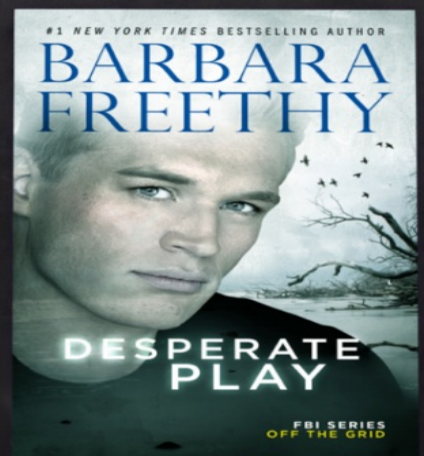
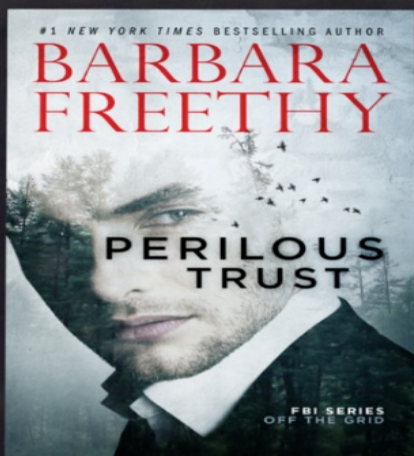


#1 New York Times Bestselling Author

BARBARA FREETHY

OFF THE GRID FBI SERIES

Books 1-3

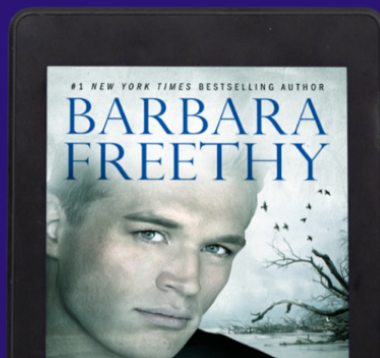
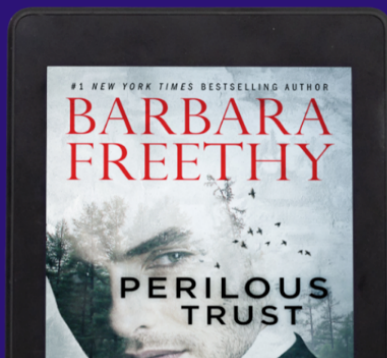


#1 New York Times Bestselling Author

BARBARA FREETHY

OFF THE GRID FBI SERIES

Books 1-3





OceanofPDF.com

Off The Grid: FBI Series

Books 1-3

Perilous Trust
Reckless Whisper
Desperate Play

BARBARA FREETHY



Fog City Publishing

CONTENTS

Also by Barbara Freethy

Perilous Trust

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Epilogue

Reckless Whisper

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

[Chapter 9](#)
[Chapter 10](#)
[Chapter 11](#)
[Chapter 12](#)
[Chapter 13](#)
[Chapter 14](#)
[Chapter 15](#)
[Chapter 16](#)
[Chapter 17](#)
[Chapter 18](#)
[Chapter 19](#)
[Chapter 20](#)
[Chapter 21](#)
[Epilogue](#)

[Desperate Play](#)

[Chapter 1](#)
[Chapter 2](#)
[Chapter 3](#)
[Chapter 4](#)
[Chapter 5](#)
[Chapter 6](#)
[Chapter 7](#)
[Chapter 8](#)
[Chapter 9](#)
[Chapter 10](#)
[Chapter 11](#)
[Chapter 12](#)
[Chapter 13](#)
[Chapter 14](#)
[Chapter 15](#)
[Chapter 16](#)
[Chapter 17](#)
[Chapter 18](#)
[Chapter 19](#)
[Chapter 20](#)
[Chapter 21](#)
[Chapter 22](#)
[Chapter 23](#)
[Chapter 24](#)
[Chapter 25](#)
[Chapter 26](#)
[Epilogue](#)

[Access MEMBERS ONLY Page!](#)
[About the Author](#)

[*OceanofPDF.com*](#)

ALSO BY BARBARA FREETHY

Want more Romantic Suspense?

Off the Grid: FBI Series

[PERILOUS TRUST](#)

[RECKLESS WHISPER](#)

[DESPERATE PLAY](#)

[ELUSIVE PROMISE](#)

[DANGEROUS CHOICE](#)

[RUTHLESS CROSS](#)

[CRITICAL DOUBT](#)

[FEARLESS PURSUIT](#)

[DARING DECEPTION](#)

[RISKY BARGAIN](#)

Lightning Strikes Trilogy

[BEAUTIFUL STORM](#)

[LIGHTNING LINGERS](#)

[SUMMER RAIN](#)

For a complete list of books, [visit Barbara's Website!](#)

[OceanofPDF.com](#)

Off The Grid: FBI Series Box Set
Books 1-3

© Copyright 2021 Barbara Freethy
All Rights Reserved

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

OceanofPDF.com

PERILOUS TRUST

OceanofPDF.com

PERILOUS TRUST - BOOK BLURB

It was one dark night that brought Damon Wolfe and Sophie Parker together. They were two tortured souls, looking for escape, and they weren't supposed to see each other ever again...

Four years later, Sophie's FBI father, who is also Damon's mentor, is killed in a suspicious car crash after leaving Sophie a cryptic message to trust no one. When Damon shows up, she isn't sure if he's friend or enemy, but she knows he could easily rip apart what is left of her heart.

The last thing Damon wants is to get involved with Sophie again. It was hard enough to walk away the first time. But she's in trouble, her father's reputation is under attack, and the lives of his fellow agents are at stake if there's a traitor in their midst.

When someone starts shooting at them, they have no choice but to go on the run and off the grid. Everyone in their world becomes a suspect. They want to uncover the truth, but will it turn out to be the last thing they expect? Proving her father's innocence might just cost them their hearts...and their lives...

OceanofPDF.com

PROLOGUE

"SOPHIE, I'M SORRY." It wasn't the best start to the worst message he would ever have to leave, but it had to be done. He'd spent the last six hours creating a trail that would hopefully lead away from his daughter. He'd left New York City hours ago and was now driving along lonely, rural, winding roads in northern New Jersey, the beautiful scenery barely registering in his brain as he escaped from his life.

His left hand tightened on the steering wheel as he cleared his throat and tried to find the right words. "I've made a mistake—more than one. I thought I could stay out of the mud, but it turns out that I'm covered in it. I don't have time to explain, but—" He stopped abruptly as the beep from her voicemail cut him off.

He punched in her number again, knowing she wouldn't answer. It was two o'clock on a Wednesday, and she'd be teaching a class in archaeology at NYU, probably getting her students ready to go on one of the summer digs starting next month. Ever since she was a little girl, Sophie had been fascinated with history, with the past, with finding

answers to century-old questions. Now she taught during the school year and went on digs in the summer—the perfect combination.

It had been worth it—giving Sophie everything she wanted. Hadn't it?

He glanced back at the phone. With Sophie's schedule, he doubted she'd get the messages for a few more hours. Maybe by then he'd be somewhere safe and they could actually talk. But if that didn't happen...he had to tell her what to do. He couldn't wait another second. He couldn't keep pretending everything would be all right. He'd been preparing for weeks...just in case. He now had to execute the plan.

Her voicemail encouraged him to leave another message.

"Remember how much your mom loved spring cleaning and how we hated to get rid of the things we loved—like my beer bottle collection? Remember our secret stash? Well, I've left you something there. But in order to get it, you'll need to find the key that's hidden away at your favorite place in the world."

He was being cryptic, but he couldn't risk the information being heard by the wrong person. Hopefully, only Sophie would be able to figure out what he was talking about. While she might wonder why he was sending her so far away, he needed to get her out of town as quickly as possible. That would buy her time.

"Get the key and follow my instructions," he continued. "I know you'll have a million questions about this message. You'll try to call me, and I won't answer. You'll wonder why

I didn't talk to you before now. You'll think twice about doing what I'm asking you to do, but you can't do that, Sophie. Above all, you have to be safe. You have to live a long life. It may not be the life you planned, but it can still be happy. So, no questions, no second thoughts, no wondering if there is another way. You can't trust anyone. Not the police and definitely not the Bureau—no one. Whoever you think might be my friend or yours—*isn't*." The phone cut off again.

"Dammit," he swore, seeing a vehicle appear on the road behind him. It could be just another motorist, but as the car picked up speed, he realized that his sins were gaining on him fast. He hadn't been smart enough. He hadn't done enough to make a clean exit.

He pressed his foot down on the gas pedal, his small sedan almost trembling with the speed required to get away. He'd once been an incredible driver, able to avoid almost any tail, but so many of his skills had broken down in recent years, he could barely remember the person he used to be. He had many regrets, but if he lost his life on this road, maybe no one would ever really know why. *Maybe that was a good thing.*

He called Sophie again. "If I can find a way out of this, I will. In the meantime, do exactly what I told you. I want you to know how proud I am," he said, his voice choking with emotion. "Everything I did—the choices I made—were to make our lives better, especially your life. I feel sick at the heartache you may have to go through. The last thing I ever wanted to do was hurt you. You have always been my everything. If something happens to me, don't try to find

out who is responsible. Don't go to my house. Don't go to your apartment. Don't trust anyone, especially not those you think are my friends."

He should give her a name, but then she might think that was the only person to avoid, and there were more... more than he knew...

"Just run," he continued. "Get rid of your phone as soon as you finish listening to these messages, so they can't track you. I'm sorry again, Sophie. I hope you can make a new life for yourself, and I pray one day you'll be able to forgive—"

The phone flew out of his hand as his car was rammed from behind. He pushed the pedal all the way to the floor, but the vehicle behind him had more power. He swerved around another turn, down a straightaway, to a harder curve. He saw the narrow bridge ahead as his car took another hit.

He yanked the wheel, trying to regain control, but the car skidded across the concrete. He was headed straight for the guardrail. He had some impossible hope he might clear the water and land on the other side of the pond, but that would take a miracle.

The last thing he deserved was a miracle.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER ONE

HER SECOND-YEAR UNIVERSITY students were restless and as eager as she was for the academic year to be over. It was the first of June, and with the unusually hot weather, Sophie Parker could see their gazes straying to the windows as she spoke, the lure of summer interesting them far more than the study questions for the final exam they would take next week. She couldn't blame them.

Six weeks from now, she'd be out of the classroom, too, taking eight of these students on an archaeological dig in Egypt. They would finally get a chance not just to read about history but to experience it, to feel the heavy, haunting atmosphere at a century-old site, to dig for something real, something from the past, something that could change what they knew of history.

Discovery was an addicting thrill—one she'd never been able to shake. Unfortunately, she had to limit the thrilling moments to the summer months. The rest of the year, she was a professor at NYU, where she shared her passion with her college students.

Glancing over at the clock, she realized it was one minute to four. *Time to free them for the weekend.*

"That's it," she said. "I'll see you for our final exam next Wednesday. If you have questions, you can email me, or come by my office hours on Monday from ten to noon. Good luck with your studying."

As the class ended, she answered a few questions about the exam, then gathered her things together. She was about to leave when a man in a dark suit entered the room. He was in his fifties and had short, pepper-gray hair and dark eyes. He walked toward her with a deliberate, purposeful step, the expression on his face intensely serious.

Peter Hunt was an FBI agent, and one of her father's best friends. He'd gone to Yale with her dad. He'd been in her parents' wedding. He'd been Uncle Peter to her for as long as she could remember. And he had never, *ever*, visited her at work.

A chill ran through her.

Something was wrong—terribly wrong.

Following Peter into the classroom was Karen Leigh—a tall, stylish blonde in her late-thirties, wearing a navy-blue pencil skirt and cream-colored silky blouse. Despite the hot weather, Karen looked impeccably cool.

She'd met Karen once when she'd stopped in at her dad's office. He'd told her how much he respected Karen's instincts, which was why he'd made her assistant special agent in charge of the organized crime division, of which he was the head. The fact that both Peter and Karen had come to see her did not bode well.

She tried to stay calm, not jump to conclusions, breathe, but her chest was tight, and she couldn't get any air into her lungs.

"Sophie," Peter said, his dark eyes somber. "I'm afraid we have terrible news."

"I'm sorry, Sophie," Karen added, compassion in her gaze.

"Sorry about what?" She didn't really want an answer, because she knew that whatever they were going to say would not be good. "Where's my dad? Has something happened to him?"

"He was in an accident," Peter said gently. "A car accident. He didn't make it, Sophie."

"What?" she gasped, putting a hand to her heart. "What do you mean—he didn't make it?"

"Your father drove through a guardrail and flipped his car into a pond. He died at the scene." Peter delivered the statement in a slow, purposeful manner. "I'm truly sorry, Sophie. This is not the kind of news I ever wanted to give you."

She immediately started shaking her head in denial. "There must be some mistake. My father is not dead. He can't be dead. He's healthy. He runs every day. He's going to barbecue ribs for me this weekend—his famous pork ribs. We're getting together on Sunday to watch the Yankees. We're going to talk about my trip to Egypt next month." She blew out a breath. "Oh, God!" Her legs felt suddenly weak as she realized none of those things were going to happen.

Peter grabbed her arm and led her to the chair by her desk.

She practically fell into her seat.

He squatted down in front of her and looked into her eyes. "Breathe, Sophie."

"Tell me it's not true." She silently implored him to say it was some awful joke, but she could see the pain in his gaze.

"I wish I could. I really do. Alan was a good friend. I can't believe he's gone, and I know how difficult this is going to be for you. The two of you became so close after your mom died."

Burning tears pressed at her eyes. She put a hand to her mouth, feeling like she was going to throw up. His words reminded her of the last time she'd heard horrible news. But her mom had been sick for years. They'd said their good-byes more than once. She'd known the end was coming, and it had been a blessing, because her mom had been suffering.

But this? This sudden end to her dad's vibrant life was impossible to accept. It had been him and her against the world since she was sixteen.

"Where did it happen? The accident? Was it here in the city?" she asked.

"No, it was a few hours away—in northern New Jersey," he replied, as he stood up.

"What? What was he doing way over there?" she asked, even more confused. "Did it have to do with a case?"

"To be honest, we're not sure why he was in that location," Karen interjected. "We're trying to figure that out. When did you last speak to your dad?"

She had to think for a minute. "Two days ago—Monday night. We haven't seen each other in a few weeks, and he asked me to come by on Sunday. I didn't actually commit to going to his barbecue, because I have finals next week, and I need to finish writing the test this weekend." She drew in another tight breath. "You're sure there's not a mistake?"

"I'm sure," Peter said. "There's no mistake."

"Was there another car involved? Were other people hurt?"

"We're not sure if another vehicle was involved."

His answer confused her more. "My father just drove off the side of the road? That doesn't make sense."

"It appears he was driving at a high rate of speed."

"What time did it happen?"

"Around two o'clock this afternoon."

Two hours ago. Her dad had died two hours ago, and she hadn't known, hadn't felt anything change. How could that be?

"Where is my father now? I want to see him."

"He's at the medical examiner's office in New Jersey, and you can't see him yet, Sophie," Peter said. "Not until they're done with the examination."

She looked at him in confusion. "They're doing an autopsy?"

"Yes. We need to know if Alan had a medical emergency, or if there were any substances impairing his judgment," Peter replied.

"My father did not take drugs. He was in great health. He barely drank. You know that." Anger ran through her. How could Peter speak so clinically about her father?

"It's protocol," he said. "We're also working with the New Jersey police to determine whether another vehicle might have caused the incident and left the scene."

"Who found him?"

"There was a 911 call from a hiker. He saw the accident from a good distance away, so he couldn't render aid, but the police arrived within minutes. It appears that Alan was killed on impact, Sophie. He didn't suffer."

"But you don't know that for sure, because no one was there for at least a few minutes." The thought of her father knowing he was trapped and dying made her sick to her stomach.

"Sophie," Karen said, bringing her focus back to the conversation. "I know you're devastated by this news. We all are. But I need to ask you a few questions."

"Like what?"

"Did your father tell you about any problems in his life, at work, with friends or coworkers?"

"No, but he rarely spoke about his job with me. He always said there was so much he couldn't talk about that it was easier just to avoid everything."

"What about a woman? Was there someone in his life?" Karen continued.

"I don't know. He went out to dinner sometimes. He had female friends. He didn't discuss them, and I didn't ask."

"When you spoke to your father on Monday, did he say anything about any meetings or plans he had this week?" Karen continued.

"I don't think so. We mostly talked about me and the archaeological dig I'm organizing." She felt guilty now that

she hadn't asked her dad more about how he was doing and what was going on in his life. Perhaps she'd missed some important clue or sign of what was to come.

"What about Harrison Delano?" Karen asked. "Your father had a dinner on his calendar with Mr. Delano scheduled for tonight. I understand from Peter that Mr. Delano was a friend from Yale."

"Yes. They kept in touch." She glanced at Peter. "You know Harrison. Why don't you just ask him?"

"We will; we haven't had a chance yet," Peter replied. "We wanted to speak to you first."

"Why are you asking me these questions? What do my dad's dinner plans have to do with his death?"

"Karen has been going through Alan's calendar to see if we can find any clues," Peter said.

"I'm trying to piece together a timeline for the week," Karen added. "Your dad was in the office yesterday and left before three, which is early for him. He didn't come in this morning, and he didn't call in sick. I tried to reach him on the phone several times, but he didn't pick up or return my calls. I was concerned because we have several important cases that require his attention, so I went to his house, but he didn't answer. As far as I can ascertain, the last person to speak to him was the security guard in our office building when he left yesterday afternoon. I would love to find someone else."

"Well, it wasn't me." She licked her lips, realizing the truth behind the questions. "You don't think it was an accident, do you? Because FBI agents don't just drive their cars off mountain roads."

"We're not discounting any possibility, Sophie," Peter said. "Figuring out what happened to your father is our top priority."

"We will get answers," Karen promised, determination in her eyes. "Your father was loved and respected by many people in the New York field office and all over the country. We will do right by him."

"I hope so." At the mention of her father's extended network of friends, she realized that she needed to start making calls, think about planning a funeral, talk to her father's estate attorney, go to his house and get the big notebook from the drawer in his desk that he'd told her had all the information she would need if anything ever happened to him.

She'd never wanted to look at that book or open that drawer, even though he'd reminded her every time he'd updated it. After her mother had died, he'd realized how difficult it was to find passwords, and he'd vowed he'd never leave her with messy problems to clean up. She'd told him she didn't want to think about him being gone. They had years—decades—to get organized.

Another tear slipped out of her eye, and she brushed it away with her fingers. There would be time for crying later. "I need to start making calls."

"I'm happy to help with arrangements, Sophie," Peter said, pain in his gaze now that they'd gotten past the questions. "There's no need to rush into anything. You can take your time."

"I can't even begin to think of everything I need to do," she murmured. "All the people I need to tell."

"I can take care of the Yale group," he offered. "Harrison Delano, Michael Brennan, Senator Raleigh, Diane Lewis and anyone else I can think of. I need to interview each of them anyway to find out when they last spoke to your father."

"That would be good."

"And, of course, everyone at the Bureau—in the New York field office—and around the world will be notified," Karen put in. "Your father mentored a great many agents when he was an instructor at Quantico." She paused. "I've had the opportunity to experience his generosity and brilliance firsthand. Alan made me the agent that I am, so I can assure you that we will find out what happened to him. We will do him proud."

"Thank you. I appreciate that."

"Why don't we take you home now?" Peter suggested. "We can continue this conversation at your apartment. As much as I wish we could just discuss funeral plans, we have quite a few more questions to ask you, and I think doing that at your place would be the best idea. You'll be more comfortable there."

She doubted she'd be comfortable anywhere, and the last thing she wanted to do right now was answer questions. "I need a little time," she said, their expectant gazes and determination to jump right into crime solving a bit overwhelming. "Thank you for the offer of a ride, but I only live a few blocks away, and I could use some air."

"We'll walk with you then," Karen said.

She frowned. "I—I don't want to be rude, but I really need some time to myself."

"You're right. Look, why don't you go home and regroup?" Peter suggested. "We'll meet you at your place in two hours—say around six thirty? We'll bring Indian food. As I recall, it's your favorite."

"I'm not hungry." She couldn't imagine eating ever again.

"I'll still bring something," he said. "It's important that we talk sooner rather than later, Sophie. We don't want to let the trail go cold."

"But I don't know anything about my dad's activities."

"You might know more than you realize."

"All right," she said, getting to her feet. She didn't want to argue; she just wanted to be alone.

"Good. And please don't speak to any reporters before we speak again," he added.

His statement made her realize that her father's death was going to be publicized. She would need to make her calls fast. She grabbed her bag and led the way out of her classroom.

They parted company at the stairwell, and she went up to her third-floor office alone.

She sat down at her desk and stared at the framed photo taken of her and her father at her college graduation. He'd gotten her a lei from Hawaii, and the beautiful pink flowers added color to her white gown. Hawaii had been one of their favorite vacation spots. Her parents had gone there on their honeymoon, and every year after that, they'd made a trip to the islands. They'd even thrown her mother's ashes in the sea off Oahu in a beautiful twilight ceremony. It was what her mom had wanted.

Where would her dad want to be buried? She had no idea. She would have to go to his house and check the book—the *damned* book.

How could she do this again? She was twenty-eight years old and she was going to have to bury a second parent. It wasn't fair.

She breathed through the pain, knowing she was barely holding it together, but she had to think about what to do next. First, she had to get up. She had to go home, make calls, tell people what had happened. The only relative she had left was her Aunt Valerie, her mother's sister, who lived in Australia with her husband and children. She hadn't seen them since her mom had died twelve years ago. But before that, her aunt had been a mother to her while her mom was sick. She definitely needed to call her aunt.

She reached into her bag and pulled out her phone. She kept it on silent during the day, and she'd had back-to-back classes since noon, so she hadn't checked it in hours.

Now, she saw four voicemails from the same number—it wasn't a number she recognized.

Telemarketers didn't usually call that many times or leave messages.

Her dad's voice came across the speaker, stabbing her in the heart.

For a moment, she thought that Peter and Karen were wrong, that her dad was alive, that there was some mistake, but as she listened to the messages, she heard emotions in her father's voice she'd never heard before. He sounded frantic, worried, terrified, and his words were rambling and not making sense.

The first message ended abruptly, and as she moved through the rest of the voicemails, her bewilderment grew. Her dad was talking in riddles. Setting up clues to hunt for, offering apologies, telling her to be careful, not to trust anyone, but never saying exactly what was going on, why he was calling, where he was, what he was doing.

The last message cut off in mid-word. She heard a horrible crash and then nothing.

Her stomach turned over.

Had she just heard the moment when her father had driven through the guardrail?

Had he died because he wasn't paying attention to the road, because he was talking on the phone?

Or had he died because whatever danger he was running from had caught up to him?

She called the number back, but there was no connection, no service, nothing.

As she stared at the number, she wondered why her dad had called her from a phone other than the one he normally used. Not that it was that unusual for him to have more than one phone. He'd always had a separate phone for his work as an FBI agent and one for personal use. But he hadn't used either of those, and she wondered why.

He was obviously in trouble. He'd talked about trust and making bad choices. What were those choices? What had he done? And why hadn't he called someone for help—someone like Peter or Karen? Surely, he trusted Peter. They'd been friends forever.

But he hadn't called Peter; he'd called her. He'd told her what he needed her to do, and she would do it.

Jerking to her feet, she threw her phone into her bag and left the office.

She walked as quickly as she could to the edge of campus, then joined the streams of people on the crowded streets of New York. Everything felt surreal. Life was going on normally for everyone else, but not for her.

Sweat beaded her brow as the summer heat beat down on her head, but she couldn't let the weather slow her down. She suddenly felt as if time was not on her side. Peter and Karen were coming by her apartment at six thirty.

She needed to be gone by then. She'd change her clothes, pack a quick bag, and get in her car.

But those plans came to a crashing halt when she turned the corner and saw two men get out of a dark SUV and head into her building. They wore slacks and button-down shirts, and while they didn't look dangerous, there was something about them that made her pause.

Through the windows in her building stairwell, she could see the men going up to the upper floors. Her gut told her they were on their way to her apartment.

Her dad's words rang through her head: *Don't trust anyone, especially not anyone from the police department or the FBI. Get rid of your phone as soon as you finish listening to these messages, so they can't track you.*

She took her phone out of her bag and stared at it for an indecisive minute. He'd told her to throw it away, but if she did that, she'd never hear his voice again.

She couldn't do it—*not yet.*

She'd hold on to it for a while longer.

But she would do what else he'd asked. Turning on her heels, she walked in the other direction. She had to find a place to hide, to listen to the messages again, and figure out what to do next.

As she tried to blend into the crowd, she felt more alone than she ever had before. *Was there anyone who could help her?*

She had friends, but how could she bring them into this situation? How could she put them in danger? Especially when she didn't know what the danger was exactly.

She had to follow her dad's instructions, as cryptic as they were. He'd made it clear she was in danger, and since he was dead, she had to believe him. She had to find a way to save herself.

She pulled out her phone again and let the voicemails play through her ear as she walked away from her life.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWO

SPECIAL AGENT DAMON WOLFE hated summer, especially the kind of hot, sticky, New York City heat that made him sweat at six o'clock at night. In his life, everything bad that had ever happened had occurred during some kind of intense heat wave. Coincidence, maybe, but that possibility didn't make the season any more appealing, and it was only June.

He should have thought about the humid summer heat when he'd agreed to come to New York and work for his mentor, Alan Parker, who ran the organized crime division out of the FBI's New York field office. But when Alan had called with a job offer three weeks ago, he'd had no choice but to say yes. Alan had been his instructor at the FBI Academy in Quantico, and he'd mentored him after graduation as well. He had always wanted to work for the best, and Alan was the best.

But since Damon had arrived in town a week ago, he'd been finishing reports on a case he'd been working for the past two years, so he hadn't seen much of Alan yet. Alan had also been in and out of the building and had told him he would speak to him soon about his new assignment. He

was hoping that assignment would involve Wyatt Tanner, the friend and agent who had him now headed to a park by the East River instead of to a bar for a cold beer.

Wyatt had sent him a cryptic SOS in a private chat room they'd set up for emergencies four years ago while they were at the academy. Six people knew about the chat room, but he'd been the only one to respond. He had no idea if the others were still watching the forum, since it was rare that anyone used it these days, but he still made it a point to check in every day.

Wyatt was working undercover with a crime organization, and any contact outside his handler—which was Alan Parker—could jeopardize his cover. Which meant Wyatt was in trouble.

As Damon neared the park, his gaze swept the surrounding area. There was a basketball court with two hoops and groups of teenagers making use of both. A nearby playground area was filled with families. Everything looked very normal, innocent—a relaxing summer evening in a tiny space of green, in a city filled with high-energy people, endless concrete, frustrating traffic jams, and very tall buildings.

A furtive movement in a cluster of trees by the river caught his eye. It was Wyatt—or at least a shadowy version of him.

Wyatt hadn't just lost a few pounds; he'd dropped at least twenty, his ripped, faded jeans hanging low on his hips. His brown hair was longer than Damon had ever seen it. Wyatt also had a full beard going, and as Damon drew closer he saw an abundance of tattoos on Wyatt's arms and

a multitude of bruises on his face, as well as a nasty gash on his forehead. His left eye was almost swollen shut.

"What the hell happened to you?" he asked.

"Got jumped," Wyatt replied.

"Are you all right?" He was disturbed by the bright lights in Wyatt's eyes, the jerky way his gaze darted in every direction, as he nervously rocked back and forth on his heels.

"Anyone follow you?" Wyatt demanded.

"No. What's going on? Are you made?"

"Not sure. Probably. Yes."

Wyatt's clipped responses deepened his worry.

"Are you on something?"

"No. Don't think so. Not sure. Haven't slept in two days." Wyatt took his hands out of his pockets and slapped his cheeks, as if to keep himself awake.

"You need to go to a hospital, Wyatt. You're messed up."

"Not safe. Someone tried to kill me, Damon."

"Who?"

"Don't know. Couldn't see. Too dark. Barely got away."

"Did you contact Alan?"

"I was supposed to meet Alan where it happened. I think he set me up."

"No way," he said emphatically, shocked by Wyatt's unexpected words.

"Then why hasn't he answered my messages? I've been trying to talk to him for two days. I get nothing back."

Frowning, he couldn't answer that question. "He hasn't been in the office much this week. In fact, I've barely seen him since he asked me to join his team."

"He told me he was bringing you in a few weeks ago. I thought it was a good thing. He's off his game. I've been feeling it for months." Wyatt paused, his lips tightening. "Or maybe he's not off his game. Maybe he knows exactly what he's doing."

He had no idea what Wyatt was talking about, but it was clear he needed help. "Look, I don't know what's going on, but you need medical attention. You're in bad shape."

"You think I don't know that?" Wyatt asked angrily. "But if I come out of the shadows, I'm dead."

"Then we'll keep you in the shadows. There has to be a doctor in the city the Bureau uses. There was one in DC."

"Can't trust anyone at the Bureau. Someone is a traitor. Maybe Alan. Maybe someone else."

"Well, you can trust me." As he finished speaking, his phone buzzed.

At the sound, Wyatt jumped like he'd been shot, backing up a few feet, his dark eyes blazing with fear and fury. "Did you tell someone you were coming to meet me?"

"No, I didn't. This is from Bree." He turned his phone around so Wyatt could see the message. "She's getting back into town tomorrow. She just finished up a case in Michigan and wants to have lunch and catch up. I haven't seen her since I moved here."

For a brief moment, Wyatt's expression softened and his gaze cleared, as if he were remembering the days when he and Bree and Wyatt had first become friends. They'd met at Quantico on the first day of training, eager to become agents, to make their mark on the world. Hard to believe that was four years ago. So much had happened since then.

His explanation seemed to ease the stress in Wyatt's eyes, but then a car came speeding around the corner.

Wyatt grabbed Damon's arm and pulled him into the thicket of trees as the black SUV stopped in the street next to the basketball court, its engine idling.

"What did you do?" Wyatt demanded, fear as well as anger in his eyes now. "What the hell did you do, Damon?"

"Nothing. I didn't do anything. I have no idea who is in that car."

"You're lying."

He was further shocked to feel the hard nuzzle of a gun against his side, and with Wyatt in the condition he was in, he wasn't at all sure Wyatt wouldn't shoot him. "I'm not lying, Wyatt. I didn't tell anyone you contacted me. I'm on your side."

"Or pretending to be. Just like Alan."

"Alan would never give you up, Wyatt. He wouldn't do that."

"I'm no longer surprised by what people will do, given enough motivation," Wyatt said cynically.

"You're exhausted. You're not thinking straight. You need to sleep and eat. Come to my apartment. Once you're rested, we can talk. We'll figure things out."

Wyatt looked like he was considering the offer, then he stiffened as the doors on the double-parked vehicle suddenly opened. As a jean-clad leg came out of the car, Wyatt said, "Gotta go," and took off through the trees.

Damon was torn between going after him and seeing who was in the vehicle.

A second later, three male teenagers, one with a basketball in his hands, exited the SUV. They headed straight for the court. They weren't trouble, and if Wyatt had been operating on normal brain cells, he would have seen that.

He moved toward the river in the direction that Wyatt had gone, but his friend had vanished. He spent ten more minutes looking for him, then gave up. Wyatt was better than anyone at disappearing.

As he thought about their disjointed conversation, he couldn't believe Alan had set Wyatt up. But if Wyatt's cover was blown—and judging by his appearance, someone had tried to kill him—then Wyatt was clearly in danger. And he wasn't going to keep himself alive as jumpy and paranoid as he now was. Wyatt had always been sharply intuitive and a chameleon, easily able to blend into any group, which made him perfect for undercover work, but that guy didn't exist anymore.

He debated what to do. Pulling out his phone, he punched in Alan's personal number. He wouldn't tell him he'd met up with Wyatt yet, but he'd feel him out, see what Alan had to say.

Unfortunately, Alan's phone went to voicemail.

He debated for another second, then tried his work number. To his surprise, it wasn't Alan who picked up the call; it was a woman.

"Agent Leigh," she said crisply. "Who's calling?"

He was surprised to hear her voice. Karen was the assistant special agent in charge of the organized crime division, but she didn't answer Alan's phone.

Something was wrong.

"Karen, it's Damon. I'm looking for Alan."

"I had his calls transferred to me."

"Why?"

"You don't know?"

"Know what?" A bad feeling crept down the back of his spine.

"Alan is dead, Damon. He died this afternoon."

"What?" His hand tightened around the phone. "What are you talking about?"

"He was killed in a single vehicle accident in a rural area in northern New Jersey."

"My God. That's..." He had no words.

"I know. It's tragic," she said.

For the first time, he heard a tremor in her voice.

"And it doesn't look like it was an accident," she continued. "He was traveling at a high rate of speed and there were no skid marks, no evidence that he attempted to brake before crashing into a pond."

"Any witnesses?"

"A hiker—from almost a mile away. He didn't see much."

"Other vehicles?"

"The witness thought he saw another car on the road, but he was so stunned by the accident scene that he wasn't certain. He did call 911 and the police got there quickly, but it was too late."

"I can't believe this," he muttered, his pulse racing, his head hammering with questions and a deep-rooted pain that was starting to take hold.

Alan was dead? How was that possible?

"None of us can believe it," Karen said. "Did he tell you where he was going today—why he was in New Jersey? He didn't show up for work, and he didn't call in sick."

"I haven't spoken to him since Monday. He said he had some things going on, and since I was finishing up my case on MDT, we agreed to speak next week." He paused, wondering if Alan's death had any connection to the attempt made on Wyatt's life. Wyatt thought Alan had set him up, but maybe someone had set them both up. He wanted to ask Karen, but after Wyatt's paranoia and now Alan's death, he didn't want to say too much without thinking everything through.

"I have to go," Karen said. "There's a lot going on."

"What can I do to help?"

"We're going to be working all night to see if we can identify anyone who might have posed a threat to Alan, but with the number of cases he's worked on the last twenty-plus years, it's going to be a long list."

"I'll be in shortly." He cleared his throat. "What about Alan's daughter? Has she been notified?" His stomach twisted again at the thought of Sophie receiving the horrific news.

"Peter and I spoke to her several hours ago. She was—shattered."

His heart split apart at the thought of the beautiful blonde with the warm, gold-flecked, brown eyes, irresistible smile, and soft, sexy, kissable lips. He hadn't seen her in four years, not since the one night they'd spent together—a night that never should have happened.

Since then, he'd tried *not* to hear about Sophie. When Alan had brought her up on the odd occasion, he'd quickly changed the subject. She was a part of his past, and that's where he'd been determined to leave her.

But now...

He could only imagine the pain she was in. He felt like someone had just torn off his right arm, and Alan was only his mentor, not his father. Sophie had to be dying inside.

"How—how is she doing?" he asked, feeling as if the question was completely ridiculous, because of course she wasn't doing well.

"I don't know. Peter and I spoke to her around four. We told her we'd meet her at her apartment around six thirty. She wanted some time to catch her breath and regroup. When we got here, we found her door open, and her apartment trashed."

"You're at Sophie's apartment now?" he asked, his pulse quickening.

"Yes."

"And Sophie?"

"No sign of her. We're trying to trace her phone. Hopefully, she's just taking a walk or went to see a friend. Do you know any of her friends? You and Alan have been close for a long time. Do you know Sophie as well?"

"No," he bit out. "I have no idea who her friends are."

"All right. So, why were you calling Alan? Is it something I can help you with?"

He hesitated, then said, "It doesn't matter now. I'll see you back at the office."

He put the phone in his pocket and let out a breath. Since he'd arrived at the park, his entire world had shifted. First, Wyatt acting paranoid, hyped up, and completely off-balance. Then Alan...

He couldn't believe Alan Parker was dead. The man wasn't even sixty years old yet. He was healthy, fit, and energized—a natural leader, an intelligent boss, a good friend.

He should be used to people vanishing from his life. It had certainly happened often enough, but he never seemed to be ready for it. Not that those people had died; most had just walked away from him.

But this wasn't about him. This was about Alan...and Sophie.

With a quick glance around, his nerves now on edge, he left the shadow of the trees and walked through the park, his thoughts turning to the woman who'd made a huge impression on his life, an impact so big he'd run away from her as fast as he could.

He'd met her at a very, very low moment in his life—and also in hers. They'd both been mourning the loss of a good friend—Jamie Rowland. Jamie and he had been Army buddies for ten years before switching careers to join the FBI. Sophie had known Jamie in her childhood, her father Alan and Jamie's father Vincent having worked together at the Bureau.

He'd met Sophie at Jamie's wake. He hadn't known who she was beyond the fact that she was a gorgeous blonde, who was hurting as much as he was. Her eyes had held a haunting pain, and her sweet mouth seemed to tremble

between gulps of wine and champagne as she came to terms with her grief.

They'd had an instant, intense physical attraction to each other, a desire to lose themselves in a happier place, and for two strangers—a surprisingly deep understanding of what they'd each needed that night.

It was only later—when he'd realized who she was—who her father was—that he'd realized how stupid he'd been to sleep with the daughter of someone who had the power to kick him out of the academy from which he was so close to graduating.

But apparently Sophie had never shared their one-night stand with her father, because Alan had not said a word. And he'd certainly never spoken about it to anyone, especially not to Alan, a man who had helped him shape his new career in the FBI.

Now Alan was dead.

Sophie must be going out of her mind—*wherever she was.*

Was she just crying away her grief in a bar somewhere? Or had someone taken her? The same someone who had forced Alan off the road?

God, he hoped she wasn't in danger, too. But the fact that her apartment had been broken into did not bode well.

He stepped off the curb and raised his hand to hail a cab. A moment later, he was on his way back to the office. While the cab made its way slowly through the city traffic, he pulled out his phone. First, he sent a text to Bree that lunch was on for the next day and that he wanted to talk some baseball with her.

After that, he went on the Internet to visit the same baseball chat room where Wyatt had left him the message. They spoke in coded baseball lingo, each of them using the name of a player from the 1986 World Series Mets team. They'd started the private forum while at Quantico, during missions where they needed an outside way to communicate. They'd always referred to Alan as Coach when they were on academy assignments. Wyatt had been Fernandez, after the lefty All-Star pitcher. He didn't know if Wyatt would check the forum again, but it was his best chance at getting him a message.

He thought for a moment, then typed in: *Coach is dead. Fernandez in trouble. Need the starters back on the field. Who's available?*

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THREE

SOPHIE HAD ALMOST USED her credit card to rent a car, but then she'd thought about all the ways her card could be tracked. She didn't know who she was running from, but her father had told her to be careful, especially where law enforcement was concerned, so she'd found an ATM and withdrawn seven hundred dollars in cash, the maximum amount she could take out of her account in one day. Then she'd grabbed a cab to a rental car office and booked the cheapest car she could find.

Her father had told her to go to her happy place and that was five hours away—a lakeshore cabin in the northern Adirondacks. She had no idea why he would send her there to start her on this crazy, sad, frustrating scavenger hunt. Nor did she know why he had spoken so cryptically about protecting herself when he hadn't told her who she needed to protect herself from. A name would have been nice.

*Unless, he hadn't known exactly who was dangerous?
Or perhaps he'd run out of time...*

How she wished she'd picked up the phone when he'd called, but he probably hadn't expected her to do that. He knew she kept the phone off when she was teaching. *Why hadn't he called her in the morning before she'd gone to work when they could have actually spoken to each other?*

She had so many questions and no answers.

It was still difficult—make that *impossible*—to believe he was dead. It felt like a dream—a very bad dream. If only she could wake up!

Her phone vibrated again, and she knew she had to get rid of it. It had been buzzing off and on for the last thirty minutes.

She picked it up off the console and clicked to hear the new voicemails. It made her angry that there were other voices covering up her dad's voice now. She needed to ditch the phone as he'd asked, but she didn't want to let go of her last connection to him.

The first call was from Peter Hunt. *"Sophie, we're at your apartment, and you're not here. It looks like your place was broken into. I'm concerned about you. Where are you? Please call me back as soon as possible."*

Her apartment had been broken into? Maybe by the two guys she'd seen going into it.

The next call was from her friend, Kathleen, a fellow professor at the university. *"Oh, my God, Sophie. I was just watching the news and heard about your dad's accident. I am so, so sorry. I want to help. Please call me back or come over. I can't believe this has happened. I know how close the two of you were. I want to be there for you. Call me back."*

Maybe she would call Kathleen back—but not now, not yet.

She clicked through to the next voicemail from her friend and neighbor. *"This is Becky, Sophie. I just heard the news. I'm really sorry. But right now, I'm more worried about you. Where are you? There are police in your apartment, and the landlord said your place was broken into, and no one knows where you are. There's a news crew out front, and guys in dark suits knocking on everyone's door asking if they saw anything or heard anyone. I just got home a few minutes ago so I don't know what happened. If you're in trouble, I want to help."*

She was happy now that she hadn't gone into her building, that she'd followed her instincts and run. Whatever her father had been trying to warn her about was already happening.

