definitely the odd one out.”

Sabina froze, as if unsure how to respond, making Scarlett laugh. “I work in the medical field, which is woefully lacking in diversity. Being the odd one out isn’t something that bothers me. Honestly, it’s not something I would have even commented on had it not been for how similar everyone else looks.”

Sabina studied her, then made a face. “I know. It’s weird. I mean, the cousins don’t look identical—not like Kara and me—but they are similar

enough that it makes a person look twice. As to the lack of diversity in the medical field, I'm not sure if Brad's mentioned it, but I run a foundation that gives scholarships to women in STEM. When you're feeling up for it, you could join us, and we could work on making a dent in those diversity numbers."

"I don't know anything about how to do that, but I'm game to learn," she said.

"Learn what?" Brad asked, joining them and taking a seat beside her.

"The foundation stuff. She's going to help us," Sabina said, dropping a kiss on her son's head as Chad sat next to her.

Brad's gaze lingered on Scarlett for a long moment. Then he reached for her hand and said, "I think that's a great idea. Now, what's the update?" he asked, nodding to the picture she still held.

"Kimmie Garza. She had a couple of arrests for solicitation and a minor one for possession," Sabina said. "Your instincts were spot-on, Brad. I'm glad you had Andrea send us the CCTV of her as soon as you did."

"She's a professional," he said.

Sabina nodded. "She works for an agency called Sussurri."

"Whispers?" Brad asked. "At least it's close to the Spanish word for that."

Again, Sabina nodded. "It's Italian, though. We're tracking down who owns it and, if the owner doesn't run it, who runs it."

"Do you think Gracie worked for them, too?" Scarlett asked, handing the photo back.

"We know she did," Sabina said, taking the picture. "On paper, they are nothing but an above-the-board escort service. But even then, they still need to show their merchandise—which is what the women are to them—so they had several pictures on their website."

"Um, I don't mean to sound like a Pollyanna, but they have a *website*?" Brad asked, drawing a smile from Scarlett.

Sabina laughed. "Not one you can find with Google. If you know how and where to search, though, then yes, they have a site."

Chad shook his head as he handed Will a toy to divert him from grabbing at the picture in his mom's hand. "I'm sure it was child's play for you to find that, but sometimes it scares me what you can discover about people," he said.

Sabina flashed her husband a self-satisfied grin. "And you love me for

it.”

“No, I love you for you. Your skills are something that I just greatly admire,” he retorted, earning a kiss from his wife.

“And you’re certain Gracie worked for them?” Scarlett asked again.

“We had to go a few versions back on the site, but yes, we found pictures of her. They updated the page the day she died and removed them all,” Sabina answered.

“So we have Petrov and someone from Sussurri in Mystery Lake,” Scarlett said. “We’re certain that Petrov came to kill me. But since Kimmie was going through my things, I’m going to guess that she was sent to get something back. Something Gracie might have taken that the agency now thinks I have.”

“It’s a good thing Ryan and Mari grabbed those boxes a few days ago,” Chad said. “Should we send someone to get the rest of your things? I’m assuming you’re staying here for a while.”

Scarlett glanced at Brad. She’d agreed to stay until they knew she and the baby were safe, but they hadn’t talked about anything after that. And while living together out of necessity was one thing, choosing to live together because they *wanted* to was something else altogether. And it seemed too early in their relationship to be making that kind of decision.

“As long as this is unresolved, she’s staying. After that, we’ll figure it out,” Brad said, taking the burden of answering from her. “Since we don’t know how long that will be, it would be good to have everything boxed up and brought over here.”

“Kara and I can do it tomorrow morning,” Sabina said, setting Will on the ground. He quickly got up on his hands and knees and started motoring around the living room.

“Ethan and I will come with you,” Chad said. When Sabina arched a brow, he added, “Multiple people are looking for Scarlett—two we know of and there may even be more. There’s a high likelihood at least one of them will be watching her place.”

“Well, when you put it that way, we’d be delighted to have you along,” Sabina replied, eyeing Will, who’d made a beeline for the sliding glass doors.

The doorbell rang, and Brad rose to let Kara and Ethan in. She’d only met Ethan once, over a year ago, and she’d never met Jasper, their six-month-old son. But like all the Warwicks, Ethan enveloped her in a big hug within seconds of walking in. Then, just loud enough for her to hear, he said, “We’re

so glad that you're here.”

Six words. A small thing. Maybe it was hormones, or maybe it was the words, but tears pricked her eyes. She tried to blink them back, but when she reached for Jasper, a baby boy with his father's hair and his mother's eyes, and he came willingly into her arms, she gave up the fight.

Brad handed her a tissue as Kara wrapped an arm around her, sniffing back her own tears. “Who would have thought, all those years ago, that we'd find ourselves here,” Scarlett said.

Kara hiccup-laughed. “Never in my wildest dreams,” she said. Kara had joined the aid agency straight after residency to hide from her mother's killer. Scarlett had already been with the group for three years, staying one step ahead of her own demons. Neither thought their lives would ever be anything other than the nomadic existence of an aid worker.

Then things changed. For Kara, anyway. HICC had caught her mother's killer, allowing her to reconnect with her sister and build a different life. As for Scarlett, the fear of being sucked back into the world she'd left behind when she walked out of South Central LA for nursing school kept her on the run. Even investigating Gracie's death was supposed to be a momentary reprieve from her work. Because unlike Kara, she'd never imagined a life different from the one she had. Until she found out she was pregnant. And the family she never knew she wanted became very real.

Pulling her thoughts away from the philosophical wanderings, Scarlett refocused on the here and now. Refocused on Jasper as he tugged on her curls, pulling one down at a time, then chuckling as he let it go and it sprang back into place. Will had spotted his cousin and crawled over to say hi as well. Kara scooped up her nephew, then ushered them all back to their seats.

Leaving behind the topic of Gracie and her murder, the six chatted about everyday things—the upcoming storm, the room plan for Mitch and Ava's wedding, and when she'd meet William Warwick. The thought of meeting a former president seemed a bit surreal until she reminded herself that, first and foremost, he was Brad's grandfather.

To her surprise, she was able to eat most of her meal. She'd been stomaching Brad's pancakes, and the kitchen's chicken soup, but hadn't yet tackled anything more. Tonight, though, while she kept her helpings on the smaller side, she'd eaten everything on her plate.

After finishing off an apple pie among the six of them, they retired to the living room. Brad had just delivered her a cup of ginger tea when Chad's

phone rang. Glancing at the number, he frowned, then rose and walked to the dining room as he took the call. Sabina watched him go, a look of concern in her eyes, and Scarlett hoped nothing was wrong.

Jasper and Will played with blocks on the floor while the adults finished their coffee and tea and chatted. They'd had an early dinner, but the day had been a long one for Scarlett, and it wasn't long before she fought a yawn.

"If you need to go lie down, go," Brad said, leaning close to her as he spoke. "No one will mind."

She was considering the idea when Chad walked back into the room.

"What?" Sabina asked, in tune with her husband's mood.

"That was Ryder. One of our operatives," he said, directing the comment to her. "He's at the Blacksmith and not only is Kimmie Garza there, but so is Jason Katz."

"Together?" Scarlett asked.

Chad shook his head. "Doesn't appear that way."

Silence descended on the room with the exception of Jasper and Will, who were laughing at something only the two of them understood.

"Does that mean Petrov wasn't hired by the Wolf?" Scarlett asked. She'd known Gracie's life was more complex than she'd shared, but it seemed to be getting more complicated by the hour.

"Or is Katz up here to finish the job Petrov didn't?" Brad asked, his hand tightening on hers.

"While the latter is possible," Sabina said, "I doubt it. If the Wolf was willing to send Katz, why not send him in the first place? I think it's far more likely that the father of Gracie's baby is the one who hired Petrov and that person isn't the Wolf."

"Which means Katz is here for some other reason. Like to find incriminating evidence that Gracie might have had on the Wolf. Evidence they now think Scarlett has," Ethan said.

"If you're right, Sabina, then that means we have at least three distinct people involved—the Wolf, whoever sent Kimmie, and the baby's father, who *isn't* the Wolf," Scarlett said. "And all are either looking for something they think she had—and that I now have—or are looking for me because they think I know something." Several people nodded. She leaned back against the couch, then, after a beat, shifted and leaned into Brad. He put his arm around her and pulled her close.

"At the risk of sounding like a cliché, I don't know anything," she said.

“I wish I did, but I don’t.”

“I suspect that we’ll find out what they’re all looking for once we find the deleted files from Gracie’s phone,” Sabina said. “It shouldn’t take us more than a day or two.”

“Then, when we know, we can decide what to do about it. The first objective is to keep you safe, though,” Chad said. “After that is justice for Gracie.”

For the second time that night, Scarlett found herself blinking back tears. “Thank you. I guess I didn’t expect all this when I came up here.”

“You mean the help?” Kara said.

Scarlett nodded as she dabbed her eyes. “You told me time and again how close the family is and how much they look out for each other. I guess I just never expected to be a part of that,” she replied.

Ethan snorted. “You’re carrying Brad’s baby. Of course you’re a part of this. But even if that weren’t the case, you’re still Kara’s best friend. And you’d still be a part of it.”

She gave a watery laugh. “You know you all are a little crazy. And a little weird, too. But good. You don’t need me to tell you this, but I’ve seen enough bad in the world that I want to—what you have as a family is special, and that you recognize it, appreciate it, and foster it, is even more so. We may encounter some bumps down the road as we navigate through everything, but thank you. For your help, for your support, and for welcoming me.”

“On that note, I’m going to kick you all out now,” Brad said, letting go of her hand and rising. “Some people are growing a baby and need their rest.” She rolled her eyes at his pronouncement, but he wasn’t wrong. Chad’s announcement had overshadowed the fatigue she’d felt a few minutes earlier. Now that the shock had worn off, it was back with vengeance.

Thankfully, no one seemed to mind the abrupt dismissal. Especially not since Will and Jasper looked on the precipice of war over a specific block that looked exactly like all the others.

“Ryder is going to follow Katz since we already know Kimmie Garza is staying at the bed-and-breakfast in town,” Chad said as he gathered their things.

“You’ll keep us posted?” Brad asked.

“Of course,” Ethan answered.

A few minutes later, everyone had gone, and it was the two of them. Well, the two of them and the tiny human growing inside her.

“Other than tired, are you feeling okay?” Brad asked, standing in front of her.

She assessed her body, then nodded. “Just the fatigue. I feel like I’ve hit a brick wall.”

A look of concern flashed across his face. “Go on to bed, I’ll take care of everything here.”

She glanced around. They’d cleaned up after dinner so there wasn’t much, but still, coffee cups littered the living room, and the dessert plates needed to be put in the dishwasher.

“It’s not a problem,” Brad said. “I promise. Go get some rest.”

“How are you taking this all in such stride?” she asked, the question emerging before she had a chance to think about it.

He hesitated, then smiled. “Honestly, inside, I’m not. I’m not freaking out about you or the baby. Or even finding Gracie’s killer—I trust Chad and Sabina and their teams to take care of that. But I am worried about your safety. And a little concerned that you’ll wake up one day before they find the killer and decide it’s too confining to be here and that you want to leave.” He hesitated again. “I’m also a little nervous about whether I’ll be a good dad.”

He had nothing to worry about on any of those fronts, not where she was concerned. “I recognize the value of a safe harbor, Brad, and that’s what you’re giving me here,” she said. “I’m too tired to leave anyway, but even if that wasn’t the case, I’m feeling *safe*, not confined. And as to being a good dad, I have zero doubts you will be, but what matters more is what you think. Although, in my experience, having some trepidation can be a good thing. It can make us better. Make us want to try harder.”

He chuckled. “At this rate, then, I’ll be the best father there is.”

She believed it, even if he’d said it in jest.

“You really don’t mind, then?” she said, gesturing to the kitchen.

“Go,” he said. “It won’t take me more than ten minutes.”

She hesitated, then turned to leave. Halfway across the room, she turned back. Her heart thudded, and she questioned whether what she was about to ask was something she should. But a need deep inside urged her on.

“Will you stay with me tonight? In my bed? To sleep?” She wanted more, but not now. Between her sickness and the new footing that they found themselves on, she had no wish to rush things. But she wanted the reassurances that both his presence and his body offered. She wanted to feel

his arms around her and his heat envelop her. The chemistry they'd explored that night in LA was still there, and it had only grown stronger with each hour together. Right now, though, she wanted the quieter comforts he could provide. That she knew he'd want to.

A smile broke over his face, and his eyes twinkled in the unique way they did. "I'd be more than happy to," he said.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE RINGING OF HIS PHONE DRAGGED BRAD FROM ONE OF THE BEST SLEEPS HE'D HAD IN A WHILE. Beside him, Scarlett's warm, pliant body curled into his.

"Answer it," she mumbled against his chest. "Middle-of-the-night calls make me nervous. And you have a sister-in-law who's about to pop with twins."

That woke him up. Reaching for the phone, he felt around until he found it. "Yeah," he said by way of answering.

"We're on our way to the hospital. Tia's gone into labor," his mother said.

"Please tell me dad's not driving," Brad said, easing into a sitting position.

His mother laughed. "Not hardly. He's sitting in the passenger seat telling me the best way to get to the hospital."

"There's only one way to get to the hospital from your house."

"Yes, son, I am aware of that," she replied as his dad all but shouted, "The next left, Annie. Left!"

Brad chuckled. "Is the family gathering?"

"Sometime in the next twenty-four hours, you and your brother are going to be uncles. But Cody isn't much better at keeping his shit together than your dad, so we're not sure how far along in labor she actually is," she said. "I'll find out once we get there and let you know."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Annie. I'm perfectly...don't miss that right!" his dad barked.

"Right," Brad said. "We'll want to be there, so call as soon as you know anything. Love you both and give our love to Tia and Cody. Um, Cody didn't drive, did he?"

This time, his mom chuckled. "No, Manvir did," she answered, referring to Tia's dad. Tia's parents, famous chefs from Brooklyn, New York, were in the process of retiring. They'd been spending more and more time in Mystery Lake with Cody and Tia.

“At least we know they made it. Let us know what you find out, and for Tia’s sake, I hope we’ll see you soon.” He ended the call and let his hand fall to his lap. His baby brother was going to be a dad. The world was a crazy place sometimes.

“Annie?” Scarlett asked. Brad rolled his head and looked at her. “After they were here the other night, I meant to ask, but I guess I forgot. Why does he call her Annie?”

Brad smiled. “A pet name, I guess. Her name is Elizabeth Anne. He always called her Annie. Her parents called her Elizabeth. Aunt Annie was hard for my cousins to say when they were little, so they all call her Aunt Beth.”

Scarlett smiled. “Both names kind of suit her.”

Brad smiled and shifted back down onto the pillow, then held his arm out. Scarlett resumed her spot tucked against his side. “My mother is a woman of many talents and more patience than a saint. It’s not surprising that more than one name suits her.”

“So you’re going to be an uncle?”

He smiled. “I’m going to be an uncle. Intellectually, I’ve known that for six months, but now that it’s happening...”

“How do you think Cody and Tia are holding up? Are they ready?”

“Is anyone ever completely prepared to bring a baby home, let alone two? Tia will take everything in stride, though.”

“And your brother?”

“He’ll panic over every little thing until Tia tells him to get his shit together. Then he’ll snap out of it and be a great—and normal—dad. Although I wouldn’t be surprised if he passes out in the delivery room.”

She laughed, her breath huffing over his chest. “What are you going to be like in the delivery room?” she asked, touching on the specific topic for the first time. They’d talked about parenting, but they hadn’t talked about the birth. He liked that she assumed he’d be there.

“Solid as a rock, I promise,” he said, patting her arm.

“You know, it’s always the mighty who fall.”

“Not going to happen. You’ll be doing all the hard work. The least I can do is be your biggest cheerleader.”

She raised a brow. “Cheerleader? There is one rule I’m laying down right now.”

“Yeah?” He drew back far enough to see her.

“There will be no cheerleading. I do not want to hear you chanting that I can do it or telling me that I’m doing great. And if you so much as think of telling me how amazing I am for doing something women have been doing for thousands of years, I will have you removed. I think I could get Ethan to do it for me.” He laughed, then she added, “Of course, I’m assuming everything progresses the way it should and that there aren’t any complications.”

“Are you worried about that?” he asked. One in the morning wasn’t the best time to have this conversation. Between her fatigue and his job, though, he’d take what they could get.

“I have no specific reason to be. I guess I’ve just seen a lot of things *not* go well. One of those ‘the more you know, the more you know what can go wrong’ kind of things.”

“You mentioned seeing a doctor in LA?”

She nodded, her hair brushing his chest. “After the at-home test, I was feeling so terrible that I went to see a friend of mine. He did an ultrasound, and everything looked the way it should for how far along I was. I even heard the heartbeat. He’s the one who diagnosed me with hyperemesis gravidarum.”

“Do you need to be seen again? We can make that happen,” he said, not having any idea how frequently pregnant women were supposed to see the doctor.

“I am due for a monthly check-up, but it can wait until this other stuff is resolved. I’m sure Kara would bring a monitor here if you wanted to hear the heartbeat.”

A chill raced across his skin at that thought. The hospital would give the family a private waiting room after Tia’s delivery. Maybe he could get Asher or Kara to give her an informal check-up while they were there. Of course, that was assuming she’d go with him. Which he had.

“Will you come with me tonight when it’s time?” he asked.

She lifted her head and searched his expression.

“Don’t say it’s a family thing, because you are very much a part of this family already,” he said, heading off the objection he could all but hear in her head. “I’m not going to try to convince you. I want you to be there. I don’t want you to doubt that for a second. But the decision is yours.”

“Way to put a girl on the spot,” she muttered. “At least I don’t have to decide right this moment.”

He chuckled as his phone dinged with a text. He read the message from his mom, then laughed. “Actually, love, you do need to decide. Tia is getting ready to push.”

At six that morning, Brad and Scarlett reentered the apartment, exhausted but high on adrenaline. Maya and Ruby Warwick had entered the world at forty-two minutes after two in the morning. By four, they’d met their adoring grandparents from both sides of the family as well as their uncles and aunts-to-be. Even if Scarlett wasn’t aware of her future title.

He’d told her they wouldn’t marry because of the baby, and he hadn’t lied about that. He fully intended for them to marry because they *wanted to*. While he might be certain about this eventuality, though, he recognized that she might not be there yet. She also had a lot of other things on her mind that needed more immediate attention—like the threat to her life and growing their baby.

Their baby. Their baby whom he’d seen for the first time an hour earlier. It hadn’t taken much to convince Kara to sneak them to a back room and do an ultrasound. The first time he saw the little bean floating around in the amniotic fluid, he realized his dad wasn’t the only crier in the family. He hadn’t let loose quite like his dad, but he definitely experienced some heavy emotions.

Between meeting his nieces and seeing their baby, it had been an eventful five hours. And without a word, they walked to Scarlett’s room, stripped down to minimal clothing, and climbed back into bed. Opening his arms, she turned and curled her body around his, setting her head on his chest and sliding a leg over his thigh. Warm and happy, it didn’t take either of them long to fall asleep.

A scant three hours later, he was standing in the living room, cup of coffee in hand, staring out the window at the snow-covered lake. Flurries swirled through the air, a precursor of the coming storm. He raised his mug in silent salute to Mother Nature—she was giving them a hell of a season, timing the storms perfectly in sync for skiers to have new powder every weekend.

On the counter, his phone buzzed with a text. After walking over to grab it, he took a seat on the sofa, pulled a blanket over his lap, and opened the app.

Gramps: *When am I going to meet Scarlett?*

Brad winced. He was usually good about checking in with his grandfather every day or two, but this week had thrown him off schedule.

Brad: *I should have brought her over sooner. Maybe this weekend if she's feeling up for it?*

Gramps: *Don't apologize, your mother and father explained everything. It's a lot to take in. Any news on Maria's or Gracie's deaths?*

Brad: *You know you're pretty much the coolest Gramps*

Gramps: (laughing emoji) *By the time you were old enough to think of me as a person and not just someone who spoiled you, I'd seen a few things in life. When you hold the keys to the nuclear codes and have to make life-and-death decisions for our men and women in the armed forces or see drugs eating away at the communities you care about, you learn to put a few things into perspective. The fact that you didn't run over and tell me about Scarlett and what will be my eighth great-grandchild isn't something to get het up about*

Brad: *You sound like Nanna. She used to tell Cody not to get too het up about things. It didn't rub off btw. He came barging in here pissed I told Mom and Dad first*

Gramps: *Your father is still crowing about the coup*

Brad: *Between that and becoming a grandfather today, I think he'll be riding high for a very long time*

Gramps: *I love my son, but your mother is a saint*

Brad chuckled.

Brad: *Have you been to the hospital yet?*

Gramps: *Heading over in an hour. Tia and the babies were resting when I spoke with your mom a little bit ago*

Brad had asked his assistant to clear his morning calendar. Thursdays and Fridays tended to be light meeting days as everyone prepared for the weekend, so it hadn't been a hard task.

Brad: *Why don't you stop by on your way back?*

Gramps: *How about I text you when I leave, and if she's awake and up for a visit, I'll stop by. I hear she's not feeling so great. Your grandmother had that with your uncle Michael. She never said, but I'm pretty sure that's why she put the kibosh on a fourth.*

Brad hadn't known that and although he didn't doubt his grandfather, he had a hard time picturing his indomitable grandmother being laid so low.

Brad: *Sounds like a plan. And if you time it right, I may have pancakes for you. Scarlett seems to be able to stomach them*

Gramps: *Your grandmother's recipe? I'll be there*

Brad smiled and set his phone down, only to have it ding again. Then again. Both his dad and Cody had sent photo albums of the girls. He smiled as he flipped through the pictures. The girls weren't identical, and Ruby had more of her mother's red highlights in her hair, whereas Maya had a mop of thick black curls. They both had big, dark eyes lined with long lashes, but Maya's were almost black, while Ruby's had a hint of some other color Brad couldn't define—maybe green or maybe blue. Oddly, though, they shared a similar birthmark, a tiny half-moon on their left shoulder.

He didn't know how much time had passed, but he must have fallen asleep on the couch because he woke with a start to find Scarlett leaning over him, brushing a lock of hair from his forehead.

He stared into her amber eyes, then smiled. She smiled back. "You look almost angelic when you sleep," she said.

"Because I am an angel," he said, wrapping an arm around her waist and pulling her on top of him. She resisted for half a second, then relaxed as he covered her with the blanket.

"You are no angel, Brad Warwick. I have that night in your hotel to prove it," she mumbled.

He wasn't sure if she'd even meant to say the words, but his body reacted instantly to the memories they evoked. Since December, he'd spent many nights—and many mornings in the shower—reliving that night in LA in his mind. He remembered everything about it. The scent of her skin, the feel of her hair brushing his torso as she kissed her way from his thighs to his lips, the slow slide into her body.

He shifted underneath her. "Sorry," he mumbled, hoping his obvious response wouldn't make her uncomfortable.

She lifted her head. "Are you?"

Her question caught him off guard and gave him pause. Was he sorry for being attracted to her? Hell no. Was he sorry his body reacted to her? Also, a hard no.

"No, actually, I'm not," he admitted. She remained quiet but held his gaze. "There hasn't been a day that's gone by since that night that I haven't thought of you," he said. "Of what we did. I hope we get to a place where we can do it again. Frequently."

“I hear a but in there...?” she said.

Because there had been one; several, actually. He’d been about to add “but you’re not feeling well,” and “but we’re still getting to know each other,” and “but there’s more at stake now than there was,” and even “but you’re focused on finding Gracie’s killer.” She knew all those things, though. He didn’t need to say them. All he needed to say, all he wanted her to know, was that he wanted her. In every way. What she did with that information was her decision.

He shook his head. “No buts. You know where I stand. If you’re considering it, you also know what my answer, my response, will be.”

He could read nothing in her expression as she stared at him. Then a heartbeat later, her lips were on his. He didn’t hesitate to bury his hands in her hair and tilt her head to give him better access. This was no tentative kiss, no test of any kind. It was primal and demanding, and he gave as much as he took from her.

She shifted again so that her legs were on either side of him, her nipples brushing against his chest and her core rubbing his length.

“Ah, fuck me, Scarlett,” he said, reaching down to pull one of her thighs up so he could reach her. He hadn’t meant the word literally, but a second later, Scarlett lifted her shirt over her head and thrust her breasts in his face. He’d heard pregnant women could be sensitive, and he wanted to be gentle. But with the temptation in front of him, he feared he wouldn’t do a great job of it.

Scarlett called out as he sucked one nipple into his mouth and held her other breast in his hand, rolling the tip between his fingers. So lost in the sounds she was making, he barely registered her sliding his sweatpants down his thighs.

But when the tip of his cock touched the raw heat of her body, shock—and need—swept through him.

His head fell against the arm of the sofa, but he managed to keep one hand on her breast, toying with her. “Fuck me, Scarlett.” And this time he *did* mean it literally.

He closed his eyes as she lowered herself an inch. He wanted to remember this moment, wanted to feel *everything*. She leaned forward and kissed him, still hovering over him. He speared his hand into her hair and took her mouth as she rocked against him, his tip sliding in and out of her as she moved. He fought the urge to curl his hips and thrust inside. This was her

show, though, and she was clearly enjoying teasing him, taunting him.

But a man could only take so much, and he was reaching his limit. He needed her, needed this connection to her, too much. And he wasn't too proud to beg. He opened his mouth to plead, but all that came out was a low, long curse as she pressed down, taking in all of him.

His hips bucked, his grip on her breast tightened, and Scarlett moaned. And he'd swear that *nothing* in his life was sexier than the sounds she made when he was buried deep inside her.

She lifted up, then pressed down again. He opened his eyes and watched her as he shifted his free hand to her clit. She hadn't bothered to take her underwear off. She'd just shoved them to the side. And damn if that wasn't the hottest thing he'd seen in a long time—her body taking in his, so needy that she hadn't even bothered to undress.

She made a series of indecipherable sounds, huffing his name as she rode him. Unable to stop himself, he released her breast, curled forward, and took it in his mouth again. Then, with one hand still playing with her, he anchored his other on her hip and started thrusting.

Scarlett's head fell back, and she moaned as she rocked faster and faster against him. Her body twitched around his, and the beginning of his release gathered at the base of his cock. Knowing she was on the precipice, he shifted and gripped her hips with both hands. Pulling her tight against him, so her core rubbed against his body, he rocked back and forth. Her breath came in jerky waves and grew louder and louder as they moved.

Then finally, he felt it, her body squeezing his tip as the tiny ripples of her release started deep inside her. She arched her back and froze as they intensified and spread through her body. By the time her body clenched around his base, he was right there with her. Throwing his head back, his release joined hers with a strength that had her crying out.

Gripping her hips, holding her as close as two people could physically be, they both rode the tidal wave of satisfaction. When their bodies finally subsided into a satiated fatigue, he wrapped his arms around her and lay back down, keeping her body pressed to his.

Scarlett tucked her head against his chest as she caught her breath. He closed his eyes and focused on the feel of her in his arms. How long they stayed there, curled on the couch and tucked under the blanket, he didn't know. But when her fingers started dancing across his skin, time didn't matter. He stayed still, enjoying the sensation, enjoying her exploration of his

body. Minutes passed, and her touch grew bolder, trailing down his thigh, then back up to cup his ass.

His body stirred. “Scarlett?” he prompted. She moved against him in a subtle, sensual way. “I know you can feel what you’re doing to me, so I can only imagine that’s what you want?” He’d already started rocking his hips against her, a slow slide in and out.

She lifted her head and met his gaze with a seductive smile. “I think we may have discovered the best way to ease my morning sickness.”

It took him a second to catch on. Then he smiled back. “Happy to help, ma’am,” he said. Then, holding her tight, he swung his legs off the couch and rose. “I’m at your command.”

With him still deep inside her, she wrapped her legs around his hips. “We both know that’s not true, but I wouldn’t mind if you took me to bed and we did that”—she nodded to the couch—“all over again.”

He kissed her deeply as he made his way to his room, the movement of his gait bouncing her on top of him. When he reached his bed, he lowered them both, never leaving her body. “Now that is a request I’m more than happy to oblige,” he said. Then proceeded to make good on his word.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“GRAMPS, IT ISN’T A PRETTY STORY,” SABINA SAID. WILLIAM WARWICK SAT TO SCARLETT’S RIGHT while Sabina had taken the chair to her left, leaving Ethan across the table from her. She hadn’t quite digested the fact that a former president was less than two feet away. Or the fact that he was grilling his grandson and granddaughter-in-law about what they were doing to solve her problem for her.

Thankfully, she’d recently discovered a very lovely way of easing her tension and nausea. Glancing into the kitchen, where Brad was making more pancakes, her mind went to their time on the couch. Then to their time in his bed this morning. As if sensing her thoughts, he looked up and, catching her eye, grinned and waggled his eyebrows, drawing a laugh from her.

William’s gaze traveled to his grandson, then to her. A soft smile touched his lips before he turned back to Sabina. “Do I really need to lecture you about how you young people don’t have the corner on all the ugly things happening in the world? You do remember I was in the military and was also their commander in chief?”

Sabina made a face. “Yes, but don’t you want to, I don’t know, forget about all that and just hang out with your great-grandkids? You’ve done enough.”

William raised an eyebrow. “Sabina Warwick, did you really say that to me? Will *you* ever feel you’ve done *enough*?”

Sabina looked duly chastened but not happy. “Fine,” she huffed.

William rolled his eyes at her begrudging capitulation, making Scarlett chuckle again. Ethan sat back with a grin and sipped his coffee.

“Do you have any idea who Lupita is?” Sabina asked her.

Scarlett shook her head. “No idea. As I said, Gracie liked to keep me away from her life. Why?”

Sabina tipped her head. “We recovered a lot of texts from her to Gracie. Most of which were very sexually graphic.”

That Gracie would have a relationship with another woman didn’t

surprise Scarlett—she'd always been attracted to, and attractive to, both sexes. What did surprise her, though, was that she'd texted about it. For someone as private as Gracie, that seemed unusual.

“Were the texts both ways?” she asked.

“Gracie responded, although the graphic ones all came from Lupita,” Sabina replied.

“And the number? I assume you've traced that. Or tried?” William asked.

“Lupita is either almost as good as me and my team, or she has people working for her who are. We are tracing it, but the connection bounced all over the world. We'll get there—it will just take a little time.”

“Okay, what else?” Scarlett asked as Brad joined them with a huge platter of pancakes. Ethan had already set the table and brought all the fixings over.

“Kara reached out to the coroner. She was directed to destroy all the samples she took. She didn't. She comes from a neighborhood similar to the one you and Gracie grew up in, and she didn't like the police telling her what to do with the discarded body of a Latina woman. She's going to send the samples to a lab that we use for DNA testing.”

“That's good news, right?” Brad asked, shoving the platter of pancakes in front of her. Realizing that no one would take any until she took hers, she dished two onto her plate. Then she grabbed a third before sliding it to William.

“If the father of Gracie's baby is in the system, then the fetus's DNA will give us his identity. It won't tell us if he killed her, but we'll at least have a name for a suspect,” Ethan said, helping himself to a stack.

“Which is more than we have now,” Sabina added.

“How long will that take?” Scarlett asked.

“A week if they aren't backlogged. They usually give us priority, but sometimes, that's not possible,” Sabina replied.

Scarlett took a bite of her breakfast. She'd never thought of herself as a pancake fan. It wasn't a food she grew up with, nor was it one commonly served in the areas she worked. Brad had converted her, though. Not only were they delicious, the perfect blend of lightly sweet with a touch of savory, but they seemed to help settle her stomach. Maybe between the sex and the pancakes, she'd make it through the next few weeks without feeling like death? She smiled to herself at the thought. It had appeal.

“Anything else?” she asked, returning her attention to the conversation.

Sabina finished her bite, then wagged her head. “There are a couple of big files on Gracie’s phone that we haven’t recovered yet. Ava is working on those today.”

“We also tagged Katz’s and Kimmie Garza’s cars. They’re both staying at the bed-and-breakfast so it was easy to do. Now we’ll be able to monitor their movements. At least until Ryan gets the warrant to arrest Kimmie for the B&E of Scarlett’s studio,” Ethan said.

“Any idea on when that might be?” Brad asked.

“He thought today, the last I talked to him,” Ethan replied.

“Any signs of Petrov?” William asked, having polished off his three pancakes already.

Ethan shook his head. “As a gun for hire, it’s not going to look good if he doesn’t complete the job, so we assume he’s around someplace.”

“We’re looking at rentals and have an eye on the hotel north of town, too. We know he’s not here at the lodge or the bed-and-breakfast,” Sabina added.

William nodded, then turned to her. “I know you’re not feeling well. I remember when my wife Genevieve went through it with Ethan’s dad. I felt helpless and miserable, but it was nothing to how she felt. There is a silver lining to it, though.”

If there was a silver lining, Scarlett didn’t see it, and she arched a brow in question.

William smiled. “This family tends to attract or raise very strong women. I’m sorry you’re feeling so poorly, but I’m guessing it’s making it easier to convince you to stay here in the apartment and out of sight.”

“Gramps,” Brad said with a frown, but Scarlett laughed.

“There’s some truth to that and you know it, Brad,” she admitted. “For the first time in weeks, I feel as if I can rest. And while every now and then it feels overindulgent and as if I should be out *doing* something—”

“You shouldn’t,” Brad insisted.

She smiled at him. “But while it feels indulgent,” she repeated, “when I contemplate doing anything other than sleeping, or walking the thirty feet to the living room, my body is happy to remind me that it’s not a good idea. So, yes, you’re right, William, I haven’t put up a fuss about handing over pretty much everything to either Brad or HICC.”

William patted her hand. “Listen to your body. Especially your heart. It’s

not an indulgence, it's smart. If something happens to you, it's not only you that will be hurt. There are two other people you are responsible for now."

"She's not responsible for me, Gramps," Brad interjected.

"I am," Scarlett said, her voice soft but clear as she met his gaze. "I'm carrying our baby, that's a part of you. But even if I weren't, I still have a part of you that's mine, don't I? Just as you have a part of me—in your heart or your soul or whatever you want to call it—that's yours. If I get hurt, it will hurt you. And if you get hurt, it will hurt me. We're responsible for and to each other now."

"And that's how it should be, darling girl," William said as he rose. His motion drew Sabina's and Ethan's attention away from Brad, who was looking at her with an expression she couldn't quite decipher.

Then he cleared his throat and rose as well. Taking the cue, Sabina and Ethan joined William in donning their coats and hats. Scarlett watched them, a family comfortable with one another, before rising and joining them as well.

"We will see each other again soon," William said, giving her a hug. Sabina came next, accompanying her hug with a promise to let her know what Ava found as soon as she recovered the files. Then Ethan enveloped her, feeling so similar but so very different from Brad. He promised to bring Kara by after she and Sabina packed up Scarlett's former studio—a task she'd almost forgotten they were scheduled to do later that morning. She issued a stern warning to Sabina to be careful, then stood beside Brad as they said their final farewells.

As soon as the door closed behind them, Brad turned to her. "How are you feeling?"

A peculiar tone in his voice had her searching his expression. Not seeing anything that gave her any indication of his mood, she answered. "I'm fine. Your pancakes are..." She gave him a sheepish look. "Well, I hope you don't mind making them a lot, because they might become one of my go-to meals."

"Good. So no nausea?" he asked.

She shook her head, still curious about his mood.

"Then you won't mind if I take you to bed and have my with you seven ways to Sunday?"

Scarlett rolled over, confused as to what had awoken her. And where she

was. Blinking at the soft light bathing the room, she willed the fog to clear from her head. When it did, she remembered exactly where she was. In Brad's room. In his bed. Where she'd been pretty much all day.

After their late breakfast, he'd made good on his promise, pushing her almost to the point of not being able to take another orgasm—a possibility that had never crossed her mind before. Then he'd left her sleeping so deeply, she hadn't even woken when Sabina and Kara had dropped her things off. Mid-afternoon, she'd risen to use the bathroom and eat a bowl of soup, then gone straight back to bed.

As she stared out the sliding doors at the early evening light, she realized she'd never slept so much in her life. Guilt began creeping into her psyche as she considered that. Was she taking advantage of Brad? So many women didn't have a choice but to push through their morning sickness; *was* she being overindulgent?

Then William's words came back to her. It wasn't indulgent, it was smart. A privilege not everyone had, to be sure, but still the smart thing to do. And so, like the fact that she'd moved into Brad's room, and they were having sex and a baby together, she shoved her guilt into the category of things not to overthink. Maybe she'd regret it when the situation with Gracie's murder was resolved. If she did, she'd deal with it then.

The doorbell rang, startling her. *That* was what had woken her. Because Brad wouldn't ring his own bell and she wasn't expecting anyone, she grabbed her phone to send him a text. She had no intention of opening the door if it wasn't someone he'd made plans with.

To her surprise, she found three texts from Sabina. The first from ninety minutes earlier, followed by a second, an hour later. The last—a curt message informing Scarlett she was on her way up to the apartment—had arrived not five minutes before she picked up her device.

Knowing full well she looked like a woman fresh out of bed after a good long tumble, Scarlett considered trying to at least fix her hair. Then, deciding it would take too long—and require too much energy—she made her way out of the bedroom. Sabina would get what she'd get. If she were anything like her sister, she'd snigger and tease her.

After looking through the eyehole to confirm it was Sabina, Scarlett threw the door open. Sabina's eyes widened as she took in her wild hair and rumpled pajamas. There might even have been a love bite or two that caught her attention.

Looking just like Kara, Sabina flashed her a wicked smile. “Looks like you two found a way to combat your morning sickness.”

She considered making an excuse, then decided to treat Sabina as she would Kara. “It’s shockingly effective,” she said, turning away from the door and walking to the living room.

After shutting the door, Sabina trailed behind. “I have to admit, I’m a little jealous. I was a weepy mess and only wanted Chad to hold me while I cried at commercials. I’m not a crier by nature, and it freaked him out. But then the second trimester came along, and I couldn’t get enough of him. He definitely didn’t mind *that* phase of my pregnancy.”

Scarlett laughed. “Brad may have to quit his job if I get any more needy in the coming months.”

Sabina snorted. “One of the benefits of living so close to where he works. Assuming you stay here, he’s five minutes away any time you need him.”

Scarlett smiled and sank onto the sofa. “I kind of like that idea.”

Sabina wagged her eyebrows. “I’m betting he does, too. Do you need anything before I sit? Water? Tea?”

Scarlett shook her head against the pillow. “I just woke up and feel like I could go back to sleep again. It’s hard to believe that up until a few days ago I worked full-time. I don’t know how I did that.”

Sabina tipped her head as she took a seat. “We do what we need to. You needed to work then. Now you don’t.”

Scarlett closed her eyes, then realizing how chilly she was, reached for a blanket. “Sorry,” she mumbled. “I’m like the least exciting person on the planet right now. I’m sure you came by to tell me something? Oh, and thank you for packing my stuff and bringing it by earlier.”

“Not a problem. And as to being exciting, there are literally cells dividing in your body right now and growing a human being. I get what you’re saying, but scientifically speaking, it doesn’t get much more exciting than that.”

Scarlett cocked one eye open. “You’re a little weird.”

Sabina grinned. “I’m an unapologetic geek. What can I say.”

Scarlett had to smile at that. “You know,” she started, “when you and Kara decided to unite and bring your mother’s killer out into the open, I was happy for her—for you. But selfishly, I was worried that I’d lose my best friend. I don’t trust easily, and it’s hard to make friends when you’re out of

the country ten months a year. It was a weird and not altogether comfortable time.” She paused. “It came to nothing, of course. Kara is as loving and as loyal as she’s always been. I guess change is always uneasy.”

A muffled winter silence filled the room. The storm had intensified, and snow danced and fell in the wind, leaving Scarlett feeling as though she were living inside a snow globe when she looked out the sweeping windows.

“I was jealous of you,” Sabina said. “I was jealous that you had all those years and all those experiences with her. You’d been in life-and-death situations, you saved lives together, you went out drinking together. All those things, big and small, that I never got to do with her.”

Scarlett rolled her head to see Sabina more clearly. She was picking at something on her sweater. After a beat, she sighed. “But while I was jealous, I was also so grateful for you.” She lifted her eyes and met Scarlett’s. “So thankful that she had you as a friend, as a confidant. The work you two did, it’s hard. In truth, I don’t know how you did it. Dropping into hot spots at a moment’s notice, not sure what you’ll be facing when you get there or what your own team will look like.” She paused again, then offered a tentative smile. “I was jealous, but so grateful. Thank you.”

Scarlett sniffled, then so did Sabina. “Here,” Sabina said with a laugh, tossing her a Kleenex and taking one for herself. “Now that we’re all sappy, how about we talk about murder?”

Scarlett chuffed a laugh as she dabbed her eyes. “Right, seems like a good transition. Whose murder? Maria’s or Gracie’s?”

“Neither,” Sabina said as she hit a few buttons on her phone. “Do you recognize this man?” she asked, handing the device over.

Scarlett reached for it, then looked at the picture. She didn’t bother to hide her surprise as she sat up. “That’s the man Brad and I saw get shot at Roxy’s in December. Who is he?”

“Trenton Halliwell. Officer Trenton Halliwell,” Sabina said, taking her phone back. “His body was pulled from an aqueduct this morning.”

“Let me guess, he had a single bullet hole in his chest?”

Sabina touched her nose in a “you got it” gesture.

Scarlett let that piece of news settle into her brain. Then, meeting Sabina’s gaze, she said, “There are only so many reasons a cop would willingly walk into a bar with one of the Wolf’s top men. I have to wonder which one it was.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BEFORE SABINA COULD RESPOND TO HER COMMENT, THE LOCK ON THE DOOR DISENGAGED AND Brad walked in. Despite running one of the top lodges west of the Mississippi, he wasn't much of a suit guy, and his long-sleeved Henley, dark jeans, and boots fit him to a T. Brad Warwick was an objectively good-looking man. The kind that would catch a woman's eye.

He'd caught hers that first night—and still held it—but it was more than his looks that had her stomach fluttering every time he walked into a room. The way he looked *at her*—intimate and hot, yet concerned about her well-being—was now her kryptonite. It didn't hurt that his gaze also held a hint of possessiveness overlaid with a fair bit of protectiveness. Not so much protective of her, although he was that, too, but of what lay between them. As if he recognized that what they had was unique and worth safeguarding.

Although, right now, as he walked in and spotted her on the couch, it was the heat in his eyes that had her squirming.

Sabina cleared her throat. “Now, none of that, Mr. Charming. I'm here on business.”

Brad startled. “I didn't even see you there.”

“Obviously,” Sabina replied with a chuckle.

“Give me one second and I'll ask what business,” he said as he toed his boots off, then walked to Scarlett. Leaning over, he kissed her. “How are you feeling?” he asked, a twinkle in his eye.

“Better,” Scarlet replied, fighting the urge to grab his shirt and pull him down into a proper kiss.

He smiled, as if reading her thoughts. He probably had, but she didn't care. “Good,” he said before kissing her again. Then, shifting away, he took a seat at the end of the couch and pulled her feet onto his lap, covering them with the blanket.

“What business?” Brad asked Sabina.

Sabina went through the same routine with him as she had with Scarlett, showing him the picture. When he confirmed the dead man was the man

they'd seen, he passed the phone back.

"We were getting ready to discuss why a cop would willingly walk into the back room of a bar with the Wolf's top lieutenant," Sabina said.

"He didn't look tense or as if he were being coerced, which leads me to believe he was a part of the organization," Brad summarized what she'd been thinking.

"But in what capacity? And do we even care?" Scarlett asked. Both Sabina and Brad looked at her. "He clearly knew Katz and whoever the third guy was, so I agree, we should assume he was dirty. But what I care about is whether his death is tied to Gracie. As cold as this sounds, if there's no connection to Gracie, the shooting of a dirty cop doesn't really register on the radar of things I care about."

"No judgment here," Sabina said, and Brad nodded his agreement. "I agree that the connection to Gracie is what's important. That Halliwell was killed by Katz and that Katz is now here in Mystery Lake was too much of a coincidence for me to ignore, though. So I decided to look into his recent cases."

"You found something?" Scarlett asked, starting to sit up. Brad grabbed her feet, arresting her movement. After a brief stare-down, she capitulated and relaxed back against the cushions.

"Officer Halliwell was one of the cops who attended the scene of Gracie's death. One of the four officers assigned to the case," Sabina said.

Scarlett drew back. "I'm, I don't know what to think about that. Do you think he found something there? Something that implicated the Wolf, and that's why they went after him?"

"I'm not going to discount any theory right now," Sabina said.

"But if there was evidence of the Wolf at the scene and Halliwell took it to protect his overlord, wouldn't they be pleased?" Brad asked.

"If it were something that tied the Wolf to the scene, they'd be grateful he took it," Sabina said. "But having someone like Halliwell have possession of that kind of evidence? It was a no-win situation for him—take it and know too much about someone he shouldn't or leave it and get taken to task for failing."

"A death sentence either way," Scarlett murmured.

Sabina inclined her head. "Or his death could not be about Gracie at all," she added.

"True, but it is a connection," Scarlett said.

Sabina inclined her head. “We’ll keep looking into it along with the other leads. Ava got called into a situation so wasn’t able to dig for the missing files today. But Leo, another member of my team, will pick it up tomorrow,” Sabina said as a knock sounded at the door.

“For as secure as you tell me this place is, there are an awful lot of people who just knock on your door,” Scarlett teased.

Brad leaned over and kissed her again as he rose. “You saw the biometric readers in the elevators and the codes?” She nodded. “Only family is in the system. And Andrea, my head of security. If someone knocks, you can be assured that ninety-nine times out of a hundred, it will be a Warwick.”

And it was. A few seconds later, Brad ushered in the remaining cousins she hadn’t met, introducing her to each as they crossed the threshold. Charley and Joey, the youngest of the ten—and the only girls in that generation—entered first. Josh and Sofia followed, while Asher and a *very* pregnant Ellie Cavanaugh pulled up the rear.

Scarlett had to admit being a little starstruck at the last arrival. Ellie Cavanaugh was one of her favorite actresses, and she’d watched all her movies more than once. The woman gave her a sheepish, almost shy, smile, though, and hugged her the best she could with her protruding belly. “Sorry to bring the masses,” she said. “Asher and I wanted to come meet you before these two arrive.” She set a hand on her belly. “But when we stopped by the Perch to pick up some dinner to bring over, we ran into the others, and they decided to invite themselves along. I hope you don’t mind? And if you do, that’s okay. I remember my first trimester. It was *rough*.”

“No, I don’t mind at all,” Scarlett replied honestly. She wanted to meet Brad’s entire family, and with their impromptu dinner party, the only ones she hadn’t met were his uncle Michael and aunt Sonya, and Gina, Kara’s and Sabina’s aunt. “I may not last long, but I’m glad you’re here,” she added with a smile.

Ellie laughed. “I may not last long either. I feel like a blimp, and my feet are killing me.”

“Which is why you should sit down,” Asher said, walking over and ushering his wife to a chair.

“We heard you’re eating a lot of chicken soup these days,” Charley said. She and her sister were in the kitchen pulling containers out of bags and setting them on the counter. “We brought some of that. But we have lasagna, too.”

Scarlett blanched at the thought of tomato sauce.

“Okay, no lasagna,” Joey said. “There’s mushroom and chicken risotto and a few veggie pierogi. They have an excellent salmon, but Ellie ix-nayed that. And judging by the look on your face, that was a good call.”

The men set the table, and Sofia and the twins plated the food as Scarlett contemplated her options. Ellie shot her a commiserating look. “We’re all different, but I can tell you from my experience, the risotto was always a good option. Not too rich but heavy enough to fill me up without having to eat too much.”

Scarlett rolled the idea around in her head and when she didn’t immediately feel like vomiting, she nodded. “Risotto it is then.”

“Again?” Scarlett asked as she rolled over in bed. At least this time the early-morning call was at six and not one. Brad dropped a kiss on her shoulder, answered, then smiled as he listened to whoever was on the other end of the line. If the call wasn’t about either Ellie or Olivia going into labor, she’d eat her hat. And if she had to guess, between the two, she’d pick Ellie. Twins tended to come early. Then again, Olivia had reached thirty-eight weeks, so was a good option, too.

When Brad hung up, she reached for his hand. “Who is it this time?”

“Ellie,” he said. “She went into labor two hours ago, and the twins are already here. A boy and a girl. Finley and Violet. Michael and Sonya are there, as are Joey, Charley, Ethan and Kara. Joaquin, Ellie’s dad, is on his way up from Mexico. He was already planning on coming today but thought she’d deliver closer to her due date, so he’d be here in time.”

“Will we go over?”

He rubbed her arm, then kissed the top of her head. “I was thinking we should sit this one out. Wait until they are home and then go visit. We needed to be there for Cody and Tia, but I didn’t like you being out as much as you were.” He paused. “That’s my preference. If you feel strongly otherwise, we can talk about it.”

She considered the options. With all the family members already visiting the couple, she didn’t think Ellie or Asher would hold it against them if they didn’t go to the hospital. She didn’t know how long the new family would be there, but she and Brad could make a point to stop by as soon as they got home. Maybe return the favor and bring dinner.

“We can wait. Or I can. If you want to go, please go,” she said.

He shook his head. “I’ll wait, too. They won’t mind. We can take them dinner in a couple of days,” he said, echoing her thoughts. “Cody and Tia will be home by then, too, and we can make the rounds. As you can imagine, both houses are very secure.”

She nodded, her cheek brushing against his chest. They fell into a quiet and companionable silence as he played with one of her curls and she splayed her hand across his abdomen. She’d seen a lot of fit men before. She’d worked with a lot of military and team guys who could double as romance novel cover models. But there was something about Brad’s body that had her nerve endings lighting up. He was built, though not ripped, and something about that felt real. And hers.

Her hand drifted beneath the covers and down his thigh before she ran it back up his inner leg. He shifted, widening them, giving her better access. Wrapping her hand around his length, she stroked.

He closed his eyes and let his head fall back. “I love the feel of your hands on me,” he whispered reverently. His hips twitched and small, almost feral, noises passed through his lips as she continued to stroke him. She loved seeing him like this; she loved that he didn’t rush her, and that he was more than content to enjoy the ride she wanted to take him on.

She rose over him and smiled. Because she most definitely had a ride planned for him.

Three hours later, she woke to Brad kissing her forehead. She’d fallen back asleep and slept through him rising and getting ready for work.

“I’ll come home for lunch,” he said. “There’s pancake batter in the fridge.”

She opened her eyes at that and stared at him. She hadn’t known him even a week, but she very much suspected that she was falling in love with him. She’d never been in love before so wasn’t certain, but she’d never felt this kind of desire before, a craving that was so much more than the physical. The desire to see him again in a few hours, to have lunch with him, and just *be* with him, was all new. In some ways, it made her uncomfortable, like a needy teenager with her first crush. But in others, it felt right. As if it wasn’t possible for her to feel any other way.

“Thank you,” she said, lifting her head for a kiss. He obliged and when he pulled away, he ran his fingers through her hair, cupping her cheek.

She thought he might give her one more kiss, then say goodbye, and

while he did give her another kiss, he didn't say goodbye. "I know everything is in flux right now and this, what's between us, is new. But I'm glad you're here. In my bed—in our bed. But also here, in my life. In my family's life. Thank you."

Before she could say anything in return, he kissed her forehead one more time and walked out. She stared at the empty door, then heard the front one open, then close. Silence enveloped her. Glancing out the window, she watched big cotton ball-size snowflakes drift down.

Slumping against the pillows in a way that let her watch the snow, she replayed his words in her head. He'd thanked *her*. After everything he'd done for her, he'd thanked her. She understood his words but didn't fully comprehend them. One thing that stood out to her, though, was that she needed him to know how much she appreciated him, too. Not just her gratitude for everything he and his family were doing to help her, but that she appreciated *him*. The man who had captured her heart.

After a long shower and an even longer debate about how to show Brad that she cared, she decided to go the old-fashioned route. She called his parents, discovered his favorite meal, then asked for help in making it. She knew the basics, but cooking was a skill she'd never had to master—between her travels and the mess halls she generally ate in, she hadn't spent much time in the kitchen since her parents' deaths. All of which was how she found herself that afternoon in Brad's kitchen with Anthony Warwick learning how to make prime rib and Yorkshire pudding.

Anthony was explaining when to add the Yorkshire pudding batter to the hot pan when a knock came at the door. Not expecting anyone, but now also used to the way the Warwicks dropped in and out, she wiped her hands on her apron—something Anthony had insisted on—and opened the door.

And found a woman she'd never met before and who most definitely was not a Warwick. Scarlett's heart skipped several beats and, as if sensing her unease, the woman stepped back.

"I'm Andrea Frazier, the head of security for the lodge," she said. Scarlett's gaze skimmed over her. With her embroidered pants, long crocheted sweater, and bangle bracelets, she didn't look like any security Scarlett had ever seen. If she'd learned anything in life, though, it was that looks could be deceiving.

"You must be Scarlett," Andrea added.

Not having any reason to doubt her, yet still not ready to take her word,

Scarlett glanced at Anthony. He wiped his hands on his own apron and came far enough around the kitchen island to peek through the open door.

“Andrea! Nice to see you,” he said with a smile.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Scarlett held out her hand and shook Andrea’s. “I’m sorry, you caught me off guard, please come in.” She moved to the side, and the woman walked in, waving a greeting to Anthony.

“Brad’s not here. Can I help you with something?” Scarlett asked, unsure why she was there, but sensing it wasn’t a social call.

“Brad’s on his way,” Andrea replied. “He’s finishing a call but asked me to meet you here.”

Anthony came to join them, standing at her side.

“Okay,” Scarlett said, drawing out the word. “I don’t mean to sound rude, but why?”

Andrea held out an envelope. “Because Jason Katz left this for you at the front desk.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“No. ABSOLUTELY NOT,” BRAD SAID. THE LOOK SCARLETT SHOT HIM TOLD HIM EXACTLY HOW SHE felt about being dictated to.

“I have to agree with my son,” Anthony said. Brad nodded to his dad in acknowledgment of his support.

“I don’t know,” Chad said. Brad narrowed his eyes at his cousin.

“I’m kind of with Scarlett on this one,” Sabina added.

Brad clenched his jaw to keep from shouting that they were all crazy. There was no way in hell Scarlett was going to meet Jason Katz. No matter how polite the letter he’d had delivered to her was worded.

Brad scowled again. Yes, the lieutenant for one of LA’s biggest drug lords had waltzed into the lodge, handed the envelope to a front desk clerk, then, on his way out, and bold-as-you-please, looked at one of the CCTV cameras and doffed his hat.

“Katz didn’t say I had to come alone,” Scarlett said.

He hadn’t. But the fact that Scarlett was even contemplating meeting him in the bar that evening, as requested, was driving Brad a little bit crazy. They’d *seen* him kill another man. His boss may have killed Gracie. How could she possibly be considering it?

“What are you thinking?” Chad asked her. Brad shot his cousin another dirty look.

She sighed and set her hand on top of his. Uncurling it from the fist he’d made, she twined her fingers with his. “I don’t know. Not completely,” she said. “What if we fill the bar with HICC people? And even a few folks from Ryan’s team? I don’t know if anyone can be spared, but Brad could come with me, too.”

His dad made a sound of protest but didn’t say anything.

Sabina turned to Chad. “Ava gets back in an hour, and Ryder, Teague, and Eli are in town. Andrea will want to be there. So will Ethan.”

Chad nodded. “I can call Ryan and see who he’s got. If all is well with Olivia, he’ll want to be there, too.”

Brad was losing this battle. He could feel it.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea,” Anthony said, but even his voice had lost its conviction.

“We all know he’s not going to confess to anything,” Scarlett said. “Aren’t you at least a little curious as to what he might say?” she asked, directing the question to Brad.

“If he’s not going to confess to killing Gracie, what could he have to say that’s of interest to us?” he countered.

She shrugged. “I don’t know. That’s the point. We won’t know unless we talk to him.”

“This is no time to be *winging it*, Scarlett,” he snapped. She arched a brow. He let go of her hand, then ran his fingers through his hair as he rose. Walking to the sliding door, he stared out. The storm had passed, leaving nothing but fresh powder as far as the eye could see.

“I don’t like it,” he said, turning back to the table with his arms crossed.

“I know,” Scarlett said. “I don’t much like it either. But what I really don’t like is the thought of what he might do if we *don’t* meet him. I feel like he’s giving us a chance. He’s offered to meet on our home turf, and I fully believe he knows I won’t come alone. If we don’t take this chance, what will he do then? If he really wants to speak to me, I doubt he’ll be this polite a second time.”

Brad’s stomach twisted. He hadn’t thought of it that way. “Fuck,” he growled, running his hands over his face and spinning away from everyone again. She was right.

“How many people can you have there?” He growled the question to Sabina and Chad.

A beat passed, then Chad answered. “Nine, including Andrea. Ryan just confirmed he, Mari, and Brenden are available, as are two of his deputies.”

“And you’re never alone,” he said, turning and fixing Scarlett with a hard look. “I’m with you all the time.”

She said nothing, but nodded in agreement.

“And your people will get there early?” he asked, looking to Chad and Sabina.

“It’s three o’clock now. We can have everyone in place in an hour,” Chad confirmed.

“We’ll liaise with Andrea, too. I’m sure she’ll want some of her team there,” Sabina said. “I’ll also get Leo and Collin to monitor the cameras,” she

added.

Scarlett held out her hand to him. He eyed it, then walked back to her. Wrapping his fingers around hers, he retook his seat. “Any chance Ryan can arrest him for the murder of Trenton Halliwell sometime before five o’clock?” he asked, only half joking.

“If we had any evidence, I’m sure he’d be more than happy to,” Sabina replied. “Unfortunately, we don’t.”

He huffed, then squeezed Scarlett’s hand. “Can we make it back in time for dinner?” he asked, again only half joking.

She glanced at his dad. “I’ll stay and take care of it,” Anthony said.

“If I have anything to say about it, we will be back long before dinner. We’d planned to put the roast in at four thirty and eat at six thirty,” she said.

He didn’t stop the half-smile tugging at his lips. Not only was he pleased that she felt well enough to eat a full dinner, but he would have to be an idiot to miss the meaning behind the meal. She hadn’t just wanted to feed him—she’d wanted to do something *for* him. Something that let him know that he—and his likes and dislikes—were important to her.

“I’ll hold you to that. It’s my favorite, you know,” he said. She smiled at him, a gorgeous, intoxicating, intimate happiness glowing in her eyes.

“I might have heard that,” she said quietly.

Chad cleared his throat and rose. “Okay, we’re off to go coordinate.”

“Who will take care of Will?” Brad asked. With all the parents occupied with their new grandkids—or, in his dad’s case, with dinner—he didn’t want them left in the lurch for childcare.

Sabina waved him off. “Waverly has him at the daycare until five, then Gina will pick him up and take him home,” she said, referring to her honorary aunt who’d moved to Mystery Lake a few years ago.

“You sure?” Brad asked.

“We’re sure,” Chad said. “Gina got back from her trip to St. John yesterday and called this morning to ask if she could take Will for the night.” He paused, then smiled. “Go figure, she missed the little guy.”

“Or she wants to give you two a chance to make another one,” his dad said.

Scarlett and Chad laughed, but Sabina turned red.

“Really, Dad?” Brad said on an exhale.

His dad shrugged. “I’m not taking it back.”

Still chuckling, Chad grabbed Sabina’s hand. “On that note, we will see

you at five in the bar. Stay in touch,” he said before dragging his wife out the door.

When it closed behind them, no one said anything. Then his dad sighed and rose. “I’m going to find Andrea and have a little chat with her. And give you two some alone time. I’ll be back in an hour,” he said.

“You know we can’t make another right now, right?” Scarlett called after him.

His dad chuckled as he left.

“I can’t believe you said that,” Brad said, fighting his own laugh.

“I get the feeling that your dad is going to be who your dad is. If you can’t beat him, join him,” she countered.

He wagged his head. “There’s some truth to that. But as his son, I can’t.”

She chuckled, then slid her leg over his so she was straddling him. Gliding her fingers into his hair, she started massaging his scalp, easing the headache he hadn’t even realized was brewing until now.

“It will be fine,” she said, pressing her thumbs into his temples.

“I sure as hell hope so,” he replied. Then, needing to hold her, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close, burying his face in her hair. She shifted one arm to behind his neck and the other to around his back, embracing him.