She had to follow his directions, however crazy they might seem. She had to be smart and stay safe until she could figure out what was going on.

An exit sign called her attention, and she impulsively moved to the right, getting on a highway going away from her destination. She stayed on the road for ten miles, and then she pulled off to the side, her engine still running.

She picked up her phone and played her dad's messages one last time, trying to burn the words and the sound of his voice into her head. She searched for clues in every sentence, wondering if she was missing something, but she was as confused as ever when she was done, and huge, rolling waves of pain ripped through her, threatening to

take her under and drown her in sadness. She couldn't let that happen. She had things she had to do.

"Good-bye, Dad," she whispered.

She got out of the car, put the phone in front of her front tire, then got back behind the wheel and drove over it. She got out once more to check that the phone was shattered. Satisfied, she kicked the pieces into the nearby brush. Once that was done, she returned to the car and pulled back onto the highway. She drove another five miles, then took the next exit and doubled back the way she'd come.

If they traced her phone to this area, hopefully they wouldn't know where she was going next, or at least not right away. She had no doubt that the FBI could find her with all their resources. In fact, all they had to do was talk to Vincent Rowland.

Vincent and her dad had come up together in the FBI and had bought cabins next to each other at the lake over twenty years ago. They had been the best of friends and felt that they needed a place to go where they and their families could be safe. They'd set up layers of secrecy regarding the ownership of the cabins, and when they were there, they used fake names. Her family had been the Framinghams; and the Rowlands were the Baldwins.

It had been a fun game when she was a kid, and on the summer trips to the lake, she'd become good friends with Vincent's son Jamie and his daughter Cassie. Unfortunately, after her mother got sick, trips to the lake had become less frequent. After high school, her dad hadn't wanted to go there anymore; the cabin held too many memories. She'd occasionally gone up with Jamie or Cassie for a weekend,

but those outings had also dwindled as their lives moved in different directions.

Jamie had gone into the military. Cassie had moved to California. Vincent had divorced Jamie and Cassie's mother and quit the FBI to travel and play golf, while her father had gone to Quantico for a while to run the academy.

Maybe her father hadn't considered Vincent in his rush to keep her safe from some unnamed danger. Or maybe Vincent was the one person her dad trusted not to betray him.

She frowned, thinking back to the voicemails she'd just listened to. Her father had told her to avoid the FBI, which included his best friend Peter and his number two, Karen Leigh.

Their questions to her now took on different overtones. Had they been interrogating her because they wanted to solve her father's murder, or because they wanted to know what she knew? Hopefully, there would be more clues at the cabin.

Pressing her foot down on the gas, she sped up, careful to stay close to the speed limit; she couldn't risk a traffic stop.

As the hours passed, and her adrenaline rush began to fade, she took a chance and stopped at a drive-through coffee stand so she could make it through the mountains without falling asleep.

She turned on the radio for a distraction, and the music helped for a while until she got to one of Jamie's favorite songs—a song his sister Cassie had played at the wake she'd held for Jamie. The wake had just been for Jamie's

friends; the family had had a more formal service a day earlier with an official burial, but Cassie had wanted to toast her brother in a place he'd loved very much, and Sophie had been more than happy to go along.

The last time she'd been on this road had been the weekend of that wake.

While it had been cathartic to be with other people who loved Jamie as much as she had, it had also been incredibly sad. Jamie had been one of her confidants, even more than his sister, because for all his carefree charm and jokes, he was also a deep thinker, and they'd had a lot of really good conversations over the years.

Many of the people at the wake had been coupled-up, including Cassie, who'd brought her boyfriend of the moment.

But she'd been alone—and so had a very attractive, dark-haired man with piercing blue eyes and a gaze that had scorched her soul the first time he'd looked at her.

She'd never felt such a strong, visceral reaction to a man—almost like a punch in the stomach—something so hard it took the air out of your lungs, weakened your legs, made you feel like you could fall if you weren't careful.

Of course, she hadn't been careful.

She'd accepted a glass of wine from him and then another and another. They'd sat by the fire on the beach and talked about Jamie and then the music had started and she'd had the crazy idea to dance. Somehow, they'd ended up far from the beach...

She swallowed a sudden knot in her throat.

Damon Wolfe had come into her life at the absolutely worst possible moment.

She hadn't known anything beyond his first name that night. She hadn't wanted to know. All she'd wanted was him. The pull between them was impossible to resist. She'd never felt such an intense connection, and she didn't want to question it. She just wanted to let herself feel it, and it had truly been amazing.

But when the sun came up, she was alone.

She'd found out later that Damon was training to be an FBI agent at Quantico and that her father was one of his instructors.

She didn't know if her dad was the reason that Damon had never followed up with her, but it hadn't really mattered. She'd known from the first second she'd met Damon that he wasn't a man she could keep for more than a night. And perhaps it was better that way.

Damon was pursuing his life as an FBI agent, and she was doing the same, following her dreams to be an archaeologist.

She supposed she should be glad now that her father had seen her get her doctorate, had heard about her first discovery, had watched her teach a class, but all she could think about was all the things he wouldn't see...her wedding, her children, the rest of her life...

The pain felt overwhelming, made worse by the fact that she couldn't talk to anyone, couldn't go to her friends for a hug, couldn't share her sorrow with people who had known her father, who knew her. But her dad had told her what

she needed to do, and she would do it. Hopefully, one day it would all make sense.

When Damon got into the office, there were a dozen agents gathered around the long table in the conference room adjacent to Peter Hunt's office. Peter Hunt was the special agent in charge of the New York field office, serving just under Walter Holmes, the assistant director in charge. They oversaw a dozen specialized divisions and task forces, one of which was the organized crime division run by Alan Parker.

Karen Leigh, who had been second in charge of Alan's division, stood at the front of the room, giving her thoughts on what organizations might be involved in Alan's death—if his accident had been instigated by one of the crime families or syndicates under his watch.

"We believe these three organizations require the most scrutiny," Karen said. She pointed to a whiteboard where three names were listed. "The Rasulov group, a Russian crime syndicate operating out of Brighton Beach, led by Sergei Rasulov; the Venturi family, a longtime Italian Mafia family run by brothers, Stefan and Lorenzo Venturi; and lastly, an offshoot of the Japanese Yakuza gang run by a new player Toshi Akita," she said. "Our department will be focusing our investigation on these players, but any other information is vital and welcome."

Karen stepped back, giving the room to Peter Hunt.

"Our top priority, and the directive from Director Holmes, is finding Alan's daughter," Peter said, drawing Damon's attention to the large wall monitor where Sophie's image appeared.

His gut clenched at the sight of her. She'd lived in his head for the past four years, but he'd always tried to blur her features. Now she was staring right at him with her gold-flecked brown eyes, framed by long, black lashes. Her blonde hair fell in thick waves around her shoulders. Her skin was perfect with just a touch of pink on her cheekbones. She had three freckles above her right eyebrow that weren't really noticeable in the photo, but he knew they were there. He also knew there were more on her shoulders and her breasts...

He shook that image out of his head as Peter continued his recap of the night's events.

"Sophie walked out of her office building at NYU shortly before five, as evidenced by the campus security cameras," Peter said. "We're tapping into other cameras along her route home, but don't have that information yet. We're also getting a trace on her phone. We're hopeful that she went to a friend's house and that she wasn't at home when her apartment was broken into, but we need to find her to confirm that. You all know that Alan's daughter was the light of his life. Let's do our best work in not only locating Sophie but also in finding out who killed Alan. Everything else on your list that doesn't require immediate attention takes a backseat."

As Peter ended the meeting, the agents got up to go back to their cubicles and offices. A few of the women were

crying. Others fell into conversation with each other as they mourned Alan's unexpected death.

Damon felt very much alone as he left the conference room. He probably knew Alan as well as anyone in the building, but he'd only been in the office a week, and in this group, he was very much an outsider.

"Damon."

He stopped and turned as Peter came toward him.

"Let's talk in my office," Peter said.

"Sure." He didn't know Peter at all. He had had only one brief conversation with him when Alan had introduced him on his first day of work.

As he followed Peter into his office, Peter motioned for him to close the door behind him.

He did so, then took a chair in front of Peter's desk, noting the pale, tense expression on his face, and sudden drop in energy from what he'd displayed to the group a few moments earlier.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

"I know Alan asked you to come to New York to work on his team, but Karen said you haven't been assigned to a case yet, which seemed odd to me."

"I've been finishing up some loose ends on a previous case."

"With MDT," Peter said with a nod. "I followed that. You did good work, Damon."

"Thank you. I have to admit I had some civilian help."

"The Monroe family—yes, they turned out to be quite helpful."

"They did," he agreed.

"I'm curious as to why you left DC?"

And he was curious as to why Peter had so many personal questions, but he kept that to himself. "I've always wanted to work for Alan. He's the best—was the best," he amended, feeling another rush of anger and disbelief that Alan's life had been taken. He was going to find out why and do his best to put whoever was responsible behind bars.

"Alan was one of the best agents I've ever worked with," Peter said. "He actually got me into the FBI."

"I didn't realize that."

"Yes. We went to Yale together. I was the cyber nerd of our group. After college, I got involved in computer security systems, and about ten years later, Alan recruited me to work for the Bureau. He changed my life." Peter paused. "He had that impact on a lot of people."

"He was very charismatic," Damon agreed.

"And he could assess talent better than anyone. He knew how to get the best from his people. That's why he did so well at Quantico. He could spot the future heroes from day one."

Damon listened to Peter ramble and had a feeling that they were moving closer to some point, but it was taking a hell of a long time to get there. When Peter finally paused, he said, "What do you really want to ask me?"

Peter straightened, as if realizing he'd gotten lost in his memories. "Alan respected you, Damon. I believe he called you to New York for a specific reason, a problem that he wasn't willing to share with anyone else. And I think that problem got him killed."

Peter's gaze met his, a challenge in his eyes, a dare to refute his words.

"Alan told me that he wanted to talk about my next assignment this week, but we never got a chance to do that. If he had a secret, he didn't share it with me."

"That's a shame. I was hoping you could be more helpful."

"I would like to be helpful, but I think Karen Leigh would know everything that Peter was involved in."

"They were very close, but she told me that he's been acting oddly the past few weeks. He's been secretive, sometimes unreachable. She thought something was going on in his personal life. Now, she's wondering if it was work related."

"I wish I could say I knew."

"So do I," Peter said with a sigh. "We need to find Sophie. I can't bring Alan back, but I can sure as hell try to save his daughter. I assume since you were good friends with Alan that you know Sophie?"

"I met her once years ago."

"You don't know who she might have sought out or where she might have gone if she wanted to get away from everything?"

"Given your history with her dad, I would have thought she'd run to you."

"Yes, I would have thought so, too," Peter said heavily. "Which leads me to believe she didn't go willingly."

His stomach turned at the thought of Sophie being someone's captive. "I hope that's not the case."

"Me, too. Thanks. You can go."

As he headed for the door, Alan's phone buzzed.

"Senator," Peter said. "I know. I can't believe it. A tragic loss."

As Damon closed the door to Peter's office, he wondered which senator had called to offer condolences. He didn't envy Peter having to tell Alan's friends he was dead.

He'd seen a lot of people die—both as a soldier and as an FBI agent—and notifying family and friends was never easy.

He walked back down the hall and took the elevator to his floor. When he got to the cubicle he had yet to feel at home in, he was faced with another surprise—this time a happier one.

The pretty brunette with the light-blue eyes made him feel like he finally had a friend in the building.

"Bree," he said. "I'm glad to see you."

She gave him a hug. "I can't believe Alan is dead. I heard the news when I got off the plane. I thought it had to be a mistake."

"I wish it was." He sat down at his desk as she took the adjacent chair.

"From the number of people in the building at this time of night, I'm assuming it's not an accident," she said.

"No, and worse, Alan's daughter is missing. No one is sure if she ran or if someone got to her."

Bree's gaze clouded with concern. "That's disturbing."

"Her apartment was trashed, searched thoroughly, sofa cushions ripped apart, drawers broken."

"They think she has something."

"Or knows something, but I can't see Alan reading her in on anything to do with his work. He kept her away from his job. He told me once he didn't want her to be part of this world."

"Whoever searched her apartment may not know that. Are there any leads?"

"Not that anyone has shared with me, but I don't know too many people here. Maybe you can get a little more insight."

Bree had been in the New York field office for three months, and while she didn't work in Alan's division and was often out of the building tracking down kidnappers and missing children, she still had more contacts than he did. And he could trust Bree. She was another person from their academy group that Alan had recruited to come to New York. Now that Alan was dead, he couldn't help wondering if there had been some reason Alan had wanted so many of them in New York.

"I'll certainly try to get some information." Bree cast a quick look over her shoulder to make sure no one was in earshot. "We need to talk some baseball."

"Let's take a walk outside."

They didn't speak again until they were out on the sidewalk, a few hundred yards away from the federal building.

"Did you speak to Wyatt?" Bree asked.

"Yes, I met him at a park by the East River earlier tonight. He looked like shit, Bree. He said someone tried to kill him, and it appeared that that person had beaten the crap out of him. He was also hyper and paranoid, giving me

short, one-word responses. I thought he could have been on something or else he hasn't slept in a week."

Her brows furrowed together in concern. "That doesn't sound like Wyatt."

"He was like a stranger, Bree. He told me Alan set him up."

"That's crazy. Alan would never do that."

"That's what I said. Wyatt wasn't convinced. He told me Alan set the meet with him, but he didn't show up, and Wyatt was ambushed. If it wasn't Alan who set him up, then it might have been someone else at the Bureau, because they were operating under strict protocols."

Her gaze grew troubled. "Alan would never sell out an agent under his command."

"Well, the bottom line is Wyatt is compromised and in danger. I tried to get him to go home with me, but he flipped out when a car pulled up by the park. It was nobody—just a bunch of teenagers—but he obviously didn't feel like he could wait around to see who was in the car. I need to know what case Wyatt is working on."

"You don't know?" she asked in surprise. "He didn't tell you?"

"No, he didn't get a chance or he thought I already knew."

"But you're on the same team."

"Alan hasn't read me in on any of the current operations yet. Now that he's dead, I'm wondering if Wyatt's attack and his accident are tied together."

"You need to talk to Karen Leigh."

"I know, but can I trust her? What do you think? Do you know her?"

Bree hesitated. "Not well enough to say."

"What does your gut tell you?"

"I'm not sure," she said slowly. "She's smart, ambitious, driven, very dedicated, works long hours. She and Alan seemed extremely close, very much in sync. I did have a moment when I wondered if they had a more personal relationship, because I saw them together having a late dinner one night, but that could have just been a working dinner."

"Interesting."

"What are we going to do about Wyatt? I saw your message about Alan to him, but he didn't respond—nor did anyone else."

"I think Parisa and Diego may be out of the country. They may not have access to the forum. This is on us, Bree."

"Hopefully, Wyatt gets back in touch and sets up another meet."

She pushed a strand of hair off her cheek, and he saw the dark shadows under her eyes. "You look tired."

"I haven't slept much this week, but it was worth it. I got to reunite a mother and daughter. It doesn't happen that often, so I don't care how exhausted I am."

He smiled, knowing how important it was to her to bring families back together. "Congratulations."

"Thanks."

"Should we go back to the office?"

Guilt flashed through her eyes. "I feel bad, Damon, but I really need to sleep for a few hours so I can get my brain working again."

"No need to feel bad. There are a lot of people working on Alan's case."

"I'll dive in tomorrow morning. But if you need something before then..."

"I'll be in touch."

"I'm glad you're in New York, Damon. Even though we won't be working directly together—it will be nice to have you in the office."

"To be honest, I don't know what I'm going to be doing now that Alan is dead, but one step at a time. We've got to get Wyatt out of trouble."

"We will," she promised, as she turned and walked away.

And Sophie, too, he silently muttered, as he headed back to the office.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FOUR

WYATT TANNER MOVED through the crowded streets of New York like a wary cat, keeping in the shadows, choosing alleys whenever possible, staying away from the lights. He probably should have taken Damon up on his earlier offer of help. He'd always trusted Damon, but then he'd always trusted Alan, too, and now...now he didn't know what to think.

He didn't want to believe that the man who had had his life in his hands the past ten months had sold him out, but he couldn't come up with a better answer no matter how hard he tried. And if it wasn't Alan, it was someone else at the Bureau, someone who knew where he was, what he was doing, and that boiled down to a very small group of people.

Alan had brought him into the New York field office ten months ago for the express purpose of planting him with the Venturi family, an Italian Mafia family that had been decimated in the eighties, only to spring back into business after 9/11 when the government's interest turned to Islamic terrorist groups. The Venturis had also resurged because

the old man Giancarlo Venturi had died in prison a year ago, and his two sons had decided to bring back the family business.

Lorenzo and Stefan Venturi had been laundering money for quite some time, but they'd moved beyond cleaning dirty money through real-estate development, wholesale diamonds and gambling to dealing drugs that were fueling the opioid crisis in the Northeast.

He'd found his way into the organization through his construction skills, the same skills he'd learned from his very respectable, very upstanding contractor father. He was sure his dad had never imagined he'd use what he'd been taught on numerous job sites to infiltrate a crime family, but that's exactly what had happened.

He'd gone slow at first, getting close to one of the construction supervisors, who'd taken him to a poker game, where he'd used his card counting skills and reckless gambling attitude to get invited to the high roller's game. Eventually, and as planned, he'd found himself in debt to the youngest Venturi brother—Lorenzo.

With a desperate need to pay off debts to the family, he was able to pick up side jobs, starting with small things like making cash deposits at different banks into different accounts, and then when he'd proved himself trustworthy, he'd been brought into other deals, delivering drugs, weapons, and diamonds.

He'd been building a damn good case against the Venturis until something had changed a few weeks earlier.

There was a new player in the game. The Venturi brothers were having secret meetings and rumors of

joining forces with a larger syndicate had rumbled around the organization.

Alan had set up a meet with him two days ago, saying he had important information to discuss, which had been unusual, because in the past Alan had always let him initiate contact. Alan hadn't shown up at that meeting, and he'd come close to losing his life, so it sure as hell felt like a set-up.

He'd thought for a while that the Venturis had someone inside at the FBI. It was difficult to believe that Alan might have been that mole, but he looked damned guilty at the moment.

He had to figure out a way to keep himself alive and get to the truth. He shouldn't have panicked at the park, but he'd had the sudden thought that if Alan was a mole and he'd personally picked Damon to work for him, then maybe Damon was dirty, too. But that was wrong. Damon was a good guy. He knew that. He just wasn't thinking straight. He was exhausted, running on fumes, and every bone in his body hurt. His head was throbbing, his vision was blurry, and he was almost out of cash and options.

He hated to ask for help, but Damon was his best bet. Hopefully, he'd be willing to talk to him again. He just needed to get on the Internet, which was what was driving him toward an Internet café shortly before midnight. The café was occupied by a clerk and one older teenage boy.

He used the last few dollars he had to buy ten minutes on a computer and then logged in to the baseball forum. His nerves jangled as he opened the private chat room and saw a message from Damon.

The breath left his lungs as he read Damon's post. *Coach is dead. Fernandez in trouble. Need the starters back on the field. Who's available?*

The coach was Alan. He was Fernandez, and Damon was calling anyone else who could make themselves available to help. But no one else had answered yet.

He sat back in his chair and stared at the screen.

Alan was dead?

Maybe he wasn't dirty after all.

Or Alan had failed at doing what he was supposed to do—which was to take him out. Not that it was Alan who had attacked him, but he could have easily hired the muscle.

But that didn't matter anymore. Alan was dead and it couldn't be an accident. So, who had killed him? Someone from the FBI? Someone from the Venturi family? The new player in town?

He tapped his fingers lightly on the keyboard, thinking that Damon might be in as much trouble as he was, because he was Alan's latest recruit.

He typed in a note for Damon, who'd chosen the All-Star catcher Gary Carter as his moniker on the site...

Carter never should have signed with a new coach. Might want to go back to the minors. Better players there. Let's meet for batting practice at the cages tomorrow night at nine. Need some tips on my swing.

Damon would know he was referring to the 8th Street arcade where they'd had a few meets in the past. It was a good, crowded location, with a lot of people around.

He hit Send, hoping he wasn't making a mistake.

Even if Damon could be trusted, if he talked to the wrong person at the FBI about any of this, he could be risking both their lives...

Damon didn't sleep all night, tossing and turning in his ridiculously hot apartment that was barely livable with all the windows open and two fans blowing. He was supposed to have air conditioning, but it wasn't working. He'd grabbed the apartment fast because it was close to his new job, but he was definitely going to have to rethink his living situation.

During the restless and interminably long hours, he thought about where Sophie might have gone if she was in danger. He kept coming back to the place where they'd met, the last time he'd seen her—in a small lakeshore cabin in the Adirondacks.

He didn't know if Sophie's family had a place there or if she'd just gone there with the Rowlands—with Cassie and Jamie. But he did know that she'd spoken fondly of summers at the lake. The Adirondacks were a good five hours north of the city. Maybe it was a place where she'd feel safe.

But would she be safe there?

He kept coming back to one puzzling question. Sophie had grown up with the FBI as her second family. If she was in trouble, why would she run away from her father's friends? She had to have had a really good reason.

Tired of his thoughts running endlessly around in a circle, he rolled out of bed around four, showered, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, and checked the baseball forum.

He was thrilled to see a message from Wyatt. His friend was still alive and had set up a time to meet that night.

Checking his watch, he calculated the time it would take to look for Sophie at the lake and get back to meet Wyatt. He decided he could do both. He hopped into his car, made a quick stop to grab coffee and a breakfast burrito and then it was onto the interstate. He could be taking a five-hour drive for nothing, but he could be at the lake by ten and back in the city by early evening.

Sophie might not be at the lake. She might not have run at all. She could have been kidnapped. *She might not even still be alive.* His stomach rolled with nausea at that horrific thought. But he couldn't dwell on it. He could only do what he could do, and that was to check out the cabin. He wasn't going to accomplish much at the office. Alan's team hadn't exactly shut him out, but they definitely hadn't felt compelled to share information with him. Apparently, they didn't trust him any more than he trusted them.

Maybe Bree would get him some information. She might not be on Alan's team, but she had friends who were. Which reminded him—he was supposed to meet her for lunch. He'd text her later and cancel. She wouldn't be awake this early.

As the miles passed, it felt good to be in his car with the air conditioning blowing in his face. He'd been stressed out and overworked since he'd joined the Bureau four years ago. Most days he liked the hectic pace. He wasn't good

with downtime—too much opportunity to think. He preferred to be busy, moving forward, making things happen. But now seemed like a good time to take stock in his situation.

His mentor and the man he'd come to work for was dead. Where did that leave him? He wasn't sure he wanted to work for Karen Leigh, if she got moved up. On the other hand, the FBI could bring someone new in to replace Alan. But nothing would happen too fast. He could easily be in limbo for a while, but that might be a good thing. He'd have more time to help Wyatt and to look for Sophie.

His jaw tightened as he thought about the last time he'd been on this road, when he'd made the trip to the lake for Jamie's wake.

He could still remember the first time he'd seen her. The room had been packed with people, and he'd actually been looking for Cassie, but when his gaze had connected with Sophie's, everyone else in the room had faded away. He'd felt a compelling need to get closer, and that's exactly what he'd done. In fact, he didn't think he'd spoken to anyone else there.

He'd listened to stories of Jamie shared by various people, but he hadn't told any of his stories. It was just too painful to talk about someone who shouldn't have died so young.

His chest tightened. *Damn!* It still hurt to think about that day.

He'd almost quit Quantico after Jamie's death. But it was Alan who had convinced him to keep going. He was so close

to graduation, to a new career, and it's what Jamie would have wanted him to do, so he'd done it.

But first he'd spent one incredible night with a beautiful woman, whose attraction had terrified him so much that he'd left before she woke up, before she could smile at him, beckon him with her eyes, tempt him with her body, make him forget all his plans, all his goals.

Maybe if he'd met her at another time, in a different place, things would have been different...or not.

He didn't believe in love, and Sophie had that love-ever-after vibe about her. Stay or go—he would have ended up disappointing her with either choice, so he'd left, and deep down inside, he'd always been a little afraid to see her again.

He was going to have to get over that...and fast.

He owed Alan Parker a lot, and if he could help Sophie, he would.

Then he'd leave her—*again*. Hopefully, it would be easier the second time around.

Sophie couldn't find the damn key, and every passing minute reminded her how fast time was flying. It was nine-thirty on Thursday morning, and the sun was rising higher in the sky.

The cabin was set back from the shoreline and tucked between tall, thick trees that separated the structure from neighboring buildings by a good twenty-five yards. The nearest cabin belonged to the Rowlands, but she couldn't

see it from here. From the front windows, she had a partial view of the water, and in the past several minutes, she'd seen a few dog walkers and kids heading down to the lake. The town was waking up, and she needed to be gone before anyone realized she was there.

She'd tried to look for the key when she'd arrived around midnight, but when she'd finally gotten to the cabin after hiding her car behind a boathouse a mile away, she'd realized the electricity was off. No one had used the place in forever, and a caretaker only came by a few times a year in the daylight to dust away the cobwebs and make sure the property was intact.

She'd tried looking for candles but without even a cell phone flashlight, she'd gotten nowhere fast. Finally, she'd laid down on the couch and fallen into an exhausted sleep.

She'd been surprised she could sleep at all, but her brain and her heart had obviously needed a time-out from the pain and the worry. She'd woken up an hour and a half ago and had started her search, but she'd found nothing.

It was ridiculous. The place wasn't that big. There were two bedrooms, one bath, a living room, and a small kitchen. There was a hall closet that was still filled with beach supplies, chairs, paddles for the two kayaks that sat in the garage, beach towels and other random items that she had already looked through. She'd also gotten into the attic space and searched through old boxes that had gotten stashed up there at some point.

That venture had taken her down a very sad memory lane, and she'd had to push back more tears as she'd seen

old, loose photographs taken of her and her family during various summer vacations.

So, what next? She'd looked through her dad's bedroom and the dresser that held only musty linens. The bathroom was empty. She'd dug through the kitchen drawers, tossing the loose items onto the counters, and she had come up with a couple of keys, but they were all for the front or back door of the cabin, or a boat that had been sold long ago.

She moved back to the doorway of the second bedroom, the one she'd always used. There was a queen-sized bed; she'd already pulled off the quilt and checked under the pillows, which hadn't been easy since the bed had reminded her of Damon and the night they'd spent together.

She hadn't been in the cabin since that night. Like her dad, this lake house held too many memories, both good and bad, and while she loved to dig into the pasts of people from centuries ago, she tended to leave her own past alone.

Turning away, she walked into the middle of the living room.

What was she missing?

Had she made a mistake in coming here? Had she thought her dad meant this cabin, when in fact he'd been talking about some other happy place?

But nothing else jumped into her head. Although, she did wonder why he would have sent her so far away to get a key. Why not leave it somewhere in New York City? If not her house, or his, why not somewhere closer, easier to find?

He had to have had a reason. Maybe he'd just wanted to get her out of town quickly. Or he'd left the key here a long time ago and had never come back to retrieve it. She certainly couldn't remember him talking about any trips to the lake in recent years, but then she knew little about what he did on the weekends. They were close, but they were also busy, and while they talked or texted often, they didn't see each other in person more than a few times a month.

As her gaze swept the room, an old memory poked at her brain, telling her to pay attention.

She'd been about ten or eleven. Her mom was making cookies in the kitchen. She'd left the kitchen and come into the living room to ask her father to take her out on the boat.

"What are you doing, Daddy?" she'd asked, as her father carefully pulled a brick out of the wall above the fireplace, revealing a small space.

"Making a hiding place," he replied, the tension in his eyes warring with the smile on his face.

"For what?"

"Whatever we need. It will be our secret place, just like this is our secret house. You can keep a secret, can't you, Sophie?"

"I won't tell anyone," she promised.

"You're a good girl. I hope you always know how much I love you."

The last words of her memory stung, but she walked quickly across the room, running her fingers over the rough-edged bricks, trying to remember which one was

loose. He'd said something about her age marking the spot —*eleven*.

She counted eleven up from the bottom and pushed at the brick. It wobbled, and she grabbed it more firmly, pulling it out of the wall.

Her heart leapt against her chest as her gaze fell on a silver key.

She'd found it.

But the key wasn't the only item in the hiding place. Next to it was a small 9 mm gun, similar to the one she'd seen her father carry.

Her breath came short and quick. She wasn't a stranger to guns. Her dad had taught her to shoot when she was a teenager. But the gun and the key made her think about the person or people who had taken her father's life.

She took out the key and put it in her pocket, then retrieved the gun.

She'd no sooner done that when she heard heavy footsteps on the porch.

Someone was coming!

Was it a neighbor, a friend, or an enemy?

Through the window, she saw the shadow of a man.

He knocked.

She didn't answer.

Maybe he'd go away.

He didn't.

He knocked again, and then he kicked open the door.

She raised the gun and pointed it at him. "Stop right there. Hands up."

CHAPTER FIVE

"I DIDN'T EXPECT you'd be happy to see me again, Sophie, but I didn't think you'd want to shoot me," Damon said, putting up his hands.

"Damon," she said in shock.

He was the last person she'd expected to see. Four years had passed since their gazes had last met. She wished he'd gone bald or gray or gotten fat, but that hadn't happened. He looked just as mouthwateringly delicious as he had the first time she'd seen him.

His dark-brown hair was still thick and wavy, perfect for running her fingers through. His blue eyes were as mysterious and enticing as the sea, changing colors with his mood, with his passion. His full-lipped mouth was still oh-so-sexy, and his broad shoulders, lean hips, and long legs made shivers run down her spine that had nothing to do with the danger lurking in the shadows, and everything to do with him, and a ridiculous attraction that, apparently, she still hadn't gotten over.

"Want to lower that gun?" he asked, his voice quiet but purposeful.

She started, realizing she'd already gotten lost in him, and that couldn't happen—not this time. "What are you doing here? Why did you kick down the door?"

"I was looking for you, and when you didn't answer, I decided to make sure you weren't hurt—or something."

"Or something? You heard about my father, didn't you?"

"I did. I'm really sorry, Sophie. I mean that."

He probably did mean it. He'd been one of her dad's star pupils and someone her father had kept in touch with over the years.

It was ironic that Damon was probably the one man she could have introduced to her father who he would have liked.

Or maybe not.

Her dad had never encouraged her to get involved with anyone from the FBI. In fact, he'd made a point of keeping his work relationships away from her. That had made it easy for her to never see Damon again.

"We need to talk," Damon continued. "I'd like to do that without a gun in my face."

"How did you know I was here?"

"I had a hunch. When we were at the wake, you said this place meant a lot to you and to Jamie."

Her gut clenched as she thought about Jamie again. Just about everyone she'd ever loved was dead. "Did you tell anyone else you were coming here—anyone from the Bureau?"

Damon gave her a steady, measuring look. "No, I came alone. But a lot of people are looking for you. Did you know that your apartment was broken into?"

"Yes. A friend of mine left me a message. But I couldn't call her back."

"Why? Because you lost your phone hundreds of miles away from here?"

So, they'd traced her phone signal. She'd figured they would.

"It was a good move," he said. "To throw people off the track."

"Well, it didn't work. You're here."

"I wasn't going off your phone signal." He paused. "I'm closing the door. Don't shoot me."

She didn't know if she *could* shoot him, and he didn't seem to be too worried, but she kept the gun pointed at him anyway, just because it made her feel like she had a little more control over the situation.

He closed the door, but it didn't latch, not after he'd broken the lock.

"You'll have to get that fixed," he said. "Not that it was doing much for you anyway."

"You need to go, Damon."

"Let's talk first. Why did you run away from your apartment, your friends, your father's coworkers? Why did you just disappear, Sophie?"

"Because someone killed my dad."

"It's possible it was an accident."

"You don't believe that any more than I do," she said sharply.

"Maybe not, but I think something specific spooked you."

"You mean like the two men I saw going into my apartment building?"

"You saw the men who broke into your apartment?" he asked in surprise.

"I don't know if they were the ones, but they could have been."

"What did they look like?"

"Law enforcement, maybe—I don't know."

Damon stared back at her, and she could see him running through her words in his head. "Why would you be afraid of law enforcement when your father is FBI?"

"Gut instinct," she lied, knowing she wouldn't have been afraid at all if her father hadn't told her to be. "And it looks like I was right to run. If I'd gone to my apartment, who knows what would have happened?"

His lips drew into a hard line. "Look, Sophie, I want to help you."

"Why? Why on earth would you want to help me?"

His gaze darkened, and the air sizzled between them as they found themselves back in a place probably neither of them wanted to revisit, but they were there all the same.

"We're not friends," she said quickly, needing to break the tension. "We're not anything. We haven't seen each other in four years. Why do you care where I am, what I'm doing? Is it because of loyalty to my dad? That has to be it, right? Nothing else could have made you drive all the way up here."

"I should have called you after that night," he said.

"I'm not looking for an apology."

"Aren't you?"

"No. Maybe. No," she said, hating to sound so uncertain. "None of that is important. I have bigger problems."

"Then let's talk about now," he said, relief in his eyes as he changed the subject. "I respected your father. He was a mentor to me. I owe him for that, and I know that he would want me to help you. He trusted me, and I hope you can trust me, too."

"I don't know if my father trusted you," she said, shaking her head.

Surprise and anger flared in his eyes. "Why would you say that?"

"Because he told me not to trust *anyone* from the Bureau, and since you're an agent, that includes you."

"When did he tell you that?"

She realized she'd said too much. "A while ago."

"Really? A while ago? Or was it today? What else did he say?"

"That's my business."

"Every word could be important, Sophie. You need to tell me."

"No, I don't need to tell you. If he wanted you to know anything, he would have left you a message."

"So, he left you a message?"

Damn, the man was sharp. "It doesn't matter how or when he said it, I'm still not going to trust you. I'm not going to go against him."

"I'm not just some agent from the Bureau, Sophie."

"Oh, please. Just because we've seen each other naked doesn't mean anything."

He frowned at her comment. "Look, we're wasting time. Here's what's going to happen. You're either going to tell me what your dad was worried about so I can help you

figure out who killed him and keep you safe at the same time, or you're going to have to shoot me. Those are your options. Because I'm not leaving here without you."

"You think I can't pull the trigger?" she challenged. "Because I can."

"And where will that get you? Will you be any closer to finding your father's killer?"

She really hated his calm, pointed questions. She was running on emotion, and he was using logic. "Fine, I can tell you this much. My dad said that he was in trouble and that he wanted me to be safe. He told me not to trust anyone, to run away and hide. Do whatever I needed to do to stay alive." She deliberately left out the part about the key and the next step she was supposed to take.

"Was that it?" Damon challenged.

"There was some stuff about him being sorry and how much he loved me, but the last message ended abruptly." She drew in a shaky breath. "I think he was calling me from the car right before he went off the road. I heard a crash and then nothing."

"Did he say who was after him? Did he name names? Did he call out a case he was working on? Anyone who had a grudge against him?"

"No, he was quite vague. And I'm not lying about that. I wish he'd said who or what or anything specific, because then I wouldn't be running away without knowing who might be chasing me." She licked her lips. "I believe he really just wanted to say good-bye." Her eyes watered, and her hands on the gun began to shake as her shoulders grew weary.

"So, what are you going to do now? What's your plan?"

"I'm still trying to figure that out. I know I can't stay here."

"No, you can't. I don't even understand why you came here at all. Surely, someone at the FBI knows about this place. Peter told me your dad brought him into the FBI. He must have made the trip up here at some point."

"No, he didn't come here. Only the Rowlands were here with us. They own the cabin next door. Vincent and my dad bought the cabins as safe houses a long time ago. When we were here, we used fake names. I thought it was a game back then. My dad never let his work touch our lives."

"Well, someone from the Bureau will talk to Vincent Rowland. Vincent may be retired, but he and your father were good friends; he'll be interviewed."

"I know all that, but I had to go somewhere," she said. "I needed to be alone to cry, to think. I wasn't planning to stay longer than a night."

The doubt in his eyes grew as his gaze moved past her to the fireplace, to the empty space and the brick she'd placed on the floor.

"You didn't come here to mourn—you came here to get something," he said.

"This gun," she lied.

"You drove all the way up here to get a gun? No way. I don't buy it. You're not telling me the whole truth, Sophie. And I can't help you if you don't."

"Damon, please, just go. Just leave me alone," she pleaded, desperate to get him out of the cabin before she did something even more stupid—like start to trust him.

"I'll disappear. I'll go somewhere no one else knows about. You don't have to worry about me. You've done your duty. You came after me. You did that for my dad. Now do something for me—leave me alone. You've managed it for four years. You can keep going."

His mouth tightened. "I'm not leaving you alone. You won't be safe. You can't get help from a friend, because you'll put them in danger, and even if you are very careful, you'll make a mistake. You don't know how to stay off the radar, but I do. You're going to have to trust someone at some point. You're going to have to put your anger aside and let it be me."

Before she could answer, she was suddenly hit with a shower of glass from the nearby window.

What the hell had just happened?

Another pane blew out, and something whizzed by her ear.

Damon grabbed her arm and pulled down as a third window exploded.

Someone was shooting at her!

"Are you hit?" Damon asked, his gaze raking her face.

She shook her head, unable to find words. There was glass in her hair and her bare arms were bleeding, but she'd managed to escape the bullets. "Who is shooting at me?"

"Doesn't matter. We need to get out of here. There's a back door, right?" Damon asked in clipped tones.

"Yes, but what if they're out there, too?"

Another shot took out the last of the front windows, and she ducked closer to Damon. The shooter must have some

sort of silencer on his weapon because she couldn't hear the blasts, only the glass breaking.

"Stay down," Damon said, as he crept closer to the window and took a look outside.

"Do you see anyone?"

"Yes. In the trees. Just one, I think. Looks like he shot out my tires. He probably thinks it's your car. Here's what you're going to do. You're going to run out the back, while I draw out our shooter." He pulled a gun out from under his T-shirt. He'd obviously had it tucked into the waistband of his jeans.

Her recent stand with her own gun seemed fairly ridiculous right now. Damon could have taken her out any time he wanted.

"Where's your car?" he asked.

"I hid it by a boathouse a mile away from here."

"Good. Go there. I'll meet you as soon as I can. Where's the boathouse?"

She hesitated for a split second.

"Seriously?" he demanded, anger in his dark-blue eyes. "Someone is trying to kill you, Sophie, and I'm the only one standing in the way."

"It's off Caldwell Road, past Kingston Lodge. What if you can't get away? What if there's someone at my car?"

"There won't be. I'll get away, and you'll wait for me. You need me, Sophie, whether you want to admit it or not."

The vase on the table shattered with another shot.

She picked up her gun, crawled over to the kitchen table, grabbed her bag, and ran through the kitchen toward the back door.

She took a peek outside. The back yard was enclosed, and she didn't see anyone inside the fencing.

She heard gunfire from the front of the house—*Damon was shooting back.*

As she went outside, she stayed close to the back of the structure until she could get through the gate and dash into a cluster of trees. She held her breath every step of the way, expecting to be taken down at any moment, but Damon was doing what he'd promised, keeping the shooter engaged.

When she reached the woods, she heard the distant sound of sirens. Someone had heard Damon's gunshots and called the police.

The shots abruptly ended. All was quiet except for the sirens. A car engine roared from somewhere nearby.

Had the gunman left at the sound of the cops? She really hoped so. She also hoped Damon was all right.

Five minutes later, she made her way past the old lodge to the boathouse. Her car was where she'd left it. She pulled out her keys, watching the vehicle for a long minute before making her way over to it. She slid behind the wheel, her heart pounding. She wanted to speed away. But would she be safer on the road? Her father certainly hadn't been.

Damon had asked her to wait. He'd told her she needed him, and she had the terrible feeling she did. She had no idea who had come after her—why anyone would try to kill her.

Her father's warning voicemails had just been jumbled words before this. Now they felt very, very real.

Her heart stopped as a man came around the side of the boathouse. To her relief, it was Damon. He slid into the passenger seat and said, "Drive."

"Where?"

"Wherever you're supposed to go next." He gave her a knowing look. "Your dad told you to come here, didn't he? I'm guessing his instructions didn't end there."

She hated that he was right and even more that he knew it. But his cocky arrogance and his powerful male presence made her feel a little safer. "What happened to the gunman?"

"He took off at the sound of the sirens."

"Did you get a look at him?"

"Not much of one. He had on jeans and a sweatshirt, a baseball cap on his head. Didn't see his face. He jumped into a truck and took off. I wasn't close enough to get a license plate. I could guess at the make and model, but right now it's more important that we keep moving. If your father's concerns about law enforcement are valid, then we need to leave before the police find us."

She hadn't even thought of that. "But you don't need to go with me. You're FBI. You can tell the police you went to the cabin, but I wasn't there. You can tell them about the shooter." She was actually proud of her suggestion, until Damon gave a quick shake of his head.

"Not a chance. The shooter saw me. I have to be able to defend myself, and I can't do that if I get tied up with the local cops, not to mention the fact that you need me, Sophie." His hard gaze met hers. "You may not want to

admit it, but you do. You can't underestimate who's after you."

She shivered, and it wasn't just because of the recent gunshots. She still couldn't believe Damon had come after her.

"Like it or not, we're in this together now," Damon said. "Where are we going?"

"I'll tell you when we get there."

"Why don't you let me drive?"

Her hands were shaking and her heart was hammering against her chest, but there was no way she was giving up the wheel. It was all the control she had right now, and she was hanging on to it.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SIX

DAMON SCoured the road as Sophie drove away from the cabin. Fortunately, she knew where she was going and was able to avoid the police activity at the house and the surrounding woods, but his pulse didn't slow down until they were at least ten miles away.

He was actually impressed with Sophie's steady hand on the wheel. She was terrified and probably still dealing with a huge adrenaline rush, but she was keeping it together.

He still wondered why she'd run from NYC to the lake house and what she'd gotten from the hiding spot in the fireplace; he was damned sure it wasn't just the gun. But that raised another question. If Alan didn't trust his fellow FBI agents, then why had he sent his daughter to a cabin he owned—a cabin next door to the one owned by the Rowlands?

Sophie had said it was a secret cabin, but Vincent Rowland knew about it, and he could have told any number of people at any time.

Vincent might not have believed there was any need for continued secrecy after he retired. And if Peter or Karen

had contacted him last night and asked him if he knew where Sophie might run, he could have told them about the cabin.

Not that Damon wanted to believe Peter or Karen had sent someone to the lake with a gun to take care of Sophie. But he couldn't rule it out.

"When is the last time you spoke to Vincent Rowland?" he asked, glancing over at her.

Sophie shot him a surprised look. They'd both been silent for the past twenty minutes, each lost in their own thoughts, but now he wanted to talk. He needed more information, and he needed it fast.

"Vincent?" she echoed. "I don't think I've spoken to him since Jamie died. Why?"

"Still wondering how anyone found you at the cabin."

"Vincent wouldn't have told anyone. He and my dad had a pact. The cabins were their safe houses. And besides that, I've known Vincent since I was a child. The Rowlands were there for me and my father during the darkest days of our lives when my mom died. There's nothing you could say that would make me believe Vincent or Cassie would send a shooter to the lake to take me out."

"I'm not saying that's what happened, but if Peter or Karen or anyone else at the FBI called Vincent or Cassie after you disappeared last night and said they were worried about you and asked if either of them know where you might go, it's possible someone might have mentioned the cabin in an attempt to help you. They wouldn't know about your father's warning not to trust anyone at the Bureau."

"I suppose I could believe that," she conceded. "But Cassie is in London right now."

"She still has a phone. What about Vincent?"

"I don't know if he's in New York; he travels a lot."

His phone vibrated in his pocket, and as he pulled it out, he realized he should have disabled the phone before leaving the cabin. "It's Peter," he said.

"You can't answer that. You can't tell him where we are," she said, panic in her voice. "You shouldn't have even brought the phone with you. What if they're tracking us right now?"

"I'll get rid of the phone as soon as I see if he leaves me a voicemail." He waited a moment, then saw the message. "Looks like he did."

"Put it on speaker. If we're in this together, there can't be secrets between us."

He did as she asked.

"Damon, it's Peter Hunt. If you've located Sophie Parker, you need to bring her in. She's in serious danger. I'm extremely worried about both of you. Call me back."

"That was fast," he muttered. "Obviously, Peter knows about the shootout at your cabin."

Sophie glanced at her watch. "That was half an hour ago. How did they find out so quickly?"

"They obviously traced the car to me and notified the FBI. Peter put two and two together, figuring I'd come after you." He paused. "What's the deal with you and Peter Hunt? Why didn't you ask him for help? He has obviously been a long-time family friend."

"I told you—my dad said not to trust anyone. I didn't know if he was including Peter in that, but he certainly didn't tell me to go to Peter, so I didn't."

"You said your father's last message was cut off. Maybe he would have said more if he had time."

"He left me four voicemails before he got cut off, and he never mentioned Peter in any of them."

He was surprised that Alan had left her that many messages. Her words also led him to believe that she still hadn't told him the whole story, but he'd questioned enough witnesses in his time to know when to push and when to retreat.

Right now, Sophie was running high on emotions ranging from fear, to grief, to anger. He needed to let her burn some of that off before he tried to gain her confidence.

He also needed to get rid of his phone. He didn't have a removable battery, so he turned off the power, then rolled down the window and tossed it into the bushes on the side of the road. Hopefully by the time anyone got to his last known location, he and Sophie would be miles away.

As he disconnected from his phone, it felt both freeing and alarming. He'd gone undercover before and been without a phone, but he'd always had a contact at the Bureau, someone who knew where he was and what mission he was on. He could have called for backup at any point, and it would have come, but this was different. When he'd gotten into the car with Sophie, he'd chosen a side—her side.

It was a little shocking how quickly and easily he'd done that.

He told himself it was for Alan; that wasn't the complete truth. But motivation didn't matter. He and Sophie were on their own, and he needed to think about what to do next.

"Where did you get this car?" he asked.

"I rented it in New York. I paid in cash. I'm supposed to bring it back today, but I don't see how I can do that."

"No, you can't do that. We're going to need to switch cars at some point. The FBI will already be checking with rental car agencies in Manhattan. Your photo will be sent around, and if they don't have this license plate number yet, they soon will."

"How are we going to switch cars? We're in the mountains."

"We'll figure it out. Hopefully, we have a little time."

Several more minutes passed, then she said, "Will someone be worried about you, Damon? Someone you care about?"

He wished he had a better answer to that question. "I'm sure my abandoned car and shot-up tires will cause some concern, but I just moved to New York a week ago, so I haven't gotten close to anyone. I barely know my coworkers' last names."

"Why did you move? I thought you were a superstar in DC. My dad mentioned you a few months back, saying you were cracking some huge terrorism case. He was quite proud; he liked to brag about the successes of his students. You were one of his favorites." She cleared her throat. "I was happy to hear you were doing so well."

"Were you?" he asked dryly.

She shot him an indecipherable look. "Well, maybe *happy* is a little strong. But you didn't answer my question. Why did you leave DC?"

"Your father made me an offer. He wanted me to work on his taskforce in New York. It was time for a change, so I said yes." He paused. "You never told your father you knew me, did you?"

"I said I met you at the wake; that was it. I don't tell my father about one-night stands."

"So, I wasn't your only one-night stand?"

Something twitched in her gaze, then she turned her attention back on the road. "Does it matter?"

It didn't matter, but he knew the truth. That night had been out of character for her. He'd known it at the time, but he just hadn't cared; he'd wanted her too much. He'd taken her *yes* at face value, because asking if she was sure might have changed her answer, and that had been unthinkable.

"What was the task force my dad wanted you to work on?" she asked.

"I don't know. I assumed it had to do with the focus of his division—organized crime. But he never got a chance to tell me. I was wrapping up some details on my last case, and he told me we'd get into my new assignment next week. I wasn't worried about what it was. I wanted to work with your father. I respected him a great deal. He pushed me to do my best and I liked that. Whatever he wanted me to work on was fine with me."

"A lot of his students felt that way about him, and it was a two-way street. My dad really cared about the people he

worked with. He used to tell me that his biggest flaw was getting personally attached. I didn't understand how that could be a flaw, but maybe it made him vulnerable to betrayal."

"You think he was betrayed?"

"Yes," she said without hesitation. "By someone he trusted, and then he didn't know who to believe."

"What else did he say in his message to you, Sophie?"

Her hands tightened on the wheel, and she didn't look at him when she said, "I already told you. He was proud of me. He wanted me to have a happy and long life even if he couldn't be there. But he hoped he would be. He said he might be able to figure things out, but obviously he didn't have the time to do that."

"I wish I could hear the messages," he muttered.

"So do I," she said, a deep, wrenching pain in her voice. "You don't know how difficult it was for me to crush the phone, to destroy my last connection with him. I almost couldn't do it."

"But you did." He was starting to realize that the soft Sophie of his dreams had a steel core.

"I knew I had to. I couldn't be sentimental about it."

He couldn't imagine the difficulty of the choice she'd made to destroy her father's last message to her. That must have been agonizing; he knew how close they were. It would have been much easier for him, because he didn't feel close to either of his parents. Their actions had always been disappointing.

He'd been told that he'd disappointed them, too. That was probably true. Clearing his throat, he repeated his

earlier question. "Where are we going, Sophie?"

"I'll tell you later."

"Why not now?"

"I don't know. It's just the way I feel."

He disliked the edge in her voice, the distrust. The Sophie he'd met at Jamie's wake had been sad, but she'd also been open, warm, and caring. It was what had drawn him to her. He'd wanted to wrap himself up in her softness, her kindness, her passion, and he'd done just that.

He wondered if he hadn't taken more from her than he'd given back. He hoped not. He hoped the night had been as good for her as it had been for him. He couldn't really imagine how it couldn't have been. It was the most memorable night of his life—maybe because it had just happened once. But that night was a long time ago now, and he needed to stay in the present.

He straightened and looked out the side view mirror, then glanced behind them. Since he'd last checked the road, a silver SUV had come into view.

"They've been there for a couple of minutes," Sophie said, looking into the rearview mirror.

He mentally cursed himself for getting lost in the past for even that long.

There appeared to be a couple in the front seat of the SUV: a man behind the wheel, a woman in the passenger seat.

"Do you think it's the person who shot at us?" Sophie asked with alarm. "What should I do? There's nowhere to pull off."

He could hear the panic in her voice and wished he was at the wheel. He would have forced that issue earlier, but Sophie had barely been willing to let him in the car; he hadn't wanted to push his luck.

"I don't think that's the shooter," he said. "But pick up your speed a little. Let's take the next turnoff, see if they follow."

"What if the turnoff is a dead end? Shouldn't we just try to outrun them?"

The curvy two-lane road didn't seem like a good option for a road race. "My gut tells me that they won't follow. Let's try turning off first."

The minutes ticked by as they both looked for an exit.

"There's a road," Sophie said with relief.

He put his hand on the side of the door as she took the turnoff a little fast. As they shot down the side road, he saw the SUV pass by on the main highway. Sophie drove another mile and then slowed down and pulled over to the side. She glanced in the rearview mirror. "I don't see them."

"Let's give it a minute."

As the road remained empty behind them, Sophie blew out a breath and gave him an apologetic look. "Sorry. I guess I'm jittery."

"Better to be acutely aware of your surroundings than not. How about letting me drive?"

She hesitated. "I can't."

"Because you think I'm going to drive you somewhere you don't want to go?"

"Maybe. Yes. I feel like I have one tiny thread of control right now, and it's only because my hands are on the steering wheel."

He could have taken control of her and the car at any moment, but he wasn't going to tell her that. He needed her to stay strong and if that meant she was at the wheel, he could live with it. "Then you can drive."

She pulled the car back onto the road, made a U-turn and returned to the highway.

They didn't speak for a while, and he was fine with that. He needed to keep his head in the game and talking to Sophie was distracting.

As she drove through the mountains, he could see that they were taking a circuitous route south, probably back to New York City or at least somewhere in that vicinity. But the trip was taking a torturously long time. They often found themselves behind slow-moving motorhomes or they'd spend long minutes sitting in lines of cars waiting to get past road construction.

After almost three hours, Sophie took an exit and pulled into a gas station. "I need to use the restroom, and we're almost out of gas."

"I'll take care of the gas."

"I have cash."

"I do, too. Hang on to yours for now."

She nodded wearily as they walked into the convenience store. They both used the facilities, then he prepaid the gas while Sophie grabbed drinks and snacks and met him back outside as he finished filling up the car.

"I know you want control," he said. "But you're exhausted, and I have a feeling we still have a long way to go. How about letting me take a turn driving?"

"I am tired," she admitted. "But I got energy drinks and candy bars, so I should be okay."

He smiled at her valiant effort to stay strong and to stay awake. "I'm sure we'll make good use of all of those, but let me drive. I promise I won't take you anywhere you don't want to go. Just give me some general directions, and I'm good."

He could see the conflict in her brown eyes, but eventually, she said, "All right."

He was relieved to win one battle, especially since he was very tired of being a passenger. Sophie might like control, but so did he.

As he got back onto the highway, a sign ahead offered several options. "Which way?"

"Stay to the right."

"We're not going back to New York City, are we?"

"No, we're going to Connecticut."

"What's in Connecticut?"

"You'll see when we get there."

"Do you know how annoying that answer is?"

She smiled for the first time, which was fairly incredible considering his words. "I know it's annoying, but somehow that makes this situation feel less terrifying. It's like we're normal; we're just two people annoying each other."

"Nothing about this is normal."

"I know. You're right. But in all honesty, my life has never really been normal. It has its moments, sometimes

years, where things seem like they're going along smoothly, and then *bam*—everything changes. The floor drops out from under me. You'd think I'd be used to it by now, but it always takes me by surprise. I wonder when it won't."

He looked over at her, feeling a wave of compassion at her sad, bewildering tone. "I don't know, Sophie, but I don't think it's going to be this week."

"Me, either," she said with a sigh. "I might have to close my eyes for a minute, Damon. I feel so tired. I hardly slept last night."

"Take a rest. But before you do, can you give me a city? Otherwise, who knows where we'll be in Connecticut when you wake up?"

She hesitated, then said, "New Haven. Will you do what I was doing, Damon? Will you get off the highway occasionally, switch things up? It will take longer, but I think it will be worth it."

"I can do that. Don't worry. I'm very good at evasion tactics. I can spot a tail from miles away."

"What are we going to do about the car? A police officer might see the license and call it in."

"That's why I will take the back roads. We'll switch cars when I see the right opportunity."

"Okay," she said, settling back in her seat as her eyes drifted closed.

She was asleep within a second, and his gaze lingered on her face so long he almost went off the side of the road on the next turn.

Dragging his attention back to the highway, he told himself to concentrate on the mission—which, apparently,

was taking Sophie to New Haven.

He'd never been there, but he knew Yale was there. Alan had gone to the university; so had Peter. That bothered him. If Alan was sending Sophie to another location that was tied to his life, then they might end up dodging more bullets.

He wished Sophie had been more forthcoming. While being an agent often required patience, he wasn't that good at waiting. He liked action. He liked results. But right now, all he could do was drive—and try not to look at Sophie.

She was getting under his skin again. Over the past few hours, the undercurrent of tension between them had been impossible to miss. Even with everything else going on, their past was lurking in the shadows.

It was easier not to think about that night when Sophie was awake, when someone was shooting at them, but now with her sitting so close, and with the endlessly long, empty road in front of him, he couldn't get her off his mind.

All the images he'd tried to forget were coming back in full, vivid glory. He could feel her body under his, and the memory of her taste made his lips tingle. It had been a night to remember but one he needed so desperately to forget.

He thought he'd made some progress in that regard. He'd dated other women since Sophie. He'd kept busy building his career. He'd constantly reminded himself that love was for losers, and he wasn't going to be a loser ever again.

On the other hand, sex with a beautiful woman was just fine...it just couldn't be Sophie.

He blew out a breath, tapping his fingers restlessly on the steering wheel, trying really hard not to turn his head, not to admit that he wanted her again.

But even if he did want her, he wasn't going to have her. He wasn't going to cross that line.

He had to think of Sophie as a job. His only goal should be in getting her to safety.

So why couldn't he stop thinking about getting her back into bed?

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SEVEN

THEY'D SET up a bonfire on the beach, Jamie's friends sitting in beach chairs and on blankets, waiting for a special fireworks show that Cassie had arranged for Jamie's wake. Someone had handed out champagne glasses, which they really didn't need since they'd been drinking since sunset, and it was now past eleven.

"Mind if I share your blanket?" the tall, dark-haired man with the compelling blue eyes asked.

She'd been avoiding him since she'd first seen him in the house. He unnerved her with the way he looked at her, the way she felt herself looking back at him.

There was a part of her that screamed danger—send him away—but instead of saying no, she said yes. She moved over so he could sit down on the blanket next to her, her body tightening at his nearness. She felt all tingly inside, on edge, a little reckless—none of the emotions she should be feeling at a memorial wake.

This wasn't a date. She was supposed to be mourning her friend, not ogling a man, who seemed to be as alone as she was. But as the breeze blew off the lake, she could

smell the musky scent of his cologne. She could almost feel his breath on her cheek. And his amazing blue gaze seemed to see right into her soul.

All of her senses were on fire. She twisted her fingers together, resisting the impulsive desire she had to touch him.

It had to be the champagne or the wine. She'd drunk too much.

But she didn't feel drunk. She just felt—needy, hungry, empty.

She turned her head and found him watching her, shimmering beams of desire in his eyes. She didn't know much about him except that his name was Damon, and he and Jamie had served in the Army together. He hadn't said much all evening. He'd just watched, listened, took everything in.

She supposed she'd done much the same. Except for Cassie, she didn't really know any of Jamie's other friends. He'd traveled a far different road from her in the past ten years, and while they'd kept in touch, they hadn't seen each other very often.

Realizing that Damon was staring back at her, she focused on the fire and took a long sip of the bubbly champagne. It tingled against her throat, and she wanted more of that feeling—anything that would take away the sadness of this night. Jamie had been like a brother to her, the one person who could make her laugh, tease her out of a bad mood, make her feel like she could make it, be whoever she wanted to be. She was going to miss him so much.

She drank her way quickly to the bottom of her glass.

"Maybe you should slow down," Damon said.

She gave him a defiant look. "Why? What are any of us waiting for? We put off doing things until later. We say maybe next year, there will be time, but there isn't always time."

"That's true enough," he said somberly, finishing off his own glass.

She leaned over and grabbed a half-opened bottle from another blanket and refilled their glasses. After her first sip, she said, "Jamie was good at living in the moment. I need to get better at that." She glanced over at him. "What about you?"

"I could improve."

She smiled, feeling rebellious and reckless, a bad but heady combination, especially considering the irresistible pull she was feeling to the man sitting next to her. "Want to work on it right now?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"A dance," she said, getting to her feet. She extended her hand, and after a moment's hesitation, he took it.

"No one else is dancing," he said, as he stood up.

"Then we'll be the first." She needed to move, and the music and the night were calling to her.

Everyone else faded away. She could hear chatter. She was vaguely aware of a few more people getting up to dance, but she couldn't seem to look away from Damon's mesmerizing gaze.

He pulled her against his hard, masculine chest, and she was happy to go into his embrace, her emotions changing

from sadness into yearning, from anger to desire.

At some point, the music ended...but they couldn't let go of each other...

A horn blared in her ear. She didn't understand why there was a car in the cabin. But she wasn't in the cabin anymore, was she?

Blinking her eyes open, she sat up abruptly, realizing that while she'd been dreaming about Damon, the car had stopped, and Damon was not in the driver's seat. She was stunned by that revelation. *Where the hell was he?*

She'd told him to drive to New Haven, but this strip mall with a deli, yoga studio, real-estate office, Chinese restaurant, and a phone store wasn't at all familiar to her. Her heart began to beat faster as she searched for some sign of Damon.

Had Damon taken advantage of her unconsciousness to talk to the FBI—or someone else?

He'd told her to trust him, but what did she really know about him? He could have told someone she might be at the lake. He could have pretended to get rid of the shooter so that he could get closer to her. And she'd gone along with it. She'd even let him drive.

Anger ran through her at her own stupidity. She wanted to run away, but she couldn't drive anywhere, because he obviously had the keys.

She opened the car door and stepped out on the pavement. She could try to get a cab, but without a phone, that wouldn't be easy. While she was debating what to do, the door to the Chinese restaurant opened and Damon came out, holding a large, white paper bag in his hands.

A mix of relief and anger ran through her. "Why did you stop here?" she demanded. "And why didn't you wake me up and tell me where you were going?"

"Well, you woke up on the wrong side of the car," he drawled.

"Not funny, Damon."

"I stopped to get food, because I was hungry, and I thought you might be, too. I also wanted to get a phone that couldn't be traced to us." He tipped his head to the phone store. "And I didn't wake you up, because I didn't need you to take care of any of that. I thought you could use the rest. You were restless the last hour, mumbling random words in your sleep."

She felt heat sweep across her cheeks, as she remembered her last dream had been of their night together. "What did I say?"

"Nothing incriminating."

She supposed she should be grateful for that. "Where are we, Damon?"

"About twenty-five miles outside of New Haven. Want to tell me where we're going now?"

She glanced at her watch and couldn't believe it was a little past six. Where had the day gone? They'd left the lake sometime after ten, and, apparently, they'd spent eight hours driving through the mountains and across two states. Taking back roads might have prevented a tail, but it had also delayed them from getting to the next location before closing time. Staying off the highway and keeping to side streets would put New Haven at least an hour away.

"We can't go there until tomorrow," she said. "It won't be open by the time we get there."

"So, it's not a safe house?"

"No, it's not. We're going to need a place to stay the night."

"Agreed. First, we need to ditch this car, and I think this is a good spot."

"Here?" She looked around the parking lot in confusion. "Why is this good?"

"There are plenty of other cars around. There's an all-night liquor store over there, so the lot probably won't ever be completely empty, and the car won't stand out."

Damon was very good at situation analysis. "All right, but how are we going to get to New Haven?"

"We're going to worry about that tomorrow."

"What?" She didn't like that idea at all.

"We'll take a cab to a motel somewhere between here and there. We'll hunker down and stay out of sight until the morning. Then we'll look into getting another vehicle."

"You don't think the FBI has alerted every cab driver to our fugitive status?"

"Probably not in Connecticut," he said, placing the call.

She leaned against the car as he ordered the cab, feeling more clear-headed now that she was getting some fresh air. It also felt good to stand up after so many hours of sitting.

"Five minutes," Damon told her. Then he scrolled through his phone. "There's a group of motels about eight miles from here. There's a motel about two miles from here, but I think that's too close to this lot. Wait, I see four

motels/hotels within a three-block radius about eight miles from here. That's a better spot for us. If anyone finds the car and tries to track us to a nearby motel, they'll have to figure out which one we're in."

"Your mind is a magical thing," she said. "Very clever."

"Not so much magical but well-trained," he said. "I'm trying to stay one step ahead."

"That would be an amazing feat, because I think we're about ten steps behind."

"We might not be if you'd share a little more information."

"It won't change anything."

"I'd like to be the judge of that."

"Well, you can't, so..."

"All right, let's not talk about it now. Get your bag. I want to move away from this car before the cab gets here."

She took her purse out of the car and made sure she hadn't left anything behind. Then she followed Damon across the length of the parking lot. They were close to the entrance when a taxi turned in to the lot, and Damon flagged him down.

Other than giving an address to the driver, they didn't speak on their way to the motel.

When they reached their destination, she paid for the trip in cash, and they waited for the taxi to pull away before walking two blocks away to a different motel.

It was a cheap, run-down-looking building with outside hallways facing the parking lot, and it didn't stir a lot of positive feelings within her.

"You want to stay here?" she asked, unable to stop herself from wrinkling her nose in disgust.

"Yes. It's the kind of place where people don't ask questions."

"It looks like the kind of place where they rent rooms by the hour."

"Maybe, but that's not going to bother us." He handed her the bag of Chinese food. "Wait here while I check us in. I'm going to be less memorable than you."

She wasn't sure if that was a compliment, but she waited outside the lobby while he got them a room.

He'd been in the office only a few minutes when a truck pulled into the parking lot with two guys in it. She remembered Damon saying that the shooter at the lake had left in a truck, and she felt suddenly very nervous. She walked quickly into a breezeway and through a door labeled Ice Machine. Her heart rate sped up when she realized the small room had only one way out. Had she made a tactical error?

She should have gone into the office where there were people—where there was Damon—but it was too late now.

She heard footsteps outside, and she looked around for some kind of weapon, but there was nothing in the small room but a vending machine, an ice machine, and a plastic ice bucket.

She stepped to the side as the door opened, and blew out a breath of relief when she saw it was Damon.

"Looking for some drinks?" he asked with a raise of his brow.

"No. Two men drove into the parking lot. I didn't want them to see me. They were in a truck. I didn't know if it was the same truck the shooter was in."

"It wasn't. I saw the guys—an older man about fifty with a teenaged son and a mangy-looking dog."

She was relieved to hear that.

"I don't think they're going to bother us," he added.

"Okay, good. Where's our room?"

"Top floor. I got you a room with a view, princess."

She made a face at him. "I am not a princess. I'm fine with dirt—just not motel room kind of dirt."

"It's going to be fine. Let's get some drinks while we're here."

After grabbing sodas and water out of the vending machine, they made their way to the second floor.

The room smelled like beer and cigarettes and was as bad as she'd expected, with peeling paint, an old TV, and lumpy-looking mattresses, but if there was a silver lining, it could be found in the fact that there were two beds. Besides the danger tracking her steps, spending the night with Damon presented other challenges.

Damon set the bag of food down on a small table and turned on the ancient air conditioning unit, which rattled and smoked a little as it struggled into action.

"Damn, it's hot in here," he muttered. "The AC feels like heat."

"Now who's being a princess?" she asked, as she sat down at the table.

He frowned and took the chair across from her. "I hate the heat."

"It's not that bad. Maybe it will get cooler the longer it's on." She opened the bag and began pulling out cartons, her stomach rumbling at the spicy smells. She hadn't eaten anything besides the convenience store snacks hours ago.

"I wasn't sure what you liked, so I got a little of everything," Damon said. "Too bad we don't have a microwave; it might be a little cold by now."

"I don't care, and I like pretty much everything. I'm also starving. Yesterday, I didn't think I'd ever be hungry again, but now I feel like I could eat every bit of this."

"Well, don't hold back."

She didn't, grabbing a plastic fork and digging into a carton of Kung Pao chicken. Damon went after the sweet and sour pork. Five minutes later, they switched, and when they were finished with those cartons, they moved on to chow mein, fried rice, and a beef stir fry.

Twenty minutes later, she sat back with a satisfied sigh. "That was excellent. I ate way too much."

"It's good to eat. You need to keep your strength up for whatever is coming next."

She frowned at his words. "Thanks for the reminder. I was having a nice little moment of denial, and you ruined it."

"Sorry. Maybe these will help." He pushed a bag of fortune cookies across the table.

She took one out and turned it over in her hand. "I can't imagine what could possibly be in this fortune cookie that I would want to hear."

"Something uplifting and positive," he suggested.

"Or trivial and pointless." She suddenly smiled.

"What?" he asked curiously.

"Jamie used to make up fortune cookie sayings. We'd get Chinese food during our summers at the lake at the Pink Pagoda—which by the way, was painted yellow, but apparently no one felt that was a problem. Anyway, Jamie never liked his fortune; he always got weird ones, so he started making up his own."

A light of recognition came on in Damon's blue eyes. "Damn! He did that with me, too, only we were in Shanghai together."

"So, it was a real Chinese fortune cookie?"

"I suppose. It was a touristy restaurant. We only had a few hours of leave left, and Jamie was hungry."

"He was always hungry," she murmured, wondering if anyone she loved would ever outlive her, which was a very depressing thought. "Do you remember the fortune that Jamie made up?"

Damon thought for a minute. "It was something like: *'Help! I'm a wise man trapped in a cookie.'*"

She grinned. "That sounds like Jamie. My favorite of his was: *'You want to change your life? Stop eating cookies.'*"

A smile slowly spread across Damon's lips, warming up his usually stoic, somewhat hard, expression, and she liked it—far too much.

"You don't do that very often," she commented. "Only every once in a while, and you fight it until you just can't stop it."

Damon raised an eyebrow at her words. "What are you talking about?"

"Your smile. It's rarely used."

He shrugged. "I smile when it's warranted."

"Do you? You don't seem like a man who likes to show his emotions, whether they're good or bad."

"Emotion is weakness in my line of work."

"I guess I can see that. I often wondered how my dad did the job, because when he was with me, he was so open and loving. I could never really see him going undercover, pretending to be someone else. He didn't seem like he could do it." She paused, as her father's last words ran through her head. "Obviously, he could. Maybe he was putting up a front with me. Maybe I didn't know him at all."

"You knew him. Don't second-guess your relationship."

"I can't stop myself. I'm not supposed to trust anyone but him, but what if I didn't really know him? What if I just saw the man he wanted me to see?" She reflected on everything that had happened. "Two days ago, I was living one kind of life and now I'm living another, and it's all because of my dad. I feel like there might be a lot of things I don't know."

"I'm sure there are a lot of things you don't know," Damon agreed.

She didn't like his reply. "I was kind of hoping you'd respond with something more reassuring."

"I don't think we should lie to each other, Sophie, not with everything that's going on."

He was right, but the truth seemed very elusive at the moment. She broke open her cookie and read her fortune. "Well, this isn't helpful at all."

"What does it say?"

"Two days from now, tomorrow will be yesterday."

"Intriguing." Another one of his rare smiles appeared. "Maybe it means tomorrow will be better."

"Now, there's that optimism I was looking for earlier. It only took a cookie to get you there. I just hope it doesn't mean tomorrow is going to be worse."

"Speaking of tomorrow," Damon began.

"I told you I'd tell you when we got there, and that's still true."

"Why the delay? You think I'm going to tip someone off?"

"It has crossed my mind. When I woke up and you were not in the car, I felt a moment of panic. I don't know why. I should be used to waking up alone when it comes to you."

"Ouch," he said with a grimace. "That was a low blow. But I didn't leave this time; I bought you food and a phone."

"I know." She took a breath. "And I'm sorry for the crack. It was a low blow."

"I deserved it. One of these days, I'm going to tell you why I left before the sun came up."

"I already know why—the night was over. And that's all you wanted."

His gaze darkened. "Like I said, one of these days, we'll talk more about it."

"One of these days...why not now?"

"Because you're holding back on me. I can't put everything on the table unless you do, too."

"I'm not holding back on personal stuff."

"Holding back is holding back..."

She couldn't imagine there was any great mystery that he was about to reveal. "Fine. You keep your secret, and I'll keep mine. I'm not really that interested anyway."

A gleam came into his eyes. "I think you are—even though you don't want to be."

"And you're delusional. My father was just killed. I'm on the run. I'm not even thinking about the night we spent together. It's so far down the list of things I need to be concerned about, it's not even on the list. It was another lifetime. I don't even know why we're discussing it."

"Because you brought it up with your low blow," he reminded her. "I don't think it's that far down the list."

She really hated how often he was right. "Let's just drop it." She was overwhelmed with emotion right now, and discussing that night with the one man she'd spent four years trying to forget was only going to make things worse.

"Dropping it," he said, as he shoved his chair back and stood up. "I'm going to get another water. Do you want anything else from the vending machine?"

"No, thanks."

"Lock the door behind me, and make sure it's me before you let me back in."

While she didn't appreciate his ordering tone, she flipped the dead bolt after he left and let out a breath.

It was good to put some space between them—if only for a few minutes.

But as she looked around the seedy motel room, the silence suddenly seemed overwhelming. She'd spent most of the day wishing Damon would go away, and now she really wanted him to come back—and fast.

CHAPTER EIGHT

DAMON DIDN'T REALLY WANT anything from the vending machine; he just wanted to get away from Sophie. He never should have gotten into a discussion with her about their night together, but there was a part of him that wanted to make her understand that his leaving had never really been about her. It was him—all him.

He only liked commitment when it came to his job, to the soldiers he served with, his fellow agents, the people he was trying to put away or those under his protection. In his career, he was willing to put everything on the line. But women were another story.

He had never been good at relationships. He didn't do long-term. He didn't make promises. He didn't believe in soul mates or even love, really. He certainly didn't believe in happily ever after. And usually he stayed away from women who thought differently than him.

Sophie should have been one of those women he stayed away from, but four years ago, he hadn't been able to do that. He'd been in a dark place, and she'd helped him get out of it. He thought he'd helped her, too. But staying with

her after that night wasn't an option. He was just sorry he'd hurt her, and clearly he had.

She might say all the right things, pretend it was no big deal, but her eyes were too expressive. When she felt pain, she showed it, and knowing he'd put a little of the pain in her eyes gnawed at him. It was the last thing he'd ever wanted to do.

He wanted to tell her that. He wanted her to know that it wasn't anything she'd said or done, but he also knew that dissecting that night probably wouldn't get them anywhere and they definitely had more pressing problems.

He took a lap around the building to burn off the unsettled feelings, the reckless energy, wanting to tire himself out before he had to return to Sophie and the very small hotel room. Instead of thinking about her, he should be planning for tomorrow. He might not know exactly where they were going, but he could still come up with some contingency plans. He could get on his phone and research New Haven, figure out how they might get transportation, look into the best places to stay in case they were in town longer than a few hours.

Feeling better now that he had a specific plan that didn't include having sex with Sophie, he stopped at the vending machine and picked up more drinks and a few chocolate bars. Then he headed back to the room. He rapped once, saw her peek through the blinds at him, and then she opened the door.

He thought he saw relief in her brown eyes, but he didn't know if that had to do with his reappearance or the chocolate in his hand.

"I love Almond Joy," she said, grabbing the bar. "Coconut and chocolate are my favorite combination." She stopped in the middle of unwrapping the chocolate. "You didn't get this for yourself, did you?"

"You can have it. I'm not that into chocolate."

"I do not understand how anyone could not be into chocolate."

He was happy to see they were back on a more even keel.

He sat down at the table and took out the phone he'd recently purchased. On the long drive through the mountains, his only worry about being disconnected from the world was Wyatt. He was supposed to meet him tonight, and he wasn't going to be there. He needed to make sure Wyatt knew that, and he hoped he could get Bree to go in his place.

"What are you doing?" Sophie asked, peering over his shoulder as she munched on her chocolate bar.

"Checking something."

"Like what? Your mail?"

"No."

"Sports scores? Stock market? Latest news?" she asked cheekily.

"Chocolate definitely wakes you up."

She made a face at him. "Come on, Damon, talk to me. I need to know if you're going to compromise us in some way. You would be just as aggressive if I was the one on the phone right now."

"Relax, Sophie, I know what I'm doing."

"I'll relax when you tell me *what* you're doing."

"Several years ago, while I was at Quantico, a group of us set up a private chat forum, a place where we could exchange coded information if we couldn't get on a phone or meet in person. It was originally part of an assignment to set up a protocol for communication. But we kept it going after we graduated, a safety net so to speak."

"How many people know about it?"

"Six—well, five, now that Jamie is no longer with us."

"Why are you checking it tonight?"

"Because yesterday morning I received an SOS from one of the members of the group. We met up, and he told me that he'd escaped a recent attack on his life. He wanted my help, but before we could get any further in the conversation, he got spooked and ran. Last night he got back to me asking if we could try again tonight. Unfortunately, I'm not going to make it. I need to let him know and see if someone else can meet him."

"Is he in danger?"

"Yes."

"Maybe you should be meeting him instead of staying here with me."

He'd had the same thought, but there was no way he was leaving Sophie alone. Wyatt could take care of himself.

"That's not an option."

He opened the forum, and while there was no further communication from Wyatt, there was a reply from Bree to Wyatt.

Bree had always used the moniker Knight after the Mets second baseman Ray Knight, saying it was about time a knight was a woman. Bree and Parisa, the other woman in

their group, had never been particularly thrilled with the all-male baseball forum idea, but neither one of them wasted energy on things that didn't really matter, especially when they both knew they were as good, if not better, than any male agent.

Bree's message read: *I feel like taking a few swings tonight, too. Hope you show, Carter. You've been MIA too long. Team is looking to trade you.*

He was relieved that Bree was going to meet with Wyatt. That took the pressure off him. But he didn't care much for the second part of her message, which confirmed his belief that Peter and Karen knew he'd gone looking for Sophie. They might not know if he'd found her, but they'd be suspicious of his motives and his secrecy.

He typed in a reply: *Not going to make practice tonight. Working on a pitch with another player who needs the support.* He hesitated, wishing they could be more direct, but they couldn't. *Who's leading team trade talks? Coach's BFF or second in command? Might be hidden agenda.*

"What on earth does all that mean?" Sophie asked.

He glanced up at her and saw the confused look in her eyes. "I said I can't make the meeting."

"It sounds like you're talking about baseball."

"That's the way it's supposed to sound. It's set up to be a baseball chat about the 1986 World Series Mets team."

A gleam of understanding entered her eyes. "Because Jamie was obsessed with the Mets."

"It was his idea," he conceded. "We all picked particular players to use as our monikers. I'm Gary Carter. He was a catcher."

"And Fernandez, who's that in real life?"

He hesitated. "It doesn't matter."

Her eyes widened. "You're really not going to tell me? You want me to trust you, but you clearly don't trust me. This is a two-way street, Damon."

"And my secrecy is not about you. I have a bond with these people that I can't break."

She didn't look happy with that answer, but she seemed to accept it.

"I can tell you this," he said. "The person who's in trouble has been working undercover for your father. He was supposed to meet Alan on Monday, but Alan didn't show, and my friend was attacked. He barely escaped with his life."

She paled. "Your friend's assault is connected to my father?"

"He seemed to think so, but he didn't know about your father's accident when we spoke. I'm not sure what he believes now."

"If his attack is connected to my dad, then that should give the FBI a clue as to who's behind everything."

"My friend hasn't told the FBI what happened to him. He was waiting for your father—his handler—to get back to him. I told him about your dad's death last night, and he wanted to meet. That's where we are right now."

"I don't understand. Why don't you tell the FBI what your friend said?"

"Because he's worried there's a mole. He thought he was set up." He paused, remembering how bad Wyatt had looked. "He was in terrible shape, Sophie. I've never seen

him like that. He used to have swagger, charm, a never-say-die personality, but he was like a hyped-up junkie in need of a fix—paranoid, edgy, scared... It was like he was hanging onto a cliff by his fingertips."

"I know that feeling." She sat down across from him. "If your friend worked for my dad, then my father must have had a lot of faith in him, because he only brought people on to his team who he respected. Maybe we should both go meet him. Maybe holing up here isn't the best idea. We can come back in the morning—or I can."

"It would take us a few hours to get back to New York, and the place we were going to meet at would be closed by then. Plus, we need to be in New Haven in the morning. Another friend is going to meet him. Hopefully, she can get him to a safe place, and then we can figure out what's going on."

"What does that other line mean—about the team looking to trade Carter?"

"She's warning me that I'm under suspicion, probably because my car was found shot up at the cabin. They don't know whose side I'm on."

"Your decision to come looking for me has certainly complicated your life."

"Somehow, I always knew it would."

Their gazes clung for a long moment. Sophie swiped her dry lips with her tongue, which turned his body instantly hard.

He cleared his throat and looked back at the phone. "Anyway, there's nothing more to be done tonight."

"Getting back to your group," Sophie said. "It sounds like one of the members is a woman. I might be able to figure out who's in the group if I think about Jamie and his time at Quantico and who he talked about..."

"It's not worth expending your effort on that."

"Well, it's better than thinking about the fact that my dad called a meeting with an undercover agent, and he didn't show up, and then that agent was almost killed."

"We don't know why he didn't show up."

"What does your friend think?"

He didn't want to relate what Wyatt had said, not when he didn't know what was fact and what was theory, and especially not when Sophie's pain was so raw, the depth of her loss so deep. "I'm not sure."

"You said we weren't going to lie to each other, Damon. Does your friend think my dad was the mole?"

"He considered it to be a possibility," he said carefully.

She sucked in a breath. "I knew you were going to say that, but it's still not easy to hear."

"And we don't know if it's true."

"Someone killed my dad, so it doesn't sound like he was in charge of anything. Maybe he was a victim, too."

"That's a good possibility. We can speculate all we want, but we don't have enough facts to come to a conclusion."

She let out a frustrated sigh. "You're very logical, Damon."

"That usually works in my favor."

"I'm sure it does, but it's irritating at times."

"Because it makes me right more often than wrong?"

"And because it makes you cocky," she retorted. "But mostly because it makes me feel like I'm way out of my depth. I run on emotion; I always have. But all that emotion has landed me in the deep end of the pool. I'm treading water as fast as I can, but it wouldn't take much for me to drown. And sometimes I feel like it would be easier to let go."

He did not like that comment at all. "I'm not going to let you drown, Sophie. And you are not going to let go, because whether or not you run on emotion, you are a fighter. I've seen nothing but fight in you since we were at the cabin."

"I try to fight, but sometimes it feels futile. I watched my mother fight cancer. She battled for a long time, but she didn't win. I lost her when I was sixteen. And now I've lost my dad. I'm alone. And if that's not bad enough, there's a chance I'm going to find out that my father is not the man I thought he was. How can I lose faith in the most important person in my life in less than twenty-four hours?"

"No one is asking you to lose faith. Let's deal with the facts as they come."

She swallowed hard, her gaze still troubled. "What do you think, Damon? I know you liked him, respected him. Do you think my father did something wrong? Is there any way he could be a—traitor?"