And for a long time, they simply held on.

At ten minutes to five, they walked into the bar, hand in hand. Chad had texted to say that Katz was already there, so they’d decided not to wait.

They spotted him easily, sitting alone, his back in a corner, with two empty seats across the small round table. He nodded to them, but Brad steered Scarlett toward the bar first. He took his time ordering two sparkling waters with lime, if for no other reason than to delay having to be in the man’s presence.

Scarlett flashed him a look, letting him know she knew what he was doing and that she was not pleased. As soon as the bartender delivered their drinks, she grabbed hers and made her way to Katz.

Katz rose as they approached, giving the impression that he was a gentleman. And to many, with his clean-cut hair, square jaw, and tailored suit, he probably looked the part.

“Ms. Mitchell, Mr. Warwick, thank you for joining me,” he said, waiting for Scarlett to sit before he retook his seat.

“With such a polite invitation, how could we refuse?” Scarlett replied, meeting the man’s gaze without any sign of trepidation. She had far more experience with men like Katz than he did, but still, Brad marveled at her bravado.

He inclined his head. “It’s come to my attention that you are looking into the death of Graciella Lopez.”

“She was a friend,” Scarlett said, neither confirming nor denying his statement.

“I’d like to know what you’ve found,” he replied.

Scarlett tipped her head.

“So you can decide whether or not to kill us like you did Halliwell?” Brad asked. Katz’s gaze flickered to his, then darted around the room before settling back on Scarlett.

“Is that why you brought so many of your people?” Katz asked, his tone amused. “Because you thought I planned to kill you?”

“Perhaps not today,” Scarlett said. “But the thought did cross our minds.”

Katz tsked. Actually tsked. “Such talk of killing is unnecessary. I simply want information.”

“Why?”

“Because someone has hired me to find the same answers that you seek,” he replied.

Brad felt more than saw Scarlett’s attention sharpen on the man even as she casually sipped her drink.

“Then the Wolf wasn’t involved in her death?” she asked.

Katz flashed them a frown. “I assure you, my employer had nothing to do with her death. As I said, I’m seeking the same answers you are.”

“Again, why?” Scarlett asked.

Annoyance flashed across Katz’s face, but it was gone almost as quickly as it had appeared. “Because Graciella meant a great deal to my employer, and my employer wants the same thing you do—to bring her killer to justice.” He paused, then smiled. “Although, admittedly, the versions of justice we are each seeking might be different.”

“We don’t know anything,” Scarlett said.

Again, Katz tsked. “Please don’t play dumb, Ms. Mitchell. You know Alexei Petrov is in town and likely killed Maria Abel instead of you. And you know Kimmie Garza is also searching for something.”

Under the table, Brad set his hand on Scarlett’s thigh. A second later, she

placed hers on top of his.

“We do believe Maria was killed by Petrov in a case of mistaken identity, but we don’t know who hired him or why he wants to kill me. When I first learned he was here, I thought he’d been sent by your employer.” Katz said nothing, so Scarlett continued. “And as to Kimmie Garza, yes, she searched my room. And we know she works for Sussurri—as did Gracie—but I don’t know what she was looking for.”

“You have Graciella’s things. Perhaps there’s something in there?” Katz suggested.

Scarlett shot Katz a look that bordered on insolent, and Brad squeezed her leg. Unfortunately, that didn’t stop her.

“Gee, I never thought of that,” she said. Katz narrowed his eyes. “I went through everything and found nothing.”

“Perhaps you could hand it over to me?” Katz suggested.

Scarlett smiled. “It’s with the police now. You could always ask nicely and see if they’d let you have a look.” It wasn’t with the police, but Katz didn’t need to know that. All that he needed to know was that she no longer had possession of it.

Again, Katz’s eyes narrowed. Then, surprisingly, he leaned back and chuckled. “Contrary to what you may think or believe, we *are* on the same side of this. I will continue my inquiries,” he said, reaching into his pocket. Brad swore the tension in the room shot up tenfold. Katz smiled again, and slowly opened his jacket and reached inside. Then, withdrawing his hand, he held up a small white business card.

“For Gracie’s sake, if you find you ever need any assistance, that number will reach me,” he said, rising as he set the card on the table.

Brad glanced down at the small white rectangle. It did indeed have a number on it—with an LA area code—and only a number.

He gave them one last nod, then walked away.

As soon as Katz exited the bar, Scarlett leaned into him. “I think I’m going to be sick,” she said.

“Like really sick, or are you just saying that?” Brad asked, glancing around to determine the closest bathroom.

She took a deep breath but remained quiet. Picking up her hand, he kissed the top, then began rubbing the pressure point near the pad of her thumb.

“Not really sick,” she replied. “I can’t believe we did that,” she added on

an exhale. “I mean, he’s not the first killer I’ve sat across the table from. Or the first drug runner. But, well, I think I’m a little worked up these days,” she said, gesturing shakily to her stomach.

“We’ll wait for Chad and the team to confirm he’s out of the building before we go back to the apartment,” he said. “The good news is, it’s only five fifteen so you can lie down before dinner if you need to.”

Before she could respond, Chad and Sabina joined them, pulling over an extra chair. “Well, that was interesting,” Sabina said.

Scarlett looked up, a beat passed, then she chuckled. “Yeah, you could say that,” she said.

“I assume you heard it all?” Brad asked. His phone, with the microphone on, was in his front pocket. He pulled it out and shut it off so that the rest of their conversation wasn’t overheard.

“We did,” Chad said.

“So did we,” Ryan chimed in, dragging a fifth chair over. “Do you believe him?” he asked, directing the question to Scarlett.

“The only reason I have to believe him is that there’s no reason not to,” she said.

“Come again?” Sabina asked.

“If the Wolf has something to do with Gracie’s death, why not just kill everyone he thinks is involved, like Halliwell? The fact that I’m alive, as is Kimmie and, presumably, Petrov, does lend some credence to his story.”

“You can’t get information from a dead man,” Brad said.

“Well, technically…” Sabina said. “I’m just saying,” she said defensively when Chad laid a flat look on her. “But I hear you, Scarlett,” she continued. “If Katz wants to figure out what happened to Gracie, then he needs the witnesses or the people who were involved alive. At least for a little while. If he were covering something up, though, the scorched-earth approach seems to be more the Wolf’s style. I’m not 100 percent ready to get behind that conclusion though.”

“Because he *did* kill Halliwell,” Chad said, and Sabina nodded.

“Maybe Katz confirmed Halliwell was involved in Gracie’s death, which is why he’s dead. Or maybe he had nothing to do with Gracie’s death and was killed for some other reason. We did discuss that option,” Scarlett pointed out.

Sabina inclined her head in acknowledgment as all their phones chimed. Brad glanced down at his device to see a message from Eli—Katz was in his

car and headed toward town.

“We can go home now,” he said to Scarlett. She looked to Ryan, then Chad, then Sabina.

Sabina reached across the table and took her free hand. “Go,” she said. “There’s nothing more you can do tonight. Eat your dinner, do...other things, and get a good night’s rest. Leo is close to recovering all the files, and I think tomorrow is going to be a big day.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“WHEN DOES THE DNA COME IN?” SCARLETT ASKED KARA.

“Monday or Tuesday, I’ve been told,” she replied. They were curled up on the sofa, Kara with a cup of coffee and a mug of hot chocolate for Scarlett. Ethan, Chad, and Brad had taken the babies out for sled rides. With Jasper only six months old and Will a few months older, Scarlett had thought them a little young. But no one else seemed to think anything of it, so she decided it was just one of those things that people who grew up with snow did.

“Do you think it will tell us anything? Anything useful?” she added.

“You know how it is. It will give us the scientific information. Unless there’s a match, though, it won’t tell us who the father is.”

“And even if there is a match, we may have a name, but it won’t tell us if he’s the killer.” Scarlett sighed, repeating what Sabina had said a few days earlier. “What kind of person commits murder over a baby born out of wedlock these days? It used to be politicians would care about that sort of thing, but now? It’s in the news all the time, isn’t it? Infidelity, prostitutes, drugs...”

“Makes you wonder if the father is involved at all,” Kara agreed.

“It also makes me wonder if there’s someone we missed. If we believe Katz, which I’m inclined to, then the Wolf didn’t send Petrov, someone else did. And if Gracie’s pregnancy had nothing to do with it, and the father didn’t send him, then who?”

“Maybe he and Kimmie were both sent by the owner of Sussurri? When Petrov failed, they sent Kimmie up to search for Gracie’s things?”

Scarlett considered this. The timing did work. But it seemed odd to start with the most drastic of measures—murder—then move on to breaking and entering. “Hmm, possibly,” she said with a wag of her head.

“You said you had some of Gracie’s journals. I know you went through them already, but now that we know for certain that the Wolf is involved, as well as whoever Kimmie and Petrov represent, is there a chance you’d see them through a new lens?”

Again, maybe. At the very least, it would give her something to do. She said as much to Kara, who promptly texted Ryan about getting access.

Three hours later, she, Sabina, and Kara were in the living room going through the six journals when Chad, Ethan, and Brad walked in with Jasper and Will. The babies, still wrapped up in snowsuits, were both sound asleep. To Scarlett's surprise, Brad pulled a foldable crib from the closet, and they set the boys down to sleep in the middle guest room.

"You guys want any coffee or something hot?" Scarlett asked. When they all asked for coffee, she rose. Brad motioned for her to stay seated, but she'd been reading for hours and wanted the break. She also hadn't felt sick all morning. She was still tired, but she didn't feel like a hulled-out shell of skin and bones, and she wanted to take advantage of it.

"Finding anything interesting?" Chad asked.

"So far, the only thing *I've* found is that I think Gracie missed her calling as an author. Her handwriting is atrocious, but when she starts to philosophize or dig into people's psyches, her prose is beautiful," Sabina said.

"Did she opine on anyone who might have killed her?" Ethan asked as Scarlett brought out three cups of coffee. She handed one to him first, then to Chad. When she made it to Brad, he took it, then pulled her onto his lap. She'd never sat on a man's lap before, not even her father's when she'd been a little girl, and she landed stiffly on his thighs.

"Relax," Brad said quietly in her ear. She glanced around the room. No one seemed to be looking at them as if they were weird, so she leaned back.

"I don't know if you noticed, but she mentioned a colonel a couple of times," Kara replied.

Scarlett nodded. "And Lupita as well. I assume that's the same Lupita from the texts."

"Based on what I read about Lupita, I agree. They seemed to have an ongoing relationship," Sabina said. "She mentions a cat a few times. Did she have any animals?"

Scarlett shook her head. "I saw a couple of references as well. I dismissed them, thinking she was talking about a neighborhood cat or something. Now that you ask, I wonder if 'cat' is her word for a specific person. Maybe the pimp, or madam as the case may be, who runs Sussurri?"

"Like the colonel," Brad said.

"Could they be the three people we're looking for?" Chad suggested.

“Lupita, the cat, and the colonel,” Ethan said, mulling it over.

Silence fell, punctuated only by the sound of one of the boys letting out a brief, though loud, whimper. The room seemed to collectively hold its breath, waiting to see if it woke the other boy. When no more sounds came from the room, the parents all relaxed.

“Lunch, anyone?” Brad asked.

“I thought you’d never ask,” Ethan muttered. Kara elbowed him with a laugh. He grabbed her and pulled her to him, lifting her chin for a kiss. “A man’s got to keep up his stamina,” he muttered.

“That’s my sister, so just no. Please,” Sabina said, rising from where she’d been sitting on the floor by the coffee table. Chad chuckled, then hooked his foot around Sabina’s ankle, and she went tumbling into his lap. He muffled her shriek of surprise with a kiss.

“I feel a little left out,” Brad muttered in her ear.

“But joining in now, we’ll feel like we’re followers,” Scarlett said on a laugh.

“And unimaginative,” Brad murmured.

“Which we most definitely are not,” Scarlett said, facing him. She held his gaze as memories of them together filtered through her mind.

His pupils dilated, and his hand on her waist twitched. “No, we most definitely are not,” Brad repeated.

Ethan cleared his throat, and Scarlett jerked around. He grinned. “So, lunch?”

The men had finished clearing the table when the doorbell rang. The boys had woken up thirty minutes earlier, and Scarlett was lying on the floor, building a tower with Jasper as Will cruised around the edges of the coffee table.

Brad glanced through the eyehole of the door, then said, “Mitch and Ava. And Eleanor.”

“The raccoon?” Scarlett asked, a little alarmed. The stories she’d heard made him seem harmless, but having him around the babies seemed unsafe.

“Don’t worry about it. He hangs out with them at daycare. He’s like a dog. Or something,” Kara said as Brad let the couple in.

Will started squealing as soon as he saw the animal, incongruously attached to Mitch’s chest in something that resembled a baby carrier. At the

sound of Will's voice, Eleanor started squealing in return and waving his arms and feet.

"Hold your horses for a hot second," Mitch grumbled, going through some complicated process of unsnapping his pet. As soon as Eleanor was free, he ran across the floor to Will, stood on his back legs, and wrapped his short little arms around Will's shoulders.

"Did they just hug?" Scarlett asked. By now, Jasper had spotted Eleanor, too, and was babbling. Eleanor nuzzled Will one more time, drawing a belly chuckle from the boy, before ambling over to Jasper and sprawling across his lap. Delighted, Jasper patted the creature.

"They have weird greeting rituals," Sabina said, taking a seat behind Scarlett on a chair.

Eleanor looked up as he noticed Scarlett for the first time, then proceeded to stare at her with his dark, round eyes.

"Um, should I look away?" Scarlett asked no one in particular. She didn't know if this was a dominance thing and if it was, whether looking away or holding his gaze was the safest option.

"He's curious," Mitch said, taking a seat opposite her. "He likes most people, and your hair probably reminds him of Ava's. Which he likes. So don't freak out if he tries to crawl on you."

She flashed him a wary smile, then another to Ava, who joined him, perching on the arm of the chair.

"If you don't want him on you, just lift him off. He doesn't like the N-O word. If we *show* him what he can't do, he seems to respond better," Ava said.

Sure enough, Eleanor rolled onto his feet and ambled over. Still lying on the ground, her head resting on her propped-up fist, Scarlett felt disadvantaged as he looked her straight in the eye. Then with one paw, he reached out and caught his claw in one of her curls, drawing it gently back toward him. Okay, she had to admit, he was pretty cute.

A strangled "oh" from Ava was all the warning she got, though, before Eleanor dived through the triangle gap created by her head, shoulder, and arm. Then, throwing himself onto his back, he started rolling around in her hair.

Scarlett startled, then froze.

"Sorry, he likes our curls," Ava said with a wince. Eleanor continued to roll around on his back, catching her hair with his claws and drawing it to

him in a combing sort of motion. She hadn't known what to expect, but now that the surprise and alarm had faded, she noted how gentle he was. And how nice his ministrations felt.

"Not going to lie, this is a little weird," Scarlett said. "The only animals that people had where I grew up were fighting dogs. And the animals in the camps and makeshift hospitals where we worked weren't ones you wanted to get close to. It's kind of nice, though. Like having someone running their fingers through your hair. Although, if he keeps it up, I'm going to have to oil it again." Like a lot of Black women with long, natural hair, she had a plethora of hair care products that helped her style her curls.

"Or wrestle it into submission," Ava agreed with a knowing nod. "How are you feeling?"

Scarlett wagged her head, to the delight of Eleanor, who made a sort of clicking noise and buried himself even further into her hair. "The medicine Kara gave me is helping with the sickness. I've even been able to eat most days."

"But?" she pressed as Mitch wrapped an arm around her and pulled her from the arm of the chair onto his lap.

"Still tired," Scarlett answered. In fact, she'd been up for six hours. The longest time she'd been without a nap since she'd stopped working. "How are Cody and Tia and the babies?" she asked.

They chatted about the new family, then caught up on Asher and Ellie and their new babies. Tia and Cody were already home, but the doctors had wanted to keep Ellie and the twins for another day. It was unclear if that suggestion had been an actual medical decision, or one pushed by Asher. Apparently, not being in control of any of his wife's health care hadn't sat well with the physician, and his usual solid and steady personality was nowhere to be seen. Mitch's obvious glee as he described his cousin falling apart made Scarlett laugh.

She was still chuckling when, growing bored of her hair, Eleanor rolled over and ambled out from under the thick curtain. His fur brushed her cheek as he stepped over her arm, and she lifted her head to give him more space. She thought he might wander over to Jasper, and he did, but not before turning, putting his claws on either side of her face, and bumping his nose against hers.

Mitch chuckled and Ava "aaawwwed."

"That's his way of kissing you," Ava said. "He sees enough kissing that

he recognizes it as a way to show affection, even if he doesn't quite get the mechanics. For which, quite honestly, we're grateful," she added. "The nose boop is just fine, thank you."

"What's going on with you two today?" Brad asked as everyone joined them in the living room.

"We're headed over to see Maya and Ruby this afternoon, but..." Ava hesitated.

"Tell them," Mitch said, rubbing a hand down her thigh.

"You found something?" Scarlett asked, sitting up. Brad sat on the couch, and he held out a hand to help her up. A few seconds later, she situated herself beside him.

"It's Saturday, Ava. You were supposed to have the day off," Sabina said.

"There's no overtime, you know," Chad added with a grin.

Ava waved them off. "I caught up with Leo yesterday, and he gave me a rundown of what he was encountering with Gracie's device. An idea came to me this morning, and I wanted to try it. It wasn't a big deal. Mitch took Eleanor sledding for a couple of hours, and I worked my magic. And now we have recovered most, but not all, of the files."

"I get the sense you're not entirely pleased," Scarlett said, watching the younger woman.

Ava curled her lips in. "Don't get me wrong, I'm glad we've recovered what we've recovered. And that we know how to get to the rest even if it might take another day." She hesitated again.

"But she doesn't like what she found," Mitch said.

Scarlett studied the woman again and discovered she did look a bit ill.

"Ava?" Sabina asked.

Ava took a deep breath. "Okay, it's ugly," she said, pinning Scarlett with a look. "Honestly, not something I ever thought I'd see. Or ever wanted to."

Scarlett nodded for Ava to continue as Brad took her hand.

"One of the files, one of the bigger ones, is a video of Gracie. Based on the beginning of the recording, I think she'd been taking pictures of friends, then thought she'd turned it off, but actually turned it to video mode."

"Okay," Scarlett said.

"She was approached by a cop for soliciting," Ava said. "She wasn't, not then. She was literally doing nothing more than walking across a parking lot."

Scarlett's stomach started to twist. She had a feeling she knew where this was going.

"He..." Ava swallowed, and Mitch rubbed her arm, then gave it a little squeeze. "He assaulted her," she said, baldly. "I won't go into the details, but he used his authority to subdue and restrain her, then he raped her." No one said a word as everyone processed the new information. Mitch kept his arms wrapped tight around Ava, who, as the only one who'd watched the video, visibly struggled to deal with what she'd seen.

After a bit, she cleared her throat and continued. "Everything was caught on video," she said. "I think Gracie dropped her phone when he handcuffed her, and he didn't bother to pick it up."

"His name?" Ethan asked, his voice hard. He and Kara were sitting beside her and Brad on the other end of the couch.

"His name, his face, his...other things, are all there in Technicolor," Ava said. Then quietly, she added, "As are Gracie's cries for help."

Brad wrapped an arm around her, and Scarlett tucked herself against his side as he dropped a kiss on her temple. "I'm so sorry," he said. She was still processing everything Ava said—and trying not to drown in the thought of her friend's pain or the sound of Gracie's voice as she begged for help—and she nodded against his shoulder.

"Is there any chance *he's* the father?" Sabina asked.

Ava shook her head. "The date of the video was a month before she died. But"—Ava glanced at Scarlett—"I think she was blackmailing him."

Sabina straightened. "What makes you say that?"

"She posted the video to a file-sharing site. Then she texted the link to a number with a message telling the recipient to have a look and that she'd be in touch. We're tracing the number, but it's possible it's a burner," Ava said.

"She said she'd found a way to pay for one of the better, longer rehabs," Scarlett said, her voice sounding distant even to her. "I wonder if that was how."

"Is it possible the cop could have hired Petrov?" Brad asked.

"He's recently married to a woman who comes from a wealthy family. He'd have access to funds to hire someone like Petrov," Ava said.

"So Gracie decides to blackmail him to pay for her rehab and he decides that killing her is an easier route," Scarlett said.

"He does have a motive for murder," Ava said. "But there's more."

Scarlett slumped into Brad, who rubbed a reassuring hand down her arm.

“Okay,” Scarlett said. “Lay it on me. On us.”

“I also found pictures of a notebook. A ledger, to be precise,” Ava said.

“A ledger?” Kara asked.

Ava nodded. “For Sussurri.”

“She had the proverbial little black book, didn’t she?” Scarlett asked.

Ava inclined her head. “Pictures of it, anyway. The names of the people are coded, so it’s not a straightforward list. But the services they received—and what they were charged—is clear.”

“Which is what Kimmie Garza must be looking for,” Scarlett said. She knew the warrant for Kimmie’s arrest had been issued, but Ryan’s team had been having a hard time finding her.

Ava inclined her head. “That would be my guess.”

Scarlett considered this, then sighed. “Any chance Gracie was also blackmailing Sussurri?”

“No signs of that yet, but I don’t think we should discount the possibility until we have proof either way,” Ava said.

“So whoever runs Sussurri may have had a motive for murder, too,” Scarlett said.

“If they killed her, though, they didn’t find what they were looking for, or they wouldn’t have sent Kimmie to Mystery Lake to find it,” Brad said.

“Any chance whoever is behind Sussurri sent Petrov?” Mitch asked. When everyone looked at him in question, he continued. “If they killed Gracie but didn’t find what they wanted, doesn’t it seem reasonable that they’d then come after Scarlett as the one who now has possession of all of Gracie’s things?”

“Kara asked the same question a couple of days ago. It seems far-fetched to me that they’d first send someone to kill me *and then* send someone to find the information,” Scarlett said, repeating the logic she’d shared with Kara. “But now that we know what they’re looking for, it still seems backward, but I guess it’s possible.”

“So we have a cop who Gracie was probably blackmailing, the madam she might also have been blackmailing, and the baby daddy. On top of that, we have Petrov—who was sent to kill Scarlett—and who could have been hired by any one of the three of them,” Ethan said.

“And don’t forget a drug dealer who claims he had nothing to do with it and only wants to find her killer, too,” Scarlett said.

After a beat, Chad chuckled. “Well, this is a lot more interesting than I

thought it was going to be.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

BRAD AND SCARLETT WERE CUDDLED ON THE COUCH WATCHING AN OLD AGATHA CHRISTIE MOVIE when someone knocked on the door.

Brad sighed. He understood his family's desire to get to know Scarlett, and he wanted to resolve the issue of Gracie's and Maria's murders as much as any of them. But he was looking forward to having more than a few hours with her without an interruption.

Silently, Scarlett shifted, and he rose. "It's Ryan and Olivia," he said to her before opening the door. Olivia was his only cousin—well, cousin-in-law—that Scarlett hadn't met.

Brad greeted Ryan with a handshake and then Olivia with a hug before introducing her to Scarlett. The two women took a seat and immediately picked up a conversation. Brad turned to Ryan. "Everything okay? Want a beer?"

Ryan shook his head. "Olivia still can't stand the smell of alcohol, so we've both been abstaining. I'd take some coffee, though. We finished dinner fifteen minutes ago, and I ate too much."

Brad grinned. "Is Olivia still craving a half dozen items per meal?" he asked. While Ellie and Tia had each craved very specific things, Olivia's pregnancy had her wanting *everything*. But only a little bit of everything. Which meant that for the past several months, their meals consisted of at least six different foods. All of which Ryan ended up finishing off.

Ryan smiled. "Tonight, it was a kale salad, mashed potatoes, chicken strips, sweet potato fries, salmon, and asparagus."

Brad blinked. "That sounds disgusting." He also knew if Scarlett wanted all those things at one time, he'd make sure she had all those things.

Ryan shrugged good-naturedly, proving that they were more alike than not. "The fries and salad actually went together pretty well," he said, making Brad laugh.

"Let me get you some coffee," Brad said, leading his cousin to the kitchen. "Other than weird eating habits, everything okay?"

Ryan leaned against the counter and crossed his arms. “Since both Tia and Ellie went into labor after being here, Olivia wanted to stop by. She wanted to meet Scarlett anyway, but she also heard about everything going on and thought it better to wait and let Scarlett catch her breath. That changed yesterday morning when Ellie went into labor.”

“So now we’re *that* house?” Brad asked, chuckling.

“I think it’s safe to say that all pregnant Warwicks will now show up here at some point in the last two weeks of their pregnancies,” Ryan responded with a half-smile.

Brad poured a mug of coffee and handed it to Ryan. “You look like something else is on your mind,” he commented.

Ryan took the coffee, stared at the hot liquid, then looked up. “Akers, the sheriff in the next county over, caught a murder tonight,” he said. “I’m waiting for more details, but I think it might be Petrov. The description fits.”

Brad crossed his arms and leaned against the counter. “If it is, what does it mean?”

Ryan shook his head. “My gut? Katz got to him. We won’t be able to prove that, though.”

Brad considered this, then chose his words carefully. “This will come out callous, but I don’t really care if Katz got to Petrov. I *would* like to tie Petrov to Maria’s murder so there’s justice for her. But if he’s dead, he can’t come after Scarlett anymore.”

“It also means that Katz might have been telling the truth. Or some version of it,” Ryan said.

“Have you found Kimmie?” he asked.

He shook his head. “She checked out of the bed-and-breakfast before we could execute the warrant and is gone,” Ryan said.

Brad raised an eyebrow. “Are you sure she’s just gone and not *gone* gone?”

“Not one little bit,” Ryan responded. “Once we confirm the DB is Petrov, we’ll reach out to Sussurri and let them know she might be in danger. They might know where she is.”

Brad shook his head. “For a woman whose death didn’t even register with the LAPD, Gracie had a lot of ties that the Feds probably wouldn’t have minded knowing about. The Wolf and Sussurri primarily.”

“I think the lesson we take from this is never make any assumptions,” Ryan said, then nodded toward the two women. “Shall we join them?”

Brad pushed off the counter and led his cousin into the room. A heavily pregnant Olivia lounged in a chair with her feet propped up, and Scarlett had retaken her seat on the couch. Less than fifteen minutes had passed since Olivia and Ryan had arrived, and already Olivia was enlisting Scarlett's help with the Hedy Experience, a program she ran at the high school to encourage girls in STEM. The project overlapped, in philosophy, with the foundation Sabina ran, and Scarlett was asking all sorts of questions.

Content to listen, he and Ryan sat back and sipped their drinks as the women talked. He knew it wouldn't always be smooth sailing with Scarlett. They were still getting to know each other—while also tracking a killer and getting used to the idea they were going to be parents. But right now, in this moment, his life was pretty damn near perfect. Outside, fresh snow covered the landscape like bright frosting, delighting the weekend skiers. Inside, a fire roared in the fireplace, Scarlett was tucked under a blanket, and he had family visiting.

His gaze lingered on Scarlett. From the moment he'd laid eyes on her, he'd known that she'd mean something to him, that she'd *be* something to him. Then, when he'd touched her, what that *something* was had crystallized into one thing—his future. Those memories of the future that he'd glimpsed their first night together? They'd happen. He had no doubt. The only thing he regretted was not trying to find her sooner. But what was done was done. She was here now—they were here. And regardless of what came at them in the years to come, they'd still be here.

Perhaps there was a little bravado in that. Or naivete. He didn't think so, though. He knew relationships took work. He knew they went through hard—and sometimes terrible—times. But he'd also seen his parents, his grandparents, and his aunt and uncle work through those times. He'd seen the other side.

He'd once asked his dad how he and his mom did it—how they stayed such a strong unit. His dad had shrugged and simply reminded him that he could be gone from this life in the next breath. A morbid thought, but he also heard what his dad hadn't said. If he could be gone in the next breath, how should that reality shape his words and actions *now*? What would he *really* want to say, or how would he really want to act, if he had no second chances?

A piece of advice he'd never forgotten. He wasn't perfect—he lost his temper, he got frustrated and overwhelmed. But the memory of his father's words always followed his outburst or anger, grounding him to what was

important.

And Scarlett was important.

“What do you think?” Ryan asked.

He shifted his gaze away from Scarlett to his cousin.

“Hmm?” he asked.

Ryan smiled. “Scarlett was asking about stopping by to see Tia, Cody, and the babies tomorrow.”

“I’m happy to stay here, but it might be nice to get out for a little while if it’s not unsafe,” Scarlett said.

With Petrov likely dead, she was safer than she had been two days ago. But there were still people out there looking for her—or for the information she had. Although, a walk in the woods around Cody’s place *would* be nice.

“Will you let me know what you hear from Akers?” he asked Ryan.

Scarlett frowned. “Who’s Akers?” Brad grimaced, wondering if Ryan had wanted to keep that information to himself. His cousin waved him off, though, and he relayed the same information to Scarlett and Olivia that he’d provided earlier.

“Wow,” Scarlett said. “That’s an interesting—and not altogether surprising—development. If Katz really is trying to find Gracie’s killer, he may go after the madam, or Kimmie, next.”

“Once we confirm it’s Petrov, we’ll call Kimmie’s employer,” Ryan said.

Scarlett nodded, then turned back to him. “What do you think? If they are up for visitors and Petrov is out of the picture?”

“Then I think it’s a great idea. I bought a few things over the last couple of months for both Tia and the babies. We can take them over,” he said. By “a few,” he meant about a dozen things. The man who ran the gift shop in the lodge had a keen eye and access to all sorts of vendors. As soon as Tia’s pregnancy became obvious, he’d started sending Brad suggestions for gifts, most of which he ended up buying.

“Depending on how things go with that one,” Ryan said, nodding to his wife, “we’ll join you.” He rose as he spoke and, taking his cue, Olivia swung her feet off the table and held her hand out. Ryan smiled as he walked over to help her up.

“As much as I’d like to see Tia and the babies, I would not mind giving birth sooner rather than later. Some women are fine until the day they deliver. I’m not one of them. It’s *so* uncomfortable—heartburn, achy feet, sore back.

Not to mention a rib cage that feels stuffed with a bunch of organs that have been shoved up there to make room for this girl,” she said, setting a hand on her belly. Despite her words, she smiled as she spoke.