Her question hit him hard. She was forcing him to look at something he didn't want to look at. "It would be very difficult for me to believe that," he said slowly. "I don't see how Alan could sell out his country or a fellow agent. His life was the FBI."

"It was. He lived for his job," she agreed. "He was a patriot. He always talked about the importance of doing the right thing. Were those just empty words?"

He was a little surprised that she had as many doubts as she did about her father's innocence. "What aren't you telling me, Sophie?"

"Nothing."

"You just asked how you could lose faith in a person you'd loved your entire life in less than twenty-four hours, and I want to know the same thing. I don't think your doubts are based solely on what my undercover friend thinks about your dad, so what else is in play?"

He could see the conflict in her eyes, but finally she said, "On his voicemails, he kept apologizing, and he said something about not realizing he was down in the mud until it was too late. That makes it sound like he made a mistake; I just don't know how big a mistake it was. Obviously, it was big enough to get him killed." She got up from her chair and paced around the small room. "I wish I could listen to the voicemails again. Maybe I'm not remembering them clearly."

She paused in front of him, giving him a sad, helpless, frustrated look that made his heart flip over. He wanted to pull her into his arms. He wanted to tell her everything was going to be fine, that her father was not a bad guy, that they would find a way to prove that. But he didn't know if any of that was true. He'd already promised her he wouldn't lie to her. And he'd also promised himself that he wouldn't touch her.

"Maybe we should turn on the TV," he suggested.

"Really? That's all you have to say?"

"I don't know what else to say. I didn't hear the voicemails. You're feeding me piecemeal information. I have no idea if there's more you're holding back, since I still don't know where we're going tomorrow. I'm operating with less information than you are, unless you want to start sharing..."

Her mouth tightened. "Maybe we should turn the TV on. This conversation is going nowhere."

"It would go somewhere if you'd talk."

She walked over to the dresser and picked up the remote. Then she sat down on the bed and flipped through the channels.

"See if you can find some news," he said. "There might be an update on the investigation."

"We get like ten channels, Damon. You could have picked a better motel," she said grumpily.

He could have done a lot of things differently.

He looked back at his phone, as Bree answered his question: *Coach's BFF and second are tight. Manager also angry about your actions. You might not keep your job if you stay away too long. Any idea who tried to strike you out?*

He typed in an answer. *"Didn't get a good look. More important things to worry about than job. Hope you can get Fernandez back on his game. Think there's a link between us. Let me know next practice time. Don't get yourself benched. Think we're going to need you."*

Bree sat in her office cubicle Thursday evening and read Damon's message on her personal phone with a growing sense of uneasiness. After Damon's car had been located at a cabin in the Adirondacks, at a property purportedly owned by Alan Parker, a lot of questions had been raised about him. There had been a flurry of meetings, hushed conversations, and even a few suspicious looks sent in her direction, since several people knew that she and Damon were friends from Quantico.

If anyone asked, she could truthfully say that Damon had not told her of any plans to drive north when they'd spoken the night before. When he hadn't shown up for work or responded to a text about lunch, she'd assumed he'd gone off to find Wyatt. She'd certainly never anticipated he'd go looking for Sophie Parker.

She remembered seeing Sophie at Jamie's funeral. Jamie had mentioned Sophie a few times in conversation, referring to her as his nerdy but beautiful childhood friend, who was obsessed with digging for relics from the past. It was clear that there had been a deep affection between them, so deep she'd once felt a little jealous... *How silly was that?* She'd only been Jamie's girlfriend for about five minutes. In fact, she didn't know if Jamie had ever really thought of himself as her boyfriend.

She shook those disturbing thoughts out of her head, and brought her mind back to the present.

There was a connection between Alan's death, Wyatt's attack, and Sophie's disappearance, and Damon had put himself in the middle of all three events. But now, with Damon laying low and Wyatt out of touch, it was on her to

find out what was going on. If there was a traitor in the building, she needed to figure out who it was.

"Agent Adams?"

She looked up in surprise to see ASAC Karen Leigh standing by her desk. She'd had very little contact with Agent Leigh since she'd come to the New York field office three months earlier, because their teams rarely crossed paths. But Karen had an excellent reputation and was regarded as a rising star at the Bureau.

She got to her feet. "Agent Leigh, what can I do for you?"

"I'm going downstairs to get a coffee. Since we're both working late, I thought you might like to join me."

She could see by the purpose in Karen's eyes that it was more of an order than an invitation, not that she had to follow orders from Karen, but she was interested in what Karen had to say. "Of course. That sounds good. I can always use a shot of caffeine."

"Excellent."

They didn't speak on their way out of the offices or in the elevator to the first floor. When they got to the coffeehouse located in the lobby, they picked up their drinks and then took a seat at an isolated table against the wall.

She was actually happy to have coffee. She was still working on too little sleep from her last case, and she had a long night ahead of her.

"Have you heard from Damon?" Karen asked, not bothering with any polite chitchat.

"No, I haven't." She kept her expression neutral, her shoulders relaxed, her breath even. She'd taken enough polygraphs to know how to lie with the best of them. "Have you? I'm worried about him. I hope he's all right."

"I'm worried, too. Did he tell you he was going to look for Sophie Parker?"

"Is that what he was doing?" she countered.

"I would imagine so, since Alan owned the cabin in the Adirondacks where Damon's car was located," Karen said sharply.

"If you knew that Alan owned a cabin there, why didn't you send someone to the lake to look for Sophie? When I was in the office last night, it didn't appear that anyone had any idea where Sophie was. But a cabin owned by her father would seem to be a big lead."

She might be making a mistake to confront Karen, but she'd always been better at offense than defense.

"I didn't know about the cabin until the police notified us that Damon's car was found on the property," Karen replied. "It took us some time to dig through the property information to find the link to Alan. Apparently, Damon didn't need to do that, and I wonder why."

"Maybe Alan told him about the cabin," she suggested.

"Then Damon should have told us."

"I don't know why he didn't," she said. "But if I had to take a guess, it would be because he's new to the team, and he doesn't know who to trust."

"Everyone on Alan's team can be trusted. Alan handpicked each one of us. We are all extremely loyal to him. Did Damon doubt that in some way?"

"I really don't know. I spoke to Damon for about five minutes last night. We haven't seen each other in months. All he said was that he'd been here a week and didn't really know what Alan was working on."

"Well, that was by Alan's choice. He had some special project in mind for Damon that he didn't share with me."

She found that interesting. Karen couldn't hide that Alan's secrecy on Damon's assignment bothered her. And why wouldn't Alan tell Karen what he wanted Damon to work on? Maybe it was whatever case had gotten him killed.

"Do you have any theories on who killed Alan?" she asked, taking a sip of her coffee. Since Karen had instigated the conversation, she was going to seize the opportunity to find out what she could.

"Nothing I can talk about. We're keeping the circle small right now." Karen tapped her blue-coated fingernails on the table and said, "What about Wyatt Tanner?"

"What about him?"

"You know him, too, don't you? Have you heard from him?"

"I know him, but I haven't spoken to him since he went undercover almost a year ago. Why do you ask?"

"He missed a meet, and with Alan's accident, I'm concerned about him. I want to make sure that everyone we have in the field is safe until we bring Alan's killer to justice. I know that you and Damon and Wyatt went through Quantico together, and Alan spoke highly of all three of you."

"We're friends, but our assignments have taken us in very different directions."

"Yes, I know. Alan actually wanted you for our team, but he said you had a passion for finding missing children."

"I do," she admitted.

"That's a tough job. A lot of heartbreak."

"I'm a tough agent. As are you. You have an excellent reputation."

Karen's tension eased at her compliment. "I do my best. Alan taught me a lot."

"How long have you worked for Alan?"

"Two years—ever since he left Quantico and came to New York. I'm really going to miss him. He wasn't just my boss; he was a mentor and a friend."

There appeared to be genuine emotion in Karen's eyes, and Bree couldn't help wondering just how deep Karen's friendship with Alan had gone, but she certainly couldn't ask her that.

"Alan was a good man," Karen added. "He didn't deserve to die."

"No," she murmured, feeling now as if Karen had gone somewhere else in her head, a distant look in her eyes.

Karen suddenly straightened, squaring her shoulders and tilting up her chin. "If you hear from Damon or Wyatt, please tell them to get in touch with me. Now that Alan is gone, it's my responsibility to make sure that all the agents in our department are safe."

"I don't expect to hear from them, but if I do, I will certainly pass the message on. I would assume that Wyatt would get in touch with his handler. Was that Alan?"

"It was. I've tried to contact Wyatt through our emergency protocol, but he hasn't replied."

"Maybe he still will."

"I hope so."

"So do I," she murmured. Glancing at her watch, she realized time was quickly passing, and she had her own meet to make. "I should get back upstairs. I have some work to finish. Are you coming?"

"Actually, I'm going to stay here for a few more minutes. I haven't been out of the office all day," Karen replied. "I could use a break."

She got to her feet. "Then I'll see you later."

After leaving the coffeehouse, she paused in the lobby of the building, and glanced back at Karen through the glass doors. She was on her phone, and Bree couldn't help wondering who she was calling and if it had anything to do with their conversation. Karen had definitely been pumping her for information, but she'd gotten nothing, so what did she have to report?

Turning away, she made her way to the bank of elevators. She stepped to the side as the doors opened to allow people to exit and was surprised to see Peter Hunt with a man she knew only by reputation and from the news, Senator Greg Raleigh from Connecticut.

Peter gave her a brief nod as the men walked out of the building together.

As she got in the elevator, she couldn't help thinking that senators rarely came to the FBI; usually the FBI went to them.

It could be nothing...but right now everything had the potential to be something...

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER NINE

AFTER SCOURING the Internet for news stories about Alan's accident, Sophie's disappearance and the shootout at the cabin, Damon found little new information. Police were still asking for witnesses to Alan's accident. Sophie was still missing and possibly in danger, and gunshots were heard near a cabin, sometimes used by the Parkers. There was no mention of his presence at the cabin, and he was quite sure that someone at the FBI had put the lid on that.

Frustrated at being in the dark and cut off from the Bureau's resources, he set down the phone and glanced over at Sophie who was changing channels every few minutes. She hadn't had anything to say to him in the last hour, which was probably a good thing, but he had a feeling there were a lot of ideas running through her head.

He needed to make sure he knew what she was thinking of doing before she did it.

"Can't find anything you like?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Nope. Not that the choices are great: a game show, a rerun of *I Love Lucy*, an episode of the *Real Housewives of Somewhere* and some sitcoms with

laugh tracks so loud they must have brought in a hundred people to feign amusement."

He smiled at the disgust in her tone. "Not much of a TV watcher, are you?"

"I like the History Channel, travel documentaries, and shows with substance. I mean, who cares how this woman gets her lips to look plump?" She waved the remote toward the screen, which showed a middle-aged brunette at a plastic surgeon's office.

"Certainly not me," he said, getting up from the hard, uncomfortable chair. He crossed the room and sat down on the other bed. Thank God, the motel had had a room with two beds. It was hot enough in here without having to deal with the heat between him and Sophie. At least they could keep a good several feet between them.

She muted the sound on the television and said, "I feel like I want to call someone, Damon."

"Who?" he asked warily.

"My aunt Valerie—my mother's sister. She lives in Sydney, Australia, so maybe the news about my father hasn't gotten down there yet, or it might not be important or big enough for her press to cover, but I don't know for sure, and it's bothering me."

"You can't call her."

"She's the only family I have left, Damon. It's one thing to leave my friends hanging, but Aunt Valerie was there for me when my mom was sick. How can I let her think something might have happened to me?"

"If you call her, something *might* happen to you," he said forcefully. "We can't risk it. The Bureau could have a tap on

your aunt's phone."

"All the way in Australia?" she asked doubtfully.

"With technology, the world is not that big anymore. Look, it's only been a day. You can wait awhile longer."

She let out a sigh. "Has it really only been twenty-four hours? It feels like much longer than that."

It did to him, too. "Tell me about your aunt, your relationship," he said, thinking that if she talked about her family, maybe she could wait on actually talking to them.

"Valerie is my mother's younger sister by seven years. She came to live with us when I was eleven. That's when my mom was diagnosed with cancer. She was only thirty-five years old."

"That's rough."

"It was horrible. The other moms were jogging and taking yoga classes and helping their kids with homework and art projects, driving carpool and doing all the things that moms do, but mine was having chemo and trying not to throw up. Valerie came for a visit and realized that we needed help. My dad was there for my mother, of course, but he was working, too. So, Valerie moved in. She gave up her single, twenty-eight-year-old life to take care of us, and she stayed with us for five years. I don't know what I would have done without her. She made it okay to laugh when everything seemed really bad."

"I'm glad you had someone like that in your life."

"Me, too. Valerie fell in love with an Aussie a year before my mom died, and she did long-distance with him until after the funeral. Then it was finally her turn to have a life. She got married and had three little girls. I haven't seen

them since they were babies, but I keep in touch through text and email." She gave him a pleading look. "I really want to talk to my aunt."

"Tell me about your mom," he suggested, offering another distraction. "Your dad always spoke of *his Maggie* in almost reverent tones. She sounded like an amazing woman."

"She was amazing, and after she died, she became a saint in my dad's eyes, probably mine, too. Not that she wasn't wonderful, but I think we did embellish just how wonderful she was after she was gone."

"How did your parents meet?"

"They met at Yale their junior year. Mom was a history major and Dad was pre-law. He was going to be a lawyer back then. They both said it was love at first sight. They got married a year after college. Neither set of grandparents was happy about that. My mother's parents were wealthy, and they didn't think my father, who came from very blue-collar roots, was good enough for their blue-blooded daughter. They had a huge fight and basically told my mom she could choose him or them, and she chose him."

"They sound terrible."

"They weren't nice. They were full of stubborn, arrogant pride, and worried incessantly about what the world thought of them. They did make amends with my mom after she got sick, but it was too little, too late. After my mom's funeral, I never saw them again. My grandfather died a few years ago, and my grandmother moved to Australia to be near Aunt Valerie. She's probably driving my aunt nuts,

although Valerie married a man my grandmother approved of, so maybe it's not so bad."

"I don't understand how anyone could disapprove of your father. He didn't have a lot of money, but he did graduate from Yale."

"He was a scholarship kid at Yale. They acted like he was gifted his diploma, which was ridiculous."

"What about your father's parents? Why didn't they approve of the marriage?"

"I think they were put off by my mom's family and their snobbishness. They were around somewhat when I was little, but they died young. My grandfather had a heart attack when I was about five and my grandmother was killed in a car accident a few years later." She paused. "What if I just text or email my aunt?"

"No."

She sighed. "Fine, then let's talk about your family. Are your parents alive?"

He really didn't want to talk about his family, but if it kept Sophie from doing something stupid, then he had to do it. "Yes," he said shortly.

"And well?"

"Last I heard. Why don't you throw the remote control over here? I'll see if I can find a better show."

"Hang on, we're talking, Damon."

"I don't like to talk about my family."

She gave him a speculative look. "Why not? What's the deal with them?"

"There's no *deal*. We're just not close."

"Now or always?"

It was clear that Sophie wasn't going to let the subject go without getting more information. She really did like to dig, even if she didn't have her hands in actual dirt. Unfortunately, his family history was not his favorite subject.

"Always," he said. "Can we talk about something else?"

"After we finish talking about this," she said stubbornly. "Come on, Damon. We have hours to kill. What are your parents' names?"

"My father is Cameron Wolfe. He's an entertainment lawyer in Beverly Hills."

"That sounds fancy."

"It can be. He works with a lot of celebrities."

"And your mother? What's her story?"

"Her name is Suzanne Cummings. She never took my father's name as she was a soap opera actress in her twenties when they met."

"No kidding?" she asked in surprise. "What soap opera was she on?"

"I think it was called *Now and Forever*. It ran for about five years. At any rate, my parents' relationship was as fake as the daytime drama she starred in, filled with secrets, lies, and betrayals—all the things that make for a good show. Only it wasn't a show, it was my life." He cleared his throat, realizing how much his bitterness was showing. "They got divorced when I was nine. I'm quite certain my father made sure that the divorce happened before their ten-year anniversary, when my mother would have gotten a bonus settlement, as noted in their pre-nup."

"That's sad and cynical."

"It's also the truth. Their divorce played out in the tabloids. My mother was a drama queen and my father was a Hollywood deal-maker. He was also an SOB. There were rumors of other men with my mother, other women with my father, alcoholism, drugs, whatever would make for a better story. At different points, one of them would petition for full custody of me, claiming that the other was a bad parent. I'd get dragged into court or sent to my grandparents' while everyone had a cool-down. I thought for a long time they were fighting about me, that they loved me so much they couldn't bear to give me up."

"Maybe that was the reason," Sophie said quietly.

"No, I was just a pawn in their divorce game."

"I'm sure they both loved you."

"They loved themselves more."

"Who did you end up living with?"

"I went back and forth, and back and forth, and back and forth. Summer was the worst. I could never just be in one place, hanging with my friends. I was always in a car, on a plane, headed to somewhere else, some place usually hot and sweaty. Speaking of which, the air conditioning in this room sucks."

"It's not great," she agreed. "We could have afforded a better place."

"And drawn more attention."

"Did your parents remarry?"

"We're not done with them yet?" he asked with a groan.

"Almost there."

"Yes, my mother remarried when I was twelve. My stepfather was a studio vice president of something. He

moved us into a Beverly Hills mansion with a great pool."

"And good air conditioning, I'll bet."

"It did have that. But the house was so big, sometimes I wasn't even sure they were in it with me. Then they had three girls, one right after the other, and it was baby-land around there."

"And your dad? Did he also remarry?"

"The first time when I was about thirteen. Second time I was twenty. He got divorced for the third time last year. In case you haven't guessed, he's not much of a prize as a husband...or a father. But he is charming. Everyone likes him." He stopped talking, surprised at himself for having said so much to her. "Now that you're sufficiently bored, can I have the remote?"

"I'm not bored at all." She licked her lips. "We kind of skipped the getting to know each other part when we first met."

"We did do that," he agreed, meeting her gaze. His body hardened as he saw the memories in her eyes, the same memories running through his head. "Now, the remote?"

She ignored him—again.

"How did you get into the Army? Did you enlist at eighteen, or what?" she asked.

"No, I went to college. I didn't know what I wanted to do, but it was going to be far from Hollywood and the film industry. Then 9/11 happened, and it changed me. After that horrific event, I was drawn to the military. I joined the ROTC, which horrified both parents for the five minutes that they chose to care about it."

"Maybe they were worried about your safety?"

"I doubt that, but I didn't pay attention to them. I got my degree and went into the Army as an officer and finally found something real—sometimes too real at times," he muttered, thinking that going from Hollywood to boot camp had been like going from Earth to Mars. He hadn't been at all prepared for real hardship, for physical and mental tests, but he'd come out a much better and stronger person.

"You met Jamie in the Army, right?"

"Third year in. We were on the same team—as close as brothers. When our tours were up, it was Jamie who suggested we look at the FBI."

"I never thought he'd follow his father into the FBI," Sophie said. "As a kid, he was adamant about not doing that."

"He told me that, too. Jamie wanted to make his own way in the world, but when his dad retired, he felt like he could join the Bureau without having to worry about nepotism or people thinking he was getting favors he didn't deserve." He paused. "Did you ever want to follow your dad and work at the Bureau?"

"Not even for one second."

"Okay, that's a no."

She gave him a sheepish look. "It's not that I didn't admire what my father did. He was a true patriot. He believed in country, duty, faithfulness, the good of all people. He devoted his life to that, and I was super proud of him. And sometimes I felt selfish for not wanting to do the same, but I've always been more interested in ancient history than current events. For me, piecing together

someone's story from what little might be left behind from their home, their city or their grave is fascinating."

He liked the way her brown eyes shimmered with gold when she felt passionate about something. He liked it even more when the passion was focused on him.

"One time I found a small, engraved gold ring," she continued. "It took me almost two years to figure out that it belonged to a very young prince in a very old country. He'd died on his wedding day, shot by a rival for his wife's attentions. He was seventeen years old."

"What happened to his killer?"

"Of course, you would ask that," she said with a laugh. "That's your special agent training. I was more interested in what happened to his wife."

"Well, did you find out?"

"His wife was forced to marry her husband's killer. But interestingly enough, that man died by poison a few years later. No one ever knew who did it. I think it was her."

"Sounds like one of my mother's soap operas. How did you learn all that from a ring anyway?"

"I traced the ring through the engraving back to the prince's family and then I researched my way through old manuscripts and tales of that time period and put it all together. I'm making it sound easy, but it wasn't."

"That's impressive. You must be great at puzzles."

"I do like the challenge. When I find something like a ring or a bone, I develop a rather obsessive compulsion to know everything about it. Every person has a story and so many are never told, but every now and then, I get to tell one. It's how we inform history. It's how we learn from our

pasts." She let out a breath. "And I'm getting super carried away."

"You love what you do. That's great. Not everyone can say that."

"I do love it. I wanted to be an archaeologist from about age six on. You don't know how many times I dug up our backyard."

"Did you ever find anything?"

"The bones of somebody's family pet. After that, my parents put a moratorium on digs in the backyard. But they did sign me up for summer adventures, so that helped."

"Your dad told me that you teach, too, is that right?"

"Yes. I teach in the fall and go on digs in the summer. I'm supposed to be in Egypt next month."

A look of concern flashed through her eyes.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I just remembered that it's finals next week. I was going to spend this weekend writing the tests for my classes. I'm supposed to have office hours on Monday and the final is next Wednesday. But I'm sitting here in a seedy motel room without any way to communicate with anyone. What are my students going to do? Are they going to get incompletes? Some of them are graduating. And some of them have worked two jobs to afford to go on the dig with me in July. I'm letting down so many people, Damon. I feel terrible about it. Am I being selfish?"

"No, you're being smart. You could have been killed this morning. Hell, you could have been killed last night if you'd gone into your apartment instead of running away. This isn't a game you're in. Your father is dead, and we're trying

to keep you alive. Don't forget that. I'm sure the university is aware that you're missing. Someone will step in for you. They'll take care of your students."

"You're probably right," she said slowly. "I just don't want any of them to get hurt by this."

He was touched by the generosity of her spirit, the softness of her heart. She cared about people, and that was somewhat rare in his world. He had his core group of friends, people he trusted with his life, and the danger they were perpetually in intensified their loyalty to each other. But Sophie felt loyal to her students, her employers, her friends, even an aunt she hadn't seen since she was sixteen.

He wondered what it would feel like if she felt that way about him...

But he didn't want that kind of caring relationship. He didn't want someone he had to check in with, someone to worry about and to have worry about him. That's why he'd left her all those years ago. He'd known if he stayed past dawn, she'd spin a web around him that he wouldn't be able to get out of—or want to. And he'd made a promise to himself a long time ago that he wouldn't let anyone else control what he did, who he saw, where he went.

It had been a promise he'd kept.

Sometimes it felt like a lonely promise.

But he'd always told himself it was better to be the one who left and not the one left behind.

"You're suddenly quiet," Sophie said. "What are you thinking about, Damon?"

"Your students," he lied. "The only way to protect them is to stay away from them."

"That's true. Look what happened to you when you got close to me—you almost got shot."

"Wasn't even close. Which bothers me," he added, thinking about the firefight at the cabin.

"It bothers you that you weren't hit?" she asked in amazement.

"Just wondered why our attacker didn't wait for a better shot...or why there weren't two people to box us in."

Her brows knit together. "You're unhappy with the skill of our attacker?"

"You were standing in front of the window, but you weren't hit. Was that on purpose? Was it a warning shot?"

"I never thought of that," she said slowly. "But why would he be warning me?"

"No idea. I'm just speculating."

"One of my favorite pastimes," she said. "I am good at putting puzzles together, Damon, but I don't think we have enough pieces."

"We'll start getting them tomorrow."

"I hate waiting."

"So do I, especially for the details on where we're going in the morning," he added pointedly.

"It will be tomorrow soon enough."

It didn't feel that way to him. A long, hot night loomed ahead of them, and talking to Sophie had only made him like her more. He was also bothered by some of what she'd shared with him.

"Sophie," he said abruptly, swinging his legs off the bed as he faced her.

"What?" she asked warily, obviously picking up on his change of tone.

"You said we weren't going anywhere that could be tied to your father or your past, but that's not true. We're going to New Haven, where your parents went to school, where Peter Hunt went to school. I'm guessing your father might have had an apartment there at one time. Or a house. Or a life."

She drew in a breath. "We're not going into New Haven. There's a storage place on the outskirts of town." She reached into her pocket and pulled out a key.

"I knew you went to the cabin to get something besides a gun. Why didn't we go straight to the storage unit? They don't usually close that early."

"This one closes at seven. I checked before I got rid of my phone. I was trying to figure out if I could get to the cabin and then get to New Haven all in one day. I could have done it if I'd found the key faster or if you hadn't arrived or if someone hadn't tried to kill us, making us take a tortuous route to get here."

"You should have told me. We could have switched up our route, gotten to the site before it closed."

"We had to stay off the main highways," she argued. "That was more important."

She might be right, but he was still pissed off that she had kept the information from him. "What's in the storage unit?"

"I have no idea. He just told me to get the key and go there."

"In his voicemail, he specifically told you where to go? Because if he did, there's a chance the Bureau has been able to retrieve those voicemails from the phone carrier. Maybe that's how they tracked you to the cabin."

"He didn't mention the cabin. He spoke in code, like the way you do on your baseball forum. He used references to places only I would understand."

"Like what? Tell me exactly."

"You know, I don't like you ordering me around," she said with irritation.

"I don't like getting shot at. Let's see if we can work together."

"He told me to go to my favorite place in the world—that was the cabin—and get a key. He asked me if I remembered the story about his beer bottle collection and that he'd left me something there—the storage unit."

"Beer bottle collection?" he queried.

"In college, he started a collection of beer bottles, and he kept it up in his twenties. But once he married my mom and they had me, apparently my mother decided the beer bottle collection had to go. My mom loved to do spring cleaning. Twice a year, she'd make me go through my closets. One day I was really mad because she wanted me to give away something I wanted to keep, and my dad told me he had a secret place where he would stash things he didn't want to get rid of. So, I put my stuff in a box like my mom wanted me to, and my dad and I were supposed to drop it off at a charity collection box. Only, we didn't go

there, we went to New Haven and put it in his storage locker where he still had his beer bottle collection."

"Did you live in New Haven at the time?"

"No, we were in Woodbridge then, which isn't far. Anyway, that was the one and only time I went to the storage center. After my mom died, one day my dad showed up with all my boxes. He said he wanted to give me some of my memories back and make me feel better." She paused. "I didn't know he still had the storage unit. It wasn't something I thought about, that's for sure. But I guess he kept it all these years. Maybe he needed it after he sold the house I grew up in."

He was beginning to think that Alan had a lot more secrets than anyone could imagine. "So that's it, that's the whole story? Was there anything else on the voicemails?"

"No, just vague apologies and telling me to be careful and to run as fast and as far away as I could once I did the two things he asked me to do—get the key and go to the storage unit."

"I still don't like that the unit is in New Haven where he went to school. Maybe Peter Hunt knew about his beer bottle collection and where he stashed it."

"I don't think my father would send me into trouble."

"Well, the cabin didn't work out so well." He got to his feet and walked around the room, thinking about all the different scenarios that could play out. His gut was churning, his instincts telling him they could easily be walking into some sort of a trap.

"What are you thinking?" Sophie asked worriedly.

"That we should abandon the storage unit and just lay low until we figure out what's going on."

"But I have to go there. My dad told me it was important. I have to follow what he said. It was the last thing he asked me to do."

"When he asked you, he didn't know someone was going to find you at the cabin. He wouldn't want you to go into danger."

She stared back at him with determination in her eyes. "We can argue about it all night, but I'm going there in the morning. My father left me something, and I have to know what it is."

"I can stop you."

She got to her feet and walked over to face him. "You could probably do that, but you're not going to."

His heart thudded against his chest. "Why wouldn't I?"

She didn't answer right away, and the tension between them tightened so much he felt as if something was about to snap—maybe him. He shoved his hands into his pockets to stop himself from grabbing her, because with her standing so close, he could barely remember what they were arguing about.

"Because you want to know what's in there as much as I do," she said finally.

He blinked, forcing himself to refocus on the conversation.

"And you know that if we don't find the storage unit first, whatever is there could be gone forever," she added.

"It could already be gone," he said. "We don't know if we're ahead or behind."

"We'll find out tomorrow. You should take a shower, Damon; you look hot."

He was hot all right, fired up by the situation, by her, by the damned summer heat. "Finally, one of your ideas I actually like."

He went into the bathroom, shut the door and took a deep breath. He never had trouble concentrating on a mission, but Sophie was making it almost impossible to think and act logically. He could not run on emotion the way she did, or they were both going to end up dead.

Stripping off his clothes, he got into a cold shower and felt a rush of relief.

Unfortunately, he had a feeling the heat would be back as soon as he left the shower, because he and Sophie still had to get through the night together.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TEN

SOPHIE SAT down on the edge of the bed as she heard the shower go on. She took a couple of deep breaths, trying to slow down her racing pulse. Damon had definitely gotten her worked up. She felt like she'd just finished a ten-mile run. Not that she ran enough to know what that would feel like, but it was probably like this.

She got back up, adrenaline and something else making her want to move.

The *something else* was, of course, Damon.

For a moment there, she'd thought he was going to kiss her. And for a moment there, she'd wanted him to. She'd wanted to go back to the night they'd spent together when everything bad had faded away, when only good feelings had washed over her, when she'd felt desired and adored and connected...

But look how that ended...

She'd woken up alone. Even though she didn't regret the night, she did wish he'd given them a chance to see if they could have had more than a night.

But she didn't need to be thinking about that now.

She had bigger problems—much bigger problems.

She wasn't stupid. She knew that someone else might know about the storage unit, but she had to trust in someone, and right now the only person she could absolutely trust was her father.

Still, as Damon had reminded her, the cabin had been attacked and surely her father had not anticipated that happening. *Was she going to walk into another dangerous situation?* But if she didn't go, she'd never know what was there, what her father wanted her to have, and that was unthinkable.

So, she'd go and hope that Damon wouldn't try to stop her.

That thought made her wonder if she shouldn't leave while he was in the shower. She could get a cab, leave Damon to find his own way back to New York. Although, he'd probably track her down at the storage unit. There weren't that many in New Haven. She really should have kept that piece of information to herself, but it was too late now.

Run or stay...the decision seemed suddenly huge.

And then the bathroom door opened and Damon walked out in jeans and no shirt, beads of water clinging to his broad shoulders, the perfect amount of dark hair drifting across his chest and down his hard abs. Right now, he looked a lot less like a federal agent and very much more like the incredibly hot guy she'd had sex with four years ago.

She swallowed hard as he crossed the room and stood in front of the air-conditioning unit, shaking out his damp hair

with his fingers.

Yeah, leaving really wasn't an option.

She sat down on her bed, starting to think of the lumpy, uncomfortable mattress as her island of sanity in the midst of her turbulent life.

She grabbed the remote and turned up the sound on the television. The local news was on, the first story about a protest at Yale over a new increase in tuition fees. Nothing particularly earth-shattering there, and that was fine with her. She was trying to calm down, not get amped up over more bad news in the world. Maybe they'd do the weather next or sports, things that wouldn't change the course of her life.

"We have breaking news," the female anchor said, interrupting her co-host, who was about to talk about an upcoming art festival. "Out of New York," she added, then paused, as she listened to whoever was talking in her ear.

Damon turned away from the air conditioning to look at the television.

A photo came up on the screen, and for a split second she was terrified it might be a picture of her father or of her, but it was a man she didn't recognize. She blew out a breath. "Thank God, it's not my dad or us," she murmured.

"Don't thank God yet," he said tersely.

"What do you mean?"

He didn't answer as the news anchor continued with the story. "The body pulled from the Hudson River earlier tonight was that of thirty-six-year-old Lorenzo Venturi, the youngest son of the infamous Mafia leader, Giancarlo Venturi, who died in prison last year after serving half of a

life sentence for murder, racketeering, money laundering and a long list of other criminal activities. He is survived by his older brother Stefan and his mother Venetia."

"Damn," Damon said, his profile turning hard. "That's not good."

"What does this guy's death have to do with us?"

"Your father ran the organized crime division, Sophie."

"I know that. Was this guy part of one of his cases?"

"Yes. And I'm fairly certain that my friend who's in trouble has been undercover with the Venturi family for the last year."

"What does this mean then? Is it such a bad thing when one of the bad guys ends up dead?"

"Depends on who killed him and why. And whether or not they were also responsible for your father's death."

"I can't imagine it's the same person. This man was a criminal. My dad was a federal agent."

"Venturi could have been turned into an informant by your dad. He could have been passing him critical information."

"And that's why they're both dead?" she asked.

"Possibly. Or it could have been a power grab between the Venturi brothers, who resurrected the business after their father died."

"That makes more sense. If you look back through history, brothers killing brothers to attain power is quite a common theme."

"It's a plausible theory," he said. "But all we really know for sure is that the body count is going up fast, and we don't want to add to it."

"No, we don't," she said heavily, his words reminding her just how precarious her life was right now.

"You wanted another puzzle piece, Sophie. We just got one. Now we have to figure out where it fits."

"Maybe there will be an answer in the storage unit."

He met her gaze. "I still think it's a bad idea. Maybe I should go alone."

"No way. That's not happening."

"I could take the key from you. I could figure out where it goes."

"You could, but you're not going to, because we're in this together. You asked me to trust you, and I have. You're not going to let me down, are you?"

His expression hardened. "No, I'm not going to let you down."

"Good." She flipped the channel to a sitcom rerun, desperately needing some canned laughter and happy music.

"I'm going to see what else I can find out about Lorenzo Venturi's death online," Damon said, reaching for his phone.

"Are you sure your search won't trigger some FBI flag? You're using the motel Internet. Can't it be traced?"

"It can, but with news organizations reporting on Venturi's death, I think there will be thousands of searches on the subject tonight. We won't stand out."

"You always have an answer."

He looked up from his phone, his blue eyes unusually dark. "Not always, Sophie."

"What question can't you answer?" she asked daringly, knowing she probably shouldn't, but she couldn't stop herself.

"How we're going to keep our hands off each other tonight."

Her breath stuck in her chest. "Well, it would be easier if you put your shirt back on."

A slow smile spread across his face. "But it's so hot in here."

"Yeah, and you're not helping." She turned up the sound on the television again until it was almost blaring.

Damon retrieved his shirt from the bathroom, covering up just the way she'd asked. *She just wished she hadn't asked...*

"You don't have to worry, Sophie," Damon said a moment later, a gleam in his eyes. "Nothing is going to happen that you don't want to happen."

Which only made her worry more...

When had his life gone so wrong? Wyatt walked through the 8th Street arcade which was housed in an old warehouse. The arcade was crowded with kids, and it reminded him of when his biggest goal had been to break the record on whatever video game he was playing. But that life felt like a lifetime ago and yearning for it was pointless, so he quickly made his way to the back of the building where the batting cages were located under an

array of bright lights. There were five cages, the first two being used by high school boys. Bree was in the last one.

He paused, watching her adjust her helmet over her ponytail, then her batting stance, as she waited for the ball machine to start. The first pitch came in hard and fast. She swung and connected in the sweet spot of the bat, sending the ball soaring into the netting behind the machine. If they'd been on a baseball field, it might have gone over the fence.

That was Bree—always swinging for the fences.

He felt another odd wave of nostalgia. Watching Bree reminded him of when they'd all first met at Quantico, how filled with hope and optimism and energy they'd been. They were going to run the world, but now the world was running them—or at least him. Perhaps Damon, too. He'd read the messages in the forum, and he knew Damon was in trouble. He couldn't count on him for help.

Could he count on Bree?

He'd never really known her that well. She'd had a fling with Jamie and been partnered with Damon on a lot of team assignments, so she'd been closer to them, but as for him and her—they'd always been on the periphery of each other. He did know that she was smart, fearless, and fiercely loyal. He needed all three traits about now.

Taking another look around, he saw no one who rang any alarm bells, so he walked over to the fence, standing behind her.

"Took you long enough," she said, without looking at him. "I'm almost out of quarters."

He didn't know why, but the normalcy of her words lightened the load he'd been carrying the past few days. "Looks like you'll be ready for summer softball."

"No time for games." She hit one last shot into the nets before setting down her bat and walking over to him. As she got closer, her frown grew. "You look awful."

"Good thing I don't have a mirror."

"Damon said you were messed up."

"You talked to him?"

"Yesterday—before he went looking for Sophie Parker, and ran into a barrage of bullets. But he's okay—for now. Did you see his messages?"

"A few minutes ago. He doesn't say—is he with Parker's daughter?"

"Not sure, but I think so. She's still officially missing." Bree paused, her blue eyes getting more serious. "Damon didn't tell anyone at the Bureau he was looking for Sophie. He's put himself in a bad position by not bringing anyone else in on the information he had. Peter Hunt was furious when Damon's car was found shot up at a cabin apparently owned by Alan, although the ownership was buried beneath layers of LLCs. Peter told everyone in the office today that the next person who goes off on their own is going to be fired, no questions asked. I've never seen him so worked up, but then he did just lose one of his best friends."

"Which begs the question—if Peter and Alan were close, why didn't Hunt know about Parker's cabin?"

"A good question. Maybe it was Parker's safe house."

"How did Damon know about it?"

"Probably from Jamie. He used to go to the Adirondacks in the summers. That's why his sister had Jamie's wake there. I'm guessing Damon met Sophie at the lake that weekend."

"Right. You didn't go to Jamie's wake, did you?"

"No. Just the funeral," she said, a shadow flitting through her gaze. "At any rate, Damon and Sophie are not at the cabin anymore. Where they are now, I have no idea, but Peter has a lot of people looking for them."

"What do you think of Hunt?"

"He has a good reputation and a lot of powerful friends. I saw him leaving the office today with Senator Greg Raleigh."

"That's interesting," he muttered. "Senators don't usually come to the office."

"That's what I thought. I looked him up. Raleigh went to Yale the same time as Alan and Peter. I'm sure he was there to find out what's going on in the investigation."

"To make sure justice will be served...or not."

"You've gotten very jaded, Wyatt."

"Can't deny that. Been undercover too long."

"Speaking of which, I just heard that they pulled Lorenzo Venturi's body out of the river. Does that mean anything to you?"

She knew he was working with the Venturis? Sudden doubt stiffened his spine. *Had he made a tactical error?* "Should it?" he challenged.

"Well, Alan works on organized crime. You work for Alan. He's dead, and now, so is a known mobster. Seems like there could be a connection," she said with cool

confidence. "I doubt I'll be the only one to make it. Any idea who killed Venturi?"

"No. But it was probably the same person who killed Alan and tried to take me out."

"That sounds like another Venturi. Why are you so afraid of coming into the office, Wyatt? If you're made, you need protection."

"I don't know who to trust at the Bureau."

"Why? What happened?"

"Alan set up a meet with me on Monday. Someone was waiting for me, and it wasn't Alan. There's no way anyone would have known about our meet if they didn't get the information from Alan or didn't know how to hack the system. It was an inside job. I'm sure of it."

She frowned, not looking completely convinced.

"You want more?" he asked. "Then add this into the equation. The attack on me was on Monday, two days before Alan died. Where the hell was he when I was fighting for my life? Why didn't he respond to the emergency protocol I initiated after that?"

"Is it possible he didn't get the message?"

"If he didn't, then someone close to him was keeping him from getting the information."

"Like Karen Leigh?"

"She's his right hand."

"Okay. What else can you tell me? I can try to help you from the inside, but I need more information, Wyatt. You're going to have to trust someone, and I'm all you've got."

She was right, but he didn't like it. "There's a new player in the Venturi operation. I overheard an argument between

Lorenzo and Stefan two weeks ago. Lorenzo told Stefan he was selling out the family, that his father was probably dying a second death in heaven watching him work for his enemies. Stefan told him it was a new world and to get used to it or get out." Wyatt paused. "It's possible that the new player decided to eliminate Lorenzo."

"But what part does Alan play in any of this? Aside from missing the meet, why don't you trust him?"

"I've been feeding him evidence for months, but he kept saying he didn't have enough. I also gave him information to use in busting a smaller side group, who could probably produce more evidence on the Venturis. He agreed to run a sting, but someone tipped off the group, and the bust went south."

"That might not have been Alan's fault."

He drew in a breath. "Look, I don't know if Alan was playing both sides, but I have to find out. Unfortunately, I have no resources and it looks like Damon is in as much shit as I am."

"Well, lucky for both of you, there's a woman around to bail you out," she said with a cocky smile. "First things first—where are you staying?"

"On the street."

"That must be why you smell like garbage. You'll stay at my apartment."

"No. Someone could be watching you."

"Why would they be watching me? I'm not in Karen's division. I don't work with you or Damon."