“I’d do it for you if I could,” Ryan said, holding her jacket out for her to slip into.

“I know,” she said. “Since you can’t, could you draw me a bath when we get home? And rub my feet?”

Ryan kissed the back of her head. “I’ll even throw in some of that bath oil you like.”

“You are a prince among men, Ryan Warwick,” Olivia said, turning and lifting her lips to him.

Brad smiled and took Scarlett’s hand as he watched his cousin kiss his wife. Ryan’s attentiveness to Olivia surprised no one. Before realizing he needed to get his shit together if he wanted to be with the woman he loved, he’d been taciturn and distant. But when he committed to the path, he committed 100 percent. *Nothing* was more important to him than his wife and their growing family.

A few minutes later, he and Scarlett were alone again in the quiet apartment. It was only eight o’clock, but Scarlett yawned.

He smiled. “How about I draw you a bath and then we can head to bed?” he suggested.

She stepped into his arms, and he wrapped her in a hug, resting his cheek on the top of her head. “A bath sounds nice, but I’d rather curl up in bed and watch the full moon on the snow and the lake.”

He pulled her tight against him, brushing a kiss on her hair. “I think I can arrange that.”

Brad gently ran his fingers through Scarlett’s hair as she lay sprawled across his chest sleeping. She’d been up twice in the night with the inaccurately named morning sickness. After the last bout, three hours ago, she’d crashed hard and had barely moved since. She’d been doing so well that he thought she might be coming out of it, but apparently not.

The trip to Cody and Tia’s was now out of the question, but he wouldn’t complain about another quiet day at home. So long as the day didn’t mirror the night. He hated how sick she got. What was even worse was seeing the aftermath, how much it took out of her. At least she wasn’t on her own

anymore, though. He couldn't imagine how she managed the first ten weeks of her pregnancy. No, scratch that, he could, he just didn't want to. She was tough and practical and the kind of person who pushed through. But he was glad she didn't have to anymore.

The phone rang and he grabbed it, silencing it before he saw Ryan's name on the screen. Hitting the button to ignore the call, he opened his texting app.

Brad: *Scarlett had a bad night. She's still sleeping so I didn't want to answer. Is Olivia in labor?*

Ryan: *Ha, no, she wishes. Sorry to hear that. Akers confirmed it was Petrov. They also found Maria Abel's necklace and earrings in his things*

Brad: *Do you have enough to close that case?*

Ryan: *We're going through everything now, but yes, we expect to close it soon*

Brad: *Good, let me know if I can do anything. The lodge is taking care of her funeral arrangements*

Ryan: *We should be able to release the body in the next few days. There's one more thing, though*

Brad: *Why do you have to sound so ominous??*

Ryan: *Force of habit. But this is weird. They found an envelope on Petrov's body. Addressed to Scarlett*

Brad: *What the fuck? Oh wait, did Katz leave her a message? Does this mean we're officially assuming Katz killed Petrov?*

Ryan: *I don't know about you, but I'm assuming it was Katz. And yes, I think he left the message for her*

Brad: *What does it say?*

Ryan: *I can't send it to you since it's evidence in an ongoing investigation, but I have a picture on my phone. I'll stop by later today. Akers asked me to interview her anyway. He knows she's not a suspect. It's a witness interview, to be clear*

Brad: *Fun. I don't know what time she'll be up or how she'll be feeling. Can I let you know in a little while when to stop by?*

Ryan: *Any time, we're home all day getting the final things ready in the nursery. Do you have any idea how unsatisfying it is to wash and fold baby clothes? You get this normal-looking pile of clothes, but the things are so tiny you just keep folding and folding and folding. I wouldn't be surprised if all those onesies replicate themselves*

Brad: *Don't lie, you love folding*

Ryan: (eye roll emoji) *This has cured me, trust me*

Brad: *I suppose I'll find out*

Ryan: *I suppose you will. Text when you're ready for me*

Brad agreed and signed off. When he set the phone back down, Scarlett shifted against him. "Everything okay? Is Olivia in labor?" she asked, her voice heavy with sleep.

He chuckled. "She's not, not yet anyway."

"So everything is fine, then?"

He was about to answer when her body suddenly stilled. Then her chest rose in one, two, three measured breaths. His heart sank; he knew what came next. Sure enough, three seconds later, Scarlett tossed the blankets off and darted to the attached bathroom.

His own stomach clenched at the sound of her retching, and while he didn't feel as miserable as she did, he still felt terrible. He joined her in the bathroom and held her hair. When she finished, he helped her up and held her steady as she brushed her teeth.

"I'll call Kara," he said, meeting her gaze in the mirror. Her eyes were glassy as she stared back, then she shook her head.

"I just want to sleep. I have one more anti-nausea pill she gave me. Let me try that first."

He helped her back to bed, then fetched a glass of water and the medicine. Ten minutes later, she was back asleep. And he was wide-awake. Deciding to get some work out of the way, he grabbed his laptop, made a cup of coffee, and took a seat on the couch.

Three hours later, Scarlett ambled out of their room, her long hair mussed and poofy with sleep. She'd changed from her pajama shorts and tank top to a pair of leggings, a thick sweatshirt, and a pair of his wool socks.

"How are you?" he asked, gesturing to the seat beside him. Her eyes had lost some of their dullness, and her face didn't look nearly so strained or hallowed.

She flashed him a tentative smile. "I think I'm okay."

"But?"

The smile turned sheepish. "But any chance I could get some pancakes?"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

IT WAS ONE O'CLOCK BY THE TIME RYAN MADE IT TO THE APARTMENT. SCARLETT HAD WANTED HIM to come as soon as Brad told her about the envelope, but he'd insisted that she eat first and see how that went. She wasn't sure how she felt about being dictated to—even as gently done as it was. As he was the provider of the pancakes, though, and his hesitancy came from concern, she let it slide.

Brad offered his cousin and Detective Cheng coffee when they arrived. After everyone settled in the living room, mugs in hand, Ryan handed his phone over. On the screen was an image of a piece of white paper, note card-sized. Written on it in black ink were two lines of numbers. Neither of which she recognized.

"I'm sorry, I don't know what these are," she said, studying them. The sequencing looked familiar, but not the numbers themselves. Then she frowned. "Could they be bank account and routing numbers?" she suggested, handing the phone back.

Cheng's glance flickered to Ryan. "That's exactly what they are," she said. "But I assume they aren't yours? Or Gracie's?"

She frowned in thought. "Not mine. As for Gracie's, I closed her account a couple of months ago. I'm not 100 percent sure, but I don't think they are hers, either. There might be an old statement in her things, though."

"I don't remember seeing one, but I'll double-check when I get back to the station," Mari said.

"So these mean nothing to you?" Ryan pressed.

Scarlett lifted her shoulders and shook her head. "Not without context." Her gaze drifted to the phone in Ryan's hand, and she shook her head again. "Sorry."

Ryan sighed. "It was a long shot. Akers is looking into it, and I might ask Sabina to help. Katz addressed the envelope to you, so obviously wanted you to have the information. It must mean something. Even if we don't know what that is yet."

He started to slide the phone into his pocket, but it rang in his hand. He glanced at the screen, then shot from his seat. “Is everything okay?” he asked as he answered. He listened for about five seconds, then lunged for the coat he’d hung on the coat tree. “I’ll be right there. No, I won’t speed. Much. Do you need Kara to come down? How far apart?” He tried juggling the phone and putting his jacket on. Too flustered to manage, he ended up dropping the coat over his arm.

“Liv’s started having contractions,” he said over his shoulder. “I’ll keep you posted,” he added before darting out the door.

When it closed behind him, Mari laughed. “I think that’s the most flustered I’ve ever seen him,” she said.

Scarlett smiled, and Brad chuckled. “I guess there *is* something about this house.”

By nine that night, Gabriella Maria Warwick had made her entrance into the world, as stoic and as thoughtful as her father—or so the pictures seemed. Olivia’s father, Miguel, and Ryan’s brothers, Chad and Josh, provided the rest of the family with a steady stream of pictures. Gramps, who’d raised the three brothers after his son and daughter-in-law—their parents—had been killed in a car accident, added more than a few of his own to the text thread.

“She’s adorable,” Scarlett said, leaning against him and looking over his shoulder at the photos. “It’s amazing what a difference a pound and a half makes, isn’t it?”

The two sets of twins had been healthy and around six pounds each. Gabriella, as a single, weighed in at seven and a half pounds, and the difference showed. Her cheeks a touch rounder, her arms a little fuller, and her tiny body—wrapped burrito-style in a flannel blanket—a bit heftier.

“If all goes well, we’ll be holding our own in six months,” he said. That reality both hard and so easy to see.

“Do you think it will be a boy or a girl?” Scarlett asked.

He lifted a shoulder. “I haven’t given it much thought. I’m more concerned about keeping you healthy these days.” He paused. “But if I were to hazard a guess? I’d say a boy.”

Scarlett laughed. “But only because it would even out the numbers, right? With Jasper, Will, and Finley now being outnumbered by Maya, Ruby, Violet, and Gabriella.”

Brad smiled. “Not exactly a scientific basis for my guess, but it’s as good a guess as any. Do you want to find out the sex before the birth?”

She shook her head. “A lot of people want to know, but I kind of don’t. In my life, and in my work, not much surprises me. This may sound weird, but I want that moment in the delivery room.”

He twined his fingers with hers. “Then we’ll be surprised.”

“You don’t mind?”

He shook his head. “The most important thing to me is that you both are healthy. Everything else is a bonus.”

“I don’t want to check you into the hospital, but I don’t like how long this is lingering,” Kara said, pulling the IV needle out of her vein and pressing a gauze pad to the puncture wound.

“I’m just twelve weeks,” Scarlett responded as the anti-nausea concoction Kara had given her started working its magic. She’d had a few blissful days of barely any nausea, but that streak hadn’t held. Although, to be fair, despite feeling as though she’d taken two steps back in the past two days, she still had more hours when she felt fine than she had a few weeks ago. So she’d made progress, but not as much as she’d like.

Kara sighed. “I know. I just hate seeing you like this. I’m sure it’s even worse for Brad. Although neither of our experiences hold a candle to yours.”

“I never thought I’d ever have kids. I’d never even thought I wanted them until I found out about this,” Scarlett said, setting a hand on her still-flat—though curvy—stomach. “I’m not enjoying the sickness, but if it’s part of what this whole process is about, then I’ll take it.”

Kara regarded her. Then, after a beat, she set her medical bag down, rounded the bed, and lay down beside her. Scarlett smiled. How many times had they lain next to each other on separate cots in some far-flung place on the planet? She wouldn’t change any of those experiences for the world, but she appreciated the excellent mattress, fluffy comforter, and beautiful view they had now.

“Are you and Brad doing okay?” she asked.

Scarlett weighed her response before answering. “We are,” she said truthfully. “It’s weird, and I try not to analyze it too much. There was something there that very first night we met. I’ve never believed in things like soulmates or anything like that. And I’m not sure I’ve changed my mind. The way my body seemed to pull to him, though... The way it seemed to recognize something about him. I can’t explain it.”

“You don’t need to,” Kara said. “I know the feeling. Sometimes we meet people that we just *know* are supposed to be a part of our lives. Maybe as a friend, or possibly as something more. Maybe there’s even some chemical or biological component to it. Regardless, it is what it is. It was like that when I met Ethan, too. Not quite as sexual at first. But the need to have him in my life was a feeling that anchored itself in my body the first time I met him. There was no other option *but* to have him in my life. It grew from there, obviously, and I do know what you mean.”

“Any chance you can tell me whether it’s all smooth sailing? I mean, if there is such a thing as soulmates, it should be easy, right?” She knew the answer, of course. But as someone who didn’t tend to invest in romantic relationships, she was unsure how she’d handle things when they got tough.

Kara chuckled. “Not even remotely,” she said. “Well, that’s not entirely true. We haven’t had any huge issues. Our values and the things we care about and that are important to us align. But they say it’s rarely those huge issues that drive people apart—rather, it’s the small ones. The death by a thousand paper cuts kind of thing. And there are plenty of small things that irritate me. Just as I *know* there are things I do that irritate Ethan. So far, though, we’ve managed to keep our disagreements reasonable.” She paused. “I hope this doesn’t come out wrong, but in all the years I’ve known you, you’ve never been in a relationship that lasted longer than our current assignment. Even then, there were less than a handful. Now, you and Brad are having a baby together. A lifetime commitment if you’re lucky. If you’re worried about navigating something that’s long-term—whether you stay together or not—we have a great psychologist on staff. She’s not touchy-feely, which I think you’d appreciate, and she’s very good.”

Scarlett made a noncommittal noise, but Kara pressed on. “Where you grew up and the work you chose to do didn’t lend itself to building relationships and trusting people. Now you sort of don’t have a choice. Not if you want a healthy relationship with both your baby and its father. Then, on top of all that, you are now part of the Warwick clan. They are all wonderful, and I wouldn’t change any of them for the world, but sometimes they can be a lot. Thankfully, Ethan can sense when I start to feel overwhelmed, and he helps me cope. Usually by taking me for a walk or making some excuse for why I need to leave a gathering. I suspect, if you let him, Brad will help you, too. But in the meantime, or in addition to, Dr. Garcia is always an option.”

Scarlett thought about all the little things Brad noticed and she agreed

with Kara. She didn't know how everything would take shape with her and the Warwicks. She genuinely liked everyone she'd met so far. But it had been a week, and only time would tell.

"Have you heard anything from the lab yet on the DNA?" she asked, changing the subject. She and Brad wouldn't be able to get on with their life as a couple until they figured out what happened to Gracie and whether Scarlett now faced the same threat.

"No, I'll call and check today," Kara answered. The doorbell rang right as she finished speaking. "Are you expecting anyone?"

Scarlett shook her head and started to rise. Kara motioned for her to stay, and she rose to answer. Two minutes later, she returned with Sabina in tow.

"How's Gabriella?" Scarlett asked, shifting to sit with her back against the headboard.

Sabina grinned and unceremoniously plopped across the bottom of the bed as Kara retook the spot beside her. "Adorable."

"You and Chad are trying for number two, aren't you?" Kara said.

Sabina tipped her head. "Not yet. All those twins sort of scared me off."

"We were angels," Kara said in mock outrage. "What could you, a twin, possibly have against twins?"

Sabina arched a brow. "Do you want twins the second time around? Are you ready for three?" Kara blanched. "Exactly," Sabina continued. "But it's not in our control, so what can we do?" She shrugged. "We either stop at one, which we've considered, or we try for another and roll the dice. We'll figure it out. We always do. And if there was ever a family happy to welcome more kids, it's the Warwicks."

"So, are you going to go for it?" Kara pressed.

"Like I said, not yet. Chad's not getting any younger, though. And don't pretend you and Ethan aren't thinking about it."

"Oh my god, so many babies," Scarlett said, her head spinning. "Who's *not* having one or two?"

Sabina and Kara snorted, identical sounds coming from both women. "Josh and Sofia aren't," Sabina said. "Mitch and Ava aren't either, although my guess is they'll start trying their wedding night."

"Charley and Joey aren't. Neither is Matt, Josh's son who's finishing college this year," Kara said.

"But other than that, pretty much all of us," Sabina said. "In a few years, the holidays are going to be *insane*." She rolled her eyes, but her tone

sounded more excited than anything.

“Complete mayhem,” Kara agreed.

Scarlett couldn't help but laugh. She couldn't fathom what it would be like. If luck was on her side, she'd find out, though.

“So, is there a reason you stopped by?” Kara asked, nudging her sister with her toe just as her phone dinged with a text.

Sabina waggled her eyebrows. “There is. Mari sent me those numbers in the card Katz left you,” she said, looking at Scarlett. “They are both bank account numbers.”

“And?” Scarlett prompted, eager to know the owners and how they tied to Gracie.

“One belongs to—”

“Ronald Simms,” Kara said, looking up from her phone.

Sabina blinked. “How did you know?”

Kara frowned. “Know what? I was telling Scarlett the name of the man who fathered Gracie's baby. The DNA results came in,” she said, holding her phone up. “Simms had another paternity case from twenty years ago, so the lab found his match.”

“Simms fathered the baby?” Sabina asked. Kara hesitated, then nodded. “Simms's bank account was one of the ones on the card,” Sabina said. “Petrov's was the other. I dug into both and I'm sure you won't be surprised to learn that Simms wired twenty thousand dollars to Petrov a week before Maria was killed. Simms is also a retired colonel and likely the ‘colonel’ Gracie referred to in her journals.”

“So he fathered the baby, but why have *me* killed?” Scarlett asked.

“Um, well, as to that,” Sabina said. “Gracie was blackmailing him, too. We recovered all the remaining files this morning, including her communications with both Simms and Derek Rathwell, the officer who assaulted her. Between what she was demanding from each, she'd have more than enough to pay for rehab and start a new life. She'd been talking to a realtor in a small town on the Oregon coast. I think she planned to move there after getting clean.”

Scarlett let that sink in. “Now Simms, Rathwell, and someone from Sussurri are after me because they think I have whatever files Gracie was using to blackmail them with?” she asked.

Sabina hesitated. “Actually, we don't have any evidence that she was blackmailing anyone from Sussurri. Although I think it's safe to assume they

knew she had the information we found.”

“And?” Kara prompted, obviously sensing her sister had more to say.

Sabina exhaled. “Simms sent Petrov and Sussurri sent Kimmie Garza. Of the three people we know Gracie pissed off, I find it very interesting that the only one who *hasn't* made a move against you is Rathwell.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“YOU THINK RATHWELL KILLED HER, DON’T YOU?” BRAD HEARD SCARLETT SAY AS HE LET himself into the apartment.

“I’m not certain, but I find it strange that so far, he’s the only one who hasn’t shown his face. Or sent someone on his behalf,” Sabina answered.

“What’s this?” he asked, entering his room to find not just Sabina, but Kara, too. “How are you feeling?” he asked Scarlett before anyone could answer his first question.

Scarlett smiled. “Better now that Kara has dosed me.”

“Good enough for breakfast?” he asked, hovering in the door.

“Pancakes?” she asked with an impish glint in her eye.

“Of course,” he replied.

“That sounds perfect, but in a little bit.” She held her hand out to him. He walked into the room, took it, then perched beside her. “Gracie was blackmailing the father of her baby, and he sent Petrov to kill me presumably because he thinks I still have the proof. Sabina traced the money yesterday, and Kara got DNA confirmation a few seconds ago.”

“The numbers on the note Katz left for Scarlett were bank accounts?” he confirmed, rubbing Scarlett’s palm.

Sabina nodded. “Colonel Ronald Simms,” she said. “Retired army turned venture capitalist from LA. But not a very good one. It’s a good thing he, like Rathwell, married into money. A status I’m sure he’d like to protect, given his spending habits.”

“How’d you tie him to Petrov?” Brad asked.

“He transferred twenty grand to an account managed by Petrov,” Sabina replied. “We’re assuming he wanted to tie up loose ends.”

“With Petrov’s failure, is it possible he’ll send someone else?” Kara asked.

Sabina hesitated. “I don’t think he’ll have the chance. I know we’re not 100 percent certain that the Wolf really does just want to avenge Gracie’s death. If we decide to believe that, though, I doubt Katz will let Simms go

unpunished.”

“I agree that Katz won’t let Simms go unpunished if he was involved in Gracie’s death,” Scarlett said. “But if he only sent Petrov after me, and wasn’t involved in Gracie’s death, then Katz would have no reason to harm him.”

“Even if Rathwell or someone from Sussurri killed Gracie, my guess is that neither Katz nor the Wolf will let Simms’s attack on you go,” Sabina said.

“Why?” Kara asked.

Sabina shrugged. “I don’t know why Gracie meant so much to the Wolf, but my gut is saying that he respects that Scarlett is looking for the same answers. That it’s the two of them, and only the two of them, who cared enough about her to ask the questions.”

“Yes, but I don’t want to kill whoever did it,” Scarlett said, making a face.

“Your desired results may differ, but you both want the same thing. You want to know what happened to your friend,” Brad said.

“If Katz is now on Simms’s trail, has someone warned him?” Scarlett asked. “I’m not particularly inclined to offer much mercy, but I also don’t want to send a man to his death. Or can we turn the bank information over to the police to do something with? He may prefer going to jail for hiring a hit man than waiting around for the Wolf to intervene.”

“Is the bank account information even enough to have him brought in?” Brad asked.

Sabina shook her head. “With Gracie’s case already closed and the hit man dead, Simms can pretty much say whatever he wants about the money transfer and there’s no one to dispute him. Ava and Leo are working on a few leads, though, and we’re confident we can gather enough evidence in the next several days to build a case that the LAPD can’t ignore.” She paused, then added, “In terms of warning Simms, I think we’re already too late. It’s been a few days since Petrov’s death. Katz is good at what he does, and my guess is he’s already found Simms. I’m not saying he’s dead, but I’d wager that he and Katz have already met.”

“Then why bother giving us the information in the first place?” Scarlett asked.

“If Katz learns that Simms wasn’t involved in Gracie’s death, then he gave us what we need to build the legal case against him—a much longer

process than his vigilante justice, but no less effective in protecting you,” Sabina said.

“Does that mean we should assume Halliwell was involved in Gracie’s death since Katz *did* kill him?” Brad asked.

“I think that’s a safe bet,” Sabina replied. “Although how, I’m not sure yet.”

“Back to Simms,” Kara said. “Either the Wolf takes care of him, or we do. Either way, you’re protected, Scarlett. Assuming, of course, the DA’s office takes the case.”

Sabina pursed her lips.

“What?” Scarlett asked. Then, when Sabina looked at her in surprise, she added, “Kara gets that same look when she has an idea that she’s not sure is a good one.”

Sabina flashed her sister a look, then grinned. “That’s true, she does,” she said, then hesitated. “We have a businessman, a hit man, a corrupt cop, a madam, and a drug kingpin involved in the life, and possibly death, of a woman who, in the minds of all except the Wolf, is of no consequence. I’d like to think the police will be interested, but I’m not willing to bet on it.”

“It sounds like you know someone who might be,” Kara said.

“There’s a reporter that Chad and I have worked with before, Jessica Kilkenny. She used to be a techie, like me, until her friend was killed and her death covered up by several local politicians. Since then, Jess has focused on uncovering corruption and has broken several stories. She’s very good at what she does.”

“Wasn’t she the one who broke that story about the people trying to frame the vice president?” Brad said.

Sabina nodded. “Among many others, yes.”

“Would she be interested in a story like this?” Scarlett asked.

“Interested? Yes,” Sabina said. “I haven’t talked to her in a few months, though, so not sure if she’s working on something else right now.”

“Assuming she’s available, would we be able to give her enough to get the story out before the Wolf annihilates everyone involved?” Brad asked.

“Since we don’t know the Wolf’s end game, I don’t know the answer to that,” Sabina replied.

“You don’t think we know the Wolf’s end game?” Kara asked, her voice incredulous. “Because I’m pretty sure he’s willing to kill anyone who might have been involved in Gracie’s death. And even those not involved, but who

may or may not know something about it.”

“I agree,” Sabina replied. “But we can’t discount the other option.”

“What other option?” Brad asked.

“That we’re being played,” Sabina answered.

“Come again?” Kara said.

“Think about it—sex rings, wealthy businessmen, corrupt cops. If there’s a tie between them all, which we think there is, and we bring it to light, it would bring Gracie’s killer to justice, but it would also throw the criminal justice system into turmoil,” Sabina said.

“Which is always a good thing for a drug lord,” Brad finished. Sabina nodded.

A distant look filled Scarlett’s expression, then she smiled. “I like that idea. Not the part where the drug lord benefits, but I like the idea that someone as *inconsequential* as Gracie could cause that kind of chaos. I think she’d like it, too. Can you call your friend today?”

“Of course,” Sabina said, rising from the bed. “I’ll call on my way into the office. We’re still deciphering the notebook from Sussurri and confirming whether Gracie was, in fact, blackmailing Rathwell, but we have enough info to interest Jess. I’ll let you know what she says.”

After she departed, Brad looked to Scarlett. “You ready for breakfast?”

She took a moment, likely considering her stomach, then nodded.

“Make enough for me, too,” Kara said, rising. “I’m starving.”

“She’s in,” Sabina said to Brad over the phone.

“Jessica?” he clarified.

“Yes. She’ll be here tomorrow. Is there room at the lodge for her?”

“Let me check,” he said, bringing up the reservation system. “It’s ski week, so we’re pretty booked, but there’s a studio cabin available.” The two- and three-bedroom cabins were always taken this time of year, but occasionally, like now, the smaller studios remained vacant. “Or we have a room in the main building with a king bed,” he added.

“Put her in the studio. She’ll prefer the privacy,” Sabina replied.

He typed a few details into the system. “Done. Anything else?” he asked.

“How are things with you and Scarlett?” she asked abruptly. So abruptly, his Spidey senses went on alert.

“Fine. Why?” he asked slowly.

“A lot has landed on your doorstep this past week, and I wanted to check

in with you,” she said.

“Liar.”

He waited. After a few seconds, she huffed. “Fine,” she said on a sigh. “Your dad started a betting pool as to whether you two would get married before Mitch and Ava.”

“And you wanted inside information.”

She huffed again. “Mitch and Ava caught me off guard. I’m never going to live that down.”

“They caught a lot of people off guard. At first, anyway,” he said. Before getting together, his younger brother and Ava had a sort of reluctant friendship. And yet now he couldn’t imagine either of them with anyone else. They still bickered and teased as they’d always done, but now there was an underlying intimacy to their interactions that he enjoyed seeing.

“Things are fine. Good. That’s all you’ll get from me, though,” he answered.

“But she’s the one, right?”

“If you’re asking me if I intend to have a future with her, then yes,” he answered. He didn’t really believe in soulmates, so didn’t feel comfortable calling her “the one,” but she was who he saw his future with.

“If you could make that happen around Memorial Day, that would be great.”

Brad chuckled but didn’t say anything. He didn’t even know how Scarlett felt about marriage other than she didn’t want to do it because of the baby—a logic he agreed with. He hoped they’d marry—the Warwicks were traditional like that—but he wasn’t set on it. Josh and Sofia were as committed as the rest of his cousins, and they hadn’t gone through any of the legalities.

“Nothing? You’re going to give me nothing?” Sabina said, exasperated.

“How about this, when Scarlett and I get around to making those kinds of decisions, you’ll be the second to know.”

“Not the first?” she asked, hopefully.

“You know Kara will be the first,” he replied. “I’m still putting you ahead of my dad. And since he’ll never let me forget it, I’m giving you an awful lot.”

She hemmed and hawed, then sighed. “You’re right. I may not win, but if I know before Anthony, it might make up for the fact that he met Scarlett and learned about the baby before me.”

“It might,” Brad said. Then, deciding to stir her up a little bit, because what else was family good for, he added, “I have some other news you might find interesting.”

“Oh?”

“Your sister joined us for breakfast this morning. She ate one pancake then all but turned green. Claimed it was food poisoning from some fish she and Ethan had last night, but...” Kara had been perfectly fine, but it would be fun to watch whatever Sabina chose to do with the information. He might regret it—Sabina had a vindictive streak—but he’d manage.

“No!” Sabina exclaimed. “That little sneak. She was just giving me the third degree about having a second. How could I not have seen the signs?”

“Because you’re embroiled in uncovering a twisted web of murder?” he suggested.

“Still... Well, if you could keep that to yourself. I’d like to spring it on her when the time is right.”

Brad chuckled. “My lips are sealed. Now, should we stock the studio with anything before Jessica arrives?”

They chatted for a few more minutes about meals and essentials that he’d have the kitchen deliver to the cabin. After ending the call, he set his device on the desk, spun his chair, and looked out at the ski lift as he contemplated Sabina’s question. Would Scarlett want to get married? It was too early for that kind of decision, he acknowledged. Still, even after so short a time, he couldn’t imagine *not* having her in his life. And not because of the baby. Scarlett was smart, loyal, driven, while also being kind and thoughtful. What wasn’t to love? Top that off with chemistry as combustible as gasoline and fire, well, it seemed a no-brainer.

A knock at the door pulled him from his thoughts, and he called for whoever it was to enter. Andrea walked in, uncharacteristically dressed in jeans and a loose-fitting sweater that hung off one shoulder. Then again, his head of security liked what she liked and never let herself be boxed into a *type*.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

“Kimmie Garza’s back,” she said.

He drew back at the unexpected news. “I guess we should be glad she isn’t dead?”

Andrea bobbed her head, leaving her opinion on the matter up for interpretation. “I’m more worried about Katz tracking her here. I heard about

Petrov, and I'd prefer it if we keep all murderers off the property. Even if they are offing the bad guys."

Her observation wasn't one he'd considered, but he did now. "She's not booked into the lodge, is she?"

Andrea shook her head. "But she seems to be making friends with someone who is. A single dad who's up here with his two teenagers for ski week. Apparently, he's not a skier, although they both are."

"Leaving him plenty of time during the day to..."

"Yeah, to hire a prostitute who is probably using him to gain access to the lodge," Andrea said. "Aside from not wanting to attract Katz, I don't much like the idea of having a working girl here. Nothing against the women who go into it willingly, but aside from being illegal, the industry is too filled with trafficking and *unwilling* women to be something I can overlook."

"You and me both," he said, tapping his fingers on the desk, contemplating his next move. "We need to let Ryan and HICC know," he said.

"Done. I called Ryan and texted Teague already." Brad raised his brows. She grinned. "I occasionally like to remind him that I can be good at both my job and the warrior pose."

"Is Ryan sending someone?"

"He's consulting with HICC. They may choose to keep her under surveillance and watch what she does and who she talks to before they execute the warrant."

"Why would she come back here? Any ideas?" he asked.

"The only one I can think of is that she's more afraid to go back to LA without whatever she was sent for than she is of getting caught here."

Brad stilled, letting that possibility—that very real possibility—settle in his mind. "Who the hell is behind Sussurri?" he asked.

Andrea tipped her head. "I have no idea, but I think we may be surprised when HICC figures it out."

CHAPTER TWENTY

“DO YOU RECOGNIZE HER FROM ANY OF THE PICTURES LEFT ON GRACIE’S PHONE?” BRAD ASKED Scarlett. She was sitting beside him on the couch, watching the CCTV feeds of Kimmie Garza at the bar on his laptop.

She studied the woman whom Ryan’s team had decided to hold off on arresting for the moment. She was beautiful. But from what she’d seen of the Sussurri site—and yes, she’d looked after Sabina had shown her where and how to find it—all the women were gorgeous. The kind of women that men—or boys masquerading as men—fantasized about.

“Not that I recall. It’s been a while since I looked, though,” Scarlett answered. “And I turned the phone over to Ryan last week, so the police or HICC would be better to ask. Aren’t his kids going to be off the slopes soon?” she asked, pointing to the man chatting with Kimmie.

“The lifts close at five. After that, it’s too dark to ski anything but the bunny slopes,” he replied.

“So it’s unlikely she’ll be invited to spend time with him tonight,” Scarlett said.

Brad shook his head. “Not unless he’s the worst sort of dad. He has one room with two queen beds and a pullout couch.”

They continued watching in silence. As Kimmie flirted and plied her trade, Scarlett couldn’t help but think of Gracie and the life she’d led. The thought of selling her body to anyone made Scarlett physically ill. But so did the reality that for people like Gracie, people who had no support and knew nothing else, it was often the only way to make the most out of the conditions they’d been born into.

On the surface, she and Gracie weren’t that different. They’d grown up in the same neighborhood, gone to the same schools, lived at the same near-poverty level. The world saw them as girls with not much of a future. But unlike Gracie, Scarlett had had a support system. She’d had parents who’d protected her, who’d given her as safe a haven as they could, and who had taught her the value of education. As a child, she hadn’t seen it, but as an

adult, she recognized how hard her parents worked to make their apartment a safe place amid all the violence. How hard they'd worked to make their home a place where she could thrive and dream while living in a neighborhood where dreams rarely took root, much less flourished.

Scarlett had won the lottery with her parents, while Gracie had none of that. And what a difference it had made.

"HICC is tracking down who runs Sussurri, right?" she asked.

"They are. They never stopped, but with Kimmie's reappearance, they are doubling down."

"Any ideas?"

Brad lifted a shoulder. "Officially? No. Unofficially, they think it's either someone with a very clean reputation or someone on the opposite end of the spectrum."

"Someone who'd want to silence Gracie in order to preserve their reputation—whether that's as a respected member of society or someone who wants to stay off the radar."

"That is what they think," Brad confirmed as he brushed a kiss on the top of her head. "Are you ready for Jessica to get here tomorrow?"

"I'm ready for this to be over," she replied. "If she helps bring that about, then I'm more than happy to have her join the party." She hesitated, then continued. "When I first started looking into Gracie's death, it was sort of abstract. I didn't believe she'd killed herself, but I also didn't really think of myself as looking for a killer. I guess I thought I'd find some evidence and hand it over and then maybe the police would reopen her case. How they closed it in the first place makes no sense to me. The file is only a few pages. Anyway, now that we have Maria Abel's murder, Petrov's murder, Kimmie's activities, and the Wolf weaving a trail through it all, it's far from abstract. And while I've been in some hairy situations in my career, this one feels complicated in a way I don't understand. When Kara and I were taken hostage with the rest of the hospital staff, we knew why. Or when the band of rebels took over our medical camp in East Africa, we knew why. This? I don't understand."

Brad ran his fingers through her hair as the light outside began to dim. "I think all we have here is a woman who wanted a new life and knew only one way to get it," he said. "It's possible they are all connected. Maybe Simms used Sussurri. Maybe Rathwell did as well. Maybe the Wolf owns it. There could be any number of ways the shady people in Gracie's life intertwined.

But for our purposes, they were each a means to an end for Gracie. Assuming she planned to blackmail Sussurri, too, then each of them was only important to the extent that they could contribute to her freedom. To her exit from her old life.”

“You don’t think the connection between them, assuming we find one, is relevant?” she asked, tipping her head up.

His shoulder lifted under her cheek. “It might be relevant in explaining why this is so hard to unravel. Or why so many people are putting so much effort into silencing you. But are those interconnections relevant to Gracie’s death? My guess is probably not.”

She pondered this for a moment before realizing the truth of it. By looking into her death, they may uncover more than Gracie ever intended. Maybe even more than she ever knew. At the core of it, though, each of the three, possibly four, threads had likely been nothing more than an exit ramp for Gracie, not part of a bigger plan. Which brought her thoughts back to the police and autopsy reports. Kara had gone over the autopsy, so Scarlett doubted they’d missed anything. It had been months since she’d reviewed the police report, though. Knowing what she knew now, would she see something different?

“Hold on a second,” she said. He shifted the computer off his lap as she slipped from under his arm and exited the room. When she returned a few minutes later, it was closed on the coffee table.

“The boys came into the bar and left with their dad,” he said. “Teague’s following Kimmie now. What’s that?” he asked, nodding to the envelope she held.

“The pathetic police report. I figured if we want to bring it back to the basics, we should have another look,” she replied, retaking her seat. Bending the metal clasp holding the envelope closed, she lifted the flap and pulled out a stack of papers. “The report is only a few pages,” she said. “The rest are photocopies of the pictures they took at the scene.” She hesitated. “I don’t know if you’ve ever seen a dead body, but if you haven’t…”

“I appreciate the warning, but I’ll be fine,” Brad said, holding out a hand.

She nodded, taking him at his word. “You start with the report. I’ll go over the pictures again. The copy quality isn’t great, but we take what we can get.”

They sat in silence, each going through their tasks. Occasionally, she’d show him something interesting in the photos and vice versa. At one point, he

brought out his phone and pulled up a calendar, as if checking the timeline of events. As for her, she scoured the pictures looking for anything she might notice now that she hadn't before.

The images were second-rate, B-team efforts of the evidence collection team. Even she could tell that. A random picture of Gracie's living room, but only part of it. One depicting the corner of her bed and the wood floor below, as if the photographer had accidentally taken it while holding the camera by his side. There were several of Gracie, though, including close-ups of her face—showing her blue lips—and her hands—highlighting her discolored nail beds.

“Anything?” she asked Brad when she finished going through the photos.

“They noted the door was locked when they arrived and they had to use a mechanical pick to open it. Were her keys in her things when you got them?”

“They were, but I didn't look to see if her house key was still there as I had one of my own. I assume so since someone, presumably one of the cops, would have locked the door sometime after Gracie died and before I arrived.”

“Any chance someone else might have a copy?”

Scarlett considered this. “The only other person I can think of that she'd trust with a key would be her sister. Luz is harmless, but she's not well. She's been in and out of jail for all sorts of things, most of them related to her mental instability. Shoplifting, causing public disruptions, things like that. She was born with a bit of brain damage and was developmentally delayed, but I think something happened to her after Gracie left the house. Something that sort of severed her hold on reality. She prefers living on the streets, but Gracie might have given her a key in case she ever wanted to come in.”

“We should check Gracie's key chain to see if she still had her key. It might also be worth tracking Luz down.”

“We can ask Sabina tomorrow about Gracie's keys since HICC still has all her stuff. As for Luz, even if she had a key, it seems a bit far-fetched to think someone could have gotten it from her. Like I've said, Gracie was intensely private, and hardly anyone in her adult life even knew she had a sister. If there's someone in LA willing to try to find her, though, I suppose it can't hurt. Anything else?”

He shook his head. “How about you?”

She sighed in response and handed her stack of photocopied images over while holding out her other hand to take the report. Again, they fell into silence as they each reviewed what the other had started with.

Twenty minutes later, Brad reached for his phone again. Curious as to what he was doing, she let her attention drift from the report to his device. He typed in the name of one of the four officers listed in the report as assigned to the case. A picture of a young dark-haired woman popped up. Typing in another name, an image of an older man with gray hair and heavy jowls filled his screen. Then, typing in the third, a middle-aged blond man popped up.

He furrowed his brow.

“What?” she asked.

“Halliwell was the fourth officer assigned to Gracie’s case, and we know what he looks like because we saw him die in December. If the other officers were a dark-haired woman, an older man, and a younger blond man, then who is this?” he asked, tipping a paper for her to see.

The picture didn’t show a full face, but the profile, caught in the reflection of a mirror, was enough to see it wasn’t one of the four officers they’d identified. From what little she could see, he looked in his early thirties, fit, and with dark hair. He was turned in such a way so they couldn’t read his badge. Not that they necessarily would have been able to anyway with the subpar copies.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Do you think HICC could clean up the picture? Or request a proper copy from the LAPD?”

“I’m sure they could. Although I think they’d rather start with the former so as not to draw any more attention to themselves,” he said.

“It could be nothing,” she countered. “Neither of us really know anything about police procedure. He could be a trainee cop observing. Or maybe he’s from a different precinct but had an interest in the case.”

Brad wagged his head. “He seems a little old to be a trainee, but I agree, it could be nothing. At this point, though, I think it’s worth looking into everything, don’t you?”

“And with Jessica coming to town, my guess is even if we didn’t suggest it, she’d probably notice the same thing and ask. At least based on what Sabina’s said about her.”

Brad inclined his head, then reached for the papers she still held. “We can ask Sabina tomorrow when she and Jessica come by. In the meantime, are you thinking dinner might be possible tonight?”

She weighed her body’s response to the suggestion of food, then nodded. “Although oddly, I think I’m craving fried chicken.”

Brad chuckled. “As luck would have it, our kitchen makes excellent fried

chicken. It's usually on a sandwich at lunch, but I can make a meal happen."

The next afternoon Scarlett found herself seated at the kitchen table with Jessica and Sabina going over the documentation. "A fentanyl overdose is a pretty easy thing for a third party to orchestrate," Jessica said, flipping through the autopsy report. Gracie's things, which Sabina had brought over, were spread around the living room. Brad had joined them for lunch—which she'd been able to eat—but had left for an afternoon of meetings.

"Orchestrating it while she's lying in bed, though? Don't you think that's weird?" Scarlett asked.

"Especially since there were no other traces of it found on her and no signs of a struggle," Sabina said.

"But she ingested it, she didn't inhale it," Jessica said. "And look at this." She set one of the photocopied pictures on the table and pointed to Gracie's bedside table. "It's a bottle of sleeping pills. If someone got into her apartment and didn't need her to die right away—sorry, Scarlett, I'm always a little blunt," she said, shooting her an apologetic look. Scarlett waved it off. She'd much prefer blunt than sugarcoated.

"If she didn't need to die right away, but soon, then it would be easy to empty most of the pills in the bottle, add one of fentanyl, and let Gracie do the rest. I don't suppose that bottle is still in an evidence locker somewhere?" she asked.

Scarlett shook her head. "They didn't collect any evidence other than Gracie's body and her phone," she said.

"You cleaned her apartment?" Jessica asked. Scarlett wondered what the woman was getting at but nodded. Jessica Kilkenny wasn't what she'd expected. Actually, she hadn't known what to expect, but it wasn't the gorgeous strawberry blond with cat glasses and a killer outfit. A few years older than Scarlett, Jessica was blessed with flawless skin, aqua eyes, and a height—and body—that made it easy to wear almost every type of clothing.

"Do you remember seeing this? Throwing it away?" she asked, pointing to the bottle.

"I wouldn't have thrown it away, not sleeping pills..." Her voice trailed off as soon as she realized what she was saying. "It's ingrained in me not to throw medicines away, not down the toilet, not in the garbage. I always take them to the pharmacy to dispose of. Even over-the-counter ones. If that bottle had been sitting there when I cleaned her apartment, I would have put it in

the bag with the other medicines that I took away with me.” She studied the picture again. “But it wasn’t. Not by the time I got to Gracie’s place. Someone else took it, didn’t they?”

“If you’re certain you didn’t pick it up, then yes,” Jessica said.

“I didn’t,” Scarlett said, the memories of that day clearer now that she was focusing on it. “She had four pill containers in her bathroom. Two prescription, and two over-the-counter supplements. There was nothing on her bedside table.”

“Which lends credence to Jessica’s theory about how Gracie died,” Sabina said. “Someone put a fentanyl pill in with her sleeping pills, then managed to dispose of the bottle after she died. How’d they get into her apartment, though?”

Scarlett frowned, recalling her conversation from the night before. “Brad and I talked about how the police report made a point of noting that her door was locked when they arrived. We wondered if someone had been able to get access to a key. We were thinking in terms of using it to lock up after they left, making it appear as if Gracie had been alone. But if someone got hold of one, they could use it to get in, too.”

“Was Gracie the kind of person who’d have multiple copies of her keys floating around?” Jessica asked.

Scarlett shook her head. “Definitely not. She was much too cautious to do that. But her sister might have one,” she said before proceeding to tell them about Luz.

“I can’t see how Luz would get pulled into this, though,” she continued. “Not many people knew she was Gracie’s sister. And it wasn’t as if the two women saw each other often. It *is* possible that Luz could have been manipulated. But again, someone would have had to make the connection between the two, first.”

“Still worth looking into,” Jessica said with a pointed look at Sabina.

Sabina wagged her head. “We have some contacts in LA. Luz isn’t our usual sort of target, so I’ll see if we have anyone who might be able to step in and find her. Someone who’d have the skills to talk with her when they do.”

The doorbell rang, and Sabina glanced at her in question. Scarlett shrugged. She’d been living with Brad for less than two weeks and she’d heard the doorbell more times than she’d heard it in the ten years living in her flat in LA. At this point, she wondered if it would be easier to give the family keys to the place.

Sabina smiled, as if reading her thoughts, then rose and headed to the door. A beat later, Ava walked in, carrying her computer.

“I was going over a few updates to the security system with Andrea and thought I’d pop by,” she said. “How you all doing?”

Scarlett answered, then offered to make her a cup of coffee. By the time she brought the mug to the table, Sabina had introduced her to Jessica and was catching her up on the reporter’s theory about how the fentanyl made it into Gracie’s body and the existence of Luz.

“I haven’t seen the crime scene pictures,” Ava said, fingering one of them and sliding it in front of her. “Viewing Gracie’s video files was quite enough for me, thank you very much.”

“I’ll want to see all of those as well,” Jessica said.

Sabina nodded as Ava slid another picture in front of her. “We’ll get everything up on a secure site, then give you access. We’ve been making headway on the code in the book from Sussurri, but you may be able to decipher the clients more quickly than we’ve been able to. So far, we’ve identified a number of power players from a variety of industries—from film to politics to business. Actually,” Sabina said thoughtfully, “if you could focus on the identities of the clients, it would free us up to focus on identifying who’s behind the organization as a whole.”

“Not a problem. I’ll start on that tonight,” Jessica said. “Tell me more about why we think the Wolf might be working on the same side as us—”

“Although probably to a different end,” Sabina said before relaying Katz’s activities, including his meeting with Scarlett and the information he’d left for her on Petrov’s body.

When Sabina finished, Jessica nodded. “Okay, so I have a better picture of the Wolf and Sussurri. And we believe Simms hired Petrov, although I know you’re working on firming up that position. So that leaves—”

“Derek Rathwell,” Ava said.

“Exactly,” Jessica replied. “What do we know about him other than he’s a cop and a heinous human being?”

“No,” Ava said, drawing their attention. In front of her was the picture that had caught Brad’s attention the night before. “Derek Rathwell,” she said, sliding the image over and pointing to the reflection in the mirror. “He wasn’t assigned to the case,” she said. “I’d like to know what he was doing at the crime scene.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“CURIUSER AND CURIUSER,” JESSICA SAID, PULLING THE PICTURE IN FRONT OF HER. “THIS IS THE cop that Gracie caught on video assaulting her, right?”

Ava nodded, wiping her fingers on her pants as if even touching a photo of the man contaminated her.

“Eight years on the force, has never sat for the detective’s exam, mediocre record, and recently married to a trust fund baby,” Jessica mused.

“And of the four people we were initially looking at for Gracie’s death, the only one who *hasn’t* appeared in Mystery Lake,” Sabina said.

“Because he knows—or believes—the blackmail evidence is gone? If we’re onto something here, his presence at the scene might also explain the missing pill bottle,” Jessica said more to herself.

“Grabbing the pill bottle would be easy, but do you think he’s the one who erased the files from her phone?” Scarlett asked. “It sounded like however it was done was more complicated than just deleting a file. Would he have the skills?”

“It was,” Ava confirmed. “The average tech in an evidence lab—even the above-average one—wouldn’t have noticed.”

“Do you know who his wife is?” Jessica asked.

“Her name is Carmen Calder,” Ava said.

“And her money comes from Calder Security,” Jessica said. “Her dad founded it.”

“What’s Calder Security?” Scarlett asked. Judging by the looks around the table, the name meant something.

“One of the original cybersecurity companies,” Sabina said. “They’ve been outpaced in the past decade or so, but they were *the* cybersecurity company for businesses for a long time.”

“You wouldn’t have heard of them since they don’t do anything in the consumer space,” Ava added.

“Don’t you think that’s a stretch, though, to assume Rathwell has the technical skills because he’s married to the daughter of the founder?” Scarlett

said.

“Normally, yes,” Jessica replied. “But his brother works for Calder, and the two are close.”

Scarlett considered this. “Is he a good guy? The brother?”

“By all accounts, yes. He’s not high up in the company. He likes being in the weeds too much for a leadership role. He’s well respected, though,” Jessica answered.

“Is he the kind of guy who would be willing to teach his brother a few things if he thought it was for a good reason? Like, if his brother told him he’d accidentally used his own phone to video a crime scene and needed to permanently delete the files?” Scarlett posited.

All three women frowned in thought.

“I don’t know him,” Jessica said slowly. “But from what I’ve gathered, yeah, I could see him doing that. Especially if he thought he was helping. He volunteers a shit ton and really seems committed to a lot of good causes. Not that I’m taken in by that. But in his case, I think he’s genuine. Unlike his brother and his protect-and-serve bullshit.”

“So we’re saying that it’s *possible* Rathwell learned to purge a phone from his brother, then used that new skill to purge Gracie’s?” Ava asked.

“And in getting rid of the evidence against him, he also got rid of the files linked to Sussurri and Simms,” Scarlett added.

“Which now makes sense as to why he’s the only one who, to date, *hasn’t* been after either Scarlett or Gracie’s things,” Sabina said. “Because he already knows—or believes—you don’t have it.”

It was all conjecture, but it made sense. Although, how he got the fentanyl into Gracie’s sleeping pills was still an open question. As was how he could do what he’d done and still pretend to serve the law. Sometimes, she hated cops. Intellectually, she knew they weren’t all bad. Maybe even most were good people. People like Ryan and Mari and their team. But her life had been filled with more Rathwells than Ryans, men and women who took the oath and wore the badge for power rather than protection. In some ways, she preferred the rebels and insurgents she and Kara had encountered over their years abroad. More vicious by far, but at least with them, she knew what she was getting. They didn’t hide behind the veneer of a uniform, and they made no bones about the type of power they sought and held.

“What are you thinking over there?” Jessica asked.

Scarlett made a face. “You don’t want to know.”

Jessica raised a perfectly shaped eyebrow. “On the contrary, you were looking a little bloodthirsty, which makes me *really* want to know.”

That pulled a laugh from her. “I was thinking how much I hate people like Rathwell. People who abuse the trust of a community, people who are hired into positions of authority then do the kind of things Rathwell did. People who can sexually assault and kill a woman and then, in the next breath, turn around and help an old lady across the street. It’s a particular kind of psychopathy that seems to get off on the duality of it. Not just the actions, but in fooling everyone. And I hate it. I hate him.”

“You want him to pay,” Jessica said, no hint of censure in her voice.

“I do,” Scarlett said. “In the worst possible way. I don’t want the LAPD to be able to brush this under the rug. And I think we all know that if he did this to Gracie, she wasn’t the only one. Nor will she be the last. How many other people has he hurt or betrayed? People who don’t have anyone to fight for them?”

The question hung in the room, then Sabina smiled. “Well, Gracie does. She’s got a team of the best.”

“And you can be sure that as part of *my* work, I’ll be looking for other victims, too,” Jessica said.

A sudden rush of tears flooded Scarlett’s eyes, and Ava reached into her purse, then handed her a tissue.

“Pregnancy hormones,” Scarlett said. “After being on my own for so long and being one of the only people who really cared about Gracie, this is, well, it’s a lot. You have no idea how grateful I am.”

Jessica set a hand on top of hers. “I had a friend that no one would speak for either, until I did. This is what I do. This is who I am. We *will* find justice for Gracie. I can promise you that.”

Scarlett sniffed, then sent them all a watery smile. “Okay, I like the sound of that. How do we do it?”

Jessica sat back and tapped a pen on her notebook. “Sabina and Ava will give me access to everything, and I need the rest of today to go through it all. After that, I may have some additional questions for you.” Scarlett nodded, and Jessica continued. “I also want to head down to LA to see if I can find Gracie’s sister. I know you said you could look for someone,” she said, turning to Sabina, “but if she’s living on the street and has mental health issues, that’s something I have experience with, and she may be more willing to talk to me.”

Sabina hesitated, then nodded. “We’ll keep someone on standby, though, in case you need backup.”

Jessica nodded. “Once I have a picture of all the people in play, I’m going to dig into them. I know you’ve been doing a fair bit of that already, Ava, and I may want to call on your particular hacking expertise,” she added with a grin. “But I have contacts that are outside the system that I’ll tap into first so you can be more targeted when needed.”

Ava nodded. “Call any time, night or day.”

“And me?” Scarlett asked.

“Like I said, I will probably have questions for you after I go through the electronic files, but for now? Rest and grow that baby,” Jessica said.

“Pregnant women work all the time. I’m not completely useless,” she countered, feeling inexplicably annoyed. Especially since she’d just been telling them how grateful she was for their help.

“They do,” Jessica agreed, ignoring her tone. “And you will, too, once we know your life isn’t in danger. But for now, you are useless to me. You’re a nurse, Scarlett. And a damn good one based on the information I dug up on you. This, though”—she waved at the papers on the table—“is my world, and I have my process. I don’t need or want any of you hovering over my shoulder right now. I will come to you when I need you. For now, I need to do my thing. And since you *are* still sick and you *do* still have people who want you dead, my opinion is that tending to yourself—and that baby—is a good use of your time.”

Scarlett sighed, then reached for the tissue again and dabbed her eyes. “Sorry,” she said. “I think this,” she said, gesturing to the papers as well as the apartment, “is so foreign to me. I’ve never in my life been a kept woman. Add to that how sick I’ve been and everything with Gracie, and my emotions are ping-ponging all over the place. Which is also something that has never happened to me. Believe it or not, I’m usually a rock.”

“I have no problem believing that,” Jessica said with such ease that Scarlett believed her. “But if there’s one thing I’ve learned in life, it’s that we can’t *always* be the rock. No one can. And there’s no shame in that.”

“I second that,” Ava said, and Sabina nodded. “You know, Mitch used to annoy the hell out of me just to push me to be *not okay*. I know that sounds weird, but like you, I’m a rock. I like having a boss who can rely on me.” She nodded to Sabina. “I thrive on being the person people feel they can talk to about anything. I want people to count on me. But he pushed me to see that I

can't, and shouldn't, be that all the time. It's made me a better person. A better friend to myself and certainly a better partner to him. It also made me realize how much strength there is in both giving and receiving support—it's not fair to always be the giver and not allow your friends to give in return."

Scarlett smiled. "Kind of like that old adage of you should always visit your new neighbor and ask to borrow a cup of sugar so they know that they can do the same?"

Ave's lips twitched. "Yeah, a little like that. Relationships are stronger, we're stronger, when we trust others with our happiness as well as our struggles."

Scarlett weighed the words and knew they held more than a thread of truth. Then Sabina snorted and shook her head, drawing everyone's attention.

"What?" Ava said.

Sabina's lips twitched as she fought a smile. "Sorry, I still sometimes have a hard time thinking of Mitch as that insightful. I mean I *know* he is. I've seen you two together in more ways than I want to admit, and you definitely complement each other. It's just sometimes hard to believe. No offense, but he's grumpy as hell and although, like all the Warwicks, he's a rock-solid human being, he's not someone I see relaxing on a Friday night with pizza and a movie."

Scarlett's gaze darted to Ava. She didn't think she'd like anyone saying those things about Brad. And they'd definitely get her back up. But all Ava did was smile and shrug.

"He is grumpy. But he's my grumpy asshole. And for your information, Friday night movies are kind of our thing. Eleanor likes them, too."

Again, Sabina snorted. "And how often do you make it through those movies before other things start to take priority? I really don't think it's the movies he likes."

Ava gasped, but it was so over-the-top, no one could mistake it as anything other than mock shock. Especially not when she followed it with something between a chuckle and a giggle. "I think the longest we've ever sat through a movie without *other things* taking priority is forty-five minutes, so you may have a point. Still, they keep Eleanor occupied, so I'm not going to complain."

"As lovely as all this conversation is—especially for someone not having regular sex," Jessica said with a pointed look at Sabina, "can one of you show me to the cabin now and I can get started?"

“We have some very hot operatives I could introduce you to,” Ava offered with a grin as she pushed back from the table.

“She is Tucker’s type,” Sabina said, also rising as she gathered the papers.

“I’m not sure I want to be anyone’s type,” Jessica replied. “Nor do I need to be distracted.”

“Tucker would *definitely* be a distraction,” Ava said, pulling on her jacket before handing Sabina hers.

“If he’s in town when we wrap this up, you should stick around for a few days. He really would be distracting. In the best sort of way,” Sabina said as she tugged on her hat.

“Are you supposed to be talking about your employees that way?” Ava teased.

Sabina laughed. “Tucker would have my butt if I didn’t. Seriously, look at her,” she said, waving to Jessica.

“Look at me what?” Jessica asked, her voice making it clear she wasn’t sure she wanted to know the answer.

“You’re gorgeous, smart, fight for the underdog, a few years older than he is, and built like a goddess. I know that’s a weird string of things to put together. But you are, literally—”

“Figuratively,” Ava corrected.

Sabina rolled her eyes. “You are his kryptonite and wet dream all rolled into one. If I *didn’t* try to convince you to meet him, and he found out, then I’d find a brand-new, brutal training program on my calendar next month.”

“You all are crazy,” Jessica said, pulling her long ponytail from under her coat.

“Welcome to my world,” Scarlett muttered, though she did it with a smile.

“You love it,” Sabina said, giving her a hug.

“And if you don’t yet, you will,” Ava added, coming in for her own hug.

“I’ll keep you posted,” Jessica said with a nod.

One minute later, the apartment was silent. Scarlett stood at the closed door, debating what she should do with her time. Glancing at the clock, she noted Brad would be back in two hours. She was tired, but not so tired that she wanted to lie down. Instead, she decided to do a little cleaning.

Once the sheets were changed, bed made, and laundry going, she tidied the already-tidy living room. Then, with still well over an hour until Brad

returned, she considered dinner. Doing a quick scan of her body, she decided that she'd try to cook something. She had no idea what was in the fridge or freezer, but she'd see what she could find.

An hour and a half later, Brad walked in, paused as the door closed behind him, and inhaled loud enough for her to hear in the kitchen.

"Whatever that is, it smells amazing," he said, coming around the island. She straightened from where she'd been checking the bread in the oven and smiled. He stalked toward her, backing her against the counter.

"You made dinner again," he said, sinking his hands into her hair.

"Nothing fancy, just Bolognese sauce and some bread," she said before he tipped her head up and kissed her. The next thing she knew, her fingers were buried in his hair, and he had one hand at the nape of her neck and the other cupping her butt, holding her to him.

Wanting more, more of him, more of *this*. She shifted her hands down his neck, over his chest, and to the snap of his jeans. Popping it open, she eased the zipper down and took him in hand. Before this moment, she'd been too worried about her gag reflex to think about oral sex. But now, a feeling like none she'd ever known washed over her, and she wanted nothing more. She wanted to make him wild. She wanted to drive him to the brink, and she wanted him to lose control. And she knew exactly how to do it.

Shoving his jeans and boxers down, she lowered herself to her knees.

"Scarlett," his rough voice came out.

"Hush," she said before taking him in her mouth. He let out a curse and slammed his hands down on the counter, bracing himself as she tasted him. She drank in every twitch of his body, every sound—rough and primal—and every harsh breath.

She gripped his hips and took him deeper again and again. Glancing up, a thrill went through her at the sight of his head thrown back and the muscles of his forearms taut with tension as he held on to the counter.

She let out a little hum of pleasure and a heartbeat later, she found herself on her feet and bent over the counter. With her leggings now down around her ankles, he entered her from behind.

He held her hips so that she didn't bump her stomach too hard against the granite as he slid in and out. She acknowledged the care, but she didn't want him quite so cautious.

"More, Brad," she demanded, pressing back into him.

It was against his nature to risk making her uncomfortable, but it was

also against his nature to deny her. Even after so short a time, she knew this. And knew it was a gift that she'd want, and need, to treat with the care and love it deserved.

Her demand had him hesitating, but only for a second. Withdrawing from her, he kicked off his jeans, turned her around, then scooped her up and carried her to the formal dining table. Setting her on the edge, he put a hand on her shoulder and pressed her back. Tugging her leggings all the way off, he stepped between her thighs as she set her feet on the arms of two dining chairs.

“You want more?” he asked, teasing her center.

She closed her eyes and whispered a needy yes. Not even a second later, he slammed inside her. Gripping her hips to keep her perched on the edge of the table, he pistoned in and out, cursing with pleasure.

She reached over her head and grabbed the opposite side of the table, arching her back in the process. His ceaseless rhythm intensified, and he shifted a hand to touch her. The feel of him gliding in and out and in and out, his control barely in check, had her teetering on the edge. Then, as his fingertips gently flicked her, her pleasure began forming into a storm, gathering at her core before sliding down her legs, up her stomach, and over her breasts.

He thickened inside her as her orgasm gained strength. She wanted to tell him more, she wanted to tell him so many things, but words were beyond her. And when the bow finally snapped and pleasure burst through her, all she managed was a long keening sound as she gripped and squeezed him, and he emptied himself inside her.

It took a moment for each of them to come back to themselves, and when she finally opened her eyes, she found Brad looking down at her.

She offered him a saucy smile. “I should make you dinner more often.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

BRAD TRIED HIS BEST TO KEEP SCARLETT OCCUPIED WHILE ESSENTIALLY UNDER HOUSE ARREST. IT wasn't that bad, of course. Between her morning sickness, which, overall, seemed to be getting better, and Gracie's killer still at large, she hadn't pushed to go out. But she was a woman used to being busy, used to being on the move, used to an active life, and she was getting restless.

"My parents wanted to come by this afternoon. And Cody and Tia asked about bringing the twins over. Are you okay with that?" he asked as he loaded the lunch dishes into the dishwasher.