"But you were at Quantico with us. Alan was your instructor, too. He brought you into the New York office,

just like he did with me and Damon."

Her gaze narrowed. "You think that means something? He brought in a lot of people, and we all went through Quantico."

"There's a link. I don't know what it is, but my gut tells me that the three of us being in New York is not random."

"You can't sleep on the street, Wyatt. There's an underground garage in my building. I can sneak you in through there. No one will see you come in. We need to work on this together."

He was tempted. A bed and a shower were starting to feel like desperate needs, but he didn't want to put Bree in danger.

"I can take care of myself," she said, obviously reading his mind. "I also have food there. You look like you haven't eaten in weeks."

"I could eat," he admitted.

"Then it's done. 53rd and Hayes, walk between the first two buildings. There's a side door into the garage. I'll meet you there in twenty minutes." She paused. "You can trust me, Wyatt."

He walked back through the arcade and onto the street. He hoped he wasn't about to make a huge mistake.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER ELEVEN

DAMON WOKE up before Sophie on Friday morning. It was his second restless night in a row, and his mood was not the best, especially since the air conditioning seemed to have kicked off. The sun was just coming up, so he took another shower, before quietly re-entering the room.

Sophie was asleep, her golden hair laying in beautiful tangles across the white pillow, one hand tucked under her chin. She'd thrown off the covers and her top had crept up her torso, revealing a beautiful patch of creamy skin.

His cold shower quickly became a distant memory.

Grabbing the phone, he searched for a car rental place. There was one only four blocks away. That was good news. And it opened at seven—five minutes from now. He'd rent the car, find them some breakfast and by the time he got back, Sophie would be awake, dressed, alert, maybe even a little annoying, so he could get rid of the very inconvenient desire he felt for her.

He didn't really know how he'd made it through the night, but endless episodes of sitcom television had finally sent them both into a stupor. Since he'd told her nothing

was going to happen that she didn't want to happen, he'd waited for her to make a move, but she hadn't.

That was probably the smartest thing she'd done in the past two days.

Now it was time to start thinking about what was ahead.

He checked the parking lot, which didn't take long, since there were only a few cars, all of which were empty. There was an older man in the office, sitting behind the desk. Through the blinds on the window, he could see the television was on.

He walked quickly down the street. Hopefully, nothing would go wrong before he got back.

Damon was gone—again.

Sophie walked over to the window and looked out. There was no sign of him.

He wanted her to trust him, but he continued to keep her out of the loop, and she was getting a little tired of him calling all the shots.

Where on earth had he gone? They didn't have a car. Had he called a cab? Walked somewhere? Had he looked up the storage unit address online and gone without her?

She quickly put her hand into her pocket, relieved when her fingers curled around the key. If he'd gone to the storage area without her, he'd have taken the key. Although he didn't know which unit it was; she had that information in her head.

She didn't really believe he'd abandoned her. He seemed to be determined to stay as close to her as possible.

Unless their personal chat the night before had made him nervous?

She smiled at that thought. Damon was a tough, fearless guy—a soldier, a special agent, a man no doubt fully prepared to die while carrying out his duty. But when it came to talking about anything personal, he spooked pretty easily.

Having learned more about his family, his selfish parents, his back-and-forth childhood, she had a better understanding of why he might stay away from relationships. He hadn't had good role models growing up. Love in his life probably looked like a battlefield. And Damon didn't want to die on that field, so he stayed out of love.

At least, she thought he did.

He hadn't mentioned any women in his life. And he'd said there was no one to worry about him, but perhaps she was making assumptions.

Turning away from the window, she told herself to stop thinking about his love life and concentrate on what was ahead. The storage center opened in an hour. In a very short time, she'd learn exactly what her father had left her. Hopefully, it would give her some sort of peace, closure... something to help start the healing process. It would be even better if it also provided information and clues as to who had killed her dad.

Taking advantage of Damon's absence, she got into the shower and let the water and shampoo clean away some of

the grime of the last two days. She hadn't taken a shower since before she'd left for work on Wednesday morning, and it felt good to feel clean again.

It also felt like she was taking the first step back into her life, although that was probably an optimistic thought. There would be no return to normal for her, because even when they figured out who had killed her father and tried to kill her, her dad would still be gone. At the end of the day, she'd be alone. There would be no dad to call after an exciting discovery on a dig, or a bad day at work, or something funny a student had told her. No dad with a shoulder to lean on when life got tough or she felt sad. No dad to walk her down the aisle, hold her first child, tell her future husband he better be good to her or else...

Her mouth trembled as all the sadness she'd been holding at bay came back with the power of a rushing waterfall. She bit back a sob, telling herself it still wasn't time to cry. But the dam was breaking and here in the steamy shower with the water pounding down, it was easier to let the tears fall.

She cried for her loss. She cried out her fear. She cried for the injustice of it all. And when she finally ran out of emotion, she let the water stream down her face and wash it all away.

By the time she was done, the hot water was gone and it was almost a relief to feel nothing but cold. The chill brought back the protective numbness that would keep her going, allow her to do what she needed to do.

She grabbed a towel, dried off, then blew-dry her hair, used some blush and lipstick that she happened to have in

her bag, and put her sad, sweaty clothes back on. Picking up another outfit might have to get on the schedule at some point.

When she stepped out of the bathroom, Damon was sitting at the table with more bags of food, and the smell of bacon made forgiveness a little easier. "So, you're back."

"You can't be too angry," he said with a pleading smile. "I brought you bacon, pancakes, waffles, and eggs."

"And what did you bring for yourself?" she asked, as she sat down across from him.

He smiled. "Not in a sharing mood?"

"You should have woken me up and told me where you were going, Damon. You left me here without a note or a phone."

"Sorry. I didn't see any paper, and I thought you could use the sleep. I was only gone twenty minutes. Eat, you'll feel better."

She frowned but decided eating would get her further than arguing. She opened the carton holding three buttermilk pancakes, lathered each with a slab of butter, and poured on some maple syrup. Then she took a buttery bite and almost sighed with delight. "This is good."

"Excellent," he agreed, as he munched on a piece of bacon.

She noticed his concerned gaze, and wiped her mouth with her fingers. "What? Do I have something in my teeth?"

"Are you all right, Sophie?"

"Don't I look all right?" she countered.

"I thought I might have heard you crying."

"That was just the shower running," she lied, hoping her red eyes didn't completely give her away. "I'm fine. I'm ready to get on with the day. Do you think we should take a cab to the unit?"

"I rented us a car."

"What? Already?"

"There was a place not far away. I had enough cash to cover it."

"But it's in your name. How can we use it?"

"We won't use it long, but I wasn't sure how far away the place was, and I like having a car with us, in case we need to make a quick exit. Or in case your father wants you to go somewhere else."

"Okay." She did wonder if there would be another stop after this one, if her dad had left her more instructions to follow, but she'd find that out soon enough. "Did you check your forum this morning? Did you hear from your friends?"

He nodded. "Yes. Bree said they met up last night. Everyone is safe for the moment." He paused. "Do you know Senator Raleigh?"

"He went to school with my dad. Why?"

"He met with Peter at the office yesterday."

"I'm sure he's trying to find out what happened." She saw something in Damon's eyes. "Why does it bother you?"

"It doesn't bother me; I'm just trying to figure out if it's an important detail or not. What do you know about him?"

"Not much. My dad probably saw him once a year at a golf tournament for Yale alums. I don't think they had much contact beyond that." She racked her brain to think of any

other details. "He's married. He lives somewhere in Connecticut. That's all I know."

"Who else goes to this golf tournament?"

"Peter Hunt; he's a very good golfer. Harrison Delano and Michael Brennan usually go."

"Delano—he owns the hotel chain, right?"

"Delano Hotels, yes. I think Harrison owns a lot of other things as well—boats, planes, small islands. Karen told me that my father had a dinner on his calendar with Harrison for this week, but, of course, he didn't keep it. She wanted to know what that was about. I had no idea, and I told her that. I was a little surprised, because I know my dad had a bit of a falling-out with Harrison a while ago, something to do with a botched anniversary weekend at one of his hotels. I think my dad wanted to surprise my mom with something special before she died, and Harrison charged him over the moon for it. There was definitely some kind of misunderstanding, and I know Harrison didn't come to my mom's funeral. But somewhere along the way, they must have patched things up."

"Interesting. Who's Michael Brennan?"

"Michael runs a hedge fund. He's a finance guy, somewhat on the serious side. He has a daughter around my age and a son a few years older. We used to see them for holiday parties back in the day. My mom and Michael's wife were friends for a time." She paused, thinking how long ago that life seemed now. "All those friendships kind of disintegrated after my mom died, which is kind of weird, because they were my dad's friends, but I think she was the one who liked to socialize. My dad was always working. She

had to make sure he'd take time off once in a while. Otherwise, he never did."

"Your father ran with a rich crowd," Damon commented.

"He graduated from an Ivy League school—what do you expect? But they're not all rich. Peter certainly isn't. And Diane is definitely not."

"Diane?"

"Diane Lewis. She's a long-time friend and a professor at Yale now. She gave me a lot of advice when I was deciding what degrees to get and whether or not I should take my teaching position at NYU. She was a big help." She paused, thinking about how sad all of her father's friends must be, especially Diane, who had such a big heart. "I wish I could talk to Diane, too. She's a lovely person, and I know she must be worrying about me."

"You'll be able to talk to her when this is over."

"Will I?" she challenged. "My dad's messages made it sound like I was going to have to disappear for a long time."

Damon frowned again. "I don't know how he thought you were going to manage that on your own with the entire FBI looking for you, and God knows who else."

"I don't, either. Maybe the answer is in the storage unit." She wiped her mouth and stood up. "Let's go."

Sophie grew more nervous the closer they got to the storage center, and she was actually glad she wasn't driving this morning, since she couldn't seem to stop the

waves of unsettling unease rocketing through her body. Was this a good idea? Was she crazy to make another stop at a place her father had owned? Was Damon right?

Damon suddenly put a hand on her thigh, and she almost jumped out of her skin.

"Take a breath," he said, glancing over at her.

"I just have this terrifying feeling that my life is about to change again. Not that I can even imagine how it can get any worse."

"Don't try to imagine that."

She nodded, but she couldn't help noticing that he hadn't told her everything was going to be all right.

"Is this the place?" he asked a moment later.

"Yes," she said, as he slowed down.

The storage center sat on a half-acre of land. A large two-story building housed the office and a one-story structure of about fifty eight-by-ten foot units formed a U-shape next to the building. The property was on the outskirts of town by the interstate and was surrounded by a chain link fence. It was a few minutes past eight, and the front gate was open, but Damon didn't drive through the entrance, continuing on for another few blocks.

"What are you doing? That was the place."

"Just taking a look."

"What are you looking for?"

"Anything I don't want to see," he said vaguely.

"There was a white Jetta by the office. It could belong to the manager. I didn't see any other cars."

"Nor did I. Where's the unit?"

"It's around the back. It faces the interstate."

"Okay." He made a U-turn and then returned to the storage center, driving through the entrance gates, then turning right to get to her unit.

"It's there," she said, pointing to the third one in.

He parked in front of the unit. "Let's do it."

She got out of the car and met him by the padlocked door. Her fingers were shaking again, so bad she could barely put in the key. To her dismay, it didn't work.

"Try again," Damon said.

She drew in a breath and inserted the key again. It worked. She removed the lock and put it aside.

Damon pulled up the roll-back door, and they walked into the space. There were a couple of large boxes in the unit, a bicycle she remembered from her dad's limited fascination with bike racing that had probably been part of his way of escaping from the grief of her mom's death. The beer bottle collection that had once been a source of contention between him and her mom was in an open crate on the floor. There was a filing cabinet that had once sat in her father's study and a small table that had been in their family room. A signed bat from Barry Bonds, one of her dad's favorite ballplayers, was propped up against the wall. But it was the silver aluminum suitcase next to the table that drew her attention. It was the one thing in the unit that she didn't recognize.

She moved toward it, Damon right behind her. She was going to lift it, but it was heavier than she expected. Damon grabbed it and put it on the table.

"You want to open it, or do you want me to?" he asked.

She felt suddenly paralyzed. "I don't know if I should look inside."

His deep-blue gaze was filled with understanding but also determination. "I can do it if you want."

"No," she said quickly, realizing she couldn't make that choice. "My dad left it for me. I have to be the one to look at it first."

Damon took a step back and motioned her forward.

She licked her lips, then unzipped the case and lifted the lid, not sure what to expect.

"Oh, my God," she murmured.

Inside the case were stacks of hundred dollar bills.

"Shit!" Damon swore. "What the hell were you thinking, Alan?"

She was silently asking her father the very same thing. Then she noticed the mesh pocket on the inside lid of the suitcase. She unzipped it and pulled out passports and driver's licenses, her shock mounting as she saw her face, but different names, on each item. "I don't understand. What is all this?"

"Your exit package," Damon said tersely. "Your dad knew you were going to need this to start over."

She met his gaze. "Where—where did he get all this money?"

"Do you really want me to answer that?"

She could hear the anger in his voice, the betrayal...

"No. No." She threw the passports and IDs back into the pocket and zipped the suitcase shut. "Let's just leave it here."

"We can't do that," he said, grabbing the case.

"I don't want it."

"Your father left it for you, and we're not coming back for it when you change your mind. Now, let's get out of here."

Before they could leave the unit, two men rushed inside. They wore black T-shirts and black jeans, ski masks covering their faces, a gun in each of their hands.

Her heart thudded against her chest.

They were trapped. There was no way out.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWELVE

HE SHOULD HAVE CLOSED the door while they were inside.

He should have left Sophie in the car.

He should have done a lot of things.

Instead, he'd let them get caught like mice in a trap.

"Hand the case over," one of the men said in a deep, gravelly voice.

He couldn't see their faces, but by their athletically powerful body types, he imagined both to be in their thirties.

"Do it, or she dies," the second man said, aiming his weapon at Sophie.

He could feel Sophie inching closer to him. *Good.* He wanted her behind him when he made his move. And he would make a move, because there was no doubt in his mind that these men were not going to leave them alive whether he gave them the case or not.

It would be risky. He was fast, but he might not be fast enough to fire off two shots before a bullet took down Sophie.

As he adjusted the suitcase in his hand, the weight and the metal exterior made him realize it could be a weapon, too. Or at least a distraction.

That's all he needed...a split-second could make the difference.

"Do it now," the first man ordered.

"Okay," he said, putting up his free hand. "You can have it. Just don't shoot."

He took a step forward.

"Stop right there and drop it. Then shove it over here," the man closest to him ordered.

"No problem."

He leaned forward as if to set the case down, then quickly changed directions, hurling the case at the man in front of him. It hit him in the legs, knocking him down.

Then Damon whipped out his gun, shooting the second guy in the chest.

The man's gun went off as he fell to the ground.

He heard Sophie scream. He prayed she hadn't been hit, but he couldn't take time to look.

The man he'd temporarily disabled with the suitcase was getting up.

He fired his next shot at that man's heart. He staggered and fell backward, his gun falling out of his hand.

The sound of the gunshots felt incredibly loud, echoing off the walls of the unit. He was sure they would bring someone running in their direction at any second.

He turned to Sophie, who was gripping her dad's baseball bat in her hands, her face white with fear and

shock. He didn't see any blood on her, thank God. "Are you all right?"

She nodded.

"Let's go." He grabbed the case and sprinted toward the car. He would have liked to check the men for IDs, but there was no time. He put the case in the backseat, then jumped in as Sophie did the same.

He gunned the engine, speeding out of the parking lot as Sophie fastened her seat belt.

He heard sirens as they left the lot, and he took the next corner on two wheels. They needed to get away, because getting caught by the cops with a suitcase of unexplained money and two dead bodies behind them would put them both in an interrogation room, with no chance of finding who killed Alan or who was after them. The FBI would take over their case, but that might put them in even more danger if there was a mole inside the Bureau.

Sophie braced her hand against the center console as he took another turn and sped through an intersection. Thankfully, they were in an industrial area with large warehouses and semi-trucks to get lost behind.

The sirens seemed to be getting more distant, but they weren't out of the woods yet.

"Do you think they're dead?" Sophie asked.

He looked over at her shocked, white, bloodless face. Her brown eyes were huge and terrified. "Probably."

"Oh God, oh God," she murmured. "I think I'm going to be sick." She rolled down her window, fanning her face with her hand.

He wanted to tell her to duck down, not hang her very pretty face out the window, but he had to give her a minute.

"What are we going to do? You just killed two people," she said, rolling the window back up.

"It was them or us. They weren't going to leave us there alive, Sophie."

"What are we going to do now? The person in the office might have seen our car. Someone heard the gunshots. They're going to find the bodies. They're going to trace the unit to my dad, to me. How are we going to get out of this?"

She was quickly spinning out of control. He had no idea how they were going to get away, but he would take it one step at a time—problem solve.

"First, we need to ditch this car," he said.

"Where? And what will we do then? Are we going to take a train or a bus or a cab? Won't the police put our pictures out on the wire or whatever they do? How are we going to use any public transportation?"

She was right; public transportation was not a good option. Nor was continuing to drive around in the vehicle they were in. The license plate had most likely been captured on the security cameras at the storage unit. The only thing he felt remotely good about was that the bodies of the men he'd shot might later provide a clue as to who was after them, and hopefully Bree could get access to that information. But that was something to deal with later.

Spying a long block of office buildings, he drove into a parking lot packed with cars and pulled into a spot between a sedan and an older model SUV, which wouldn't have any alarm protection.

"What are we doing?" Sophie asked in alarm, turning her head to see if anyone was behind them. "Are we hiding here? It's too close. We need to get farther away."

"We're not staying here. We're going to borrow a car."

She looked at him in confusion. "Borrow—as in *steal*—a car? Do you know how to do that?"

"I do."

"But someone will call the cops when they realize their car isn't here."

"It's early in the morning. I'm guessing whoever parked here won't be checking on their car until at least lunchtime or maybe after work. That gives us a few hours to get somewhere else, then we'll drop the car off, and eventually they'll get it back. Don't worry."

"Don't worry?" she echoed, a high-pitched, squeaky tone to her voice. "Why would I worry? We've killed two people. Now we're going to steal a car. Oh, and we have a suitcase filled with a freaking ton of money and fake passports. There's certainly nothing to be concerned about. It's just a normal, average day for me."

He grabbed her arm. "Stop. I promise that you will have a chance to lose it, Sophie. You'll be able to rant and rave and scream and cry—whatever you want to do, but not now. Now, we have to get to a safe place. Can you stay with me?"

She stared back at him. "Yes," she said tightly. "But how are you going to break into that car? Throw a rock through the window?"

"Way too noisy." He pulled his keys out of his pocket and wrapped his fingers around a small black gadget. "This will get us into the vehicle and start the car."

"Really? They make things that do that?"

"The FBI does. I needed it on my last job, and I never gave it back. Come on."

He got out of the car and grabbed the suitcase from the backseat. He took a sweeping glance around the lot and then opened the SUV next to them. As he'd predicted, the device he had was able to start the car. Within minutes, they were on their way.

Despite his outward confidence, he held his breath until they got on the interstate and blended in with the traffic. For another five miles, he watched his rearview mirror like a hawk, but there were no police cars on their tail.

Sophie wasn't talking, her gaze fixed on her side view mirror.

Another five miles passed; the traffic got heavier, and his pulse started to pound again. Getting stuck in a traffic jam was not part of the plan.

"There's a police car," Sophie said suddenly. "It's coming up behind us."

"I see it." He noted the flashing lights and the increasingly loud siren.

"It's for us. They've found us. What are we going to do?"

He heard the panic in her voice, and he did not have a good answer. They couldn't make a run for it, not with traffic coming to a standstill. "Get down as far as you can," he told her. "They'll be looking for two people."

She unbuckled her belt and dropped as low as she could in her seat. "What's happening?" she asked him. "Can you change lanes, get off?"

"I don't want to do anything to draw suspicion." He paused. "The police car is coming down the left side. Cars are moving over for him."

The siren screamed in his ear as the police car drew level. He snuck a side glance at the vehicle, enormously relieved when it went by, the officers inside obviously responding to another call.

"It's not us," he told Sophie. "They're gone. I think there might be an accident; that's why the traffic is so slow."

"They're really gone?"

"Yes. You can get up."

She eased back into her seat and refastened her belt. "I thought that was it."

"I think I'm going to get off, take the frontage road for a while."

He drove the streets adjacent to the interstate for a few miles, noting firetrucks and police cars on a bridge at the scene of an accident.

He turned on the radio, searching for a news station. He wanted to know if anyone was talking about the shooting at the storage unit, but a weather update and a traffic report were followed by political news from Washington. He turned it off, feeling somewhat relieved now that they were thirty plus miles from the scene and hopefully in a vehicle that no one was looking for yet. "I think we're good—for now."

He looked over at Sophie. The color was starting to come back into her face, but she still appeared shell-shocked, and he couldn't blame her. She'd seen two men killed right in front of her. They were running for their

lives, and they hadn't even had a second to talk about or deal with the suitcase her father had left for her, which raised another big set of questions. But he didn't want to get into any of that now.

"I can't quite believe we got away," she said. "Everything has been happening so fast. You shot two people in less than a minute, and you did it before they could shoot us. How did you manage that?"

"Training and a little luck."

She shook her head in bemusement. "I thought we were trapped. I didn't see any way out. But you did. You saved my life."

"I saved both our lives."

She gazed back at him. "There were security cameras—do you think they caught what happened?"

"I'm sure they caught us leaving."

"So, now the police could arrest us for murder." She glanced toward the backseat. "And for having what looks like hundreds of thousands of dollars in cash."

"We need to talk about that, but let's put it on the back burner until we get to a safe place."

"Is there a safe place?" she asked with despair.

"Somewhere. We just have to find it."

"And then what? We hide out for a day, a week, a month?"

"You're thinking too far ahead, Sophie. Just stay in the moment. Right now, we're okay. We're alive. That's all that matters." He looked at her and saw the valiant effort she was making to hold it together. "I'm going to keep you safe. I promise."

Her brown eyes shimmered with unshed tears. "I know you're going to try," she whispered.

"Not just try. I will make it happen, and together we're going to dig our way to the truth. I'm going to need you and your brilliant, deductive mind for that."

"I don't feel smart right now; I feel—numb."

"That will wear off. Just keep breathing. Some days that's all you can do."

Sophie's pulse slowed down with each passing mile, and after an hour and a half, she was starting to feel like an imminent heart attack was no longer a possibility. But she was still worried and while she was trying to stay in the moment as Damon had suggested, she knew they were going to have to make some moves to stay ahead of the authorities and whatever bad guys were coming after them next.

"Where are we going?" she asked. Damon had been driving side streets, keeping somewhat parallel to the interstate, but his turns appeared to be completely random.

"I'm not sure, but we're going to be out of gas in about fifteen miles, so we'll have to make a stop soon, and that would probably be a good time to get rid of this car."

"And steal another one? It feels so risky, even with your handy-dandy little gadget."

"It's not my first choice. But public transportation is out."

"I know." She thought for a moment. They were headed south toward New York, and while she was excited to leave Connecticut, New York didn't feel any safer, not while things were so hot. "I feel like we need to lay low for a few hours. Maybe we should drop off the car and find a library or a bookstore, a place where we could sit for a bit without anyone noticing," she suggested.

"Those places sound too crowded."

"But having people around might prevent someone from taking another shot at us. A deserted location doesn't feel safe." She blew out a breath of frustration. Being cut off from her entire life was starting to wear on her. "We need a friend." She didn't realize she'd spoken the words aloud until Damon gave her a quick look.

"We can't bring friends into this," he said. "At least not your friends. If we get back to New York, I can get my friends to help us."

"That will take hours at the rate of speed we're traveling and getting back on the interstate could be dangerous, not to mention we'll have to steal another car, and then that theft could get reported."

"What do you suggest? I'm open to ideas."

She thought for a few minutes, happy that her brain was starting to work again. A road sign gave her an idea. "Greenwich, Connecticut is about twenty-five miles from here."

"So?"

"So, the Rowlands have a house in Greenwich. It's where Jamie and Cassie grew up. You remember—it's where they

had the catered lunch after Jamie's funeral, before we went up to the lake for the wake."

"I remember the house, but why would we go there? Vincent is former FBI, and someone also tied to your dad."

"Yes, but he's probably not there. He has an apartment in Manhattan where he stays when he's not traveling. He kept the house because it's where Jamie's things are, but he told my dad it's difficult for him to be there." Her idea began to pick up steam as she considered all the angles. "Cassie's mom has been in California since before Jamie died; she's not around. Cassie moved to London last year, so she's not using the house now, either. It could be empty, Damon." She looked over at him, feeling a surge of optimism. "There could be a car there, too. I know Vincent didn't want to get rid of Jamie's car. It might still be there." The more she thought about it, the more it seemed like the Rowland house was the perfect solution to their problems. "What do you think?"

"It's sounding better than I first thought," he conceded. "We'd have to determine whether or not Vincent is at the house, though. I'm also betting that there's a security system. Most FBI agents, even former ones, have them."

Her heart sank at that thought. "True. I don't suppose you have a handy-dandy gadget to get past that, do you?"

"No gadgets, but I might be able to disarm it, depending on how sophisticated it is. I can't remember—is the garage attached or separate?"

"It's separate. Even if we can't get into the house, maybe we can get into the garage."

"We still need to know if Vincent is there."

"Good point." She thought for another moment, then said, "You won't like my next idea, but think about it before you say no."

"You want to call Cassie," he said, meeting her gaze.

"Yes. You don't think they'd tap her phone, do you? I haven't seen her in a few years. She's living in London. They can't possibly tap into all my friends' phones, can they?"

He shrugged off that question. "It bothers me more that Cassie is attached to Vincent. Even though he's retired, he still has friends at the Bureau. Peter Hunt might be one of them. I'm sure Peter called Vincent to ask him if he knew where you were, if not before we showed up at the cabin, then definitely afterwards."

"And I'm sure he said he didn't know, because he doesn't."

While Damon was considering the pros and cons of calling Cassie, she asked the question that had been rolling around in her head the last thirty minutes. "Do you think those men at the storage unit were hired by someone at the FBI to kill us, or were they attached to some crime family my dad was investigating?"

"I don't know, Sophie," he said somberly. "I wish I'd had time to pull off their face masks or take a photo or look for ID. We might have been able to get my friend to identify them."

"I'm sure the police will do that."

"But we may not get the information quickly. It depends on how much access my friend can get."

The men's images flashed into her head. "The one closest to me had a tattoo on his neck. It had snakes and vines and a weird symbol in the middle." She paused. "It's weird, but I think I've seen it before; I don't know where. I could try to draw it if I had some paper. Would that be helpful?"

"Absolutely," he said with an approving nod. "Good job on noticing that."

"I wasn't trying to notice. It just drew my attention. It was creeping out from under his face mask, and I couldn't look away." She felt the tension return as she thought about those frightening moments. "I should have taken my gun out of my bag when we went into the unit. I don't know why I didn't think about that."

"Probably because you're not used to carrying a weapon. I should have made sure you had it ready to go. You would have had a better chance of surviving."

"I doubt that. You were more effective than any weapon I might have had in my shaky hand." Seeing Damon in action—so quick, so purposeful, so deadly—had definitely changed her impression of him. And while the fact that he could kill two men so fast and so easily probably should have scared her, right now it just made her feel safer.

"You did good back there, too, Sophie. You didn't panic."

"I didn't have time. I don't even think I was breathing."

"And yet you noticed a tattoo that might prove to be a valuable clue."

"I did do that," she said. "So, what about Cassie? Shall I call her? I know her number. I can feel her out about her dad's whereabouts without revealing anything."

He hesitated, then slowly nodded. "All right, but keep it short. You're calling to let her know the tragic news about your dad. That's it."

"She might have questions if she's heard I've disappeared."

"Say you needed time away, and the FBI was asking you a lot of questions that you didn't want to answer, so you went off on your own." He pulled the phone out of his pocket and handed it to her.

Even though it was her friend she was calling and her idea to make the call, she felt suddenly nervous. She wasn't used to lying to people, especially people she cared about. But she had to do it. She was in survival mode.

She tapped in the number and put the phone on speaker. The phone rang once, twice, three times...and then Cassie picked up.

"Hello?" Cassie said shortly, as if she didn't recognize the number and was anticipating the call to be from a telemarketer.

"It's Sophie."

"Oh my God, Sophie." Cassie's tone immediately changed. "I've been so worried about you. My dad told me your father was killed in a car crash, and you're missing, and everyone is looking for you. Where are you? Are you all right?"

"I'm okay. Well, I'm not okay, but I'm hanging in there. I didn't know if you'd heard the news about my father. I wanted to call you and tell you personally, but a lot has been happening really fast."

"My dad said everyone thinks you've been kidnapped by whoever killed your father. I've been really afraid for you, Sophie." Cassie's voice choked on the end of her sentence.

Cassie's emotion almost made Sophie lose it, but she couldn't do that.

"What happened?" Cassie continued.

Damon squeezed her leg, giving her a silent reminder not to reveal too much.

"I saw some men going into my apartment building," she said, deciding to stick close to the truth. "I got scared, so I ran away. I probably shouldn't be calling you, but I just had to hear a friendly voice. And I thought maybe your dad could help me. I don't have his number, and I wasn't sure if he was in Manhattan or Greenwich or somewhere else."

"Oh, no, I'm sorry. He's not in New York or in Greenwich. Dad just got on a plane to Paris. I'm meeting him there tomorrow for my birthday. It will be the first time I've celebrated my birthday with him in a few years, but he's not seeing anyone right now, and neither am I, so we decided we should do Paris together."

Cassie's plans with her dad for a birthday celebration almost broke her heart again. "That sounds lovely."

"But if you need us, Sophie, we will help you. Maybe you should come to Paris, too. I can wire you money, buy you a ticket, whatever you need."

She would love to run away to France, but that wasn't an option. "It's all right. I have someone who is helping me here. But maybe I'll call you tomorrow and I can talk to you and your dad together."

"Absolutely. We can call you as soon as we get together. Is this a good number?"

"I'll call you. I'm not sure if I'll have this phone tomorrow."

"What does that mean?"

"It's too long of a story to get into."

"Sophie, I'm really worried about you. Why don't you go to the FBI? They'll protect you."

"I can't trust anyone right now."

"You can't trust the people who've worked with your dad for twenty-something years?" Cassie asked doubtfully.

"That doesn't make sense."

"Nothing makes sense, but that's where I'm at."

Damon tapped her leg again. He wanted her to wrap it up.

"I'll speak to you tomorrow," she said. "Don't worry about me. And, please, don't tell anyone about this call."

"I won't. I promise. Stay safe."

"I'm going to try." She clicked the phone off and looked at Damon. "I didn't think it would be hard to hear her voice but it was. At any rate, the house in Greenwich should be empty. Should we go for it?"

"It sounds like our best bet. We need to get another phone. See if you can find a place on the map where we can buy one, before we drop this car off."

"Why do we have to get another phone now?"

"You just made a call to the daughter of a former FBI agent."

"Cassie wouldn't know how to trace a call."

"Not saying *she* would. Just see if you can find anything."

She used the phone map to search. "There's a shopping center a mile and a half from here."

He followed her directions, and several minutes later, he pulled into a busy retail center that boasted a supermarket, a drugstore, and a bunch of small shops, including one that sold phones.

"I'm going to need some cash," he said.

"We have plenty of that," she said cynically.

"Not that cash."

She dug into her bag and pulled out some bills.

"I'll be right back," he told her. "Keep the doors locked."

She did as he asked, but she felt like a sitting duck as soon as he left the car. She shifted down in her seat, hoping no one would notice her or the stolen vehicle she was sitting in. It seemed to take forever for Damon to complete the transaction, but finally he came out of the store. He took the wrapping off the new phone and dumped the box into the trash along with the old phone they'd been using.

When he got to the car, he motioned for her to get out. He grabbed the suitcase from the back and suggested they walk to the other end of the lot to call for a cab.

"So, we're not stealing another car?" she asked.

"I like the idea of using Jamie's car, if it's at the Rowlands' house. We'll get a cab to drop us a few blocks away."

"Okay. Good idea." She felt very conspicuous as they walked across the crowded lot. She felt terrified to be in the open, but she kept telling herself that no one was

paying any attention to them. Still, it felt like there were eyes everywhere. They'd tried to hide their tracks, but how successful had they been?

They stopped by the entrance to a clothing boutique, and Damon called for a cab. "Five minutes," he said, as he got off the phone.

"That feels like an eternity right now."

"We'll be fine," he assured her.

She wondered if he really thought that, or if he was just saying it for her benefit, but she decided to let it be, because she really wanted to believe they would be fine.

"That suitcase feels like it's drawing attention."

"Only because you know what's inside," he replied. But even so, he pushed the suitcase toward a garbage can so it wasn't as noticeable.

"I don't want to think about what's inside."

He nodded, his expression grim. "Neither do I."

Despite what she'd just said, she couldn't help thinking about the money, the fake IDs, the men with the guns who had almost taken their lives. Which brought up another question.

"How do you think they found us?" she asked. "How did they know we were at the storage unit?"

"The manager of the storage center could have called someone when we accessed the unit."

"Wouldn't that have taken longer for someone to get there if they were waiting for a call?"

"They could have been nearby."

"But if the manager was in on it, he could have opened the unit at any time. If they just wanted the cash..." She

stopped, seeing the truth in his eyes. "It wasn't just the cash. It's me."

"Or both of us, at this point. If they just wanted the case, they would have just shot us without asking for us to hand it over."

That didn't make her feel good at all, but she couldn't deny that it made sense. "If the manager didn't make the call, is there some way we're being tracked? We've been so careful. But first the cabin, then the storage unit..."

"We weren't that careful," he said with a shake of his head. "We were in New Haven, Sophie, close to where your dad went to school, going to a storage unit he'd had for years. Even if it wasn't in his name, it's tied to him. I told you I was concerned about that last night. At any rate, we need to get some place where we can think without looking over our shoulders every second."

She couldn't agree more. "There's a cab," she said, hoping her idea to use the Rowlands' house was as good as she thought, because certainly there was a link between her dad and the Rowlands, too.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THEY HAD the cab drop them off a few blocks from the Rowlands' house, and then they walked the rest of the way. Damon hadn't paid much attention to the house the one and only time he'd been there for Jamie's funeral, but it was an impressive two-story stone and clapboard colonial on a half-acre of land with a winding driveway and a three-car garage set back from the house. It matched the other large and stately homes in the upscale neighborhood, most of which were set apart from their neighbors by tall trees and thick brush.

"I like the privacy level," he muttered to Sophie, as they walked up the drive. He was a little surprised there were no electronic gates on the property, but since the Rowlands didn't appear to spend much time in the house anymore, maybe they'd gone lax on security.

They walked up the front steps and paused by the front door.

"Should we ring the bell?" Sophie asked nervously.

"Yes. Let's see if anyone answers. We know it won't be Cassie or Vincent."

Sophie pressed the bell and they waited. She hit it again when no one answered. As he looked around, he was relieved to see that the front door could not be seen from the street. There was a coded lock on the door, which he might be able to break, but he wasn't ready for that yet.

"Let's go around the back," he said. "We'll check the garage."

Unlike the front door, the door leading into the garage had just a simple lock on it, and he was able to lift the mechanism with another small tool that he carried with him.

"You're like Inspector Gadget," Sophie murmured.

"I'm not sure that's a compliment, but okay," he said dryly, pushing open the door.

They walked into the large garage. There were two cars parked inside. One was a silver BMW SUV and the other was a dark-red Chevy Camaro with a convertible top. His gut clenched at the sight of that car, memories of driving down to Quantico with Jamie behind the wheel, the top down, the music blaring, and the open road filled with possibilities in front of them. That day seemed like a lifetime ago.

"Jamie's car," Sophie said, walking over to the vehicle.

She put her hand on the hood, a yearning sadness in her expression, and he completely understood the feeling. Jamie had been a bright spot in both of their lives, and he doubted Jamie had even known how much of an impact he'd made on them.

"Jamie always liked driving a convertible," she continued, giving him a quiet smile. "When he got out of

the Army, right before he went to Virginia for FBI training, he came by my apartment, and we took a ride down the Jersey Shore. We hadn't seen each other in years, and I thought he'd changed in some ways—there were more shadows in his eyes, more lines on his face, even a little gray in his hair—but in other ways he was just the same Jamie—optimistic, carefree, happy. I thought being a soldier would make him more serious. I'm sure he saw some horrible things, but he never talked about them."

"He was good at compartmentalizing and letting bad memories go."

"You're good at that, too."

"It comes with the job we both did. It's hard to survive if you don't lock some things away."

"I'm starting to understand that. My emotions are all over the place," she said. "I can't let grief over my dad's death take hold. I can't let fear of whoever is trying to kill us paralyze me. I can't worry about where my dad got all that money, because I'll get lost in all the questions, and I won't be ready for whatever is coming next. My life is a spinning top right now, and if I stop spinning, I might crash and end up in an even worse place." She paused. "And then...there's you."

His pulse quickened as she turned to face him. "What about me?"

"You know," she said helplessly. "I really did think I was over you."

His mouth went dry at her words. He'd thought he was over her, too. Before he could utter a reply, the sound of voices in the yard sent him rushing across the garage. He

grabbed her hand and pulled her around to the other side of Jamie's car. They squatted down, hidden in the space between the car and the wall.

"The suitcase," she whispered.

He suddenly realized he'd left the suitcase where he'd been standing. He crept out of hiding to get it and then slid it behind the car next to her.

The voices were louder now. They sounded female.

"Who do you think is out there?" Sophie asked in a hushed voice.

He listened closely. The women were speaking Spanish—or maybe Portuguese. "Stay here. I'm going to take a look."

"Maybe you shouldn't. What if they see you? What if they come in?"

"I'll be right back. Just stay hidden."

He walked over to the side door of the garage. The top half was a window covered by a decorative fabric curtain. He lifted it and saw two women on the back deck. One was sweeping, and the other was shaking out a small rug. A moment later, they both went into the house, but the back door was still open.

If they were going to get in the house, this was their best chance. He walked quickly back to Sophie.

"Housecleaners," he said, squatting down next to her. "Two women. There could be more inside, or that could be it."

"Why didn't they answer the door?"

"Maybe they just arrived."

"Do you think they'll come into the garage?"

He looked around, doubting that cleaning the garage was part of their routine. "I don't think so. They left the door to the house open. I'm going to see if I can get inside."

"What?" she asked sharply. "You're going to sneak into the house while there are people there? Are you crazy?"

It was a risk, but one he felt he needed to take. They needed a place to stay, and this garage was not going to be comfortable for longer than a few hours. "It's a big house, and I doubt the crew has more than two or three people. I'll find somewhere to hide, and when they're gone, I'll let you in."

"What if they see you and call the police?"

"I can do it, Sophie."

She stared back at him with unhappy eyes. "Don't get caught. I—I need you, Damon. I know I acted like I didn't before, but I do."

Her heartfelt admission stirred him. She wasn't talking about needing him in a sexual way, but he couldn't stop himself from going there.

Impulsively, he leaned in and kissed her lips. Her sweet, hot taste brought back all the memories between them. He framed her face with his hands. He wanted to linger, explore the warm depths of her mouth, slide his tongue down her neck, feel her curves with his fingers, and lose himself in her, the way he'd done before.

The temperature in the garage went up by twenty degrees. It had always been like that between them—hot, passionate, reckless.

It took all his willpower to drag his mouth away from hers.

Her eyes glittered with desire, her cheeks awash with pink, a nice change from the paleness he'd seen earlier. Her blood was definitely pumping again, and so was his.

"I'll be back," he promised.

"Hurry," she murmured.

He wanted to believe it was because she wanted him to come back and keep the kiss going, but more likely it was because she was worried about being left alone. That wasn't going to happen. He was not leaving Sophie until she was safe.

But as he slipped out the side door, he couldn't help thinking it would be difficult to leave her even then.

Sophie sat down on the floor, leaning against the wall of the garage, her position protected from view by the side of Jamie's car. Her breath was coming fast and ragged, and while she told herself it was fear, it was also something else—it was Damon.

The last thing she'd *expected* him to do was kiss her. The last thing she'd *wanted* him to do was kiss her.

Actually, that wasn't true.

She'd been wanting him to kiss her since he'd first shown up at the cabin.

Closing her eyes, she leaned her head back against the wall, letting the feelings he'd stirred up run through her.

It had been just like before. One kiss—and then searing, unexpected, overwhelming need.

But this wasn't like before. They couldn't have a night and walk away from each other. They were tied together for God knew how long. They were fighting to stay alive. The last thing she should be thinking about was sleeping with Damon. *But wouldn't it be nice to forget about everything for just a little while?*

She'd told him she'd begun to understand the importance of compartmentalizing, and that was definitely true.

Why not lock everything else behind their own separate doors and just keep the one open with him? She was tired of being confused, sad, scared, angry...she just wanted to feel happy, positive emotions, release the tension, float away on a sensual cloud of goodness.