She leaned against the counter beside him. "You asked them to come hang out with me, didn't you?" she asked with an indulgent smile.

He shot her a guilty look. "Not exactly. They both asked how you were doing. I said fine, but a little bored. Neither my parents nor Cody needed any more than that to invite themselves over."

"Cody and Tia really want to get out of the house with the twins, who are barely a week old?"

He lifted a shoulder. "Cody said that until they start school, he and Tia plan to take the girls with them everywhere. He figured they'd better get used to it now."

"Which 'they' is he referring to when he says they need to get used to it? The twins or him and Tia?"

Brad chuckled as he shut the washer, then reached for a dish towel. "I suspect he meant him and Tia, but maybe the girls, too."

"I'd love to see them, then. All of them," she replied.

He leaned against the opposite counter and settled his gaze on her. His family could be a lot, but she'd been remarkably open to them. And all of their craziness. Between the baby, the new relationship, his family, and the killer, he sometimes didn't know how she dealt with it all.

"What?" she asked, eyeing him.

He stepped across the kitchen and wrapped his arms around her. "You're an amazing woman. That's all."

She burrowed against him, sliding her own arms around him. “I’m really not, but I’m happy for you to think so.”

“You are,” he insisted. “I know you’re anxious to bring Gracie’s killer to justice. And then there’s the baby, the new relationship, my family, and you said you wanted to find a job at the hospital once it was safe. There’s a lot going on and you’re just going with it. A lot of folks wouldn’t be so open to everything. Or able to handle it as well as you seem to be.” He paused, then drew back. “Unless you’re not telling me something?”

She leaned back so she could look him in the eye as she answered. “Other than bringing Gracie’s killer to justice, I’m not thinking about the other stuff too much. That might not be the right way to go about it, but it is what it is. I want the baby. I want you to be a part of his or her life, which means moving up here. Which is also not a hardship since my best friend is here, too. I also don’t think either of us is interested in denying there’s something between us that’s...different.

“Over the years, growing up, then working abroad, I saw and experienced a lot of terrible things. A lot of *really* terrible things. When you’ve lived that, it puts things in perspective. Is this all happening really fast? Yes. Is it how either of us would have done things if I hadn’t gotten pregnant? Probably not. But is it hard or overwhelming? It’s nothing I—we—can’t deal with. I’m certain about that.”

He pulled her close and kissed the top of her head. “Like I said, you’re an amazing woman. I’m glad my flight from Paris was delayed in December.”

She chuckled against his chest. “Even though I brought a murderer to your doorstep and an unexpected baby?”

“It also brought an unexpected, exceptional woman, too, so yes, even then,” he replied. “You’re right, this isn’t anything we can’t deal with. Well, we need help in bringing Gracie’s killer to justice—which, thankfully, we have. But the rest? I haven’t had the same life experiences you’ve had, but if you have any doubts, I’m with you 100 percent. I know what’s important, and I’m old enough to recognize that what we have together is special. Worth fighting for and worth holding on to. We’ve only known each other a hot minute, but sometimes that, and some good old-fashioned stubbornness, is all it takes to make a life.”

“I don’t get the sense you’re that stubborn, though,” she said, leaning back again.

He smiled. “I don’t sweat the small stuff, but the big stuff? I’m stubborn as hell.”

“And what constitutes ‘big stuff?’”

He took her hand and set it on her stomach, covering it with his. “Our family.”

She blinked, her eyes shiny.

“Don’t ever doubt it,” he said. “I know it will take time to prove it, and I’m okay with that. But I’m telling you now, you won’t ever have to doubt that. As for the rest, as you said, we’ll figure it out. Jessica and HICC will sort out Gracie’s killer. I heard Kara mentioning to you that the hospital is hiring, so a job will probably be there when you’re ready. And my family—which I hope one day you’ll start thinking of as your family—can be managed if they ever get to be too much.”

“I appreciate that,” she said. Although, judging by her tone, she didn’t see that as happening. “In the meantime, I’d love to spend time with your parents and Cody and Tia and the girls as well.”

He smiled and kissed her. “They will be thrilled. I’ll let them know.”

“They should probably come by earlier in the afternoon, though. Jessica and Sabina are planning on meeting here before dinner to go over everything they’ve pulled together since yesterday.”

“Done,” he said, stepping back and pulling out his phone.

They chatted about his work schedule for the afternoon as he texted, and by the time he left for his office, his parents were on their way over. Cody, Tia, and the girls would join them in an hour. He had an afternoon of meetings so would miss seeing his family, but he’d be back by five to hear the update.

And maybe, just maybe, they’d be one step closer to finding Gracie’s killer.

“I don’t want our daughters hearing all this,” Brad heard Cody say as he walked back into the apartment several hours later.

“Our daughters are a week old. I don’t think it will scar them,” Tia shot back. “But if you’re that concerned, you can take them to the front room and hang out there because there is no way *I’m* missing this.”

“I don’t want to miss it either,” Cody shot back.

Tia chuckled. “You’ve found yourself in a dilemma of your own making.

You're pretty, but you're smart, too. You can figure this one out on your own, big guy."

Brad entered the family room to find Tia sitting in a chair and Cody hovering over her. His parents were comfortably ensconced on the couch, his dad holding one of the twins, although which one, Brad didn't know since she was wrapped up like a burrito. Scarlett sat in the other chair, holding the second twin cradled in the nook of her arm. A whiteboard Sabina must have borrowed from the office was set up by the sliding doors. Two pairs of women's legs were visible beneath the lower edge—presumably Sabina and Jessica stood behind it. Chad perched on the arm of the couch opposite Brad's parents. Both his mom and Chad had a glass of wine in hand.

"Welcome home, honey," Scarlett teased with a grin, knowing full well he hadn't anticipated everyone still being there.

He made a humming noise and muttered, "Welcome home, indeed," before stalking across the room to her side. Picking her up, baby and all, he sat down, then settled her and, judging by the wisp of red hair peeking out from under a cap, Ruby, on his lap.

"What's this all about?" he asked, staring down at his tiny niece. It was still hard to tell what color her eyes would be, but she had a tuft of dark red hair curled like a Kewpie doll's over her forehead.

"We sort of lost track of time—your parents, Cody, Tia, and I—and then when Jessica, Sabina, and Chad showed up, Tia decided she wanted to stay. Your parents, too. Despite his protests, Cody doesn't want to leave either—"

"Only because he's a gossip," Sabina said from the back side of the whiteboard.

"I care," Cody interjected. Then, with a loud grumble, he mirrored Brad's earlier move and picked Tia up before settling her on his lap.

"Of course you do, son," their mom said. "But admit it, you mostly care about knowing before Mitch and Ava do."

"Mitch has an ace in the hole with Ava," Cody complained. "He *always* knows things first. It's annoying," he added, sounding every bit the youngest brother.

"You poor, suffering man," Tia replied, wrapping her arms around him. He lowered his head to her shoulder, and she patted his hair as she would an injured six-year-old.

"At least my woman understands," Cody muttered. Tia rolled her eyes, drawing a soft laugh from Scarlett.

“I hate to burst your bubble, Cody, but Mitch and Ava are on their way over, too,” his dad said. “She texted me about picking up dinner on the way.”

Cody harumphed. “You always did like him better, Dad.” Although his voice sounded dreamier now that Tia was running her fingers through his hair.

“Sometimes,” his dad agreed, making Brad laugh.

“Don’t egg him on, love,” his mother said, elbowing her husband.

His dad reached for his mom’s glass of wine and took a sip. He opened his mouth to say something, but his mom sent him a quelling look. Instead, he took another sip of her wine.

“Are we waiting for Ava and Mitch to start this, then?” Brad asked, waving at the whiteboard.

“They should be here—” Sabina’s response was cut off by the sound of the doorbell. Chad rose and let the couple in.

“We brought a bunch of stuff from the Perch,” Ava said, holding up two bags. Mitch followed her in carrying another three. “We’ll put them in the warming oven.”

Chad and the couple disappeared into the kitchen, then emerged again a few minutes later, Mitch with a beer in hand and Ava, a glass of wine. Glancing around the room, Mitch pulled up an extra seat as Ava took the one empty spot beside his dad on the couch, then leaned over to coo at Maya.

“Good timing, Ava,” Jessica said.

“Well, it’s good timing if you want to hear about murder, corruption, assault, and all sorts of other criminal behavior,” Sabina said as she and Jessica started to turn the board around.

When it fully faced them, Brad’s mind went blank at all the information it contained. Several pictures, tacked in place, littered the space, along with the names of several people, key events, and a timeline. They’d linked everything together with strings.

“I didn’t think people really did that,” he said.

Mitch nodded. “I thought it was only in the movies or on TV.”

Sabina shook her head.

“I have a much more sophisticated version on my computer, but it’s hard to follow if you aren’t used to it. Sabina and I decided this would be easier,” Jessica answered. “I’m Jessica, by the way,” she added with a nod to Mitch.

Brad’s eyes strayed from the woman back to the board. “I’m not even sure what we’re supposed to be looking at,” he said.

Jessica smiled as Sabina took a seat on an extra chair Chad brought over. “That’s why you have me,” she replied. “Although, I will say, this is even more complex than I originally anticipated. We’re here because of the murder of Graciella Lopez. But her murder has uncovered so much more.”

“I have no idea where this is going, but that seems obvious,” Cody said, also eyeing the board.

Jessica flashed him a grin. “Let me illuminate you all. Starting with the original suspects.” She paused and pointed to the name “The Wolf” written on the top right of the board. “Powerful drug lord. No one knows who he is, but Scarlett knew of a link between him and Gracie. A link which Jason Katz, his top lieutenant, confirmed by his presence in the middle of all this.” She followed a yellow piece of yarn connecting the Wolf’s name to a picture of Jason Katz.

“We believe Jason Katz killed Alexei Petrov,” she said, following a red piece of string to a picture of Petrov. “Who was hired by Ronald Simms— aka ‘the colonel’—to kill Scarlett and retrieve evidence that Gracie possessed naming him as the father of her baby.” Another yellow string linked Petrov to Simms.

“And Simms hired Gracie through Sussurri, the high-end prostitution service,” she said, following yet another yellow string to the word “Sussurri” written in the middle of the board at the top.

“Sussurri also sent Kimmie Garza to go through Scarlett’s belongings, presumably to find Gracie’s phone and the images she had on it regarding clients and their activities.” Again, yellow string connected Sussurri to Kimmie.

“We knew Simms and Kimmie were connected to the prostitution service, but why is there a string connecting Sussurri to Rathwell?” Scarlett asked.

Jessica’s lips thinned, and she looked down. After taking a few breaths deep enough to be visible, she met Scarlett’s gaze.

“I watched the video that Ava found. The one Gracie accidentally recorded of her rape. At the very end, as Rathwell is uncuffing her, he said something to her. Something that, despite the trauma she’d just experienced, drew a reaction from her. Not much of one, but he definitely caught her by surprise. This morning, I was able to enhance it and work on the sound.”

“And?” Scarlett pressed.

“And his exact words were, ‘You can let Tabby, Madame Sussurri, know

she's paid up for this week.'"

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

A WAVE OF NAUSEA WASHED THROUGH SCARLETT THAT HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH THE BABY. “Rathwell was on the Sussurri payroll? Paid to look the other way?”

Jessica inclined her head. “Or paid to protect the clients and the women.”

“And his ‘protection’ fees were access to the women. In any capacity he wanted, including rape,” Scarlett said, more to herself than to anyone. Brad tightened his arm around her and kissed her shoulder.

“That is my theory,” Jessica said, her voice soft.

The room stayed silent. Even the twins remained quiet. Then Scarlett took a breath, straightened her shoulders, and looked to Jessica.

“Who is Tabby?” Mitch asked.

“And does this change anything in terms of thinking it was Rathwell who killed Gracie?” she asked.

“I’ll get to Tabby in a minute,” Jessica said to Mitch. “As to Rathwell, no, I still think he killed her. And I also think he might have gained entry to her apartment through her sister. I’m heading to LA tomorrow, and I’m going to track her down and see if my hunch is right.”

“And your hunch is?” Beth asked.

“How up to speed are you?” Jessica asked.

“I told them everything this afternoon. They know about your theory regarding the fentanyl and the bottle of sleeping pills,” Scarlett answered.

Jessica nodded. “A week before Gracie uploaded the video of Rathwell’s attack to the file-share site, Luz was arrested for disturbing the peace. Gracie bailed her out.”

“Let me guess, Rathwell was the arresting officer and probably saw them together when Gracie picked her up after posting bail,” Scarlett said.

“He was,” Jessica confirmed. “I’ve asked Ava to see if she can get any footage of that day in the station to confirm Rathwell was there. I think we’ll find that he was. And I have no doubt he would have recognized Gracie and noted her connection to Luz. The sick bastard probably got a thrill out of

making sure she saw him in his place of power because he's a repugnant human."

"Then when the blackmail email showed up, he figured he could use Luz for leverage," Brad posited.

"Fucker," Mitch muttered. His dad nodded.

"It's all supposition, which is why I'm headed to LA tomorrow, but what I think happened is this: I think he intended to use Luz as leverage to get Gracie to back off, but when he tracked Luz down, he somehow learned she had a key to Gracie's apartment, and a different plan took shape. One where he permanently eliminated the problem."

"Okay," Scarlett said on an exhale. "When you're down there, you may want to talk to the woman who lives across the hall from Gracie's place. She's in her seventies and is one of those women who really doesn't give a fuck about much of anything. Meaning, if she saw a cop, or a man, come into Gracie's place, she's not going to pretend she didn't if you ask her that specific question. She's not a gossip, so unless you ask a direct question, she won't answer, but she's not afraid of talking."

"Thanks," Jessica replied. "I'll get her name from you before I go."

"So blackmail is the motive, fentanyl is the means, and now we have the possible opportunity if he had access to her apartment," Chad said. "What else?"

"To be clear, his motive isn't limited to eliminating the blackmail material related to the assault," Jessica said. "The video also ties him to Sussurri. We are headed down the right path in tagging Rathwell as Gracie's killer, but Sussurri is where the bigger picture comes into play." She paused and looked at the board.

"This is going to get ugly, isn't it? Uglier than it already is," Scarlett murmured.

Jessica inclined her head. "Yes, I think it is. And they are at the center of everything."

"An agency that has a corrupt cop on payroll isn't going to limit themselves to just one," Beth said. "Which means there's deeper corruption in the police force than one bad apple."

"And depending on Sussurri's clients, potentially corruption there, too," Anthony said.

"Judges, businessmen, any person in a position of power who uses a service like Sussurri is susceptible to corruption," Jessica agreed. "No one

would want that secret to get out, and we don't know what lengths they'd go to in order to protect it. I'm not saying they *are* corrupt, but there is the potential."

"At the very least, they are breaking the law," Sabina pointed out.

Brad sighed. "So we have corrupt cops and powerful men—"

"And women," Jessica said. "About a third of the list in Gracie's files are women."

"And powerful women," Brad said, "who engage in illegal activity that they wouldn't want known *and* that could be used against them to, for example, sway a court decision or influence a business deal."

Jessica nodded. "It's why I think Sussurri is so desperate to get their files back. Originally, I was thinking along the same lines you all had discussed—that they wouldn't want the information leaking because it would be bad for business. That it would make people stop using the service. But now, now that we've identified more people on the list, this second more powerful motive has emerged. They don't want the information made public because once it is, it loses its power to influence," Jessica said.

"Do we have any indication that Sussurri is using the information they have in the way you're suggesting?" Scarlett asked.

Jessica rolled her lips. "Not yet. But given who's behind it, it's not a question of 'if' but a question of finding the evidence."

Scarlett straightened, startling Ruby, who gave a little yelp. Tia rose from Cody's lap, retrieved her daughter, then returned to her seat.

"This Tabby person? Is that who's behind it? And is she the 'Cat' Gracie referred to in her notebooks?" Scarlett asked.

Jessica wagged her head. "Yes, I think she is the 'Cat' Gracie mentioned, but she isn't the mastermind behind Sussurri. After Rathwell said her name, I did some digging, reached out to a few contacts, and found her. Her full name is Tabitha Henderson, and she runs the business, but doesn't own it. She manages scheduling, payroll, that sort of thing. This man," she said, holding up a photocopied picture, "is who I believe is behind it."

Scarlett studied the image. The man looked nothing like she expected a mastermind to look. Then again, she'd never met someone who owned a high-end call service, had cops in their pocket, and potentially blackmailed powerful people for a living, so what did she know? Still, the heavysset man with thick glasses and thin gray hair seemed an odd fit with the role they'd cast him in. With his round face, bulbous nose, and male-pattern baldness, he

looked like someone's friendly uncle. And about as scary as a turtle.

"Who is that?" she asked.

"His name is Richard Karrol," Jessica said. "Nondescript in every way except that he holds a lot of secrets and is known in many circles as the man to go to when you want something—anything—done. He has no inner circle that anyone has been able to identify and to date, authorities have never looked at him for anything. He isn't even on their radar."

"Because he has leverage over them that makes them look the other way or because he's that good at looking clean?" Chad asked.

"Believe it or not, I think it's the latter," Jessica answered. "He may have leverage over them, too, but I think he prefers to use that on people like Rathwell, rather than on the higher-ups or the Feds. If he tries to influence someone who, by virtue of their position, has more eyes on them, it's more likely someone will notice. And Karrol is excellent at avoiding notice."

"How did you tie him to Sussurri?" Ava asked.

"He's cropped up in a few investigations," Jessica answered. "Never as a primary figure, though. Then last fall, I was working on an investigation in Kentucky and his name came up again. Seeing it two or three times, I could overlook, but four? I started to dig and while I haven't found anything concrete, I have found ties between him and a few other situations I've been monitoring. My gut says he's involved in way more than we may ever know. As for how I specifically tied him to Sussurri? Ava and I did a little digging into their website, and then I did a little more this afternoon. They don't mention him, of course. They don't mention any names at all. But the pattern of the website is similar to what I've seen in connection with the other investigations. It's more than using the same website design template—it's the way the links connect and guide users in a certain way. And the language—it's unique enough that I can't imagine it wasn't written by the same author. I know it's not hard evidence, but it's enough for me. At least for now."

"And you're going to go after him?" Scarlett asked, unsure if she wanted to know the answer. It wasn't that she wanted bad people to go unpunished, but going after Rathwell for killing Gracie seemed far less dangerous than going after someone like Karrol. Rathwell was a thug with a power complex. Karrol, based on what Jessica intimated, was the exact opposite—someone without a power complex but who held all the power.

"I am," Jessica confirmed.

“Are you sure that’s wise?” Scarlett asked.

Jessica’s attention went back to the board, and she drummed her fingers on her thigh. “We *will* get Rathwell. I promise you that,” she said, turning and meeting Scarlett’s gaze. “But I can’t let this go,” she said, holding up the image of Karrol. “The three investigations where I first noticed his name cropping up were brutal. Four people died in one, and the other two involved families losing their life savings and the trafficking of street kids into sex rings. If he’s involved, whether he’s the top dog or not—although I think he is—he needs to be stopped.”

She paused, glanced at the picture in her hand, then set it down on the coffee table. “But first things first, Scarlett. We bring Gracie’s killer to justice.”

“Which starts with you going to LA tomorrow?” Sabina clarified.

Jessica nodded. “I’ll leave early so I can be down there by eleven. I want to find Luz and see what kind of information she has that she’s willing to share. Is there anything you know about her that might help me build rapport? Or topics I should avoid?” she asked Scarlett.

“Don’t talk about their parents,” she answered immediately. “She was physically and mentally abused by both, and sexually abused by her father. It’s one of the reasons she turned to drugs when she was a kid.”

“Got it, no mention of anyone other than Gracie,” Jessica said.

“And she doesn’t like birds or the color yellow.” Jessica nodded. “But she loves Coke—the drink, not the drug—and McDonalds’ french fries.”

“Is she still doing drugs?” Brad asked.

Scarlett hesitated. “I’m not sure, but I don’t think so. I remember Gracie making some offhand comment about how if Luz could kick the habit while living under a bridge and around both drugs and alcohol all the time then she should be able to, too. But that was a few years ago. Either way, her mind is broken—between the damage to her brain at birth, the abuse, the drugs, and lord knows what else she’s suffered, it broke a long time ago.”

“Her arrest record shows that,” Jessica said, not without sympathy. “Lots of arrests for disturbing the public, vagrancy, that sort of thing. But nothing violent or drug-related. Can you also text me Gracie’s address and the name of the neighbor?”

Scarlett nodded and reached for her phone sitting on the side table. “The apartment isn’t much, but Gracie did own it, so it’s mine now. I haven’t sold it because I wanted Luz to have it if she ever wanted to get off the streets. I

have the key if you want to look inside? There won't be anything there but the furniture."

"That would be great, thank you," Jessica said. Her gaze darted back to the board again. "I hate people like Rathwell," she murmured. "Karrol isn't a peach, either, but he doesn't pretend to be something he's not. Don't get me wrong, he's flying under everyone's radar—"

"Except yours," Mitch said.

"Except mine," Jessica agreed. "But on the outside, he doesn't pretend to be anyone other than a retired businessman. He even lives in a middle-class neighborhood in Sarasota, Florida, for god's sake. But Rathwell. Someone who is supposed to be trustworthy, someone who's taken a *public vow* to protect and serve." She paused and shook her head. "Well," she said on an exhale. "Regardless of what happens in my ongoing investigation into Karrol, I'm glad you brought me in on this because Rathwell—and any other officers who might be on Sussurri's payroll—need to be taken down. I hate corruption on any level."

"Based on everything you've found today, I'm glad we brought you in, too," Scarlett said, swinging her legs around and rising. "Now, I don't know about you all, but I could use a break from all this." She waved at the board. "And some food."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“SHE’LL CALL WHEN SHE HAS SOMETHING,” BRAD SAID, WATCHING SCARLETT PACE THE LIVING ROOM. Jessica had texted to let her know she’d arrived in LA, but that had been six hours ago.

“We shouldn’t have let her go,” she said.

He hadn’t seen Scarlett move so much since he’d brought her home, and he wondered if this was the turning point for her morning sickness. He hoped so but knew better than to bring it up at the moment.

“She’s not alone,” he said. “You know Chad sent Tucker down to shadow her in case she needs backup.”

Scarlett paused in front of the sliding glass door and the evening light—a combination of the setting sun and the resort lights—illuminated her from behind. With her hair pulled back into a low ponytail, her curls still rose over her shoulders, reflecting a deep amber gold.

“Has Chad heard from Tucker?” she demanded.

He held in a sigh. “Come here,” he said, holding his hand out. She eyed him, then with a huff, stepped closer. He pulled her between his legs and set his hands on her hips. “We spoke to Chad twenty minutes ago, and Jessica was fine. She made contact with Luz and the two of them were sitting down for a meal at McDonalds. Do you want me to check in with him again?”

She looked down at him, then, after a long pause, sighed. As she ran her fingers through his hair, her own body relaxed. “I’m being overanxious, aren’t I?” His lips twitched. She tweaked his earlobe. “Don’t answer that. I know I am,” she said before plopping down on the couch beside him.

He swung her feet up onto his lap and started rubbing them. “After months of not being able to figure out what happened to Gracie, you’re so close to getting justice for her. You may be anxious, but you have a reason to be.”

“Is there anything that sets you off?” she asked. He quirked a brow. “You always seem so calm. First an employee gets murdered. Then you find out I was the target. And *then* you find out that your one-night stand works

for you *and* is carrying your baby—”

“Our baby,” he corrected.

“Our baby. And then I drag you into a hunt for a killer. But you don’t ever seem to get rattled. How is that possible?”

“I told you before that I’m pretty good at knowing what’s important. You’re important. Our baby is important. The rest we’ll deal with. I also learned a lot by watching my mom and dad. They had to raise Mitch and Cody, neither of whom was an angel. They managed to keep their sanity while also keeping them both alive without hemming them in too much. As much as I sometimes *wanted* my brothers to be different, as an adult I wouldn’t have them any other way. It’s been a good lesson in picking your battles and learning to let life unfold.”

“Very Zen of you.”

He chuckled. “I don’t know about that. I can tell you, though, that if something were to threaten my family, especially you or the baby, you’d see a different side of me.” He paused as he dug his thumb into the arch of her foot. “We’re not that different, you and me. You may be anxious now, but you don’t have the kind of job you had for as long as you had it without being able to keep some perspective and a cool head.”

She tilted her head and looked at him. “It’s weird to think about my former job. I’ve only been stateside for a little more than four months, but that’s the longest I’ve been in the country since I graduated with my nursing degree.”

He considered her words, then asked a question he’d thought about often but hadn’t given voice to. “Did you do aid work because you liked it or because it gave you some sort of escape?”

She didn’t pretend to not know what he was asking. Some people traveled the world constantly for adventure, for education, for work. But sometimes, they did it to run away. To escape from something or someone. Or in Scarlett’s case, to escape from a lot of “someones.”

“I don’t know the answer to that, as it’s not black or white,” she said. “I loved what I did and had some amazing, life-shaping experiences. I’ve seen things—both bad and good—that most people can’t even imagine. I’ve traveled to places many people don’t know exist or if they know, they still can’t pronounce it. And the nature and wildlife I’ve seen...” Her eyes took on a distant light, as if sifting through all her memories. “The world is a remarkable place,” she continued. “Filled with so much natural beauty.

Timeless and ageless beauty. I used to like to watch the sunrise every morning. And every morning, especially when we worked in rural areas, I couldn't help but wonder about the generations of people who came before me. The people who stood in the same spot and watched the same sun rise. As you said, it gives you a perspective on life that's pretty special. Or at least I appreciate it."

He heard a "but" coming, and he remained silent. A full minute passed before it came.

"But when I started, I was definitely running. Running from the neighborhood I grew up in and the violence there. Running from the death of my parents that I never gave myself time to mourn. It was easier to stay on the go than to slow down and risk having some of those demons catch up to me. I think, over the years, I've worked through a lot of the trauma of growing up where I did, including losing my parents the way I did. But I don't know...getting pregnant, knowing I'm having a child of my own—that *we're* having a child—is bringing some of it all back. I know our baby will grow up in a very different world than I did. I'm grateful for that, so grateful. But I also don't know how to operate as a parent in this different world. The role models I had were great, but they were limited—by language, by culture, by finances. I want to be a good parent. I want to be a good partner. And in retrospect, I wonder if I'd slowed down a little bit more, led a more balanced life, if I'd feel more prepared?" Her gaze drifted toward the now-darkened sky visible through the slider. "Then again, is anyone ever really prepared for parenthood?"

He smiled and started to answer, but the ringing of her phone cut him off. She glanced at the number. "It's Jessica," she said before connecting the call and putting it on speaker.

"Are you all right?" she asked by way of answering.

"We're all good. I'm at Gracie's apartment with Luz," Jessica answered. "And you can tell Chad, his shadow isn't very discreet. He did a good job of blending in, but he still managed to stand out."

"I don't think Chad intended for him to be all that discreet," Brad countered.

Jessica made an indecipherable sound. "Luz is thinking about moving into the apartment," she said. "She told me that Gracie introduced her to a social worker who manages a clinic and shelter nearby. Luz likes her and has been staying there a couple of nights a week. She dislikes feeling like a

charity case, though, so the idea of having her own place appeals to her. A place close enough that she can visit, but not have to take up a bed.” Jessica paused, then added, “For as much as Luz has been through in her life—as much as she’s going through—she has a strong sense of fairness and no interest in mooching off of anyone. I think choosing to be homeless was her way of coping with that trait. If she only has herself to take care of—no home, no pets, no friends—then she doesn’t have to worry about keeping her mental karmic scales in balance. She’d never be putting anyone out, so she didn’t need to feel guilty about not being able to reciprocate.”

“It’s hers if she wants it. You know that, right?” Scarlett said.

“Yes, and that’s what I’ve relayed to her. That Gracie would have wanted her to have it. She’ll have to figure out the finances for utilities and food, but I’m thinking the social worker might be able to help her. Get her on SSD or something like that.”

“That would be amazing. Do what you think is best, and if you need anything more from me, let me know,” Scarlett replied. “Gracie didn’t have much money, but there is a little. I’d intended to use it for Luz but hadn’t figured out the best way to do that. It’s there when she needs it.”

“Hold on,” Jessica said. They heard a muffled conversation before she returned. “Luz is going to check out the block, then come back and let me know if she wants to stay.”

“Thank you for doing this,” Scarlett said. “Gracie loved her sister. Their lives took them on separate paths, and they weren’t always close, but Gracie was always there for her, and they always loved each other.”

“If any good can come of this situation, then I’m happy to help,” Jessica answered.

“Speaking of the situation, have you learned anything?” Brad asked.

“Oh, yes,” Jessica replied. “Rathwell did track Luz down just as we’d theorized. He initially only wanted to know where Gracie lived. She used a PO for all her mail and bills and those sorts of things, so was more or less off the radar.”

“She was a very private woman,” Scarlett confirmed.

“Luz said she didn’t like him. Not because he arrested her—which she remembered—but because, as she said, his eyes were dark. And she didn’t mean the color. She told me he reminded her of the bad ghosts from the stories she heard as a child. I’m not sure which stories those were, but from what I gathered, they were a Mexican version of Grimm’s fairy tales—the

darker ones. Not the child-friendly, later versions.”

“So how did he manage it?” Scarlett asked.

“The old-fashioned way, terror tactics,” she answered. “He threatened her with more jail time, then threatened to arrest Gracie. She never said what it was that finally got to her, but I think he triggered her PTSD from the sexual abuse she suffered growing up. She eventually gave him the address and the key. But as soon as he left, she tried to find Gracie to tell her. It took her a day, but she managed to get to a phone and leave a message. She wanted Gracie to know and hoped she’d change her locks. But Luz didn’t speak to her so doesn’t know if she ever got the message. For as damaged as her mind is, she has some very lucid moments.”

“At least we now know for certain that he had access to Gracie’s place. Do we know if he ever took advantage of it, though? Have you had a chance to talk to Ruth Cowen, the neighbor?” Brad asked.

“That’s next on the agenda,” Jessica replied. “I didn’t want to rush anything with Luz, so as soon as she makes a decision, I’ll either get her settled here or take her back to her tent. I’ll talk with Ms. Cowen after that.”

“I haven’t heard from Ava today about whether Rathwell was in the station when Gracie went to bail Luz out. Based on what you told us, though, I think we’re safe in assuming he was,” Scarlett said.