She knew she'd feel that way with Damon. It had been great between them before. They'd been in sync from the first kiss, the first touch. It was as if their bodies had been waiting for each other—made for each other. If ever a night had been close to perfect, it had been that one.

Until he'd left.

Opening her eyes, she reminded herself that they were better in the dark, in the shadows, and not in reality, not in the cold light of day, which was probably why Damon had abruptly ended the kiss he'd impulsively started.

She shouldn't be worrying about having sex with Damon; she should be concerned about whether he could hide out in the house until the cleaners left. The last thing they needed was for the police to arrive and arrest them for trespassing. If that happened, they'd get split up, and who knew what other charges they would face?

As her gaze moved to the suitcase her father had left her, she knew she should also be worried about the money. She'd been trying hard not to think about it.

She had no idea how much cash was inside, but she knew it was a lot. *Where had he gotten all that money?* She hoped he'd cleaned out his bank accounts and stashed the money in the case and hid it in the storage unit before getting in his car and ending up in northern New Jersey. But that seemed doubtful.

They'd always lived a comfortable life, but not a rich life, and money had gotten tighter after her mother had become sick.

She'd also drained some dollars out of her father's bank account with all her educational expenses. He'd always told her that he wanted to pay for college and grad school, that he didn't want her to graduate with debt, and he'd made that happen, but now she couldn't help wondering how he'd managed it. She had no idea what he got paid, but she didn't think it was an exorbitant amount. *So where had the money come from? Had he liquidated some investments that she knew nothing about?*

Her father's rambling voicemails ran through her head again...The first words he'd spoken to her had been, *"I'm sorry."* He'd said he'd made mistakes, that he'd ended up in a bad place, that he wanted to still fix things and maybe he could, but if he couldn't, he wanted her to run. He wanted her to live a happy life, to be safe. But he'd also told her to get the key, go to the storage unit. He'd wanted her to find the money. She was a hundred percent sure of that. He'd

wanted her to use it and the passports and start a new life—as if that would be easy to do.

She couldn't teach without using her real identity, her real degrees. She couldn't go on digs without credentials.

But she could live. And maybe that's all he'd been able to arrange for her.

She laid the suitcase down flat and opened the lid again, secretly praying she'd imagined the amount of money inside, but she hadn't.

Pulling out a stack of hundred dollar bills, she counted one hundred bills. And there were at least fifty stacks of bills, maybe more. Her father had probably stashed away half a million dollars in cash.

She examined the first passport again. He'd used her fake name from the lake—Rebecca Framingham. Her photo looked like it might have been taken recently. Her gaze narrowed as she tried to remember when he'd last taken her picture.

He'd brought out his camera at Christmas, and, yes, she was wearing the dark red sweater she'd bought for Christmas Eve. Had he been planning this six months ago? The driver's license also matched the passport, and there was a credit card with Rebecca's name on it, too.

The other trio of passport, driver's license and credit card belonged to a Charlotte Bennett with a different photo of her. In this picture, she'd had her hair pulled back in a ponytail and she'd been wearing a dark-green top. *Had he wanted to give her two options of how to look?*

As she studied the IDs, it occurred to her that the address was the same on both—an apartment in Brooklyn.

Did the address exist? What was there? Her dad wouldn't put just any address on the ID, would he?

Her mind grappled with the information. It was possible it was a random address or an empty lot. *But was it? And did it matter?*

The garage door opened.

She dropped the IDs and slammed the lid of the case down. Then she jumped to her feet, relieved to see Damon. She didn't know what she would have done if it had been someone else. She'd been so lost in thought, she'd lost track of where she was.

"The cleaners are gone," he said. "Looks like they just did a quick dust and a vacuum."

"And no one saw you?"

"No. I noticed that they'd damp-mopped the downstairs bathroom, so I figured they were done in there. I hid behind the shower curtain until I heard the door close. Then I turned the alarm off and came to find you."

"You're good at the secret agent stuff."

"It's my job. Let's go inside."

She leaned over and zipped the case back up as Damon came around to take it. "I started counting the money. It might be half a million or more."

He nodded, his mouth tight. "I figured."

She noticed he didn't comment on where or how her dad had gotten the money, but she suspected that conversation was coming. She grabbed her purse and followed him out of the garage.

The house was just as she remembered it: well-decorated with expensive furniture, nice art, and a very

formal feeling in the living room and dining room. At one time, she thought there had been more personal items, but those seemed to be gone.

She insisted on checking every room of the house, even though Damon told her he'd already done that. She had to be sure that they were alone before she could let herself breathe freely again, although after what had happened earlier in the day, that might be optimistic thinking.

The upstairs bedrooms that had once belonged to Cassie and Jamie tugged at her heart. Even though they were both fairly empty, there were remnants of the past: board games in Cassie's closet, baseball posters of the Mets on Jamie's walls. Damon seemed a little bothered by those posters, too.

She noticed that when he spoke about Jamie, his jaw turned to rock, his eyes darkened from blue to black, and his voice came out clipped and sharp. She doubted he thought he had any tells, but he did, and over the past several days, she'd watched him closely enough to notice. It was ironic that they'd both loved the same person, and it was that person who had brought them together, but only in death, not in life.

She felt better when they returned to the first floor where there were less memories, but that good feeling ended when they walked into Vincent's study. While most of the other rooms had been stripped of photographs, this room had not. Along one wall was an enormous built-in bookcase/entertainment center. In addition to a small television, there were a dozen or so framed photographs on the shelves.

They were mostly family pictures of Vincent and his wife as well as Cassie and Jamie. But there was one that caught her eye and made her heart squeeze tighter once more.

It was a photograph of her parents with the Rowlands. It had been taken at the lake, and judging by her parents' ages, they'd probably been in their early thirties. Vincent and her father stood near the wheel of a boat while the women were sitting on a bench in the background.

The men looked handsome and young. Her father wore a short-sleeved shirt hanging open over a pair of swim trunks, his light-brown hair blowing in the wind, his smile lighting up his face. Vincent didn't have a trace of gray in his black hair and no extra weight around the middle, which seemed to have crept on in later years.

She couldn't see her mom that well, but her blonde hair and blurry smile resembled the hazy image she carried in her head. Jamie's mom had on a big beach hat to cover her red hair and pale complexion.

"They had no idea," she murmured. "Of what was coming."

Damon came up next to her to look at the photo. "Good looking group."

"In this moment, they were happy," she said. "The Rowlands were still together. My mom wasn't sick. My dad was alive." She shook her head, giving Damon a helpless look. "I don't know when it will stop hurting."

"It hasn't been that long, and it probably won't ever completely go away, Sophie. But you already know that. You've been carrying around your mom's loss for a long time."

"True."

"You will find a way to go on, to smile again, to be happy."

"I want to believe that. It's certainly not easy right now."

"I know." He put his arm around her shoulders. "Maybe that picture should remind you of what I said earlier."

"About staying in the moment?"

"Yes."

"Easier to say than to do, but I will try. I just need to stop thinking that the good things will last, because they usually don't. Maybe if I were less optimistic, I wouldn't get hit so hard by disappointment."

"You're an optimist. That's not a bad thing."

"It is when you're constantly getting hit in the face with reality. I'm like a cartoon character, who keeps taking a pie in the face because she can't seem to figure out when to duck."

He smiled. "You have been pretty good at ducking. And there's no way you could have predicted all this was going to happen."

"Is that true?" she challenged. "I'm starting to feel like I missed some big signs, especially where my father is concerned." She stepped away from Damon and returned the photo to the shelf. "However, I don't want to talk about him right now. I know we have to do that eventually, but I'm not ready."

"Then why don't we go into the kitchen and see what's in the pantry?"

"I doubt there's much food here. I don't know when anyone was here last. It could have been months."

"Maybe there are some non-perishable items we can turn into a meal."

"We should have gotten food when we left the car in that lot."

"That would have been a good idea. I was more concerned with putting some distance between us and the stolen car."

"Me, too." She put a hand on his arm as he started to turn away. "Are we staying here, Damon? I thought we were going to take one of the cars and go."

"That was my original thought, but I think we should stay here tonight. Cassie and Vincent are in Europe. Cassie's mom lives in another state. The housecleaners have already been here. I think we're good for a while."

"Someone else could come by or see us—a neighbor, a delivery person."

"Well, I don't plan on answering the door, and I think if we stay in the back of the house and don't turn on the lights when it gets dark, no one will know we're here. Luckily, the Rowlands enjoy having privacy from their neighbors."

He made a good argument, and she wasn't really in the mood to be out on the open road again where anyone could follow them or stop them. "It would be nice to stay here. It's comfortable."

"And cool," he said with a smile. "Even without the air conditioning on."

She couldn't help but grin at that remark. "You and heat—it's a love-hate relationship, isn't it?"

"More like a hate-hate relationship. Everything bad in my life has happened during a heat wave, and this weekend has been no exception."

"What kind of bad things?" she asked curiously.

"It's a long story."

"Give me the short version. You owe me. I have to listen to you complain about the heat every single day."

He tipped his head. "I will try to do better."

"Just give me an example."

He let out a sigh. "Let's see. My dad left my mom on one of the hottest nights of the year. We were living by the beach, but there was no sea breeze and no air conditioning to battle the surprising ninety-degree-plus heat. It was sweltering. My parents started yelling. It was becoming a nightly fight, so I went on the deck and tried not to hear them, but all the windows were open, and I heard every word—every hateful, horrible word. I was happy when he left, because it was quiet again."

She was surprised by his words, by the image he'd evoked of himself as a young, scared boy. Damon rarely let her see any side of himself that wasn't strong and powerful. "That's awful," she said quietly.

"It wasn't great."

"I'm guessing there were more bad, hot nights after that."

"Between them—yes."

"And with other people?" she prodded.

"A few more—some while I was in Afghanistan—which often felt like hell on earth—and the last when Jamie died."

He cleared his throat. "And that's all I'm going to say about that for now. Let's go find some food."

"Okay." With Damon and personal revelations, she felt like it was one step forward, two steps back, and she was learning when to retreat.

While Damon went into the walk-in pantry, she opened the refrigerator. There was a six-pack of soda there, probably left over from Cassie's last visit. She had had a diet cola habit since she was a teenager. There were condiments: mayo, ketchup, mustard, pickle relish, and salad dressing, but nothing else of note.

She grabbed two sodas and pulled them out as Damon came out of the pantry with an assortment of items, including soup, rice, canned vegetables, and some potato chips.

"Score," she said, taking the chip bag out of his hand. "Want a soda?"

"Sure. I'll get it in a second. We're a little short on fruits and vegetables, but we won't starve," he said.

"It all looks good to me." She opened the bag of chips and grabbed a couple, happy with the salty flavor. Then she popped open her soda while Damon went back into the pantry to forage for more ingredients. "The soup is probably fine," she said.

He came out with olive oil and crackers.

"What are you going to do with those?" she asked.

"I haven't decided yet, but it's going to be good."

"And here I thought I was the optimistic one. It looks like olive oil and crackers to me."

He smiled. "You have a better imagination than that."

His easy demeanor was starting to take the edge off, but she wondered how he'd gotten to that state so fast. It was taking her a lot longer to decompress.

"I feel like this day is surreal," she said. "It's weird that it almost feels normal now, when hours ago—"

He raised his hand, cutting her off. "No thinking about that. Lock it back in its compartment. Hours ago was hours ago."

"You killed two people and stole a car. I feel like we're Bonnie and Clyde."

"Only, we're the good guys."

"Are we?"

"Yes." He put down the ingredients and grabbed her by the arms. "Those men were going to kill us, Sophie, and if we hadn't stolen that car, the police would have arrested us. We'd be sitting ducks in a jail cell, with no opportunity to figure out who killed your father and who's trying to kill us."

"Maybe we'd be safer in a jail cell."

"Not for a second. We're dealing with organized crime, and probably more than one person working on the inside at the FBI, NYPD, DEA, and who knows where else? We'd never be safe in jail. I'm sorry I had to kill anyone. But I'm not sorry that we're the ones who are still alive."

"Well, I'm not sorry about that, either. I just never saw someone die before. It was so fast. It didn't seem real, but I know it was." She paused, licking her lips, as she gazed into his eyes. "Damon..."

"What?"

"Are we going to make it out of this? Are we going to be okay?" It was silly to ask him for a reassurance that he couldn't give her, but she needed him to say it.

"I'm sure we will," he said confidently. "But...it might get worse before it gets better, Sophie."

"Can it get any worse?"

"That's not a question you want to ask."

A shiver ran down her spine. He was right. She shouldn't have asked it, because the possibilities sent another wave of fear through her.

"I promise I will do everything I can to protect you," he added.

She looked into his deep-blue eyes and saw nothing but truth and purpose. "I know you will." She drew in a deep breath, her body starting to shiver for another reason. Damon must have sensed a mood change, because his gaze darkened, and his fingers tightened on her arms. Then he let go, and stepped back. "I'm going to see what I can make us to eat. If you want to take a shower or lie down..."

"You want to get rid of me?"

"I want to focus, and it's difficult to do that when you're close."

"You're the one who started things up again in the garage." She licked her lips, feeling the reckless feeling come roaring back. "Maybe we should eat later..."

"No, and that was a mistake," he said with a definitive shake of his head.

"It didn't feel like a mistake."

"Well, it was. I shouldn't have done that. I'm sorry."

"I'm not. I've been wondering if it would feel the same now as it did before."

She could see him fighting the desire to ask her if she'd gotten the answer to that question.

"We should not go down this road. Go take a shower, Sophie. It will be safer."

She found herself smiling at the irony of his words. "Safer? I can't imagine anything we do could make our lives any less safe than they are right now."

"Let's not find out."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SOMETHING HAD HAPPENED, Bree thought, as she responded to an all-hands-on-deck call to the large twenty-third floor conference room at the FBI field office just before two. It was standing room only, at least thirty people crowding into the room. She squeezed past another agent to see Peter Hunt and Karen Leigh at the front of the room. Both wore serious expressions and looked like they were about to deliver some very bad news.

She drew in a nervous breath. She hadn't heard from Damon all day, despite checking the forum several times. She hoped he was still all right.

"We have new information," Peter said heavily. "This morning in New Haven, Connecticut, a storage unit was robbed, and two men were killed. If you direct your attention to the screen..." He motioned to the large monitor behind him.

She saw two cars outside of an open storage unit door. There was a sudden burst of fire from inside the unit and out of their range of vision. But at the edge of the frame,

she could see someone on the ground. Then a man and a woman came running out of the unit.

Her heart thudded against her chest.

Damon!

He threw a silver suitcase into the back of a vehicle. A blonde woman jumped into the passenger seat, and they sped out of the lot.

Peter stopped the footage there. "As most of you know, that is Special Agent Damon Wolfe and Sophie Parker, Alan Parker's daughter. There were two deceased males found at the scene."

Peter hit a button on the computer to replace the storage unit security feed on the monitor with photographs of the deceased.

"The man on the left," Peter said, "has been identified as thirty-two-year-old Carl Rucker from Queens. Rucker has a long record of gang violence and armed robbery. He got out of prison eight months ago, and since then he's been working as an auto mechanic in a garage operated by the Venturi family. The second man's prints are not in the system. He had no identification and we were not able to get facial recognition. As you will note, he has a distinctive tattoo on his neck that our analysts are researching. Both men were wearing ski masks and weapons were found at the scene."

The fact that Damon had taken both men out and kept Sophie Parker safe was impressive. But she couldn't help wondering where Damon and Sophie were now and how much more trouble they were in.

"Agent Wolfe and Sophie Parker are in the wind," Alan continued. "Their vehicle was found abandoned in a parking lot several miles away. We have no other information on their current whereabouts." He paused. "This is a department-wide endeavor. As you can imagine, having an agent involved in a double homicide, regardless of the circumstances, is not a position we care to be in. We appreciate those of you in other divisions offering to help with this investigation, and we're going to take you up on it. Karen will be speaking to each of you as to how you can help."

Peter stepped back, and Karen came forward, giving him a brief nod of thanks as she took his place at the front of the room.

Karen's position at the Bureau had definitely gone up a notch since Alan had died. Before then, Karen had been seen as Alan's protégée, his rising star, but now she was running his entire division.

Karen cleared her throat. "Before I get to your assignments, I want to update you on another aspect of our investigation into the Venturi crime family and their possible involvement in the events of the last several days." Karen put a new photo up on the screen—*Wyatt!*

Bree was surprised to see Wyatt's official FBI picture. *What was Karen thinking?* If he hadn't been made before, he was now. It didn't make sense for Karen to out Wyatt in a group that included not just Alan's division but two other divisions as well, but then Karen might now know there was a possible traitor among them. Still, it was a huge risk for her to take.

"This is Special Agent Wyatt Tanner," Karen said. "Agent Parker brought Agent Tanner into the Venturi investigation ten months ago. He's been working undercover in construction for the Venturis' real-estate development firm. A CI has informed us that Agent Tanner's cover is blown and that there's a hit out on his life. He missed his last meet, and he is not answering emergency protocols." Karen paused, her cool demeanor cracking just a little. "We need to find Agent Tanner, as well as Agent Wolfe and Sophie Parker, as soon as possible. If any of you have any knowledge of their whereabouts, please come and talk to me or Peter immediately. It could be the difference between life and death. We cannot have one more person going out on his or her own. The stakes are too high. We are a team, and we will be better if we work together."

Bree felt as if Karen was looking directly at her as she finished her statement.

She didn't flinch or waver under Karen's pointed gaze. There was no way she was giving Damon or Wyatt up, and she had no intention of releasing their secret communication protocol, either. Right now, it was the only lifeline Damon and Wyatt had. And she didn't understand why Karen had told the group that Wyatt wasn't responding to emergency protocols when Wyatt had had a different story.

Before he had fallen asleep on her couch the night before, he'd told her that he'd initiated the protocols as soon as he'd escaped from his attacker on Monday, which was two days before Alan died. Had Alan ignored Wyatt's

urgent need for a meet? Or had Karen or someone else intercepted the message?

She'd wanted to press Wyatt for more information, but he'd been exhausted. So, she'd given him a meal as well as a blanket and a pillow for her couch and told him to get some rest. When she'd gotten up for work a little past seven, he'd been gone, and she hadn't heard from him since. She had left him a burner phone to use, and he'd taken it with him, but he hadn't answered her call or text. She really hoped he was all right.

"What about the storage unit?" Seth Hanford asked. Seth was another agent in Karen and Alan's division, and he seemed to be jockeying a bit with Karen for more power.

Bree made a mental note to look into his background a bit more.

"Who rented the unit?" Seth asked. "Do we know what Agent Wolfe and Ms. Parker were doing there? And does anyone know what was in the case Wolfe was carrying?"

Peter Hunt stepped forward to take the questions. "The unit was rented by Justin Lawrence fifteen years ago. It now appears that Lawrence was another alias for Alan Parker. We have no idea what was in the suitcase, but it was obviously important enough for Agent Wolfe and Sophie Parker to go after it."

It suddenly all made sense. Alan had left something in the unit for his daughter...or for Damon—something that was in that silver suitcase.

But what didn't make sense was why Alan had rented the unit under an alias fifteen years ago, and no one had known about it, including his good friend Peter Hunt.

Unless Hunt had known about it.

Had Peter staked out the storage center? Had he sent someone to wait for Damon and Sophie to show up? Had he done the same thing at the cabin? Was Peter the one relaying information to the Venturis?

"That's it for now," Peter said. "Let's get back to work."

Since she was closest to the door, she was one of the first ones out of the conference room, but she'd barely taken three steps down the hallway when Peter Hunt called her name.

"Agent Adams," he said.

"Yes?" she asked, turning back to face him.

"I understand you are friends with Agents Wolfe and Tanner."

"We were at Quantico together."

"And you were all recruited by Alan for this office."

"Yes. But, as you know, I didn't work for him."

"I am aware of that." His sharp gaze raked her face. "Are you in contact with Damon or Wyatt?"

"No," she said, keeping her expression neutral. "I wish I was. I'm extremely concerned for them, especially in light of this new information."

"If you hear from them, you need to let me know."

"Of course. But there is something I'm curious about."

"Walk with me to the elevator," he said. "I have a meeting outside the office."

"All right."

Once inside in the elevator, Peter pushed the button for the lobby level. But before they'd gone two floors, he hit the stop button and the elevator came to a lurching stop.

She stumbled and had to brace her hand against the wall. "Why did you do that?" she asked, suddenly alarmed by the isolation and the possibility that Peter Hunt could be the FBI mole.

"Because you want to ask me something that I don't think anyone else needs to hear," he said, steel in his hard, dark eyes.

She didn't know Agent Hunt. He was way above her pay grade, but he had a good reputation for being extremely perceptive and very dedicated to the job. Now, he seemed almost...menacing. But she wasn't going to let him intimidate her. Alan Parker had trained her to be tough, and she'd only gotten tougher since she'd left Quantico.

"So, ask," he ordered.

"You were friends with Alan Parker for more than twenty years, but you didn't know about his cabin in the Adirondacks or the storage unit in New Haven. That seems odd."

"Does it? Alan went to great lengths to hide his interest in those properties."

"But the lake—Sophie and her dad went there with the Rowlands. How did you not know that? Even I knew that."

"You knew about the lake house?" he asked quickly. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"I didn't know there was a house, but I knew the Rowlands held a wake at the lake for their son Jamie a few years back and that Sophie attended it."

A gleam came into his eyes. "That must have been how Agent Wolfe knew where to find her. Yet, he didn't say anything when I spoke to him."

She ignored the comment about Damon. "Did you speak to Vincent Rowland? I would assume he would have been one of the first people you would contact, since he and Alan were friends. Surely, he would have told you about the house."

"I have not been able to connect with Vincent. And while I knew Alan and Vincent sometimes vacationed together, I wasn't aware there was a particular place they went. I wasn't a part of that. I certainly didn't know Alan had bought a cabin there under an assumed name."

She might be able to believe that, but pleading ignorance about one location was one thing—two locations felt suspect. "The storage unit in New Haven is close to Yale, the school you and Alan attended. You didn't know about that, either?" she challenged.

She was taking a huge risk with her career right now, speaking so impulsively and boldly to a man who could get her fired, but if Hunt was the mole, then she needed to shake him up enough to take action, to possibly make a mistake. That might be their only chance to catch him.

"Why don't you say what you want to say, Agent Adams?" he suggested.

"I believe someone at the FBI might be leaking information to the Venturis. Wherever Damon and Sophie go, someone else seems to show up, and not too far behind."

"And you believe that someone is me?"

She stared back at him. "I hope not. I'm also disturbed that Agent Leigh put Agent Tanner's picture up on the

monitor. If there's a leak at the Bureau, she just put Wyatt in more danger."

"Agent Tanner's cover has been blown. Given his work relationship to Alan, and the fact that he's been unreachable since before Alan's death, it's possible he's no longer alive."

She sucked in a breath at his chilling words. She knew Wyatt was alive, but she needed to pretend she didn't. "How can you say that so coldly? He's one of us."

"And we're doing our best to find him. If you have proof there's a leak, by all means bring it to me. But I've got three people missing—all of them extremely important—and my first priority is finding them." He paused, as he pushed the start button. "You've got more guts than brains, Agent Adams. I know now why Alan recruited you. He liked that combination. He liked agents who tested the boundaries, but I do not. I like agents who follow the rules, because those rules will keep all of us alive and build cases that will not get thrown out of court. You might not be wrong about a leak, but unless you have a name and some evidence to back it up, it's just a theory, and I don't deal in theories; I don't have time."

When they reached the ground floor, Peter exited the elevator and strode toward the exterior doors. She thought about going back upstairs to her desk, but she couldn't help wondering where Peter was headed. He'd said he had a meeting outside the office. *With who? About what?*

Using more of her guts than her brain, she impulsively headed out the door after him. It might be a stupid move, but two people she cared about were in trouble, and she

wasn't going to stand by and do nothing. She just hoped she wouldn't make things worse.

"I'm surprised, Damon." Sophie set her fork next to her empty plate and rested her arms on the kitchen table. She felt so much better now. She'd showered, washed her hair and had found black leggings and a T-shirt in Cassie's old bedroom. She'd been extremely happy to shed the clothes she'd put on before going to work on Wednesday, before her entire life had gone to hell. It was difficult to believe that was only three days ago.

Damon finished off the last spoonful of rice. "Is there really anything left to be surprised about?" he asked dryly.

"Yes. You can cook. And you're not just average—you're good."

"After everything that has happened the past few days, that made the shock meter?"

"It did. You took a box of rice, olive oil, stewed tomatoes, canned peas and made a delicious meal. Not to mention the chicken noodle soup appetizer with the shredded crackers on top. I am impressed."

"I made do with what we had. It wasn't a big deal."

"Where did you learn to cook? Your parents?"

"Definitely not from my parents. I had a nanny who was from El Salvador. She also cooked for the family, and she could make magic out of anything. Not that she had to make magic in my parents' pantry, because they truly had every ingredient imaginable, but she used to tell me stories

about growing her own food and feeding her kids on next to nothing. Sometimes, while she was making dinner, she'd give me three ingredients and tell me I had to come up with something."

"That sounds fun."

"It was fun, until my mother came in and looked at my tomato and avocado toast and yelled at the nanny for not making me a real meal."

"Tomato and avocado toast sounds amazing, especially with a little olive oil on it."

"And black pepper. I was always allowed to use salt and pepper for seasoning my three ingredients."

She smiled at the proud gleam in his eyes. "You do like to win, don't you?"

"Can't deny that."

"I'm sorry to say that your mom does not sound that great."

"She was hard on the help," he conceded. "Not really that hard on me. She didn't want to risk me telling some judge I'd rather live with my father, so I usually got whatever I wanted, unless she was in some mood and wanted to pretend she was a disciplinarian. It didn't really matter. Whatever punishment she threw out was forgotten five minutes later."

"Did you play that for all it was worth?"

"Sometimes, especially when I got older, when I realized the power I had."

"I have a hunch you could have been a lot worse if you'd wanted to be. But you have a strong sense of what is right and what is wrong. I wonder where you got that from."

"I can't imagine. Neither one of my parents has ever met a rule they thought applied to them. They were always the exception."

"But not you. You always followed the rules."

"I wouldn't say always, but growing up the way I did, I liked structure. It felt good to know what the boundaries were. That's why I liked the military. It was straightforward. No games. No manipulation of emotions. I knew what my job was, and I did it."

"The FBI has a lot of rules, too."

"Not as many as the military, but, yes, it does."

She tilted her head as she studied him. "I get why you would like structure because your childhood was so unpredictable, but I have to say, Damon, that you've done nothing but break the rules since you heard my father was dead. Why didn't you tell anyone that you thought I might be at the lake? Why did you come alone? Really?"

"I already told you; I was worried about you. I didn't know if you were there. It was a long drive to find out."

"But you still could have told Karen or Peter where you were going, even if you thought it was a wild-goose chase. It would have made sense to let them know."

"I had met with my undercover friend right before I found out about your father, about the search for you. He'd put some doubts into my head as to who I could trust. I don't know Peter beyond the one short conversation I had with him before I left."

"What was that about?"

"He asked me if I knew you or your friends. I said I didn't. He had some questions about what Alan had

brought me in to do, but I couldn't give him much information on that, either."

"Why did you say you didn't know me?"

"You know why. You never told anyone about that night, and neither did I. It was between us—that's it."

She nodded, appreciating his words. "Yes, it was just between us."

"I've had very little contact with Karen since I arrived and barely know the team," he added. "They weren't exactly inviting me into the inner circle. I decided I'd check out the lake and if you were there, I'd figure out the rest later."

"Well, I'm glad you came to find me. I might not have made it out of the cabin alive. It's weird to think I wouldn't have known about the suitcase of cash or the fake passports or anything if I'd died there." She sighed. "Maybe in some ways that would have been better."

"Not for a second. You have a lot of life left to live, Sophie. A lot of archaeological digging to be done, discoveries to be made."

"My job has really been my whole life the last few years," she admitted. "Now I don't know when I'll get back to it or if I ever will."

"You will."

"I hope so." She paused. "When I was upstairs changing, I looked around a bit more, and I did notice that Jamie had left some clothes in his closet, if you feel like wearing something new. It felt good to me to get out of the clothes I've been living in."

"That's great news. I would love to change."

"Go ahead. I'll clean up."

He nodded but then made no move to get to his feet. "Sophie, we need to talk about the money."

Her gaze strayed to the suitcase on the floor. "I know. My dad must have drained his bank accounts. Or maybe he borrowed some money. Or he sold something and was paid in cash."

Damon's gaze settled on her face. "Is that really what you think?" he asked quietly.

"My dad is dead; he can't defend himself. I have to defend him."

"So, that's not really what you think."

"No, it's not what I think," she said in annoyance. "It looks like someone paid him off or he stole the money. I don't want to believe that either of those things could have happened, but I keep remembering how he started out his voicemail to me with an apology, only he never said how he'd gotten into trouble or what exactly he'd done. Why didn't he just say? Obviously, he was sending me to get the money. Why didn't he just tell me what he'd done?"

"Perhaps he couldn't bring himself to say the words. I think the last thing Alan wanted to do was disappoint you."

"I never thought that could happen. We had our fights as daughters and fathers do, but they were petty, small arguments about nothing. In my heart, I believed my father was the best person in the world. I loved him so much, Damon. He was my rock. He held me when my mom died. He was in the front row at every graduation. He took me to get ice cream when I got my heart broken. He even let me dress him up as a pumpkin on the first Halloween after my

mom died, because I was so sad. Does a bad person do that kind of stuff?"

Damon didn't answer, which was good, because she didn't want him to say anything yet. She had to get her thoughts out.

"I was proud of my dad," she continued. "He put terrible people in jail. He made the world safer. I don't want him to turn into someone else now that he's gone. I want to keep believing in the man who taught me how to ride a bike and encouraged me to go for everything I wanted." She took an emotional breath. "But I'm not stupid, Damon. I know my father was not making that kind of money as an agent. I just want there to be a good reason behind him having that money. Like maybe he stole it from a criminal. Or maybe he was going to use it for leverage or evidence or something..."

"It's possible," Damon said slowly.

She gave him a grateful smile. "Thanks for saying that, even though you don't believe it. Your logical brain has already come up with a different equation."

"I respected him, too, Sophie, and I would like to prove his innocence. I don't know if that will be possible, but we don't have the whole story yet. Until we do, I'm keeping an open mind." He pushed back his chair. "I'm going to take a shower."

"Okay. Don't take too long," she said impulsively. "I kind of like having you nearby."

"I'll be back before you know it, but in the meantime." He tipped his head to the gun he'd placed on the counter. "Keep that close. And don't open the door, no matter what."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

BREE FOLLOWED Peter Hunt to a bar in Midtown about a mile away from the office. Peter hadn't seemed to notice her on his tail, walking at a brisk pace and making several calls along the way. He only glanced once over his shoulder at an intersection, but she was able to duck out of sight.

He stopped in front of a bar called the Golden Goose to finish whatever conversation he was having. By his body language, he appeared to be angry. Apparently, she wasn't the only one pissing him off these days.

As he returned his phone back to the pocket of his gray slacks, a black Escalade double-parked in front of the restaurant.

She took out her own phone, pretending to be listening to something as she hid in the doorway of an office building. Peter moved toward the curb as the car door opened.

A skinny man with dark hair and glasses, dressed in an expensive suit and tie, got out of the Escalade. On impulse, she turned on her camera and snapped a photo. She didn't

recognize him, but he certainly exited the vehicle like a man expecting attention.

After him, Senator Raleigh stepped out of the car. Another meeting with the senator? Was this about Alan or something unrelated? Raleigh and Hunt had gone to Yale together; maybe the other man had as well.

She snapped a shot of the three men shaking hands. Then they walked into the bar. Glancing at her watch, she noted the time—three forty-five. A little early for happy hour, but the bar would probably be quiet before the after-work crowd came in.

Through the front windows, she saw them sit down at a table where a fourth man was already seated. She slipped out of her hiding place and moved a little closer, discreetly snapping a few shots of the fourth man as she got closer. All she could really see was the back of his head and his stark-white hair.

Then she moved down the street and crossed at the corner, spending another few minutes pretending to peruse some magazines at a newsstand with a good view of the bar. She stayed there for about fifteen minutes, not sure how long she wanted to keep her stakeout going. What might serve her better was identifying who else Peter and the senator were having drinks with.

She turned in the opposite direction and walked to her apartment, which was a mile and a half in the opposite direction.

She hoped Wyatt would be there. She had information for him and also some questions. She hadn't pressed him too hard the night before, but that was going to change. It

probably wouldn't be easy to get him to talk. Not only was he distrustful and skittish right now—for good reason—out of the guys in their Quantico group, Wyatt was the most aloof, the most elusive, the one no one really knew, not even after a long conversation. Maybe that's why he was a good undercover agent. He gave nothing away.

Unfortunately, he wouldn't be back undercover any time soon, at least not in this city.

She entered her apartment building, keeping a close eye on her surroundings. She had a gun in her bag and knew how to defend herself, but she was hoping trouble had not found its way to her door. She walked up the stairs to her second-story apartment and knocked three times before using her key.

She didn't want Wyatt to shoot her before she could identify herself. But when she entered the room, she knew he had not come back. The apartment was exactly as she'd left it. She checked the bedroom and bathroom just to make sure he wasn't there and that there weren't any signs of a break-in.

As she moved over to her kitchen window, she glanced down at the alley between her building and the one next to it. She saw someone moving through the shadows. *Was it Wyatt—or someone else?*

Grabbing her bag, she pulled out her gun. If someone had tracked Wyatt to her place, or if Peter Hunt had decided her questions needed to be silenced, she better be ready.

While Damon was showering, Sophie took their dishes to the sink. She washed and dried everything by hand, wanting to leave the kitchen as spotless as they'd found it.

When that was done, she got a notepad and a pencil out of the kitchen drawer and sat down at the table.

She'd told Damon she thought she could draw the tattoo she'd seen on the gunman, and she wanted to give it a shot. But thinking about the tattoo also made her remember how close she'd come to losing her life. She shivered, the terror she'd felt still very close to the surface. She was trying to compartmentalize, but the experiences she'd been through over the past few days were beyond anything she'd ever had to deal with before.

But this was the kind of thing that Damon dealt with all the time—the kind of situation her father had dealt with, too.

As she thought about that, an older memory came into her head—her mom and dad arguing over something late one night. It had been unusual, because unlike Damon's parents, her parents had rarely raised their voices over anything. But that evening, her mom had been upset, worried, wanting to know why her father had to have such a dangerous job, why he couldn't quit after the years of service he'd already put in, why he had to be the one to keep putting his life on the line.

She'd never really thought of her dad as having a dangerous job. He was FBI, but he wore a suit when he went to work. He didn't come home with bruises and gunshot wounds. He'd never been almost killed—at least,

she didn't think he had. But at this point, she wasn't sure about much of anything.

She'd thought she could read people. She'd thought she was a good judge of character, but the person she'd been closest to was quickly becoming a stranger, making her question everything about her life, her relationships.

But those questions weren't going to be answered until they found out who had killed her father and who was after her.

She picked up her pencil, closed her eyes and tried to remember what she'd seen.

The image started to come to life...

Opening her eyes, she sketched one snake and then another, trying to intertwine them in the way she remembered, but it wasn't quite right.

She ripped off the page and went to the next one. After several more attempts, she felt she had the snakes right. Then she tried to duplicate the vine that had wound around them. There had been tiny leaves on that vine. She felt as if there was a pattern to the leaves.

Were they spiked at the ends? She thought so. And they were bunched in twos, growing into a cluster as they wound up and down and around the middle.

Excitement ran through her as the picture developed. Now that she had the snakes, the vines and the leaves, she took a stab at the pattern in the middle. It had had six points, a circle inside, then a triangle and in the center of the triangle was an eye—a red eye.

The eye that she'd felt was looking at her.

A chill coursed through her, and it wasn't just because of the eye she'd drawn. It was because the symbol, the snakes and the vine reminded her of something.

She felt sure she'd seen the design somewhere before, but where?

She'd studied art and history and anthropology where symbols played important roles in many cultures. She could have seen this particular image anywhere. She might not have seen it as a tattoo but rather in a picture or on a piece of art.

Maybe she could find it on the Internet now that she'd put it down on paper. She looked around for the phone, but Damon had taken it with him. She'd have to wait until he was done changing, unless she could find another computer in the house.

Setting the drawing aside, she walked down the hall and into Vincent's study. There was no computer on the desk. She looked through the drawers and found nothing beyond envelopes, paper clips, pens, and some more notepads. She was about to close the last drawer when a black-and-white photograph caught her eye. She pulled it out. It was actually a photocopy of a picture of six people. They stood in front of a sign that said Quantico. Jamie was in the middle. Damon was next to him. She didn't recognize the other two men or the two women, but she was guessing this was the group of friends who used the baseball forum.

Someone, probably Jamie, had written a note across the bottom: *The next superheroes.*

She smiled. Jamie had always wanted to be a superhero—first the Army, then the FBI. Was that what drove Damon,

too, beyond his appreciation for structure?

Maybe it was more about control than structure. Damon had been used as a pawn between his parents. They'd forgotten that they had a child who needed both of them. It had been more about winning than parenting. And Damon had not had the power to change that.

He'd said it was patriotism and 9/11 that made him join the Army, and she didn't doubt that at all, but she suspected it was also about wanting to be his own man, to do something important with his life, to make a difference—perhaps even be a superhero.

He'd been a superhero today at the storage unit. He'd taken down two gunmen with two shots fired in rapid succession. He'd been so quick, only one man had been able to get off an errant shot that fortunately hadn't hit her. She still didn't quite know how he'd done it.

Jamie would have been proud of his friend, she thought, as she looked back at Jamie's smiling face in the photo. He'd had a military haircut at the time the picture had been taken, and there was purposeful determination in his expression. The two women were quite attractive, one with very dark hair and an exotic beauty, the other more girl-next-door with lighter brown hair and light eyes. The other men were handsome, both dark-haired, rugged in appearance. They definitely looked like they were ready to take on the world. Especially Damon—his dark-brown hair and blue eyes could shine, even in a black and white copy of a photo.

A step brought her head up, and she was relieved to see Damon come through the doorway.

"It's you," she said with relief. He'd changed into a pair of clean jeans and a light-blue button-down shirt that made his eyes look even bluer. His hair was still damp, and he must have found a razor somewhere as his cheeks were smooth again, so smooth she wanted to run her fingers along his jawline. "You took your sweet time."

"What are you doing in here?"

"I was looking for a computer."

"To do what? We can't use anything here in the house. Too risky."

"Really? Would Vincent or Cassie know someone was in here using the computer? Anyway, it doesn't matter, because I couldn't find one, but I did find this." She handed him the photo. "Superheroes, huh?"

"That's what Jamie called us. This photo was taken a few days before Jamie died." He sighed at the end of his statement. "Tragic."

"I never really understood what happened. No one would tell me."

"The mission we were on was classified."

"But I thought you were training. Aren't all those missions fake?"

"Not this one. All I can tell you is that it was a horrific accident. But what Jamie did that day made a difference. It changed something important, and I try to hang on to that. Otherwise, it eats away at me."

She could see the pain in his expression. "Do you hold yourself responsible in some way?"

"I think we were all responsible in some way—even Jamie. If he were alive, he'd probably be the first to say

that. You should put this back where you got it."

"Before I do—want to tell me who you've been talking to in the forum? Can we use names yet?"

He hesitated, then nodded. "I think we're there. This is Bree Adams. She's my inside-the-FBI contact." He pointed to the woman in the middle with the light-brown hair and light eyes. "And this is Wyatt Tanner, the undercover agent who was working with your dad." He identified the man on the far right with the dark hair and unsmiling eyes.

"And the others?"

"Parisa and Diego. They're both currently working out of the country; that's why they haven't responded."

"Thanks. It helps to put faces to names. I remember seeing some of these people at the funeral, but no one from Quantico came to the wake but you."

"No. They felt the wake was for closer friends. Jamie and I had a longer history together, so, of course, I went. Bree was close to Jamie but only for a short time. They had a fling during training. She was torn-up after he died, but she wasn't sure she'd be welcome at the wake, so she stayed away."

"He never mentioned her to me." She paused. "Did you have a fling at the academy?" she asked curiously.

"No, I don't mix business and pleasure. The people in this picture are my friends. That's it. Keeps life simple."

She smiled at his words, then took the paper from his hand and returned it to the desk. "While you were showering," she said, changing the subject. "I drew what I think is the tattoo. I feel like the design is familiar. I want to go on the Internet and see if I can find the image. That's

why I was looking for a computer since you can't seem to leave your phone unattended."

"Sorry. I didn't deliberately keep it from you. It was just in my pocket." He handed it to her and then followed her back to the kitchen.

She gave him the drawing, and he perused it for a long moment.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"That I wish I'd noticed even a tenth of what you did. This is good, Sophie. You're an artist. You see not just the big picture but also the details."

"I wouldn't say I'm an artist, but I do like to sketch. I have a feeling this design means something, and if we find out what it means, we might be able to close in on who this person was." She paused. "Although, maybe the police already know. Can Bree find out what the police report says?"

"I just sent a message to the forum with that very question. Hopefully, we'll learn what the police know very soon."

The mention of the police put her nerves back on edge. "You shot those men in self-defense. Even if the police arrest us, they'll have to believe that, right? The guys were wearing ski masks. They were there to rob us and probably kill us."

"I would hope that would be taken into consideration—if that's the way the police report the scene."

She didn't like the suggestion behind his words. "How could they not report it that way?"

"If there's an FBI mole, there could also be someone in the Connecticut Police Department. But let's not worry about that. I'm not as concerned about the police as I am with who sent those shooters and who's coming next. I don't think anyone is giving up."

Bree positioned herself behind her kitchen island, gun in hand, as three sharp knocks came at her door. It was a signal from their Quantico days. She walked over to the door and looked through the peephole. It was Wyatt. It must have been him she'd seen in the alley.

She lowered the gun and let him in. As he entered, she said, "I wasn't sure you'd be back."

"I probably shouldn't be, but I wanted an update."

"Where did you go early this morning?"

"To find someone."

"Who?" she asked curiously.

"A friend of mine."

"I thought you were all out of friends."

"She doesn't know who I am. She's a waitress. We've hung out a few times. She works the early shift at a diner."

She gave him a considering look. Wyatt was attractive when his face didn't boast three shades of purple bruising, and she had no doubt that he could find a woman whenever he wanted one, but she hadn't seen him getting involved while undercover. "Wasn't that risky?"

"She was part of my cover. I had to bring someone to parties. I couldn't always show up alone. It would have

raised suspicion."

"Why did you go see her today? You're obviously in a shitload of trouble. Why take that to her?"

"Because there's a part of me that wonders if she knew more than I thought she did."

"Did you talk in your sleep?"

"We didn't do a lot of sleeping," he retorted.

"Of course not. So, what happened when you went to the diner?"

"She wasn't there. The manager said she called in sick today. I went by her apartment. She wasn't home, either."

She saw the grim expression in his eyes and realized he wasn't so much suspicious of this woman as worried. "You don't think the Venturis would go after her, do you?"

"I don't know. I only took her to two parties, but it's definitely possible. I shouldn't have waited so long to look for her."

"Maybe she was just taking a personal day. When's the last time you saw her?"

"Two—three weeks ago." He sat down on the couch and propped up his feet on her coffee table. "Do you have any news?"

She took the chair across from him. "Well, Damon shot two people this morning at a storage unit in New Haven. Both are dead."

Wyatt sat up at that piece of information. "Was he arrested?"

"No. He and Sophie Parker are on the run. They were caught on security footage at the storage place. I don't quite know how they got away, but they did."

"Good. Although, I don't know how innocent Sophie Parker is."

"She seems like a pawn in all this. One of the deceased males was identified as Carl Rucker, who was employed by one of the Venturi companies."

His expression turned grim. "And the other?"

"No ID. No facial recognition. He has a tattoo. Analysts are working on it." She paused. "Karen Leigh also showed your photo to everyone. She said that a CI told her you were made, and if anyone has contact with you, they should tell you to come in. She looked right at me when she said it."

"I probably shouldn't stay here," Wyatt said. "I'll find somewhere else to sleep tonight."

She couldn't deny that moving around might be the best choice for him. "Also, Peter Hunt and I had a bit of a confrontation in the elevator. He came at me about having information on you and Damon, and I decided to turn the tables."

Wyatt raised an eyebrow. "What did you do?"

"I poked the bear."

He groaned. "That sounds like you, Bree."

"And you," she retorted.

"I can't argue with that."

"I asked him why he hadn't known about the lake house where Sophie went, since he was friends with Alan and also with Vincent Rowland. He said he hadn't spoken to Vincent and mumbled something about not spending vacation time with Alan. I'm not sure I buy it. Also, the storage unit from today's ambush was rented by Alan under an alias, and

since it was in New Haven where both he and Peter went to school, I was surprised Peter didn't know about that, either."

"Peter is looking more suspicious by the day."

"So is Karen. I don't know why she put your photo up in front of the entire office, not just your division. It felt like she had an ulterior motive. I'm wondering if she is going to frame you for something. If the investigation gets too close to FBI involvement in Alan's death, who better to pin it on than someone who might have been turned by the crime family he was sent to investigate?"

Wyatt stared back at her through unblinking serious dark eyes. "I can't think of anyone better."

"Do you know Seth Hanford? He seems to be a little put out that Karen has more power now. He has been asking a lot of annoyed questions in our meetings, as if he's angry he's out of the loop."

"I met him once. He worked closely with Alan on some projects. But he and I never had direct contact after I went under." Wyatt paused. "Getting back to the storage unit, why do you think Damon went there."

"Well, he came out with a silver suitcase, so I'm thinking he went for that."

A gleam entered Wyatt's eyes. "Maybe inside is the evidence we need to break this wide open."

"I hope so. I just sent Damon my update and some photos I want to ask you about as well." She grabbed her phone and moved over to the couch. "After I spoke to Peter, I followed him. He met three men at a bar in Midtown." She

showed him the first photo of the tall, skinny guy with the glasses. "Do you recognize this man?"

He slowly shook his head. "I don't."

"Okay, the next one is Senator Raleigh. This is Peter's second meeting with the senator in a couple of days." She flipped to the last photo. "When they got inside, they met another man. I didn't get a good picture, but he has very white hair."

"Nope. No one on my radar," Wyatt said with a shake of his head.

"They were all about Peter and Alan's age, so maybe they're just friends."

"Could be." He paused. "We need to ask Damon what's in the suitcase."

"Already did that. We'll see what he says."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

SOPHIE HAD BEEN SITTING at the kitchen table for over an hour, searching the Internet for tattoos similar to the one she'd drawn, but she'd come up with nothing even close. The phone was also not getting the best reception so every site seemed to take forever to load.

She got up from her chair and moved into the adjoining family room, where Damon was seated on the couch, his bare feet up on the coffee table, as he flipped through channels on the television. It was the most relaxed she'd seen him. The simple fact that he didn't have his shoes on made her feel like there was a little less danger around them.

"Are you done with your research?" he asked.

"For the moment. I wish I had a computer and some faster Wi-Fi. The phone doesn't move very fast."

"I'm assuming you didn't find anything then."

"Nothing that was a really good match, but I haven't given up yet. The snake is one of the most widely used symbols and it crosses many different cultures. Because the snake sheds its skin, some view it as a sign of rebirth and

fertility. Others use the snake as a guardian of valuable and precious artifacts or to ward off intruders from their religious temples. The venom of the snake symbolizes poison, danger, even the divine. Some believe the snake bite leads them into immortality. It's going to take me a while to figure out what the snakes entwined in vines with that strange symbol and the red eye mean. It could be a combination of designs made into one." His smile made her pause. "That was way more than you wanted to know, wasn't it?"

"Let's just say I know more about snakes now than I did five minutes ago."

"Well, it was a teachable moment, and I'm a teacher."

"Is that how you see yourself, Sophie? As a teacher? Or as an archaeologist?"

"Both, really. I love to impart knowledge, as evidenced by my recent monologue on snakes. But there's nothing like the thrill of discovery. At any rate, I am going to figure out the meaning of that tattoo. It may not help us in any way, but it gives me something productive to do and to think about. Plus, I don't like to quit until I have the answer I'm seeking."

"I have definitely learned that you are not a quitter. You don't give up easily on anything."

"I've had a few moments where I wondered if I should give up."

"But you don't give in to those short periods of doubt. Why don't you take a break on your research? I'd like to check the forum to see if there's news from Bree or Wyatt."

"Sure." She sat down next to him and handed him the phone. "I'm surprised you were so patient. Probably checking the forum is more important than my research."

"You never know. You had the tattoo design fresh in your mind; I didn't want to mess with that."

"I appreciate that." She tipped her head toward the television. "Have we made the news yet?"

"Not the world news. There was another missile test from North Korea, so reports have been all about that."

"Sometimes it feels like the world is becoming a very scary place."

"You don't want to know the half of it," he muttered, a dark cloud passing through his eyes.

She couldn't imagine all the bad things Damon had seen. "I don't think I could handle it as well as you do."

"You would do what you had to do—just like you did today."

"I suppose, but in reality, you did everything. I just followed along."

"You picked up the bat. I'm not sure what you were going to do with it, but I liked the idea."

She smiled. "I didn't know what I was going to do with it, either. Against a gun, it wouldn't have been much protection, but I just instinctively reached for it."

"You have a lot of courage, Sophie."

"I never thought I did, but I guess I've never been tested until now. I'd like the tests to be over." She tilted her head, giving him a thoughtful look. "Does it ever get to you—the constant danger? The darkness? The bad people?"

He didn't answer right away, taking his time with her question. "Sometimes, but in the short-term, I try to focus on the mission at hand, and in the long-term, I try to believe in the good that I'm doing. If I can make a difference, save even one life, it's worth it."

She met his gaze, thinking how lucky the world was to have someone like Damon willing to take the risks, fight the danger, run forward when everyone else was running away. She was lucky, too.

"Something else you want to ask me?" he questioned, a curious look in his eyes.

"No. Go ahead and look at the forum. I'm curious to know if there's any news."

While Damon was accessing the forum, she looked toward the windows.

The sun had gone down a while ago, and they'd drawn all the curtains and blinds in the part of the house they were using, so the only light in this room was coming from the phone and from the television. They'd also closed the doors leading into the hallway, and Damon had even gone out front to make sure no light could be seen from the street or from a neighbor's house.

She knew they were in the best possible location they could be in. None of the Rowlands were close enough to drop in, and on a Friday night, she doubted any service people would show up at the house unexpectedly. They should be fine until at least tomorrow, but it still felt a little spooky.

"Bree sent a message," Damon said.

She moved closer, so she could read the screen with him, but the sentences didn't make a lot of sense. "You're going to have to translate your baseball code into words I can understand."

"Security cams caught us at the storage unit."

"We figured that," she said, her heart still sinking at the confirmation.

"They traced the ownership of the unit to your father."

"What about the men who tried to kill us? Any ID?"

"One is a known associate of the Venturi crime family, so it's looking like they're definitely involved in this. The other, the one with the tattoo, has not been identified, and they're checking to see if they can match the tattoo to any other known criminal organization."

"I'm glad they're working on it, too. They have far more resources than I do."

"They also have more people to bury whatever information they come up with."

She frowned at that reminder. "Did Bree say anything else?"

"She confronted Peter Hunt about the possibility of a leak, and he didn't deny it."

"Confronted? Was that smart?" she asked worriedly.

"Bree is good at reading people. She probably wanted to push him and see if she could get a reaction. She also followed him and took some pictures. She wants to know if we recognize these people." He brought up the photos on the phone. "Here's the first guy."

"That's Michael Brennan," she said, recognizing her father's friend. "I told you about him before. He's the

financial, hedge fund guy who went to Yale with my dad."

"Okay. I know this is Senator Raleigh," Damon said, flipping to the next photo, then moving on to a third picture. "This isn't a clear shot, but what do you think about this guy? Do you know him?"

"That looks like Harrison Delano. He has really white hair. I can't see the man's face, but I'd bet that's him." She paused. "This is the Yale group that Peter and my dad were a part of, minus a couple of people. Maybe they're just trying to find out what happened to my father, or Peter is giving them an update."

"That's probably it," Damon said, as he typed in what she'd told him and then posted it in the forum.

"Probably?" she echoed. "Why does it sound like you think there's another reason?"

"I don't have another reason. I just don't know if that's what they're talking about."

"You don't think there's a chance they conspired against my dad in some way, do you? Those men are some of his best friends in the world."

"And they're all powerful people."

"So? I don't see how my father could have been a threat to any of them. Why would they have had him killed? No." She shook her head. "I think it's more likely they're all upset that he's dead and want to make sure he gets justice. They might also be worried about me."

"I'm sure they *are* worried about you, Sophie."

She didn't know if he meant they were worried because they cared about her or because she was a loose end. "Did Bree have anything else to report?"

"No, but she has a question—she wants to know what's in the suitcase. Apparently, they saw that on the security footage as well."

"Don't tell her," she said impulsively.

Damon lifted his gaze to hers, a question in his eyes. "We can trust Bree."

"I don't know her."

"You know me. We can trust her."

"All right, but I still don't want you to tell her—not yet anyway."

"Okay, we'll wait."

She let out a breath, not sure why she didn't want the money to come out now when it would certainly come out later, but she was still trying to make sense of it. "Thanks."

"No problem. Bree understands *need to know*." He sent a reply, then set the phone on the coffee table. "I told her we'd be in touch tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," she echoed. "I can't imagine what tomorrow is going to bring." She licked her lips, her thoughts tumbling around in her head. "I want to put my dad's killers away, Damon. I want to get my life back. I want you to have your life back. But I'm afraid of where the truth is going to take me. I'm terrified of where all this is going to end. Am I going to work hard to prove my father's innocence only to find out he's guilty? And then what? Do I try to cover it up, protect his reputation, his legacy?" She paused. "I shouldn't have even said that to you. Covering up his illegal actions would be a crime, too. I feel like I'm floundering, and it would be really easy to drown. I know you just said I'm not a quitter, but this is a lot to handle."

"I know, Sophie. It is a lot for you to deal with. You haven't even had a chance to mourn your father. But I can tell you this—you're not going to drown, because I won't let you. And you don't have to decide what you're going to do until you have all the facts, until you have to make a decision. I wish I could tell you not to be afraid of the truth, but I can't. I don't want to believe Alan is guilty of anything, but it's not looking good for him."

She appreciated his honesty, and it made her feel less guilty knowing that he had the same doubts she did. "I feel the same way. I keep thinking that if my father was innocent, he would have named names or given me specifics and leads to help prove his innocence. But cash and fake IDs and his voicemails saying he was sorry and telling me to run...paint a different picture. On the other hand, I can't understand why he didn't have more money if he was taking bribes or stealing cash. He didn't buy a big house or a boat or a fancy car. He lived simply." She took a breath, realizing what her father had spent money on. "But he did pay for all my schooling, all my living expenses. That added up."

"This isn't on you," Damon said sharply. "Your father didn't have to steal to send you to school."

"What if he did? I never asked him if he had the money for grad school; I just assumed. What does that make me?"

"Normal. Like every other kid in the world."

"And selfish."

"Like every other kid in the world," he repeated.

"I bet you didn't take money from your parents."

"That was different. Their money came with strings. I didn't want the strings, so I didn't take the money." He sent her a pointed look. "I am happy to go around the circle of questions with you, Sophie. I will help you analyze every little detail. I will speculate and theorize, but I won't listen to you try to blame yourself for what your father might have done. You are not responsible for any of this. Got it?"

Judging by his stern expression, there was only one answer. "Got it," she said, happy to have his reassurance. "I feel like I need to say thank you again."

"Please, don't."

"Then I'll just think it."

"Works for me," he said with a flash of relief.

"Speaking of your parents—"

He groaned. "We don't need to speak of them."

"I was just wondering if you keep in touch. Do you see them on holidays? Has time changed your relationship from when you were a kid?"

"Not really. I saw my mother two Christmases ago and my father probably the year before that. We exchange the occasional text or email. They send me pics from their vacations."

His parents really sounded like narcissists. "What about your half-siblings? Do you communicate with them?"

"We also text once in a while. I try to remember their birthdays. That's about it. I was thirteen when my first half-sister was born. There's a big age gap between us, and frankly we don't have a lot in common. My life with my parents was a different world. They only know the world of

their mom and dad, and it's a happy one. They don't need me dragging it down."

"You wouldn't do that."

"Well, it doesn't matter. Everyone is very happy with the way things are."

"I bet your parents miss you more than you think."

"That's because you like to believe the best in people, Sophie."

"I guess I do. It's going to be more difficult from here on out."

A glint of understanding appeared in his eyes. "No doubt about that. But I hope you don't get completely cynical."

"Like you?" she challenged.

"Like me," he conceded.

"It makes sense to me now where some of your cynicism comes from. You were hurt by your parents, and it was a deep hurt, the kind that doesn't ever really go away."

"I'm not harboring some deep resentment toward my parents, Sophie. I'm over it."

"I don't believe that."

"Well, it doesn't really matter if you believe it," he said with annoyance. "I know what's true. Stop trying to psychoanalyze me."

"I'm not doing that. I'm just trying to understand you."

"I'm not that complicated."

"Oh, come on, Damon. That's not true."

"It is true. I keep things simple. That's my strategy in life."

"And that's how you ended up here with me?" she challenged. "By keeping things simple?" His frown told her

she'd struck gold with her words.

"Good point," he admitted. "I knew from the first second I saw you that you were going to complicate my life, and I wasn't wrong."

"Hey, I did nothing to get you to come after me. I never contacted you after the night we spent together. I didn't show up at any FBI functions where you might be there."

"Was that on purpose?" he asked curiously.

"Well, mostly I wasn't around, but my point is that I let you go. You're the one who came to find me."

"I blame your father for that."

"That would make it simpler."

He smiled. "It definitely would."

"But we both know that isn't the whole story."

His eyes flared with blue sparks that immediately sent a rush of desire through her.

"We should watch TV," he said. "Where did the remote go?"

She picked it up off the table. "I have it."

"Well, turn up the sound, find us something with noise."

"Something distracting?"

"God, yes."

The desperation in his eyes made her put the remote behind her. "I don't want to watch television; I want us to finish the kiss you started in the garage."

His lips tightened. "That was a mistake."

"It reminded me of how good we are together. Aren't you curious how it would feel now?"

"It would complicate things, and we don't need that."

"Because you wouldn't be able to leave in the morning?"

"I don't want to have this conversation, Sophie."

"Fine. I don't want to talk anyway. I want to kiss you. And then I want you to take me upstairs to bed." He started to shake his head, but she leaned over and put her hands on either side of his face. "Don't say no, Damon. Not when it's what we both want."

She could see the war going on in his eyes: the need to do the right thing, the desire to feel what they'd felt once before.

"I don't want to hurt you," he said huskily.

"You won't hurt me."

"You said that the last time, but I hurt you then, and I don't want to do it again."

"That was different. We know each other better now."

"That might be true, but there's something else that's also true—I don't do love, Sophie. I'm not good at it, and it doesn't work out. I might be exactly what you want in the night, but I will never be what you want in the morning."

"In the morning?" she echoed. "We don't even know if we're going to have a morning, Damon. I could have died at least twice in the last three days. You told me that I need to stay in the moment. This is the moment I need."

"I said that about surviving."

"I don't want to just survive; I want to live. I want you. I think you want me, too. So, stop fighting. Please, stop fighting."

He sucked in his breath and she could see him trying to hang on to the last bit of control. "You're not playing fair."

"I'm not playing at all," she said, recklessness driving her forward. She pressed her mouth against his, and took

what she wanted. It was a heady, glorious, freeing feeling.

Damon let her have her way for a minute, but then he pushed her back and stood up.

She stared at him in shock, unable to believe he was really saying no.

Then he grabbed her hands and pulled her to her feet.

"If we're going to do this, we're going to do it right," he said.

She shivered at the promise in his words.

He led her up the stairs, and into Jamie's room.

She had a second thought as she saw her old friend's things. "Uh, Damon, I don't know about this room..."

"One second," Damon said, going into Jamie's bathroom. He flicked the light on, then off, and came back with a condom. "I saw this earlier. Only one. We better make it good."

"Not here," she said.

"No," he agreed, as she led him out of the room and across the hall into a guest bedroom. She didn't want any memories besides the ones they would make tonight.

With moonlight streaming through a skylight, throwing the room in dark shadows, she went into Damon's arms.

His kiss showed none of the reluctance he'd expressed earlier. It was hungry, impatient, demanding, and she matched him in every single emotion. There was nothing but now...no worries for tomorrow, no regrets for yesterday—just this moment, *this man*.

Damon set her senses on fire. He was the flame and she was the moth, and she didn't care if she got burned. She was all in.

His mouth left her lips and slid along her jaw down the side of her neck. Her nerves tingled with the sensuous trail of delight. His hands crept under her top, his rough-edged fingers drawing goose bumps from every patch of skin he touched.

"I want to see you," Damon whispered, as he pulled her top over her head. Then his fingers were on the front clasp of her bra. He pulled the edges apart, baring her breasts to his hungry gaze. She shrugged the bra off her shoulders while his mouth closed over one nipple. She threw back her head in delight, as he teased and tormented first one breast, then the next.

His mouth moved lower, his hands now working on getting her out of her leggings and panties, and she was more than willing to help him; she wanted him naked, too.

"You need to catch up," she said, feeling a little shy in her nakedness with Damon still fully dressed.

"I'm there," he said with a smile, pulling off his shirt and kicking off his jeans.

She wished she had more light to see him, but what she did see made her swallow hard. He was a beautifully made man: broad shoulders, lean torso, ripped abs, just the right amount of sexy, dark hair, and a body that was made for hers.

They pulled each other down on the bed, kissing, tasting, touching...

The memories of the one night they'd shared together came rushing back, but this time was even better—more passionate, more reckless, more adventurous, more loving...

She didn't want to say the L word, much less think it, but as she and Damon came together, she felt the deepest kind of emotional connection, built not just on passion but also on trust. This man was in her heart, in her soul. She could feel him everywhere. She didn't try to fight the feelings. She reveled in them.

Because who knew what tomorrow would bring?

They had tonight, and she would make the most of it.

He'd definitely complicated what was already a bad situation. He'd done everything he shouldn't have done. He'd given in to feelings instead of sticking with logic.

But as Damon gazed at the beautiful, naked woman snuggled up next to him in bed, strands of her blonde, silky hair covering his chest, he didn't have one single regret.

It might be the wrong time, wrong place, but Sophie was absolutely right.

He'd never felt so in sync with a woman, so desperate to know each sweet inch of her, to please her in every possible way. And it seemed as if Sophie had felt exactly the same way.

They'd been reckless the first time they'd met. They'd come together out of sadness.

But this time, the recklessness had come with a better knowledge of each other, a more complex desire, a deeper caring. It was unsettling, a little terrifying, and it wasn't because he couldn't leave her in the morning; it was because *he didn't want to*.

Sophie had gotten into his head, under his skin. She was in every breath he took. She'd become his first waking thought and also his last. He wanted to tell himself that the danger of the situation was heightening the feelings, but he knew that wasn't the whole truth. He might not have called Sophie in four years, but that didn't mean he'd stopped thinking about her. She'd always been there; he'd just put her out of reach, kept his eye on the ball in front of him. But now *she* was in front of him and behind him and next to him—everywhere he was. And it still didn't seem close enough.

He was overwhelmed again with a compelling need to have her. It wasn't just her face and body that were beautiful; it was her. It was her spirit, her courage, her curiosity, her loyalty in the face of all odds.

If he did do love, she'd be his first choice.

But he quickly reminded himself that love was a one-way street, a one-way ticket to eventual pain. Maybe a few couples made it, but not many, and usually not without a lot of compromise.

As her body shifted against his, he couldn't help wondering if the journey might be worth it, even if the eventual outcome was bad.

But that wasn't very logical. Why set himself up for a fall when he could avoid one altogether?

Because it was Sophie...Because if there was ever a time to break one of his rules, it might be now.

"It's going to be okay," Sophie said, her voice cutting through his turbulent thoughts. She lifted her head off his chest to look at him, and he could see the gleam of

understanding in her eyes. "I can feel the tension coming back. You're thinking too much, Damon. Not a very good role model for staying in the moment," she teased.

He couldn't help but smile at the reminder. "Do what I say, not what I do."

"It's not morning yet," she added. "We still have the night shadows to play around in, before we have to face reality."

"As tempting as that is, I don't have any more condoms."

"So, let's do some other stuff," she said with a wicked smile. "I have a few ideas."

"You do, huh?"

"I do," she said, meeting his gaze. "We still have a little time before the sun comes up, and I feel like we should use the time well. Because...well, because we don't know what's coming next."

He brushed a strand of hair off her face—her beautiful face. She was an angel and no angel should have to deal with the hell they were running from. Unfortunately, her father had sold his soul to the devil and now Sophie was fighting for her life.

"I know what's coming next. It's this," he said, pulling her face down so he could kiss her again.

She gave him a look of pure happiness, and the defenses he'd built up over many, many years began to crumble.

Love had almost broken him as a child, and years of losing military friends in war and his best friend to an FBI mission had continued the shredding of his heart. He truly did not think he had much left to give her, and she deserved more, so much more.

But denying her what she wanted...what he wanted seemed impossible.

"Damon, stop worrying," she said, giving him a hard look. "That's supposed to be my job. We already agreed that tonight is just about you and me—no past, no future, just now. That's all I want."

Unfortunately, he wanted a whole lot more, and that's what he was really worried about. But he wasn't stupid enough to say no to Sophie's offer. He'd deal with the fallout later. In the meantime, he'd do his best to make her as happy as he could.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

HE WAS GONE—AGAIN.

Sophie sighed as she rolled over on her side and stared at the very empty other side of the bed. She could still see the imprint of Damon's head on the pillow. She could smell the musky scent of his skin on the sheets. But he wasn't there, and she really shouldn't have expected that he would be.

She'd told him no promises, no regrets, and she'd meant it, but she still wished she could have woken up in his arms. But she was alone, and the house felt really quiet.

Sitting up in bed, she told herself this was not like before. There was no way Damon would leave her alone in the house. He wouldn't abandon her—at least not while she was in danger.

After this was over...well, everything would change then. But whether or not she and Damon would ever get together again was probably the last thing she should be worrying about.

She got up, gathered her clothes together, and then walked across the hall to the guest bathroom. She wanted

to look for Damon, but she needed to get her head together first.

During a long, hot shower, she gave herself the luxury of reliving a few of the night's best moments. She knew Damon liked her, that the attraction between them was off the charts, but she also knew that he was afraid of love, of needing someone, of thinking about a relationship in terms of forever.

His parents had done a number on his head, and she could understand why he'd be gun-shy. But she would never hurt him. How could she? *She was in love with him.*

The realization shocked her as well as the knowledge that she'd probably been in love with him the past four years; she just hadn't wanted to admit she'd been stupid enough to fall for a one-night stand.

But her love would scare Damon, so she wasn't about to share her feelings with him. He wouldn't want the burden of her emotions, and things would get awkward, and now wasn't the time for any of that.

She turned down the heat on the water, letting the cool spray tamp down her heated emotions.

Damon would no doubt have his guard walls back in place by the time she got downstairs, and she needed to put on her own armor.

By the time she had blow-dried her hair and scoured through Cassie's closet for a pair of jeans and a knit top, she was feeling ready to take on the day.

She found Damon in the kitchen. He had also apparently found different clothes in Jamie's room, putting on a light blue T-shirt and a pair of jeans that, of course, made him

look sexy as hell. And just like that, all her resolve went out the window.

Why did he have to look so good? Why did she have to want him so much? Shouldn't last night have kept her going for a while? But being with him hadn't diminished her need; it had increased it.

Damon looked up from whatever he was making on the stove. He started to smile, but there must have been something in her expression to put him off. He turned down the burner and then crossed the room, hauling her into his arms for a hot, scorching kiss that made a mockery of all her plans to just move on and let the night fade into the back of her mind.

"Good morning," he said, finally stepping away from her.

"It is now," she said a little breathlessly. "But I thought we weren't going to take the night into today."

"That was the plan, but when I look at you, plans seem to go out the window."

She liked that she had that effect on him, liked it even more that he'd admitted it.

"Come and sit down," he said. "Breakfast is ready."

"It smells good. What is it?"

"Oatmeal with extra cinnamon."

"That's perfect."

"I don't know about perfect, but it will keep us going for a while."

"I need to call Cassie and Vincent." She glanced at the clock. It was only seven a.m., but it was afternoon in Paris. "Maybe I'll do that after I eat."

"Good idea. We can talk about what you want to say." Damon pulled two bowls out of the cabinet and filled each one up with oatmeal.

She grabbed spoons out of the drawer, and they sat down at the table together to eat. "This is delicious. You really are a wizard in the kitchen. You're not so bad in the bedroom, either," she added lightly.

He gave her a wicked grin. "I'm good in a few other rooms as well."

She appreciated the comeback, happy that there wasn't awkward tension between them. "So, we're okay?" she asked tentatively.

"I'm good. You?"

"I'm good, too," she said, meeting his gaze.

"We don't need to talk about anything?"

"Only what we're going to do to evade capture and find out what happened to my dad. I do have an idea."

"Well, don't keep it to yourself."

She got up and walked over to the suitcase that was still on the floor. She opened it, inwardly wincing once again at the sight of all the money, and then pulled out the fake IDs and returned to the table. "I noticed yesterday that both sets of IDs have the same address. It's in Brooklyn. I wonder if it means anything."

Damon took the IDs out of her hand and perused them. "Interesting. Could be an empty lot or just a fake address."

"It could be, but it doesn't feel like my dad would have just pulled something out of a hat. He obviously had some plan in mind."

Damon pulled out his phone. "Let me look up the address on the map."

She sat down and finished the last of her oatmeal as he did that.

"I've got a satellite image. It looks like an apartment building." He lifted his gaze from the phone. "We could check it out. But it means going back to New York."

"I don't feel like New York is any more dangerous than any other place right now."

"Good point. It might actually be safer. No one would expect you to come back to the city. I like it." He paused, giving her an approving look. "I didn't even pay attention to the address on the IDs. I should have. Nice job, Sophie."

She smiled under his praise. "I was looking at them yesterday while you were hiding out in the house waiting for the cleaners to leave, but then I forgot when I got caught up in the snake tattoo."

"We wouldn't have wanted to go yesterday anyway. Things were too hot." He paused. "This could be your dad's safe house in the city."

A chill ran through her. "I kind of hope it isn't, because so far my dad's secret places have not worked out too well for us. Maybe we shouldn't go."

"Or," he said, a glint in his eyes..."Maybe we shouldn't go alone."

She read his mind. "You want to ask your friends to help?"

"I do. But it's up to you. We're in this together."

The thought of bringing more people into the situation was both tempting and worrisome. She didn't know Bree

and Wyatt, but Damon did. If she trusted him, she had to trust them. "If you think it's a good idea, I won't say no."

"I'll send a message. Then you can call Cassie."

She nodded, feeling a nervous tingle run through her. *Was calling Cassie and Vincent still a good idea? What information could they possibly have that might help?* And even though Vincent had been retired for years, he was still former FBI. *Would he have some allegiance to Peter Hunt?* She didn't think Karen Leigh had been there when Vincent worked for the Bureau, but she had no idea if Vincent had kept in touch with anyone.

Still, it was possible Vincent could shed some light on her father's actions. They had remained friends after Vincent retired. He might be able to give her a lead.

Damon slid the phone across the table to her. "Your turn."

"Is calling them too big of a risk? Do you think Vincent will have information we can use?"

He shrugged. "I have no idea. The call could be valuable, worthless, or could create more problems for us."

She frowned. "That's not very helpful."

He thought for a moment. "If you keep it short, say as little as possible, ask more questions than you answer, it's probably worth hearing what Vincent has to say, if he's been in touch with Peter or anyone else."

She nodded. "Okay, that makes sense. I must admit that it feels strange to be worried about calling people I've known since I was a little girl."

"It's good to be worried. Right now, we can't afford to let down our guard for a second."

She nodded, then punched in Cassie's number and put the speaker on.

Her friend answered a moment later. "Hello?"

"It's Sophie," she said, feeling a little less tense at the sound of Cassie's voice. "Are you with your dad?"

"We're in the car. I'm going to put you on speaker, okay?"

"Is there anyone else with you?"

"Just me and my dad," Cassie said. "We're driving to the Loire Valley to drink some wine. Are you okay? Are you safe?"

"I'm hanging in there," she replied, feeling wistful for father-daughter trips like the one Cassie was on.

"Hello, Sophie," Vincent said in his deep baritone voice. "I'm very glad that you're all right. I've been extremely worried about you."

"Well, I'm in quite a bit of trouble."

"How can I help you?"

"What do you know about my dad's death? Have you spoken to anyone at the FBI?"

"Yes. I've spoken to Peter several times."

She shot Damon a quick look, then said, "What did Peter tell you?"

"That your apartment was broken into and that you ran up to the lake, where someone took a shot at you. He said you're with Damon Wolfe—Jamie's friend. Are you still with him?"

She swallowed a knot in her throat as Damon shook his head. "No, I'm not," she lied. "I got scared, and I ran from him, too. I don't know who to trust."

"Let me arrange to get you out of town."

"I'm all right where I am at the moment. What I really need to know is what you think happened to my dad. Did my father tell you he was in trouble?"

There was a short pause on the other end of the line.

"A few weeks ago," Vincent said, "Alan told me that he had some significant financial problems. I asked if I could help, and he said he had it under control, but I could see that he was quite worried. Unfortunately, he didn't go into further detail. After talking to Peter, I suspect Alan may have borrowed money from the wrong person, possibly someone in one of the criminal organizations he was involved in bringing to justice."

Her heart sank at Vincent's words. "Do you really believe he would break the law because he was in debt?"

"I don't want to believe it, Sophie, but Peter told me he thought there was a leak at the Bureau, and Alan was at the top of his list. It didn't make sense to me. Alan was the straightest shooter I've ever known. And I would have given him the last dollar I had; all he had to do was ask," Vincent said, his voice laced with sadness.

"When's the last time you spoke to him?" she asked.

"Probably two or three weeks ago. I meant to get back in touch, but I've been traveling."

She frowned as Damon jotted something down on the notepad and then pushed it over to her: *Did he tell anyone about lake cabin?*

"Did you mention the lake house to Peter?" she asked. "Because I don't know how anyone knew I would be there. The cabin was supposed to be a safe place." Her words

reminded her that Vincent could have been the person who sent someone to kill her.

Damon sent her a warning look, obviously reading something on her face.

He wrote down on the paper: *Relax. Don't give anything away.*

"No, I didn't mention the cabin to Peter," Vincent replied. "On our first call on Wednesday night, he told me about Alan, and he asked me if I knew any of your friends or if you were in touch with Cassie. I told him that I didn't know who you spent time with and that Cassie was in London. He got in touch with me on Thursday to tell me about the shooting at the cabin and to ask me why I hadn't told him about it. I didn't actually think about the cabin when he first spoke to me. I haven't been there in a long time, and, to be honest, I was so shocked by the news about your father, everything else went out of my mind. I couldn't believe that Alan was dead. I'm very sorry, Sophie. I know how close the two of you were, and I cannot believe that someone killed him or that anyone is after you."

He sounded sincere, upset about her dad, worried about her. A week ago, she never would have doubted him; now, she just didn't know.

"Can you tell me why you're not talking to Peter?" Vincent asked.

"My dad left me a message telling me not to trust anyone."

"I don't understand. Did he say why or who?"

"Unfortunately, no. He sounded panicked, like he was in danger, and obviously he was. He didn't tell you why he

was in financial trouble?"

"No, I'm sorry he didn't. I did ask. He just said it was trouble that had been building for a while. That's all he would say. Look, Sophie, we need to get you somewhere safe. I want you to come to Paris," Vincent continued. "Cassie and I will take care of you. I know your father would want me to do that."

"I'd only put you in danger."

"I can handle that."

"But Cassie can't. And I'm not sure I could get on a plane. My photo is everywhere. Everyone is looking for me."

"We could arrange for a private plane. I can make that happen. I have money and connections. Come to Paris. Let everything else cool down. We can figure out this problem together."

She hesitated, somewhat tempted to take him up on his offer, but it didn't really seem realistic.

Damon wrote down: *Say maybe...play along.*

"Possibly," she said, not sure why Damon wanted her to play along, but she would do what he asked. "I need to call you back. I can't stay in any one place for long."

"I can have a plane ready to go in two hours. Can you get to Teterboro, New Jersey?"

She licked her lips as Damon shook his head.

"No, not that fast," she said.

"How long would you need?"

Damon gave another warning shake of his head.

"I'm not sure. I have to go. Please don't say anything about this call to anyone."

"Of course not," Vincent said. "But I'm very worried about you trying to do this alone. If someone at the FBI is involved in your father's death, you're going to need help."

"I'll be all right."

"Sophie, wait," Cassie cut in. "Please don't say no to my dad's offer. I really want you to be safe, and I'm scared for you."

"I know you're scared; I am, too, but I have to do this my way. I'll be in touch. I just can't talk right now. Someone is coming." She hung up the phone before they could say anything more and let out a breath. "What do you think? Do you believe Vincent didn't rat me out about the cabin?"

"His answer was definitely plausible. He could have been shocked as he said about your father's death, and the cabin wasn't in his mind at that moment."

"But?" she asked, seeing doubt in Damon's eyes.

"FBI agents don't usually forget things like safe houses. At any rate, I didn't want you to give him any indication of where you were. Just saying how long it would take to get to Teterboro could have pinpointed our location."

"I'm sure he'd be stunned to know I'm in his house."

"We won't be for long. We need to move and get another phone."

"Again?"

"Vincent could easily have the FBI ping this number."

She pushed the phone across the table as if it were a snake about to bite. "I don't think he'll do that. He knows now that my dad warned me not to trust anyone. He'll be careful who he talks to. At least, he said he would."

"I hope that's true." Damon turned the phone off and removed the battery. "We'll toss this somewhere on the way to Brooklyn."

"Do you think I should have taken Vincent up on his offer to get out of the country?"

"I think you should keep it in mind. But not until we know for sure we can trust him."

She picked up the IDs from the table and returned them to the suitcase. As she was slipping them into the interior pocket, something shiny caught her eye. It was buried deep in the netting in the pocket where the IDs had been. "I found something."

"What is it?"

She freed the metal from the net and pulled out a key. "Where do you think this goes? Another storage unit?"

He looked at the key, then at her. "Maybe an apartment in Brooklyn?"

Her heart sped up. "Do you think so?"

"It's as good a bet as any. It was with the passports. Let's straighten up this place and then go."

She put the key into her pocket but left the IDs and the cash in the suitcase. Then she zipped it up while Damon started washing their dishes.

They spent the next several minutes making sure there was no evidence that they'd ever been in the house. She didn't have time to strip sheets or throw towels into the laundry, so she made the bed, trying hard not to think about the night she'd spent there with Damon, which wasn't an easy feat. But they were back to business, and the night seemed like a lifetime ago now.

After taking care of the bed, she straightened the towels they'd used in two of the bathrooms, wiped down the sinks and counters and then returned to the kitchen.

"Now we just have to hope your gadget will start Jamie's car," she told him, as they prepared to go out the back door.

Damon held up a car key. "We won't have to. I found this in the study."

"We're doing good on keys today. Our luck might be changing."

"That would be nice."

She followed him into the garage, and they stashed the suitcase in the trunk, and then got into Jamie's car. They used the garage opener that was still in the vehicle to exit and then closed the doors behind them as they pulled into the drive.

Within minutes, they were on their way back to New York City. It felt both strange and oddly reassuring to be in Jamie's car.

"I'm glad we're in this car," she said. "It makes me think Jamie is watching out for us."

"I hope so. We can use all the help we can get."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE DRIVE FROM GREENWICH, Connecticut to Brooklyn, New York took almost two hours with heavy traffic and dodging maneuvers on surface streets to throw off potential tails.

Damon felt confident that no one had picked them up anywhere on the way into Brooklyn, but now that they were getting closer, his senses were on hyper alert.

Sophie had chatted a bit on the first part of the ride, mostly about Cassie and Jamie and her relationship with the Rowlands. He could tell she was worried she'd made a mistake in contacting Cassie and Vincent, but he thought it had gone well.

Vincent had shared information regarding Alan's financial problems, which could explain why Alan had crossed a line—if that's what had happened. But why Alan had had money problems was another question. If he hadn't been willing to tell Vincent, one of his good friends, maybe it was gambling or drugs or blackmail, something Alan would have been embarrassed to share.

He certainly didn't believe it was Sophie's schooling that had put Alan over the edge. It was bigger than that. But it

didn't appear that too many people were actually that close to Alan. Even Sophie had admitted to seeing her father only a few times a month and knowing little about his private life.

That wasn't unusual. Sophie was an adult with a busy life of her own, and Alan probably wouldn't have spoken to his daughter about other women in his life, unless there was someone serious.

No woman had come forward in the wake of Alan's death, at least not immediately, not that first night. That might have changed by now. He'd been out of touch for a while. But Bree hadn't mentioned it, either, and he would have thought finding Alan's girlfriend, if there was one, to be noteworthy.

So, who was Alan Parker? It was clear he'd had secrets, he'd worn a mask, he'd shown people what he wanted them to see. He was afraid that Sophie's battle to save her father's reputation might be a futile one, but no words would convince her of that. She would take it to the end, because she had to know, and he had to know, too.