“Ava got pulled into something else today and promised to check tomorrow. But, yeah, he made the connection somehow, and that’s a pretty good bet as to how,” Jessica said.

“So what now?” Scarlett asked.

“Now I get Luz settled wherever it is she wants to settle. Then I talk to Ms. Cowan. After that, I grab a hotel room for the night and put in a few more hours piecing this puzzle together. If everything goes as I expect it to, I’ll come back to Mystery Lake tomorrow night. We can develop a plan to bring Rathwell down.”

“I like the sound of that,” Scarlett answered.

“I have one more question before you get back to it,” Brad said.

“Shoot,” Jessica said, then added, “But talk fast, I hear Luz coming back up the stairs to the apartment.”

“Any signs of Jason Katz? He said he wants to find Gracie’s killer, like we do. I wondered if he’s taking an interest in your activities.”

“Hmm, excellent question. But you’ll have to ask the eye candy Chad assigned to me.”

“Tucker,” Brad said, then grimaced when Scarlett shook her head rapidly. “Um, I’m not sure I was supposed to tell you his name.”

Jessica chuckled, a throaty yet gleeful sound. “So that’s the infamous Tucker.”

Brad turned to Scarlett. “What am I missing?” he mouthed.

“Later,” she mouthed back.

“So you haven’t noticed anyone?” Brad asked.

“I noticed *Tucker*. I figured if his job was to have my back, then he should have my back, and I left it to him to keep an eye on things. If anyone is trailing me—us—he’d be the one to know.”

“Okay,” Brad said, drawing out the word. He’d stepped into something, but he still wanted an answer to his question. He’d call Chad once they finished with Jessica.

“Luz is back, I’ll call you later,” Jessica said before ending the call.

Scarlett shut her phone down, then tapped the screen absentmindedly.

“What did I miss with the Tucker thing? Do I even want to know?” he asked.

“Sabina and Ava were telling her that she’s his type. She’s not interested, but I think Sabina might be playing matchmaker. Or if not matchmaker, trying to give the two of them a chance to have a little fun if nothing else.”

Brad made a face. “They’re working.”

Scarlett shrugged and shook her head. “Don’t even pretend that the way Sabina’s mind works *isn’t* a mystery to most people.”

Brad laughed at that. “That’s fair. And now that you have an update and should feel settled for at least the next thirty minutes, how about we have some dinner?”

Brad rolled over in bed the next morning to find it empty. Jerking upright, he cocked his head, listening for any sounds coming from the bathroom. He’d hoped Scarlett’s morning sickness was fading, but maybe not.

When he didn’t hear anything, he swung his legs out of bed and rose. Grabbing a pair of sweats, he tugged them on before wandering out to the living room. Where he found Scarlett curled up on the couch, phone in hand and a steaming cup of, he presumed, tea beside her.

She looked up as he walked in and smiled. “Good morning.”

“Good morning to you, too. It’s early. Is everything okay?” he asked.

“It’s fine. I just couldn’t sleep,” she answered.

Well, there was only one way to fix that, but first, he wanted to brush his teeth, use the facilities, and grab a sweatshirt.

“Give me five minutes and I’ll make you some pancakes.” Before she could answer, he returned to his room and took care of business. “What are you looking at?” he asked, reentering the room and heading toward the kitchen.

“Tabitha Henderson. I’m Googling her,” she replied.

“Finding anything interesting?” He paused behind the couch.

“She looks like a stereotype of a soccer mom,” she replied, holding her phone up. As much as Brad didn’t like to stereotype, Scarlett was spot-on. Tabitha Henderson had a round face, larger frame, and brown hair that fell to her chin. It was wavy enough to look tousled, but not enough to be called curly. She wore an oversized sweater, jeans, and ankle boots in the picture Scarlett found. She looked as if she could climb into a minivan at any moment.

“I wonder if Karrol hired her because she has some of the same qualities he does?” he mused.

“You mean no one would look at her and think she runs a prostitution service and bribes cops?”

“Yeah, that,” he said, tipping her head up and kissing her. “Good morning,” he said again.

She smiled, slid her hand into his hair, and tugged him back down. “Good morning yourself,” she said when he pulled away. “We don’t know that Karrol hired her at all. There may be layers between them, but I wouldn’t be surprised if her appearance were part of it. She sells Mary Kay, too, by the way.”

“I can’t imagine the young women who work for Sussurri would use Mary Kay, but if they did, that must come in handy,” he said, walking toward the kitchen.

“It’s also a good cover. She can explain away her income and work habits as part of the Mary Kay process.”

He hadn’t thought of that but agreed. He had no idea if Mary Kay consultants made a lot of money, but based on the media portrayal of the business, there always seemed to be the possibility of it.

They were sitting down to eat when Scarlett’s phone rang. Glancing at the screen, she frowned. “It’s Jessica,” she said before answering.

“Morning,” Scarlett said.

“I didn’t call too early, did I?” Jessica asked.

“You didn’t. We’re sitting down to breakfast. You’re on speaker in case you couldn’t tell.”

“I could, but thanks. I talked to Ms. Cowan last night,” she started.

“And?” Scarlett prompted, her hand freezing midway between her plate and the stack of pancakes.

“We were right, Rathwell did go to Gracie’s apartment. Four days before she died.”

“Ms. Cowan was able to tell you that? Down to the day?” Scarlett asked.

“She was. She remembered him. Said he had beady eyes and a cocky aura. She caught him leaving. He told her he was dropping flowers off for his girlfriend.”

Scarlett made a face. “Gracie hated cut flowers. She only liked live plants.”

“Yeah, that’s why Ms. Cowan remembered him. Didn’t think he was much of a boyfriend if he didn’t know that.”

“Is she the kind of person a judge or jury would believe?” he asked.

Jessica chuckled. “Yes. And if they didn’t, she’d have no problems telling them what an idiot they were. I’d actually like to see her under cross-examination. I’d place my money on her making the defense counsel cry.”

Brad smiled at that. He liked Ms. Cowan already. “So, do you think you’ve tied everything together now?” he asked.

“As far as Gracie’s murder is concerned, yes. The problem is, everything except what we have on video is circumstantial.”

“I know we just met, but you sound like you have a plan,” Scarlett said.

Jessica hesitated. “I do. I’ve been playing out different scenarios all night. Unfortunately, I keep coming back to one.”

Brad’s stomach pitched. He had no idea what she was going to propose, but he had a feeling he wasn’t going to like it.

“And that is?” Scarlett prompted.

“I think you need to confront him,” Jessica said. “I think you need to convince him that you’re taking up where Gracie left off.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“No,” BRAD SAID. SCARLETT SHIFTED HER GAZE FROM THE PHONE TO HIM. HIS REACTION WASN’T unexpected, but it also wasn’t helpful.

“Why is that the best way?” she asked. Brad opened his mouth to protest again, but she shot him a quelling look. His eyes sparked with frustration, but he kept his thoughts to himself. At least for now.

“He’s a criminal and a crooked cop. A man who thinks he has power and likes to wield it over anyone he can. He thinks he beat Gracie. He thinks he got away with rape and murder and that no one knows he’s on the take. If you let him know that none of that is true, it will shake him.”

“Enough to lash out and incriminate himself?” she asked.

“I think that’s highly likely, given his psychological makeup,” Jessica answered.

“Why can’t you do it?” Brad asked.

Jessica didn’t answer right away, and Scarlett knew she was giving her the opportunity to answer. With a deep breath, she did. “Because I’m Black,” she said. “And from the same neighborhood as Gracie.”

Brad’s brows dropped. “I don’t understand.”

“He will see me as powerless,” Scarlett explained. “He won’t think I’m a real threat, because what could a poor Black girl from South Central LA ever do to him? He’ll think he can bully and scare me the way he does other people he sees as beneath him. He’ll think he can treat me the same way he treated Gracie.”

Brad’s lips thinned and his jaw ticked.

“Unfortunately, it’s the truth, Brad,” Jessica said. “If I confront him, he’s going to be on the defensive. A well-known white reporter with a solid reputation and a lot of investigations and awards under my belt? He’s not going to give anything away. But if Scarlett confronts him, especially if she plays up her and Gracie’s friendship, he’s going to make assumptions about her, and he won’t feel nearly as threatened.”

“In other words, he might talk to her because he believes that even if she

had the guts to bring it to the authorities, no one would believe her anyway?" he said more than asked.

"Or that he can take care of me the same way he took care of Gracie, because no one will be bothered much by the loss of one more Black girl from the 'hood,'" Scarlett said. Then felt bad being so blunt about her possible murder when Brad turned green.

"But he won't get the chance to do any of that," Jessica jumped in. "We will set the time and location of the meeting. She'll wear a wire and we can have HICC all over the place."

Brad ran a hand over his face and crossed his arms, still unwilling to consider the option.

"Can I call you back, Jessica?" Scarlett asked, her gaze fixed on Brad.

"Of course. And please call me Jess."

"Thanks, Jess. We'll talk about it and let you know," she said, then ended the call.

They sat in silence as the pancakes grew cold. When a few minutes passed, she reached for his hand and spoke. "I want to do this. I think Jess is right and that it's the best way. It isn't only about me anymore, though." She set her other hand on her belly. "We have this little boy or girl to think about."

"We have *us* to think about, Scarlett. I hear what you and Jess are saying, but I can't wrap my mind around you confronting a man we *know* is a rapist and murderer. Of course, I don't want anything to happen to our baby. But I don't want anything to happen to *you*, either."

"It won't. Not if we do this right. Not if we do this the way Jess envisioned. I can arrange to meet him at a coffee shop, somewhere public. We can have HICC fill the place up if Chad and Sabina are willing."

"They'd be willing," he interjected.

"And I'll wear a wire. Maybe Chad and Sabina even have some federal contacts who can join in," she said.

"I'm sure they do."

She'd said what she needed to say; now she needed to give him some time to get comfortable with the idea. If he couldn't, she wasn't sure what she'd do. She *knew* it was the right approach, but was it worth risking her relationship with Brad over? She'd been focused on catching Gracie's killer for months, but as he'd said, she now had an "us" to think about. The kind of decision Jess set before them wasn't one she could make on her own.

“What happens if you *don't* do this?” he asked.

She lifted a shoulder. “I don't know. I'm sure HICC and Jess would keep working on it, would keep trying to find enough evidence to bring charges against him. But I don't know if they'd succeed. Not on the murder, anyway. Or if they did, how long it would take.”

“Or how many more people he might hurt between now and then,” Brad said, his voice quiet. “There's no certainty that this will work either, though.”

“There isn't,” she agreed. “But it is the best option.”

Again, he ran a hand over his face, then huffed out a breath. “I know we don't have a lot of time to think about this, but can you give me an hour? I need to take a walk and...”

“And consider the options,” she finished. He nodded. “Go,” she said with a nod to the door. “I'll be fine here. I'll have breakfast, clean up, then get ready for the day. Time isn't on our side, but I want you to take the time you need so that when we do decide—and we will decide together—we both come at it from a more objective place rather than an emotional one.”

Her emotions were just as involved as Brad's even if they were telling her to do the exact opposite of what his were telling him. She was ready to jump at the chance to bring Rathwell down, and time—even an hour—would be good for her, too.

He eyed her, then rose and came to her side. “I know we've barely been together two weeks, but I love you. And whatever we decide, we'll decide together,” he said, repeating her words. Then he leaned down and kissed her, a gentle, almost fragile touch of his lips to hers.

If someone had told her six months ago that she'd hear those words from a man she'd known less than a month, she would have laughed. Or run. Here in this moment, though, they came as no surprise. She had no words to explain what existed between her and Brad and couldn't even try if she wanted to. Whatever it was was buried so deep in her soul that it was a part of her, a part of her that defied description but was as real and as vital as the beat of her heart and the breath in her lungs.

“I love you, too,” she replied. “Now go take your walk and we'll talk when you get back.”

His eyes fixed on hers for a heated, taut moment, then he leaned down and kissed her again. This time more firmly and with no hesitation—as if sealing their words between them. When he pulled back, he gave her a small nod, then turned and walked away.

Brad was on the phone with his assistant rearranging a few meetings when Kara, Chad, Sabina, Ava, and Mitch showed up. Kara was there for moral support, but he wasn't sure why Mitch had tagged along. He had no ties to HICC other than Ava. Then again, maybe that was enough.

"I can move that to Friday," his assistant said.

"That's perfect," he answered. He couldn't quite wrap his mind around the fact that he was casually discussing his work schedule while Scarlett prepared to meet a killer. But anchoring himself to the future gave him something to focus on other than the anxiety clawing at his chest.

By next Friday, when he stepped into the meeting Tana was currently rescheduling, the Rathwell situation would be resolved. He and Scarlett could settle into a new routine—a routine that didn't have to take into consideration killers, drug lords, and call girls—and start exploring how they wanted to live their lives.

"The only other meeting is the staff meeting. We can either cancel that or you can have Monique run it," she said.

"Ask Monique," he replied. She was relatively new to his team, having joined the lodge a year earlier. But after the baby came, she'd have to step into his shoes when he took family leave, and he needed to give her the opportunity to start taking the reins.

"Email sent," she replied. "And that's it. Everything okay?"

No, but it would be, and that's what he told her. After thanking her, they ended the call, and he joined his family in the living room. Somewhat reluctantly.

"It will be fine," Kara said, stepping to his side as he entered.

Before Kara and Ethan married, Kara had had a killer after her. The man had already murdered several of her colleagues before setting his sights on her. To end his reign of death, she'd set herself up as bait, in much the same way Scarlett would. HICC had executed the operation flawlessly, and the man was currently serving several life sentences.

That didn't mean they might not screw up this time, though.

In his head, he trusted they wouldn't. In his head, he knew this operation was straightforward, and the chances of it going sideways weren't high. Unfortunately, even though he'd agreed to it, his heart still hadn't gotten the message.

Rather than agree with Kara—which felt like tempting fate—he asked

instead, “So what is the plan?”

When he’d returned from his walk, he and Scarlett had talked it through for another hour before she’d called Jessica and given her the green light. Feeling raw and needy, he’d taken Scarlett straight to their bed, leaving Jess to plot and plan with HICC. And now was the moment of truth when he’d find out how close Scarlett would need to get to a killer.

“Let me call Jess,” Sabina said, pulling out her phone. He joined Scarlett on the couch while Ava took a chair and Mitch perched beside her. Chad took the other chair, Sabina sitting on the floor in front of him, and Kara grabbed the last seat on the couch.

The ringing of Jess’s phone—on speaker—filled the room. Once, twice, then she picked up.

“Are we ready?” she asked.

“Ready,” Sabina confirmed. “We’re with Brad and Scarlett. Kara, Ava, and Mitch are here, too.”

Something creaked in the background, and the sound of a man clearing his throat came over the line. “I’m here, too,” Tucker said.

The fact that they were together didn’t surprise him—after all, Tucker would be the lead operative—but the creak, one that sounded suspiciously like the headboard of a bed, did. And judging by the way Sabina’s eyebrows shot up, and both Ava and Chad smirked, it didn’t escape their notice, either.

Sabina cleared her throat, mimicking Tucker. “Great. Jess, do you want to tell Scarlett and Brad the plan?”

Without preamble, she jumped in. “He frequents a coffee shop at three every afternoon when he’s on duty. It’s called the Lima Bean—the beans all come from Peru, if you’re wondering—and that is where we’ll set the meeting up. He’ll take note that we’ve picked his go-to spot, and it will intrigue him rather than alarm him.”

“How can you be sure?” Brad asked.

“I can’t. But I’ve known enough people like Rathwell that I’m pretty confident in saying he’ll view our choice of location as a missed shot.”

“What does that mean?” Brad asked. He was *not* cut out for this shit.

“He’ll see it as a shot across the bow, which it is. But because it’s his turf, he’ll believe we’ve made a misjudgment rather than a calculated one,” she replied.

“Like we’re smart enough to know his favorite coffee shop, but not smart enough to recognize that meeting in a place he’s familiar with, and where he

knows people, will disadvantage us?" he clarified.

Scarlett nodded. "It will make him cocky," she said. "It will make him think we don't know what we're doing."

"Exactly," Jess confirmed. "Tucker and two other operatives will be there, along with the four Feds you conjured up, Chad," Jess said. "Everyone will wander in between the hours of two and three. The HICC folks will come in alone, but the Feds will pair off and arrive in twosomes."

Brad took Scarlett's hand in hers as Jess continued.

"Scarlett will arrive five minutes after Rathwell, which will give him time to get a coffee and find a seat. Once she's seated, she'll set a bottle that looks like the one he contaminated, the apartment key, and Gracie's phone on the table."

"I can't wait to see his reaction," Sabina said, sounding more bloodthirsty than he'd ever heard her.

"He may not react at all, but I agree, I think he will, and it will be interesting which path he chooses. But regardless of whether he laughs at you, Scarlett, or threatens you, you need to stay focused on your message," Jess said.

"Which will be that I'm blackmailing him with the video but that I also know what he did to Gracie so I'm throwing that into the mix, too," she said.

"Spot-on. Have a good story as to why you need the money, because if he asks, you need to have one on hand. If you're blackmailing him and don't know why, it will raise flags."

"She could always say it's none of his business," Brad suggested.

"She could," Jess agreed. "But she'd have to be able to pull that off. It might be easier to come up with something."

"I'll tell him I want out of my life of constant travel, and I have my eye on a cute bungalow in Venice Beach," Scarlett said. "It might also put him at ease because he'll think I plan to stay in the area."

"Making it easy to eliminate you the same way he did Gracie," Ava said with a nod. "Nice, I like it. Another way to make him think you haven't thought through everything."

"And then?" Brad asked.

"And then I get him talking," Scarlett said.

"That easy?" he asked.

She tipped her head in an "I don't know" gesture. "I have a lot of experience getting people to open up and talk to me. I don't know if it will

work on Rathwell, but that's the point of this whole exercise. Let him think I'm playing out of my league so that he feels safe in talking to me."

"And by talking, you mean threatening you," Brad said, the words leaving a bad taste in his mouth.

"Maybe," Scarlett agreed.

"Remember, it won't matter if he does because he won't have a chance to follow through," Jess interjected. "Based on the video, the Feds were able to get a warrant for his arrest and he won't be allowed to walk out of the coffee shop on his own. That's why they're there. Scarlett will also be wearing a wire, and we'll all hear if he confesses to anything else. Even if he doesn't, though, they have him on the assault and corruption charges."

It all sounded, well, not easy, but simple. He hoped they weren't tempting fate by being so certain. Again, logically, he knew that didn't make sense. But logic—his logic—had fled the building when he'd agreed with the plan.

"I get him to talk and then what?" Scarlett asked.

"Once it looks like he's done talking, or if it looks like it's not going the way we planned, the Feds will move in. He'll be armed, of course, but he'd be a fool to try anything. That said, I think it's wise if everyone on the inside wears a vest," Jess said.

He presumed she referred to Kevlar vests. They wouldn't be much help if someone took a shot to the head, but he supposed they were better than nothing. He ran his fingers through his hair and squeezed the back of his neck. He couldn't believe he'd agreed to have the woman he loved—and their baby—involved in this. But bringing Gracie's killer to justice was important to Scarlett—and he admired the hell out of her for her loyalty to her friend. Getting Rathwell off the streets where he couldn't hurt any more people was important, too.

"We'll have JJ give you some coaching on how to guide the conversation," Chad said, referring to the psychologist that HICC had on an on-call contract. She'd helped with a number of their past cases and between her career with the FBI, her education, and her experience, she was an impressive, and effective, woman.

"I'm not sure who that is, but if you think I should talk to her, I will," Scarlett replied. Chad already had his phone out texting the doctor.

"Okay, now the elephant in the room," Brad said. He didn't want to ask the next question, but he needed to know the answer. "When are we doing

this?"

A beat of silence filled the room, then Jessica answered. "Tomorrow."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

SCARLETT WALKED DOWN THE BLOCK TOWARD THE LIMA BEAN, CONSCIOUS OF THE WIRE SHE WORE despite its small size. The technology had improved since all the movies she'd seen with people wearing actual wires. Today, she sported only a pair of clear glasses—which gave those not in the shop visual surveillance—and a necklace that acted as a mic. Both transmitted by Bluetooth, and Ava was on deck to provide a backup connection on the off chance Rathwell had a jammer. It wasn't likely he'd be carrying one, but they weren't taking any chances.

Taking a deep breath, she opened the door of the coffee shop, and the smell of the brew hit her, wrapping around her body and filling her lungs. Nausea washed through her—the one factor they hadn't made a contingency for, and she forced herself to breathe slow and deep. Mixed with the overwhelming smell of coffee, she made out the scents of cinnamon, yeast, and sugar, all much more palatable to her stomach. Focusing on those smells to the extent she could, she scanned the shop. She had no idea who any of the Feds or HICC operatives were, but she spotted Jessica right away. Sitting at a table with her back to her, she was doing a crossword and drinking a cup of coffee. And right behind her, facing Scarlett in a two-person booth, was Rathwell.

His gaze scanned the shop, passing over her once before coming back. She gave him a little nod, then started toward him. He assessed her as she crossed the floor, and she did the same. Dressed in his uniform, he had his dark hair gelled back and his thin lips tipped up with a cocky welcome as she approached. She'd intentionally dressed down and wore a pair of Chuck Taylors, jeans with a hole in the knee, and a wool peacoat that had seen better days. She smiled to herself when she saw the flash of dismissal in his dark eyes—he'd made his snap judgment about her, as they'd thought—hoped—he would.

“Rathwell,” she said, stopping at his table. He held her gaze, then gestured for her to sit. She took a beat before complying.

“I understand you have some information on the death of Gracie Lopez?” he asked. She wondered if he even noticed he’d used her nickname rather than her full name.

“I do. She was murdered,” Scarlett said, repeating what she’d told him when she’d asked for the meeting.

“Her death was ruled an accidental overdose, fentanyl. I looked up the report after you called me,” he replied. He hadn’t looked up jack shit, she was certain of that.

Instead of saying anything, though, she reached into her pocket and pulled out the key. Setting it on the table, she then reached in and pulled out a bottle of sleeping pills, placing it beside the key.

A muscle in Rathwell’s temple ticked.

Then finally, she set Gracie’s phone between them. “There was an interesting file someone deleted from her phone,” she said.

Rathwell’s face went rigid, but he didn’t otherwise react.

“Interesting, the report said they’d found nothing on the device,” he replied.

She tipped her head. “They didn’t know where to look.”

A disdainful smile teased his lips. “And you did?”

She shrugged and looked away. “I have friends who know about these sorts of things.”

He let out a low, condescending laugh. “Right,” he said.

She let the silence fill the space between them for a good minute before she spoke again. “See, what I think happened is that after you raped Gracie, she tried to blackmail you and you killed her.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Interesting theory.”

“You know, she hated cut flowers. Only liked live plants.”

A beat passed as he processed the comment, then his eyes narrowed. “And this matters why?”

“Because you messed up. You said you brought her flowers the day you used this key”—she set her index finger on the item—“to get into her apartment and add a single fatal fentanyl pill to this container”—she shifted her finger to the small plastic bottle. “You probably even removed a few of the pills so that the fentanyl would fall into her palm, and into her mouth, sooner rather than later.”

“Again, an interesting theory.” His voice was steady, but his gaze darted between the items on the table. “But I never knew or met Graciella Lopez.”

Scarlett eyed him, letting the silence drag out. He made no move to fill it, and she had to give him kudos for that. After more than a minute passed, she sighed.

“So that’s the way you want to play it?” she said.

“I’m not playing at anything,” he replied. “I’m here because you said you had information on her death. As a cop, it’s my duty to follow up on a claim like that. It doesn’t look like you have anything more than a work of fiction that you’ve strung together.”

“You really didn’t know her?” she asked.

He shook his head. “I saw pictures of her, though. In her case file. Beautiful woman.”

And there she saw it, a flicker of gleeful deceit in his eyes. And a hint of assured power. He thought he held all the cards, and he was enjoying it.

“And you never met her?” she asked.

Again, he shook her head. “Look, I don’t know what you’re trying to do here...”

His voice faded as she brought out another phone. She tapped a few buttons, then slid the device across the table to him. “I’ve muted it so as not to scare the other patrons,” she said.

Rathwell studied her, a shadow of doubt easing its way into his gaze. Then his eyes dropped to her phone. Where the video of his assault played out before him.

His preservation instincts kicked in and he grabbed the device. He frantically started pressing buttons, no doubt trying to erase the file again.

She watched for a second, then laughed. “Go ahead and erase it the same way you erased the one on Gracie’s phone. I have copies. So many copies.”

Sweat broke out on his brow, and his breathing grew shallow. “What do you want?” he said, shoving the phone back at her. “Money? Is that it? The same thing your whore of a friend wanted?”

Scarlett pocketed the phone and tipped her head, as if considering her answer. “Maybe,” she finally said, then again, she let the silence stretch before adding, “I also want to know how you got into her apartment and where you got the fentanyl. If your solution to blackmail is to kill the blackmailer, I should better understand how you tick, Officer Rathwell. And it *is* ‘officer,’ right? Not ‘detective’?”

His jaw clenched so tight that she wondered if he cracked any teeth. Contrary to Jessica’s initial report, Ava had discovered that he *had* taken the

detective's exam. Twice in the past year. And failed both times. Something the arrogant prick wouldn't want anyone to know. Sure, she was poking the bear. But if any man ever deserved to be played with, to be toyed with, it was him.

"Or I could tell you and you could let me know if I'm right. Let me know if I've figured you out," she suggested, leaning forward a bit. His eyes darted up to hers, and she smiled. "You're not complex, Rathwell. Men like you? Men who prey on the weak and vulnerable because it gives you a sense of power when in reality, you have none? You're a dime a dozen in the world I grew up in. You may wear a uniform, but I assure you, you're not that different from the street thugs and gang members Gracie and I grew up around. You have a huge ego and nothing to back it up, so you go after those who can't fight back. And when someone like Tabitha Henderson, someone with *real* power, comes along and pulls you into their circle, you feel important. Like you've finally made it. It validates what you've known about yourself all along, that you *are* powerful. Otherwise, she wouldn't have come to you, right?"

A young couple walked by, and she stopped talking as they passed. The smell of their coffee had her stomach turning, but she managed to breathe through it again. When they took a seat several tables away, she continued.

"But the thing is, you're an open book to people like Tabby. She doesn't *need* you. She never did. But she sure as shit could *use* you. All she had to do was give you a tiny crumb, an illusion of power, and in your weakness, you'd grab on to it and claim it a victory." Scarlett paused, knowing she needed to get the conversation back on track. Back to the point where he'd talk. But she couldn't help adding one last thing. "She didn't pick you because you're powerful, Rathwell, she picked you because you're weak."

"I was stronger than your fucking friend," he shot back.

Scarlett scoffed. "Were you, though?"

He narrowed his eyes. "She's not here now," he countered.

"She's not," Scarlett agreed. "Because my 'whore of a friend' made you feel so threatened that you had to kill her. Is that really strength—or power? When someone like Gracie, a Latina woman with no connections and who grew up with nothing, could make you lash out and get reckless, well, it makes me think *she* was the one with the power. She had power and you hated it."

"She had shit," he spat. "She thought she could blackmail me. She was

wrong.”

“She might have been a little naive in how she went about it—which, frankly, knowing Gracie, surprises me—but that doesn’t mean she didn’t, that *I don’t*, have the power,” she countered, tapping her pocket with the phone in it.

“Then you better be careful with that *power* because it killed your friend.”

Scarlett tipped her head again. “No, *you* killed my friend.”

Rathwell studied her, and she let him. After a long beat, a smile flickered across his features, one that held a sinister shadow. “Like the cockroach she was,” he said, casually leaning back in his seat and picking up his coffee for the first time. “It’s amazing how easy it is to take the trash out when you know the right people.”

“People who can get you fentanyl—”

“Lifting a bag from a corner dealer is child’s play.”

“Especially if it’s in exchange for not arresting him.”

He smiled in response. “And the joy of it is, he’ll never talk. Not if he wants to stay out of jail.”

Meaning, Rathwell wasn’t worried about her finding the dealer and getting him to testify. She agreed with him on that point—it would probably never happen, although she wasn’t going to count Jessica out.

“And so easy to threaten a mentally unstable woman,” she said.

He shrugged. “Luz Lopez doesn’t know what day it is, let alone when or if she ever met me.”

“Or if she ever gave you the key to Gracie’s apartment,” she said, knowing that the others listening in would note that he’d known exactly who Gracie’s sister was without her ever saying anything.

“Even if she did remember, she’s not the sort who, as the lawyers say, is a credible witness.” He took another sip of coffee, his eyes never leaving her. When he set it down, he spoke again. “So, knowing what you know now, are you sure you want to take the same path your friend did? Are you sure you want to risk ending up dead like she did? Is it really worth it?”

“I could make the video public.”

“You could, but what would that get you? Certainly not any money. Newspapers only pay for shit on celebrities.”

“Showing the world what a true pig you are is worth it enough,” she countered.

He leaned forward as he laughed. “You’re nothing, you little bitch. You make that video public and I’ll have it and you discredited so fast that you won’t know what hit you.” He paused, then added, “And then, a few weeks after I reveal what a lying piece of trash you are, you’ll find yourself dead of an overdose that no one will question because of your pathetic life.”

“Just like Gracie,” she said on a whisper.

He inclined his head. “Just like Gracie.”

Scarlett paused, wondering if she’d gotten enough information for the Feds to use against Rathwell, or if she should keep him talking. As if sensing her thoughts, she saw the back of Jessica’s head tip toward the doorway.

She breathed a sigh of relief knowing it would soon be over. Before she walked out, though, there was one more thing she needed to say.

“I see your point, Rathwell,” she said. “But you should know that right now, a friend of mine is having coffee with your wife somewhere across town.”

“My *wife*?” he demanded. “What the hell does my *wife* have to do with any of this?” That comment gave her pause. Not because she didn’t have an answer, but because she had to admit, out of all the things Rathwell had said in the past thirty minutes, that was almost the most outrageous. How could the fact that he was a corrupt cop who lifted drugs from dealers in exchange for not arresting them, assaulted prostitutes, and murdered people *not* have something to do with his wife? The woman he’d chosen to share his life with. The woman who would likely be devastated by his actions.

“She seems like a nice woman,” Scarlett said. “So we wanted to show her the video—yes, the video—and give her a heads-up about you and everything that you might be facing in the next few days, weeks, and months.” Scarlett felt a thrill of victory—a cheap thrill, but still a thrill—when Rathwell went pale. “I wonder what kind of defense attorney you’ll be able to afford without her money?”

“I’ll fucking kill you,” he said through clenched teeth.

She’d expected that response, and she smiled and shrugged. “You were planning on doing it anyway, weren’t you?”

“I was,” he admitted. “But my timeline just accelerated.”

He had his hand under the table, and she suspected he was either reaching for his gun or had it in hand already. She didn’t love the idea of a gun being pointed at her, but she was confident he wouldn’t shoot her. Not in the coffee shop. And there were enough people around her to prevent him

from forcing her to walk out with him.

“It won’t change anything,” she said. “Your wife will still know. And you’ll be left wondering who else has the video. Is that a way you want to live?”

His head twitched to the left, as if he was having a hard time controlling his muscles. “I’m not sure I believe you,” he said. He did, although it was a good bluff.

“What you believe or don’t doesn’t change the facts,” she said. “And the facts are that you are going to be exposed for not just the murder of Gracie Lopez, but also rape, abuse of power, corruption, and all sorts of the things that my federal friends can think of.”

His breathing had grown so shallow and so rapid that she wondered if he was going to have a heart attack. She wouldn’t mourn him if he did, but she did want to see him, and his deeds, dragged into the light of day. He deserved everything that would happen to him.

“The Feds?” he asked. “How would someone like you, someone who grew up in the gutters of LA, know anyone who could do anything to me?”

She glanced up as a couple of folks started walking toward them. She’d not met any of the FBI agents Chad had brought in, but she guessed she— they—were about to.

She smiled and leaned forward. “You’d be surprised who I know,” she said. Then, pushing out of the booth, she added, “You, of all people, should know that looks rarely ever tell the full story.”

He started to rise, to follow her, but two agents stopped him.

She smiled to herself as they began reciting his Miranda rights. The Feds would take care of him now. She’d done her part and found justice for her friend.

She could all but hear Gracie cheering for her as she walked out the door and to her future.

EPILOGUE

SCARLETT LAUGHED AT SOMETHING ANTHONY SAID AS SHE SET A PLATE OF WARM MANDAZI—AN East African doughnut-like treat her mom used to make—on the table.

“She did, I swear she did,” Anthony said, doubling down on his claim that ten-month-old Maya had called him “Grampy.”

“I’m sure she did, dear,” Beth said, patting her husband’s thigh and giving him a kiss on the cheek. In her lap, Ruby made a smacking sound with her lips, and her grandfather plucked her from his wife’s lap and gave her a raspberry on her belly. Her squeal of delight caught the attention of her sister Maya, sitting across the table in her uncle Mitch’s lap. Mitch dutifully mimicked his dad, and soon both girls were filling the room with their belly laughs.

“Sit,” Brad said to her, motioning to the seat beside him. They’d just finished Christmas breakfast and were wrapping up with chai, coffee, and mandazi. They’d rest for a few hours, then meet up with the entire family at William Warwick’s home for Christmas dinner.

“I have no idea how I’m going to eat anything tonight,” she muttered to him as she sank onto the chair.

“You’re nursing. It’s the same as eating for two,” Emi Jones, Ava’s mom, said from the other end of the table. She sat with Ava on one side and her husband, Luther, on the other. Despite the famous couple sitting not twenty feet away, Scarlett only had eyes for the three-month-old bundle Emi held over her shoulder. Taye Anthony Warwick had been born right on schedule and, the nurses claimed, with a smile on his face. He’d inherited his father’s charm, of that there was no question.

“Chai?” Manvir, Tia’s father, asked, setting a mug down in front of her.

“And more mandazi,” Alma, Tia’s mother, said, setting a second plate down on the other end of the table. “I’m going to play with that recipe,” she added with a smile to Scarlett. Tia’s parents were known for their fusion Mexican-Indian food. Throwing in a little African wouldn’t be a stretch.

They'd also officially retired over the summer and moved to Mystery Lake. Scarlett wouldn't be surprised if they opened something small in their new hometown, though. Food was in their blood.

"You can slide that over here," Cody said, pointing to the plate Alma had set down. He had one hand twined with Tia's, who sat beside him, sipping her chai as she watched Mitch and Ava play with Maya. At four months pregnant, Ava was barely showing.

"Not a chance," Anthony said, snagging three of the triangular-shaped doughnuts before Beth managed to grab the plate. Beth shot her husband a look, and he shrugged. "Ski season started last month. Those high school kids are keeping me on my toes."

She rolled her eyes, set one more mandazi on his plate, then passed it to Cody.

"You okay?" Brad asked, taking her free hand in his and urging her to lean into him.

She took a sip of her spicy, sweet drink then rested her head on his shoulder. Two months ago, in exchange for a reduced sentence, Rathwell had pleaded guilty to all sorts of charges, including Gracie's murder. She hadn't loved the idea of him getting any leeway, but she was realistic enough to know that chances were, he wouldn't survive long in prison. Not that she wished him dead, but she wouldn't be sad if it happened.

Predictably, the information he provided in exchange for the reduced sentence had thrown the LAPD into chaos. In addition to the charges the Feds were pursuing against Simms for hiring Alexei Petrov and the death of Maria Abel, they were now also in the thick of a massive corruption investigation into the entire LAPD. Maybe someday, the organization would be filled with more people like Ryan and Mari than people like Rathwell and Halliwell.

Thinking of those two had her mind flitting back to the night she'd met Brad. Halliwell had paid the price for the role he'd played in everything. They had no confirmation, but she was pretty sure Katz had killed him because he'd helped Rathwell cover up Gracie's murder.

Richard Karrol was still at large, but Jessica was hot on his trail. HICC had pledged to help whenever and however she needed, and Scarlett hoped the reporter would take them up on it. She had no idea how Jess would do it, but she had complete faith that if anyone could bring Karrol down, it would be Jessica Kilkenny.

Perhaps the most surprising development since that afternoon in Lima

Bean, though, had been the letter she'd received a month later. At little more than a paragraph, Lupita had simply thanked her for being Gracie's friend. She also explained that she'd tried, for years, to help Gracie get sober, but that Gracie had always insisted on going at it on her own. Though short, the letter ached with regret. And love. It hadn't been until three days later that Scarlett realized something—in Spanish "Lupita" referred to the river of the wolf. She had no proof, of course, but her heart told her they'd been wrong all along. The Wolf wasn't a man. The Wolf was a woman who had loved Gracie deeply.

She hadn't shared her insight with anyone other than Brad, and they'd agreed that unless it became relevant, no one else needed to know. Despite the Wolf's reputation, Scarlett found comfort in knowing that Gracie had had someone else who'd loved her. Even if she hadn't been able to accept that love.

"Better than," she said, answering Brad's question as her gaze drifted around the table. With twelve adults and three babies, she'd never had such a big Christmas before. And dinner would be even crazier when everyone got together. It was the kind of family Gracie would have wanted. The kind of family Gracie would want for her.

On some days, they were a bit much. Most of the time, though? She loved it. Loved them. And she loved that their son would grow up with this remarkable family. With *their* remarkable family.

Her gaze lingered on Maya, bouncing on her uncle's lap, her dark hair curling down her brow and her deep, dark eyes alight with laughter.

"You want another?" Brad asked quietly. "Maybe a little girl?"

She rolled her head and looked up at him. "We have no control over that, and you know it," she said with a smile.

"Not the gender, no."

She chuckled. "You just want to get lucky."

"I already am lucky," he said, putting an arm around her and kissing the top of her head. "But I wouldn't mind putting our little bundle of joy down for a nap and spending a few hours naked with my wife. Burn a few calories so we can fit dinner in tonight."

Her body hadn't been her own since Taye was born. He was an easygoing baby, but he liked to eat. Frequently. And be held. The idea of spending a few hours reconnecting with Brad and her own body again appealed to her. If only she wasn't so exhausted.

As if reading her mind, Brad leaned over so only she could hear what he said. “It would make my Christmas if you lay back and let me take care of you.”

Despite the new-parent fatigue weighing on her, her body responded to his words. They were what she’d needed to hear. “You always do,” she said, and it wasn’t a lie. Even when she initiated things and took control, he *always* made sure she was more than taken care of.

He shifted in his seat, and she let out a soft laugh. Untangling her hand from his, she set it on his thigh, then let her fingers drift north. With the tablecloth covering them, no one would see. Even so, Brad’s hand came down on hers.

“I can either embarrass myself right here in front of everyone, or we can leave. Your choice, babe.”

She sat up, using the motion to sink her hand deeper between his thighs. He sucked in a breath and met her gaze. “I talked to your mom this morning before we left the apartment,” she said. “She and your dad are going to take Taye for the rest of the day.”

His pupils dilated as her hand curled around his inner thigh. “Have you been planning to have your way with me all day then?” he asked.

She smiled. “Maybe a time or two. Although we should have time for a nap, too.”

He glanced at the clock on the wall, no doubt calculating exactly how much time they had before they had to reconvene. Abruptly, he rose, taking her hand back in his and hauling her up alongside him.

“We’re headed out,” he announced. Conversation stopped, and everyone looked at them. Even Eleanor and John, Cody and Tia’s cat, raised their heads from where they’d been sleeping under the Christmas tree.

“Oh, I recognize that face,” Cody said before turning to his parents. “You’re taking Taye so they get sexy alone time, aren’t you?” he accused, eyeing them.

Anthony shrugged. “We’re simply taking our grandson home to spend some time with him. How Brad and Scarlett spend their time is up to them. Although I wouldn’t say no to a second new grandchild by this time next year,” he added, flashing Ava a smile.

Beth elbowed him. “What?” he demanded. “You were the one who suggested it.”

“I did no such thing,” Beth said, although even Scarlett could tell she

was lying.

“On that note,” Brad said, “thank you, Cody and Tia, for hosting, and to everyone for the food you made.” He dragged her around the table as he spoke, stopping behind Emi. “Be good for Grammy and Grampy, Taye. We’ll see you in five hours and thirty-seven minutes.” Then he kissed his son’s head.

Scarlett did the same, inhaling his sweet scent before straightening and looking around the table. Brad tugged her hand, but she held her ground, if only for a moment. “Thank you all, for everything. For welcoming me, for loving us. For, well everything. This is the best Christmas I’ve ever had.”

“And about to get better if my brother has anything to say about it,” Mitch muttered.

She smiled and winked at him. “He hasn’t disappointed me yet,” she said, making the table fill with chuckles. “And you never know, maybe by this time next year, we’ll have two more little ones.”

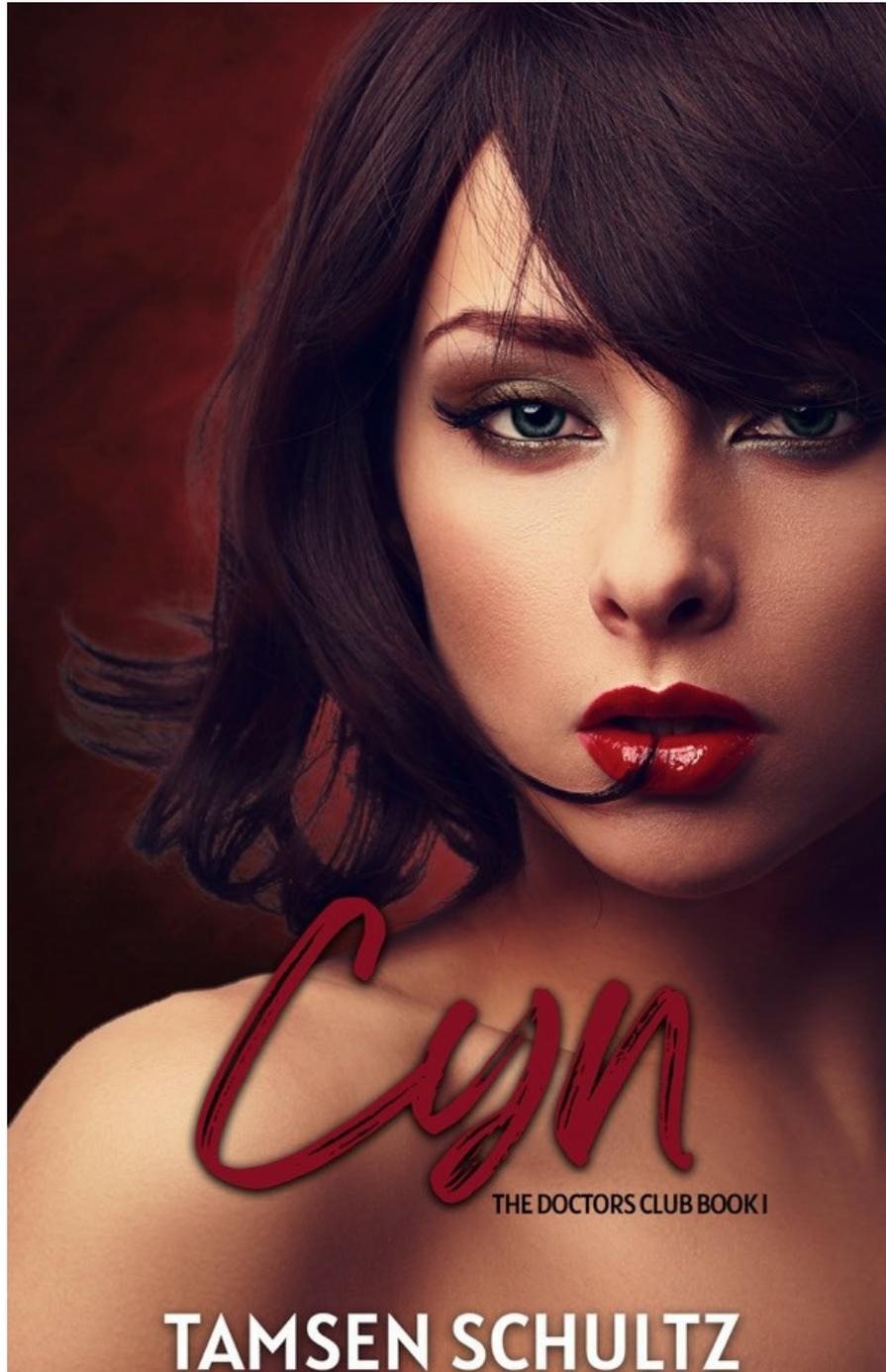
Anthony let out a “woo-hoo,” and Alma and Manvir graced her with an indulgent, happy look. She didn’t hear what anyone else said, though. Intent on making the most of their five hours and thirty-seven—thirty-six—minutes alone together, Brad was already dragging her out the door.

And she had no intention of complaining. Not even a little bit.

Coming Soon: Vindictive, Mystery Lake Series #9

Charlotte Warwick is happy focusing on the company she and her sister started and leaving men as little more than a distant afterthought. Her last boyfriend did a doozy on her and although she knows she'll recover, she's in no rush. Not even when the sexy Noah Streak—AKA Mantis—walks into her life. In her mind, the president of the local motorcycle club is the *last* man she should get involved with. Noah has other ideas, though, and when they discover not one, but two bodies, and discover a puzzle more than 150 years old, he's not above using the mystery as a chance to win her over. But when a very recent crime collides with that of the past, they find themselves caught in a tangle of greed, jealousy, and deceit, and turning to each other—trusting each other—will be the only way to survive.

EXTRACT OF CYN
#1 Doctors Club Series



A dead body, a dubious admirer, and an explosive conclusion is just another day at the office for Cyn Steele.

A body in the driveway of her seaside mansion is the last thing Dr. Cyn Steele expected to find when she returned home from a trip abroad. It's not

the first time she's seen a dead man, it's not even the fiftieth. But it is the first time one has been left as a calling card. Is it a warning or a message? She doesn't know, but the sexy new chief of police is more than interested in helping her figure it out.

When Joe Harris accepted the position as chief of police for the small town of Cos Cob, he was expecting jaywalking tickets and the occasional fender bender. He was not expecting body dumps, Somali pirates, or the whirlwind that is Cyn Steele. And while he'd rather forgo the first two, spending time with Cyn is definitely no hardship.

Unraveling the message of the body takes a dark twist when Cyn and Joe discover the young man's ties to some rather unsavory people—people intent on wreaking havoc on the city of Boston just as it celebrates a beloved national holiday. It's a race against time that takes them from Massachusetts to East Africa and back again. Failure is not an option, even if it costs them their lives.

EXCERPT

Early December
Massachusetts

CYN STEELE SWUNG HER FEET UP ONTO HER DESK AND LEANED BACK IN HER CHAIR. JUGGLING two Rubik's Cubes in her hands, she eyed her target on the other side of the room as the speakerphone beside her droned on—and on and on. Well, to be precise, the *phone* didn't drone, but her uncle did.

“And that's why it's impossible for you to resign, Hyacinth,” he said, using her dreaded—and no longer legal—first name as he brought his argument to a close. “You were well aware of the obligations you'd be held to when you agreed to your extension. It wouldn't do to renege.”

Uncle Franklin wasn't just her uncle, he also happened to be her handler for the work she did with MI6. And because she was his favorite niece, most of the time he was putty in her hands. Most of the time.

“I told you, Uncle, my heart isn't in it anymore,” she said, her attention on the small trampoline hanging on the wall twenty feet away. If she threw the Rubik's Cube with the right amount of force, and hit it at the right angle, it would bounce off the target and come back to her.

“Be that as it may, my dear, you made a commitment,” her uncle replied.

She threw one of the Cubes and hit dead center, but then it bounced far off to her right. She grimaced. It must have rotated in flight and hit the trampoline on a corner.

“*Commitment*, Uncle? We're usually much further into a conversation before that word comes out.”

“Hyacinth.”

“Cyn,” she corrected.

“Hyacinth.”

She let out a dramatic sigh and eyed the second Cube in her hand. Three years ago, her friend Violetta Salvitto—better known as Six—had given her the pair for Christmas. Cyn had yet to solve the puzzle, but she was certain that whenever she got close, her friends—Six, Devil, and Nora—rearranged the stickers. When solving it became a Sisyphean task, she'd changed the game and hung the trampoline. It was much more fun to throw things anyway.

“You would have me do the work even though my heart isn't in it?” she asked. The question was ridiculous. They were British. The heart had nothing to do with it. The *Great Families of England* always did their part to protect

queen (or king) and country. The Steele family had counted themselves among that blessed lot since the days of Henry VIII.

Franklin let out his own sigh. “Just don’t make any reckless decisions,” he said. “We both know that’s a bit of a challenge for you, but it’s all I ask. Go home for the holidays. Spend Christmas and Boxing Day at Greyswood with your family,” he said, referring to the ancestral estate. “If you still have the same opinion when you return, we will revisit this conversation.”

“Aren’t you joining the family this year?” she asked. Franklin was her father’s youngest brother. He had no partner or children of his own and was, more often than not, taken into the fold of his eldest brother’s family.

“I am not. I have some concerns I need to attend to down here.”

Franklin lived in Florida of all places. Although why that always struck Cyn as odd, she didn’t know. Maybe because it was hard to see her uncle in a pair of shorts and a T-shirt. Not that she ever *had* seen him in that attire, but she assumed he must don it every now and then.

“I’ve already booked my ticket,” she said. “I leave December twentieth and will return January fifth.”

“You’re missing New Year’s with your little club?” Franklin asked with dramatic—though sincere—shock. She, Six, Devil, and Nora had been thick as thieves since their first day of boarding school in Switzerland at the age of twelve. When Cyn had earned her PhD many years ago, Six had named their group the Doctors Club—Devil with her MD, Nora with her DVM, and Six with her JD rounded out the titles. Now they just referred to themselves as *the club* since it sounded less pretentious, if only a little bit.

But Franklin, being a long-standing member of the board of trustees of the unique boarding school she and her friends had attended, had known them as long as she had, and adored them almost as much as she did. And given that the women were all now thirty-eight, her friends were like daughters to him. Not to mention the fact that, per some secret agreement she wasn’t entirely privy to, he also served as the handler for the three of them since they were all foreign intelligence agents for their own governments. Yes, the school they’d attended had been special; who knew a school designed to develop future women intelligence officers operated in a secluded valley in the Alps?

“You are more than welcome to come ring the New Year in and shake that booty with the family, Uncle,” Cyn said. “I know you get your freak on after a drink or two.” She grinned as she spoke, imagining the look on his face.

“Hyacinth,” he said on a breath. “To be sure, I don’t have the slightest clue

what that even means.”

“Sure you don’t, Franky,” she said, infusing her voice with a Boston accent. She’d been living in the Boston area for twenty years and had an ear for languages. She had the accent down pat and, more to the point, knew it annoyed her uncle.

He sighed again. “Why must you try to bait me? It hasn’t worked in all these years. I would think you’d simply accept that it never will.”

To be fair, he had a point. *Nothing* riled Uncle Franklin. But still, a girl could dream. “You always praise me for my tenacity, don’t eat your words now,” she said.

“Hyacinth.”

He might not get riled, but he did have a line she didn’t wish to cross, and she was close to it now. She set the second Rubik’s Cube on her desk and leaned closer to the phone. “I’ll think about my future as an agent while I’m stuffing myself full of rich food and drinking far too much.”

It wasn’t a promise, but since she had zero plans to think about work while on holiday, she had intentionally avoided that word. There was no question her uncle would pick up on her deliberate answer, but she was thirty-eight, shouldn’t her life be her own? Sure, when she was younger, the excitement of getting called into a job fed the adrenaline junky in her. But now? She wasn’t exactly interested in settling down, but she was getting tired of her government telling her when to jump and how high. Besides, she liked her job—her day job. Teaching archeology at the local university was fun. Some people might bemoan the younger generation, but Cyn found them endlessly entertaining in so many ways.

“You’ll regret the drinking part,” Franklin said.

A little tension left Cyn’s shoulders at Franklin’s willingness to drop the subject and she let out a low laugh. “I always do, Franklin. I always do.”

CHAPTER ONE

CYN FLICKED HER WIPERS ON AGAIN, CLEARING A FEW FLAKES OF THE ICY JANUARY SNOW FROM HER windshield. She loved almost everything that came with living in Cos Cob, the waterfront community located a little over an hour north of Boston where she and her friends resided. But she did not like it when the snow fell at the precise rate of being just enough to make it difficult to see through her windshield yet not enough that using the wipers had any impact other than to create streaks across the window. Thankfully, she was

only a few minutes from home and would soon be out of the elements.

As she turned onto the coastal highway that would lead her to her home five miles up the way, her phone rang. Glancing at the screen on her dash, she smiled when she saw Nora's name.

"Hello, darling," Cyn said, after connecting the call.

"Are you home yet?" Nora asked without preamble. Cyn might have been gone for sixteen days, but there was no need for pleasantries—she and the rest of the club talked nearly every day.

"Five miles," Cyn answered. Nora was the worrier of the group—well, that wasn't exactly right. She was the caretaker of their lot, and she'd wanted to know when Cyn had landed, when she was on her way home, and when she actually arrived.

"Glad you missed the storm this morning," Nora said, obviously deciding to keep Cyn company for the last leg of her journey. "I'm surprised Logan wasn't backed up with delays."

A nasty winter storm had blown into town the night before and blown right on out by ten that morning, leaving eighteen inches of snow in its wake.

"We landed on time, but it took a bit for a gate to open for us," Cyn answered. "It's good to be home."

"Your visit was pleasant?"

Cyn smiled at Nora's question. Raised in Jordan, Nora was the only daughter of a very prominent businessman who had dealings in about every precious commodity there was. Cyn knew for a fact that when Nora visited her family, it was, indeed, "pleasant."

"We ate and drank too much. Daisy pretty much lap-danced her husband every night—they are trying to get pregnant, and she's taken to encouraging his amorous activities to the extremes," Cyn answered, referring to her older sister. "And Ash was convinced I'd made up all the sudoku and crossword puzzles because he was incapable of completing any of them," she said about her brother.

"Did you?"

Cyn grinned in the dark of her car. "Maybe once or twice. He threw me to the wolves with Mum and Dad, so I had to get back at him somehow."

"I take it they are still waiting with bated breath for you to settle down?"

"They are," Cyn confirmed. "You'd think with Daisy married and getting ready to propagate the Steele line that they'd be happy with that. But, of course, they aren't."

“I would think Ash, as the heir, would be the one they’d harass.”

Cyn’s mind went to thoughts of her brother as she navigated the curvy road north. Occasionally, she caught glimpses of the Atlantic Ocean to her right, but the woods were thick in this part of the state and the vast stretch of water only peeked through in teasing intervals. As to her brother, Ash might be the heir to the family title and the only one to actually be able to carry on the name of Steele—according to the rules of primogeniture—but her parents had long ago given up on him. And with Daisy married, they had, with Ash’s encouragement, turned their sights on her—their youngest.

“Yes, well, we know how logical my parents are.” They weren’t. Not in the least. Alistair and Aurora Steele might be a marquess and marchioness, and might run a not-insignificant business empire, but at home, you’d think they’d stepped right out of a hippie commune. Which was another factor that made their apparent obsession with grandkids so weird. They’d always encouraged their three offspring to live their lives, stand on their own, and be their own people. Yada yada yada. Falling into the cliché role of desperate wannabe grandparents had thrown Cyn, Daisy, and Ash for a loop. Then again, maybe that had been her parents’ plan.

“All quiet here?” Cyn asked as she stopped at the stop sign at the intersection of Cos Cob’s Main Street and the state highway. To her left, Main Street stretched eight blocks before turning back into a rural road that wound its way west. But those eight blocks were lined with colonial style buildings, housing everything from restaurants and art galleries to the more practical merchants like a pharmacy, food co-op, and bookstore. While her chosen hometown was always charming, with a recent snowfall and Christmas lights still hanging, this time of year was especially delightful.

“Isn’t it always?” Nora answered.

Cyn eased forward through the intersection. The roads had been cleared from the earlier snowstorm, but during her first winter in the Northeast, she’d learned about that sneaky little bastard otherwise known as black ice. “You almost sound a little put out by that, Nora-luv. Everything all right?” Cyn replied as she continued north. Her house was the last house within the city limits and was another mile up the road.

Nora hesitated, then sighed. “Everything’s fine. I found a litter of abandoned puppies this morning and you know how I get about stuff like that.”

Cyn’s heart clenched. Nora attracted strays and helpless creatures like

other people attracted mosquitos in the summer, and while Cyn had a hard time understanding how someone could dump a litter of puppies, let alone do it in the dead of winter, Nora would feel it ten times more. “Are they going to...?” She didn’t want to finish her sentence, but the chances of a helpless litter of puppies surviving unprotected in this weather wasn’t high.

“I have them in the warmer. They seem hardy and hopefully they’ll make it, but it’s too early to tell.” That was Nora in a nutshell—she had a bigger heart than the other three of them combined yet still had an innate ability to stay grounded and pragmatic.

“Well, I’ll come by to see them. Maybe Auntie Cyn will bring a toy or two.”

“There are nine of them. You better bring more than two. Devil and Six brought cozy fleece blankets and extra bottles, so you have some competition in the *favorite auntie* category, too.”

“They beat me there on purpose, didn’t they?” As she spoke, she passed the turnoff to Six’s house and Cyn shot a glare in her direction for good measure.

“Maybe. Probably.” Nora chuckled. “You’re always the first one to show up with treats for my strays. I guess the only way they could beat you was when you were out of the country.”

Cyn gave a dramatic sigh. “I suppose I’ll have to live with that. I will come by tomorrow, though, and we’ll have a good chin-wag.”

“Are you home now?” Nora asked.

“Nearly to my drive. Thanks for keeping me company, luv.”

“Anytime. See you tomorrow and sleep well.”

“I always do,” Cyn replied, then disconnected the call. Less than a minute later, her driveway came into view. The state highway curved to the west, and drivers often mistook her driveway for a road because it continued straight. For that reason, she’d put a bright yellow gate fifteen feet up her drive and had her groundswoman keep an area cleared for people to turn around if they accidentally went straight instead of turning with the highway.

As her wheels transitioned from the pitted and uneven state-maintained road to her recently paved one, the cabin of her car quieted. Hitting a button on her Bluetooth display, the flimsy gate opened. It wouldn’t really keep anyone out, and it wasn’t meant to—*that* gate was farther up her drive—but it was, generally speaking, enough to let the accidental tourist know that they’d made a wrong turn.

Pulling through as the arm opened, she paused on the other side. Watching in the rearview mirror until the gate latched behind her, she then eased her foot off the brake and continued forward. Her jet-lagged body clock was telling her it wasn't quite yet nine, so she wasn't too tired. That didn't stop her from dreaming of her bed and its big, fluffy down comforter, though, as she drove toward the main gate of her property. The one that was actually intended to keep people out. Or, she supposed, in.

She rounded a bend, and the tops of the wrought-iron structure came into view, bringing with it a familiar feeling of belonging. Her house might be big enough to fit her entire family and then some, but it was home.

Smiling to herself, she let her mind wander in anticipation. Soon, she'd park in her warmed garage, then traipse in through her mudroom. Dan, her personal chef, would have a light meal and a good bottle of wine waiting for her. No doubt, the gas fireplace would be on as well.

Thoughts of having a small bite to eat and a nice glass of wine were dancing in her head when she rounded the last bend before the gate. Finally, it came into full view, all twenty-feet-long-by-twelve-feet-high of it. A utilitarian fence ran the perimeter, but the gate itself was a work of art, literally. A local metal artist had designed and built it for her. Sure, many aspects of her life made her need to be extra cautious about security, but that didn't mean that security had to be ugly.

She smiled as her eyes traced the top lines then fell down the center to the big faux keyhole. She was reaching for the button on her Bluetooth display that would trigger the opening mechanism when something caught her eye. She hesitated, squinting through the windshield. Stopped so close to the gate, her headlights were too high to shed any light on the form propped along the bottom and she couldn't quite discern what it was. Switching off the headlights, she turned her fog lights on, immediately illuminating the ground area.

She stilled and stared.

Then cocked her head and stared some more.

When she'd first seen the form, she'd thought maybe one of her friends had left her something and just hadn't bothered driving all the way to the house to drop it. But as warped as her friends were—well, particularly Six—none of them would have left what she now recognized was waiting for her.

No, her friends might still have the capacity to surprise her, but there was no way in hell they would have left her a dead body.

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