He understood why Alan might have felt the need to keep some things in his life private, to have a public persona that might be different from his private one. He was certainly guilty of that. He rarely let people into his life.

But he'd let Sophie in...all the way in...

He took a quick glance at her. She was looking out the window, tapping her fingers nervously on her legs. She was on edge, and she had every reason to be. He wished he could take her back to the place they'd been last night

when passion and pleasure had dominated their thoughts, when problems and fears had vanished with a kiss.

When he was with her, he was a thousand percent with her. She took up all the space, all the oxygen in the room. She became everything—a rather terrifying thought.

He needed to stop thinking about the night. It was gone. And they were no longer hiding out in a safe place. He would need his wits about him to keep them both safe. Caring about Sophie too much in this situation could make them both vulnerable. He had to be objective, analytical, anticipatory...he couldn't let emotions cloud his judgment.

He needed to go back to thinking of Sophie as a job.

He just didn't quite know how he was going to make that happen.

Sophie shifted in her seat, then looked down at the phone where she had the list of directions. "We're getting close. A few more blocks now."

"Just let me know when to turn."

"It's a left on Kent Street. It's a mile from here."

"Got it. My realtor mentioned I should look at Brooklyn when I first moved here. She said it was the up-and-coming place to live, but I wanted to be closer to the office. Now I'm thinking I should have taken a look."

"It's definitely trending," Sophie said. "I have two friends who live around here. One is an artist but works at a museum in Manhattan for her day job. The other runs a dance studio. They both love it. They have a view of the Manhattan skyline and are close enough to get to work, but they also have more space, which is nice. My apartment is

teeny tiny." She sighed. "I wonder if I'll ever see any of my friends again."

"I'm sure you will."

"I'm not sure at all."

He couldn't blame her for her doubts. Her life now was as far from her previous one as it could possibly get. Would she return to her normal life? That would depend on who was after them and how powerful they were. One thing he knew for sure—taking out the two shooters at the New Haven storage center was not going to be the end of it.

Someone else would be coming after them; They had to be ready.

"Next one is Kent," she said.

He took the turn and drove past several spectacular wall murals, which added to the eclectic and artistic feel of the neighborhood.

"Turn left at Hickerson, and we're there," Sophie said.

"Got it." He found the address they were looking for and drove past the building and around the block, wanting to get a lay of the land before parking. He doubted anyone would be looking for Jamie's car, but he couldn't be too careful. He ended up in a spot about fifty yards away from the building and across the street. "Maybe I should check it out first."

"No way. I don't like waiting in the car. I think we need to stick together."

"We don't know if someone lives in that apartment."

"If the key fits, then I'm guessing no one does. And I've got the key."

He smiled at her proud expression, thinking back to the first time they'd seen each other at the cabin—when she'd held a gun to his head. "You still don't think I can take things from you, do you?"

"I don't think it will come to that. I really don't want to stay here alone, Damon. I got freaked out yesterday when you went into the store to get the phone."

He could understand that, and he couldn't deny that he preferred keeping her close. "Then let's go."

As they got out of the car, he grabbed the suitcase, and they walked quickly down the block. The street was filled with modest apartment buildings, most of which appeared to be well-kept. There were probably better parts of town, but also areas that were far worse. It was the kind of neighborhood where anyone could blend in, and he suspected that Alan had picked it for that reason.

There was no security on the front door to the building, and there appeared to be four units inside: two on the first floor, two on the second.

"Now what?" Sophie asked. "How are we going to know which apartment it is?"

He perused the names on the mailbox. "What's the name on the passport?"

"One of them was Framingham, the name we used at the lake house, and the other was Bennett."

"I've got a Bennett in Unit #3. I'd say that's us." He led the way upstairs, stopping at the first apartment door. He put the suitcase down, then took the key from her hand and pulled his gun out. "Stay behind me," he told her. Then he inserted the key into the lock and turned the handle.

The door swung open. He raised his gun and took a step inside, glancing in every direction, then moving farther into the room. "Hello, anyone here?" he called out.

The only answer was silence, and it didn't feel like anyone was there. It was quiet, and the place smelled musty, as if no one had opened a window or a door in a while. The living room had a couch, a chair, and a television. There was a round wooden table by a narrow kitchen galley. He moved into the bedroom and saw a queen-sized bed that was unmade and an adjoining bathroom. He checked both rooms. There was no one there, but he did notice male shirts and slacks hanging in the closet.

"Those could belong to my dad," Sophie said. "The maroon shirt looks familiar." Her gaze moved from the closet to the bed. "Why would my father sleep here? He has a lovely townhouse in Chelsea. It has two bedrooms, and it's much nicer than this."

He tucked his gun back under his shirt. "Maybe he was here late at night, or hiding out when things started heating up."

"Heating up?" she asked in bemusement. "Only a week ago, he called me and asked me to come to his house and watch a ballgame with him this weekend. It sure didn't sound like he was on the run or in hiding."

"Then things changed fast."

He strode over to the dresser and pulled out the drawers. Underwear and T-shirts were in one drawer; the rest were empty. He shoved the last one closed and then stepped back to look around the room. His gut told him

that there was something in this apartment, something beyond clothes...There was a window seat by the window. He strode across the room and pulled off the cushion, which had been attached with Velcro straps to the wooden bench. There was a large horizontal cut-out in the wood and a gold latch. He pulled the latch up and found himself staring at a safe with a coded lock.

"A safe?" Sophie said in amazement.

"We need to get inside. Do you know any of your father's PINs? It looks like a four-number lock."

She frowned as she mulled over his question. "He used my mom's birthday sometimes—1012."

He tried that. It didn't work. "What else would he use?"

"I don't know."

"What about his anniversary, date of graduation, an old address, a memorable holiday?" he asked.

She stared back at him. "My bike lock was 1492 to rhyme with when *Columbus sailed the ocean blue*, a question I missed on my history test."

He punched in 1492 and the lock clicked. He opened the safe and found himself staring down at a box of papers, folders, photos...

His pulse leapt. He pulled out several loose photos lying on the top and put them on the bench.

"Oh my God," Sophie muttered, as she picked up the first photo. "This is me. I'm—I'm leaving my office building at NYU."

He glanced at the other photos, all shots of Sophie going about her daily life, at work, at home, out with friends.

Anger ran through him as he thought about someone following her, watching her.

"I don't understand," she said in confusion. "Why was my dad taking photos of me?"

"Your dad wasn't taking pictures. Someone else was," he said grimly. He turned one of the pictures over and saw the words scrawled on the back: *Any time we want*. His stomach turned over.

"What does that say?" she asked.

He really didn't want to tell her, but she had a right to know. He handed her the photo. "Someone wanted to let your father know they could get to you—they knew where you lived, where you worked, where you spent your time."

Her face turned white. "Why didn't my dad tell me? Why wouldn't he warn me to be careful? Why didn't he go to the police if he couldn't trust the FBI?"

Sophie's voice rose with each word, and he saw the hysteria building in her gaze. He stood up, grabbed the picture out of her hand and tossed it back on the bench. Then he took her hands in his.

"Look at me, Sophie."

Her wild gaze couldn't seem to find a place to settle, but finally it swung back to him.

"We don't know everything yet," he said forcefully. "You can't jump ahead. We have to take this one step at a time."

"Every step I take makes me more afraid. How can I keep going? God! What else are we going to find?"

"I don't know, but you're going to keep moving forward because you have to," he said simply. "You need to know the truth. These photos are another clue. Your father was being

blackmailed. Someone was using you as leverage. We still have to figure out who that was and what they wanted him to do."

"I wonder when he got the photos." Her gaze went back to the top picture. "I think I wore that top last week. Or maybe this was going on for a while. I'm sure I've worn that outfit to work a dozen times in the past year. I can't believe someone was following me, and I had no idea. It's creepy. What if he was looking through my windows at home? What if I left the curtains open one night? How could my father not tell me about any of this? How could he act like nothing was wrong? He wanted to barbecue ribs and watch the baseball game with me. That's the last thing he said to me before his crazy voicemails on Wednesday."

He squeezed her fingers, seeing pain, anger and frustration in her eyes. He wished he could say that Alan had had a good reason for everything he'd done. He'd never been one to make false promises or offer reassurances that couldn't possibly come true, but right now he really wanted to do that—to do anything that would help ease the fear racing through her.

"Look, you have to hang on to what you know is true. Your dad adored you. I'm sure that in his mind he was doing everything he could to make sure you were safe."

"Not everything. He might have made me fake IDs, but he didn't talk to me, he didn't tell me his problems. He didn't trust me, Damon. That's what it comes down to."

"More likely he didn't want to disappoint you or put you in more danger by giving you information someone might try to get out of you."

"Keeping me in the dark only put me in more danger," she argued.

He couldn't disagree. "We need to go through every item in this safe and see if there is anything else in this apartment of note. Hopefully, we'll find more clues." He pulled the box out of the safe and put it on the bench. He could see file folders and more loose papers as well as bank statements. They might have just struck gold. "I'm going to take the box to the kitchen table. You can start going through it while I send Bree and Wyatt a message in the forum as to what apartment we're in. I asked them to meet us at noon, and that's about twenty minutes from now."

He carried the box into the other room and set it down on the table.

"I just hope that..." Sophie gave him one last troubled look as her voice fell away.

"Hope what?"

"That your friends—especially Bree—is not a part of this. She does still work in the FBI."

"But not in your father's department. She was never under his direction. Besides that, Bree wouldn't betray me; I'd bet my life on it."

"You're betting mine, too."

His lips tightened. "I know that, Sophie. But I think it's the best play." As she nodded and turned away, he really hoped he was right.

Sophie put the photos of herself in one pile on a chair. She turned them face down, so she wouldn't have to look at herself, wouldn't have to think about the fact that someone had been watching her go about her life. It made her feel sick to her stomach.

Aside from the photographs, there were five file folders in the box, marked with names, only one of which she recognized—Venturi. Of the other four, one was labeled Scusa Restaurant Fire, the second was tagged Express Package Hijacking, the third read Maximillian Steelworks, and the fourth just had a name—Donald Carter.

She had no idea what any of the cases were about, but she'd leave that to Damon to figure out.

As she put the files aside for him, Damon was pulling board games out of the living room closet.

"I don't think we have time to play a game," she said.

"Your father replaced the games inside with electronic equipment." He brought one of the boxes over to the table and showed her the array of devices inside. "He has listening devices, micro-cameras, flash drives, even a cell phone reader," he added, picking up something that looked like a radar gun. "It can capture the phone number of a person using their mobile device a hundred yards away."

"There really is no personal privacy anymore, is there?"

"These devices help catch criminals; don't forget that." He picked up one of the two flash drives. "I'd like to know what's on this. We're going to need to get a computer at some point." He set the box on the ground. "What have you found so far?"

"Case files that don't mean anything to me, but maybe will be significant to you." She turned back to the box she'd been going through. "There is a stack of bank statements for someone named Justin Lawrence. They show a couple of large deposits and a couple of large withdrawals. It looks like the bank is in Belize."

His expression turned grim. "Your father has an offshore bank account."

"Justin Lawrence does—not my father."

"I think they're the same person, Sophie."

"Really?"

"What's the last statement you have?"

She grabbed the one on top. "This is from May, probably last month's statement. There's a little over four hundred thousand dollars in the account." She blew out a breath, unable to believe her father had been hiding that kind of money in an offshore account. "I can't believe he had that much."

"It might match the amount in the suitcase," Damon suggested.

She hadn't thought about that, but he was probably right.

Damon took the statement out of her hand. "We need to follow the money. Figure out where it came from and where it went when it was withdrawn, and, of course, determine who Justin Lawrence is."

While Damon was looking at the bank statements, she looked through the rest of the items in the box. She found an envelope with her father's first name—Alan—scrawled across the front. There was no address, no return sender,

and no stamp. The envelope had at one time been sealed and then ripped open. There was still a piece of paper inside.

"What's that?" Damon asked, as she picked up the envelope.

"I don't have a good feeling about this. It was sealed before being opened. There's no address; it looks personal."

"Do you want me to read it?"

"No. I have to do it. I just...have to do it." She pulled out the piece of white paper that had obviously come out of a printer. There were two sentences: *One last chance or someone dies. You know what to do.*

She stared at those words until they blurred and then handed the paper to Damon. She walked over to the window and looked out unseeingly at the street below. Her father had been blackmailed. He'd had to cross a line, and because of the photos she'd seen of herself, she had to believe that she'd been the bargaining chip, the person who was going to die if her father didn't do what they wanted.

Damon came up behind her, putting his arms around her, pulling her back against his chest as he rested his chin lightly on her head. The chills running through her were instantly warmed by his presence. She felt safe and protected in his arms, and a part of her wanted to stay there forever, but she couldn't.

Nothing was over. The case wasn't solved. She had a few more clues, but she still didn't know the whole story. There was a lot left to do if she was going to get the answers she needed. She had to know what had happened to her father, because he was never going to be able to explain it to her.

If she was going to find some peace, some closure, some understanding, it would be through the clues he'd left behind. It was almost impossible to believe that these random things were all she had left of him.

The finality of her dad's death hit her hard again—a sharp, breath-catching body blow. Because she hadn't seen his body, hadn't said good-bye, hadn't gone through the formality of a funeral or a service, his passing had felt surreal, as if maybe it wasn't even real. The bullets at the cabin, the gunmen at the storage unit, the voicemails should have convinced her of what was real and what was not, but for some reason, it was this apartment that had finally pushed her into painful reality.

Her dad was dead. He was never coming back.

He'd lived a double life. He'd had aliases and safe houses and an offshore bank account. He'd been able to put together fake IDs for her. He'd had an exit plan, at least for her, if not for himself, too. And then there was the cash—blood money, she was sure. She just didn't know whose blood.

"You okay?" Damon asked.

"Not really," she said with a sigh. She pulled slightly away from him, turning in his embrace, so she was looking at him and not at the street. She saw compassion in his eyes as well as what looked like regret. He was probably dealing with the loss of some of his own illusions about her dad. Not that he'd admit to that. But she suspected her father's actions were going to feel like betrayal to Damon. Her dad was going to be one more person to disappoint him.

"I'm sorry," she said suddenly.

He raised an eyebrow. "What are you apologizing for?"

"For whatever we're going to find out. It's not going to be good. It might hurt you, change the way you think about my dad."

"Don't worry about me. I can take whatever is coming."

"I wish I felt that strong. I'm trying to hold it together."

"You're doing well."

"I think someone was threatening my dad with my life."

"Based on the photos and that note, it seems likely."

"I understand that he didn't want to worry me, but why didn't he tell any of his friends? Surely, there was someone at the Bureau he could trust." She paused, realizing the one person her father had trusted was standing right in front of her. "Why didn't he tell you, Damon? I know he had the utmost respect for you. I didn't let him say much about you if I could help it, but I couldn't always stop the conversation when he started raving about how good you were. He was very proud of you."

A shadow ran through his expression. "I have been wondering if the trouble he was in was behind his calling me to come to New York, if that's why he wanted me to work in his department, if that's why he didn't have Karen Leigh assign me to anything but instead told me he wanted to give me a special assignment."

"It could have been," she said. "That makes a lot of sense."

"Does it?" He let out a breath. "I don't know why he didn't confide in Peter, which certainly puts Peter under suspicion. And what about his old friend, Vincent? He told

him about his financial problems. Vincent was FBI, he would have known how to help Alan? Why not tell him?"

"We could probably ask the same questions about every single person who was friends with my father and works at the FBI. Next on the list would be Karen. She worked extremely closely with him. What does she know?"

He glanced toward the table. "Those files might be able to tell us something. We need to start reading, Sophie."

Before they could move, three sharp raps came at the door.

Her heart leapt into her throat.

Damon pulled out his gun as he stalked to the door and looked through the peephole. She saw his shoulders relax as he said, "It's okay, it's Bree." Then he opened the door.

A very pretty brunette of medium height entered the room. She wore white jeans and a loose-fitting soft blue sweater that brought out the blue in her eyes. Her long hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and dangling earrings hung from her ears. She had a bag over one shoulder, looking more like a woman out for some Saturday shopping than an FBI agent.

"I am so glad to see you," Bree told Damon, giving him a hug.

An odd wave of jealousy ran through Sophie, as she saw Damon give Bree a smile, the kind of smile that he gave her.

"You must be Sophie. I'm Bree Adams," she said.

Bree's words made her stand a little straighter as Bree came across the room to shake her hand. "It's nice to finally meet you."

"You, too."

"Thanks for coming to help us."

"I hope I can help," Bree returned.

"What about Wyatt?" Damon asked. "Have you heard from him?"

"Not since last night. He came by my apartment for a few minutes, but he didn't think it was safe to stay. I don't know where he is now. I tried the phone I gave him, but he didn't answer."

"Is he better?" Damon asked.

"He is," Bree said with a nod. "The first night I met up with him I was really worried, but he's getting his head together, his bruises are fading, and he got at least a few hours of sleep at my place on Thursday night. He's very focused on finding out who tried to kill him. He's quite sure it's connected to Alan's death." She gave Sophie an apologetic smile. "I'm truly sorry about your father. I respected him a great deal. He encouraged me to work in New York. He helped me get the job I have now. I'm very grateful to him."

Her dad had certainly made a positive impression on the agents he'd taught at the academy. It made her feel a little better to hear good things about him, to know that others had thought highly of him. It made her feel less oblivious and stupid for not seeing signs of his secret life.

"So, where are we?" Bree asked. "Is this apartment significant in some way?"

"This appears to be Alan's safe house," Damon said. "We found a safe in the bedroom. We're just starting to go through the box of information he had hidden away."

"That's good news."

"I hope it is," Damon said. "So far, we've found photos of Sophie. It looks like someone was tailing her for several days."

"Using Sophie for leverage against Alan," Bree said.

Sophie was impressed with the speed at which Bree had gotten to that conclusion.

"Yes," Damon said. "We need to find out who wanted leverage."

"How did you find this place?" Bree asked curiously.

"Alan left Sophie a fake passport with this address on it. We weren't sure it meant something until we came here."

"He left you a fake passport?" Bree queried, giving her a measuring look. "Is that why you ran to the lake?"

"Actually, no. I ran to the cabin to get a key that my father had left for me. The key to the storage unit where the passports were located. You know what happened there."

"Yes, but what I don't know is what's in the case," Bree said, her gaze drifting across the room to the silver suitcase that was resting on the floor by the couch. "I'm assuming it contains more than passports."

"It doesn't matter," Damon cut in. "We need to focus on what's on this table."

"All right," Bree said. "It's your show. You call the shots."

At Bree's acquiescence, Sophie felt a wave of guilt. The woman was risking her job and maybe her life to help them. At this point, she needed all the information they had.

"It's money," she said abruptly, drawing Bree's gaze back to hers. "A lot of money. I don't know where my father got it, but it probably wasn't legal."

"I understand," Bree said, her expression showing little surprise. "Thanks for telling me."

"It is possible he emptied an offshore bank account," Damon added. "We found statements under the name of Justin Lawrence, but we don't know who that is."

"That's Alan," Bree said. "That's the name that was listed on the storage unit rental contract."

"Well, that solves that," Damon said, gazing at her.

"Another alias," she murmured, wondering how many more there were.

Three more raps at the door sent her heart racing again. Damon and Bree both pulled out their guns.

Damon moved toward the door, while Bree took a step closer to her, as if to protect her.

"It's Wyatt," Damon said, opening the door once again.

The man who entered the apartment wore faded jeans, a navy-blue T-shirt and a Yankees cap on his head. His brown hair was longer than Damon's and peeked out from under the baseball cap. He had a rough beard on his face, and tattoos ran down both muscular arms. He also had a gun in his hand, and his jumpy gaze moved from Damon to Bree to her.

She felt more than a little unsettled by his stare. While all three of the people facing her were FBI agents, Wyatt felt the darkest, the one who made her the most nervous.

"Okay, I think we can all put down our weapons," Bree suggested, returning her gun to the back of her white

jeans.

Now Sophie knew why she'd worn a loose, thin sweater on a day that was already heading into the eighties.

Wyatt and Damon tucked their guns under their shirts as well.

"Sophie Parker—Wyatt Tanner," Damon said, making the introductions.

"Hi," she said tentatively, the hard, distrustful look in Wyatt's eyes not particularly welcoming.

Wyatt gave her a nod, then turned to Damon. "Glad to see you're still alive."

"Right back at you," Damon said. "You look better than the last time I saw you. Next time, don't take off."

"I wasn't thinking straight that day," Wyatt admitted. "What's the plan?"

"We're formulating one," Damon replied. "This apartment was rented by Alan. We found information in a safe in the bedroom. So far, we've determined that someone was following Sophie and using her to threaten Alan. We've also determined that Alan had access to an offshore bank account under an alias."

"I knew he was double-dealing," Wyatt muttered.

Unlike Bree and Damon, who seemed willing to give her father multiple chances to not be a bad guy, Wyatt seemed confident in his assessment. And that made her feel worse, because Wyatt had been the closest to her father this past year. Wyatt had been the one undercover, the one working with the Venturi family, the one her father had been using to allegedly build a case against the crime family. But maybe he hadn't been doing that. Maybe he'd actually been

working for the Venturis and against Wyatt. Maybe her father was the reason Wyatt had been almost killed.

A wave of nausea ran through her. She really hated to think her father had been working for the mob, that he could be a criminal. It went against everything she'd always thought he believed in.

Wyatt moved to the table. He picked up one of the file folders.

"Do you know what those relate to?" she asked. "The labels didn't mean anything to me and Damon."

"Donald Carter is a construction worker on a Venturi-run construction project in Jersey City. He was injured when a section of flooring collapsed. He's suing the Venturis, and his trial is starting in two weeks," Wyatt said. He put down that folder and picked up another one. "Maximillian Steelworks supplied the steel for that construction project, but they didn't use the steel they were supposed to use; they bought cheaper steel out of China and swapped it in. The steel was not just used in this one building but also on six others that have already been completed. A few weeks ago, I discovered that the Venturis had paid off a city inspector to look the other way so they could save on building costs, but those buildings could all be potentially dangerous. They could all collapse. I gave Alan this information three months ago."

Her heart sank again. "What did my father say?"

"That he'd look into it; that's what he always said."

"What about the other files?" Damon asked.

Wyatt cleared his throat. "An Express Package Delivery truck was robbed last month. The trucking system is

responsible for moving drugs and guns throughout the northeast, but someone hijacked that load. I gave Alan that lead, too. Apparently, he wasn't just keeping the information out of his office; he wasn't doing anything with it. He and his team weren't building a case against the Venturis. He was just throwing what I gave him in a box."

"Maybe they were working on it," she suggested, unable to not defend her father. "There's a very thick file on the Venturi family. Perhaps my dad was putting it all together here, because he knew there was a mole at the FBI."

Three pairs of eyes came to rest on her. She saw compassion in Damon's gaze, thoughtfulness in Bree's and complete skepticism in Wyatt's.

"If he wasn't the mole, he would have warned me not to keep the meet that almost killed me," Wyatt said.

"He might not have known about the meet if the information was intercepted. Look, I know it doesn't look good. I'm not stupid. But my dad is dead. He obviously didn't do everything someone wanted him to do."

"Let's keep talking about what's here," Damon said. "We can get into the blame game later." He looked at Wyatt. "Why don't you tell us what else you know?"

"I know a lot. The Venturis have their hand in everything. Extortion—that was the Scusa restaurant fire," he added, pointing to the other file. "Antonia Scusa didn't want to pay off the Venturis the way her late husband had been doing. Now her restaurant is no more. She's just lucky they didn't kill her. But they did take away the Scusa family business. They sent a message to anyone else who might be having doubts about paying for protection."

"I can't believe people still do that," she muttered.

"They do it a lot more than you would think," Wyatt returned. "But protection was a side game. The family's biggest money came from drugs, in particular opioids, as well as weapons. They laundered the illegal money in a variety of ways, through casinos, the real estate deals, and the basic bank drop where I and other hired hands would make cash deposits just under \$10,000 at banks around town."

"That's what you did for them?" she asked.

"I also worked construction and gambled with Lorenzo until he ended up in the river. I occasionally drove a van, the contents of which I was not allowed to look at. Because I had a partner, I was never able to confirm the cargo I was transporting, but I was working on that. I've fed Alan a ton of information over the last year. This is barely a tenth of it."

"There might be more on the flash drives," Damon said. "We found two in another box. But before we get to those. You told me everything changed recently, Wyatt. You mentioned something about a third party."

"Yes, a few months ago, I heard that there was a turf war brewing. Stefan was interested in partnering with this new player instead of taking them out as the Venturi family usually did. Lorenzo was opposed to the idea of a partnership. As you know, he ended up dead."

"Do you think his brother killed him?" she asked.

"It's quite possible. Or the new player who saw him as an obstacle."

"Did you tell my dad about the new player?"

"I did," Wyatt replied. "He was concerned. Said he'd heard similar rumors." Wyatt paused. "I never thought Alan would burn me. I thought he was taking too long to build the case I was handing him on a silver platter, but until recently I didn't have reason to doubt his motivations."

"What changed?" Damon asked.

"There was desperation in Alan's eyes. He kept telling me to get more, that we didn't have enough to bring a case. That it had to be rock solid before he could move. But I think I misread his desperation. He was probably being blackmailed and he was trying to juggle me and the blackmailer. When I started pushing him too hard, he had to get rid of me. He either burned my cover or he sent someone to take me out, but one way or the other, I'm certain he was involved."

She was shocked at his harsh, unyielding words. "There's no way my father would turn on a fellow agent. Maybe I can believe that he buried information to protect me, but to take someone else's life—an agent he was handling? No, he wouldn't do that."

She could see doubt in Wyatt's eyes and Bree also didn't appear convinced. She turned to Damon. "You don't believe my dad would have tried to get Wyatt killed, do you?"

"I don't want to, Sophie."

"That's not an answer."

"Look, we just don't know," he said. "We have to work with what we have, and right now we don't have that piece of the puzzle."

"Alan might have been killed because I survived," Wyatt said. "Because he didn't get the job done."

She pressed a hand to her temple, her head suddenly pounding. Her dad's voice message rang through her head: "*I thought I could stay out of the mud, but it turns out I'm covered in it.*" Did that confirm what Wyatt had just said?

But she still didn't believe her father would let a fellow agent get killed.

"I have another question," she said. "My dad is dead. So, he's done. Why isn't that the end of it? Why are they coming after me? What do they want?"

"Maybe the cash," Bree put in.

"And you're a loose end," Wyatt said. "The Venturis don't like loose ends. They don't know what you know. That makes you dangerous."

It was hard to hear herself described that way, but she couldn't deny it.

"Getting back to the new player," Damon said. "Do you have the feeling it's an already established group wanting to expand territory or a completely new organization?"

"Already established. I heard Lorenzo and Stefan arguing one night. Stefan said something like: '*They can take us global. We own the East Coast. They own Eastern Europe. Together we will run the world.*'"

"Then it's an Eastern European operation," Damon said.

Wyatt nodded. "That would be my guess, but it doesn't narrow it down much." He paused. "The last few days I've had time to do nothing but think. If Alan didn't order the hit on me, then someone else did, someone in the Bureau. If Alan was getting cold feet, and I'm not saying that's what happened," he added, his gaze directed at her, "but if it did, then the Venturis needed another mole. Someone they

could leverage—perhaps the same way they leveraged Alan. One of Stefan's strengths is finding someone's weakness and using it. Alan's weak spot was his daughter."

Damon frowned. "I don't know about that. Alan has always been a father. He's always had a family. It feels like whatever sent him down the wrong road was more complicated than threats against Sophie's life. He could have hired bodyguards for her. He could have sent her out of the country. He could have done any number of things to keep her safe. I think there's something else he was hiding, something that made him vulnerable." He glanced over at her. "Sorry, Sophie."

She sighed. "You're all just trying to get to the truth. And that's where I want to get to as well. Vincent Rowland told me that my dad had financial problems. Maybe it goes back to that. Maybe he was gambling. I never knew him to be a gambler, but obviously I didn't know him as well as I thought I did. The gambling debts could have put him in the position of having to do some favors."

"Let's move on from your dad," Bree said. "Alan is gone, but the hits on Sophie and Damon keep coming. Are the Venturis trying to get whatever info they thought Alan had on them? Or is someone from the FBI on the Venturi's payroll trying to destroy the evidence and cover their tracks? The Venturi organization will be harder to crack, because there are so many of them with criminal intent, but our New York field office...Who else could be leveraged?" Bree asked. "I don't see Peter Hunt having a weak spot. I did a little research on him. He's divorced. He has no children. He's very high up in the department, so he

wouldn't need the mob to boost his career trajectory. He doesn't appear to have any vices or any appearance of wealth. But he does have a lot of powerful friends from his Yale days."

"The fact that Alan didn't tell Sophie to trust Peter still makes him suspicious in my mind," Damon said. "Why did Alan give Sophie a blanket order to avoid everyone from the FBI?"

"Is that what he did?" Bree asked.

She nodded. "Yes, he told me to trust no one."

"Then maybe he knew the mob had pulled someone else in, but he didn't know who," Wyatt speculated. "I'm putting my money on Agent Leigh. In fact, I staked out her apartment last night after I left Bree's place. I thought Karen was in for the night, but around ten, she left in a taxi. I followed her to a bar in the Bronx, a Venturi-supported bar, I might add. She met with Paul Candilari, Stefan Venturi's number-two man. I took some photos." He handed the phone to Damon. "A younger woman joined them halfway through drinks. I never got a good look at her, beyond the fact that she had dark hair. She might have been Candilari's daughter. Or she could be connected to the new player."

"It's difficult to see her," Damon said. "But she doesn't appear to be very old."

"Well, I doubt she's in charge, but she could be related to whoever is in charge."

Damon passed the phone to Bree, who took a look and said, "This picture is certainly damning for Karen. Meeting with a known crime boss outside the office? Although, she

could play it that she called the meeting to get info on Alan, that she was using Candilari and it wasn't the other way around."

"May I see the phone?" she asked, feeling a little left out of their crime-solving club.

"Sorry," Bree said, passing her the phone.

She looked at the photo for a long moment. Karen and the older man seemed to be having an intense conversation, while the younger woman appeared to be looking at her phone and not all that engaged in the discussion. In fact, she looked bored...and a little familiar. "I feel like I might know her," she murmured.

"The woman?" Damon asked in surprise. "From where?"

She shook her head, trying to think. "I'm not sure. She's in her twenties, I'd bet. Maybe she was in one of my classes or just a student at NYU?" She frowned. "There's something about her...I wish I could see her face better."

"It's the best shot I could get," Wyatt said. "You can look through the other photos if you want."

She scrolled through the four other pictures, but none of them captured the young woman any more clearly. She gave Wyatt back his phone. "Did they all leave together?" she asked.

"No, Karen left first. I was on her tail, so I went when she did. Unfortunately, she went straight home. I was hoping she might meet up with someone else, but she didn't."

"So, what are we going to do?" she asked. "Are we going to confront Karen?"

"Yes," Damon said with a nod. "That's exactly what we're going to do. We need to set up a meet. I think we should send Karen the photo. She'll want to protect herself, so she'll come alone."

"But how are we going to get in touch with her?" she asked.

"I can make it happen," Wyatt said. "I'll use the emergency protocol we set up for my cover. I'll send her the photo and a time and place to meet."

"Why would Karen come at all?" Sophie asked. "Why wouldn't she just run?"

"If she's guilty, she'll want to know what I know," Wyatt said. "I'll offer her additional enticement. Instead of a threat, I'll tell her I want in on the action. That the Venturis trust me more than they trust her, so we need to partner up. I think she'll come. She'll be too afraid not to."

"She might not come alone," Bree put in. "And you're assuming she is guilty. What if she's innocent? How does that change the scenario?"

"I don't think it does change it," Damon said. "She'll want to know why Wyatt thinks she's double-dealing. She'll still want to protect herself from whatever he thinks he has against her. But I'm with Wyatt, I think the only reason Karen went to talk to Candilari is because she's involved in some way with the family."

"But it seems kind of stupid on her part to go to such a public meeting," she couldn't help putting in. "Why do it?"

"Sophie makes a good point," Bree said.

"She has a cover," Wyatt said. "She's looking for info on Lorenzo's murder, so she took a meeting. That photo alone

isn't enough to bring her down. We just want her to think we have more."

"Okay," she said with a nod. "How are we going to do it?"

"I'll send the message," Wyatt said.

"You will," Damon agreed. "But I'm going to take the meet. You and Bree are going to back me up."

Wyatt frowned. "No way. I've got more skin in this game than you."

"Doesn't matter," Damon said. "If Karen brings Venturi backup, they won't know what to make of me. You'll still be my ace in the hole. If they take me out, you can still take them down. I can use you as leverage against Karen, Wyatt. If she doesn't come clean with me, you'll take it to the Bureau, and she'll be ruined"

She could see Wyatt starting to cave as Damon made his case. As much as she didn't want Damon to be in the hot seat, it made sense.

"He's right," Bree said. "Damon should take the meet. Let's keep Karen in the dark about where you are and what you have. Where will you meet her?"

"Central Park. It's where I used to meet Alan," Wyatt said. "She'll feel confident that it's me she's talking to if we go with that location. Of course, once she sees Damon, all bets are off. But there are lots of trees and plenty of people around for cover."

"I don't think Karen is calling the shots," Damon said. "When I meet with her, I'm going to make sure she's as scared of me as she's scared of whoever is running her. If

we can turn her, then we'll be one step closer to taking this whole thing down."

Sophie listened to the three of them as they continued to plan their strategy. She wanted to go, too. She wanted to face Karen and ask her if she was the one who set her father up, if she was the one who'd sent gunmen after her, not just once but twice.

She could still remember how kind Karen had pretended to be when she'd first told her that her father was dead. Her questions hadn't been about helping to find her father's killer; Karen had wanted to know what she knew. She was really glad that she'd run that first night.

"I'd like to be a part of this," she said, interjecting herself into the conversation.

"It's too dangerous," Damon said quickly, immediately shaking his head.

"I'm not going to stay here by myself," she said. "Someone could figure out this apartment is tied to my dad. You said yourself we can't stay too long in one place, especially not a place rented by my father."

Damon frowned. "Then maybe Bree—" he began.

"No," she interrupted. "You are not going to ask Bree to babysit me. You need her to protect you and to take down Karen. Just let me go with you. I don't have to do anything. I'll just be nearby."

The three of them exchanged a look. Then Damon said, "You can come as far as the park, then I'll reassess the situation."

"Where in the park are you going?" she asked Wyatt. "It's a big place."

"The Alice in Wonderland statue near 5th and East 74th," he replied.

Her heart thudded against her chest at that piece of information. "My dad used to take me there when I was a kid. He used to say that his job sometimes made him feel like Alice going down the rabbit hole." She paused, an unexpected rush of tears coming into her eyes.

The irony of Damon, Wyatt, and Bree possibly taking down her father's killer at a place that had once held happy memories filled her with emotion.

"I'm sorry he let you all down—that he let me down," she said. "But I want to know the truth—the whole truth. Get Karen to that park and make her talk."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER NINETEEN

A LITTLE BEFORE three Damon drove back over the Brooklyn Bridge into Manhattan. As he maneuvered through the busy city streets, he felt like it had been a year since he'd been in the city. So much had happened since he'd impulsively decided to drive up to the Adirondacks to find Sophie. He was very glad he'd followed his instincts; he just hoped his gut was steering him in the right direction today.

Wyatt had come up with a bold plan to draw Karen out, and while he was happy to move from a defensive position to an offensive one, he was worried about Sophie. He was torn between taking her into the park and making her a potential target and leaving her alone in the car where anything could happen. He liked when she was right next to him, when he could see her, touch her, know she was okay.

He glanced over at her. She was looking toward the park, probably thinking about the statue where she used to go with her father. They hadn't had any time to talk just the two of them since Bree and Wyatt had arrived, and he suspected she'd felt a little left out of their strategy session,

but she hadn't complained, and he hadn't had time to include her.

After Wyatt had initiated the emergency protocol with the photo of Karen at the bar in the Bronx, Karen had responded almost immediately. They'd only had ninety minutes to study a plan of the park, pick up four phones with earpieces that they could use for an emergency communications system, and then get into Manhattan.

Now, he would have to waste more valuable minutes, finding a parking spot. "It's not going to be easy to park around here," he muttered, hoping Bree wouldn't have trouble finding a spot, too. She was driving Wyatt to the park in her car. They'd decided to split up to make the group less of a target.

"Try one of the side streets," Sophie suggested, her voice tense. "Wait, I think someone is leaving," she said, pointing down the block.

He let out a breath of relief. The spot was about twenty-five yards from the park entrance nearest the statue and across the street, which would keep Sophie close but not too close. There was a busy intersection nearby, so there would be plenty of people around. He knew she wouldn't be happy to wait in the car, but he had to persuade her that it was the best option.

He parked and removed the key from the ignition. "Sophie, we need to talk."

"I know what you're going to say." She gave him an unhappy look. "I'd rather go with you, Damon."

"I know you would. Here's the thing, Sophie. If you're there, my focus is going to be on you. That's just the way it

would be. And that won't work. I have to concentrate on Karen. I have to be alert to any possible danger she might be bringing with her. This meeting is crucial. It might be the one opportunity we have to turn Karen to our side. If I can make her understand that giving up her boss will ultimately put her in a far better position than taking the fall, we might be able to unravel this whole tangled ball of yarn."

"She's not going to get immunity, is she? If she's complicit in my father's death, then I want her to go to jail."

"She won't go unpunished; I promise you that. But we don't believe she's running the show, and, ultimately, we want the head guy, the one giving the orders."

"Maybe that's Peter. Bree doesn't think he has motivation or that he's vulnerable, but I'm guessing most people wouldn't have thought my father was, either."

"I haven't eliminated Peter or anyone else for that matter, but right now Karen is the play." He paused. "I wouldn't leave you if I thought this wasn't the safer, better choice. When I get out, take the wheel, and if you see anything you don't like, just drive away."

"Okay. I'll stay here. I get it. I don't like it, but I understand. You and Bree and Wyatt operate with a kind of shorthand. You're well-trained, you know what you're doing, and you trust each other."

"Bree and Wyatt are two of the best," he agreed.

"Wyatt is a little unapproachable."

"He's been living in the shadows for a long time; it's isolating to be undercover that long. Sometimes you can forget who you are."

"That makes sense. I feel like my old life is a million miles away, and it's been less than a week. I know when this is over, I'm going to need to actually deal with my dad's death."

"You will, and I'll help you any way I can."

"Thanks," she said softly, her gaze meeting his. "Damon, be careful. Promise me you'll come back."

"I promise," he said, knowing he would do absolutely anything to keep that promise.

He leaned over and kissed her hard on the mouth. Then he got out of the car and closed the door. He saw her crawl over the console and get behind the wheel. Then she flipped the locks.

He took a look around, then walked up to the intersection to cross the street. As he moved through the entrance to the park, he hoped that in a few minutes they would have at least some of the answers they were looking for.

After being off the grid the past few days, it felt strange to be walking in the open air. There were security cameras around the park, and he'd already noted where they were, so he could keep away from them. He didn't need the police getting in his way.

Pulling out his phone, he initiated the four-way call, knowing Sophie would feel better if she could listen in. "I see the statue," he said. "I'm almost there."

"I'm on the west side, in the trees," Bree said. "I have eyes on the statue. No sign of Karen."

"I'm to the east," Wyatt returned. "All good on my end."

"Sophie, you okay?" he asked, feeling like he needed to hear her voice, too.

"I'm here," she said. "I don't want to interrupt, so I'm just going to listen."

"If you need anything, speak up," he said.

"I will. Hey, Bree," Sophie added. "Did the FBI ever figure out that tattoo on the shooter at the storage unit?"

"Not that I'm aware," Bree said. "It wasn't in the update we got last night."

"Maybe I'll research that while you're all doing this."

Damon was happy Sophie was going to keep herself busy; that would make the time go faster.

He moved toward the statue, a bronze art piece about ten-feet tall, depicting Alice in Wonderland and some of her friends, including the Mad Hatter and the White Rabbit. It was quite a work of art, he thought, beautiful and whimsical. He could see why Sophie had liked it, and why there were lots of kids crowding around it now with their parents.

He moved away from the statue to a drinking fountain and a bench tucked behind a small building with two family restrooms. Wyatt said he and Alan had had most of their conversations there, away from the crush of tourists.

He glanced at his watch. Five minutes to go.

He really hoped Karen was going to show up, because there was no Plan B.

No one had spoken in a couple of minutes, and Sophie's pulse began to beat faster. To distract herself, she opened up the Internet on her phone and started looking for more information on snake tattoos from Eastern Europe since Wyatt had mentioned that he thought the Venturis' new partner might be from that part of the world. That encompassed several countries, but at least she could narrow her search a bit.

As she read more about the snakes, she wondered if she was going in the wrong direction. Maybe it wasn't the snake or the vines that were meaningful; perhaps it was the symbol.

She opened her bag and pulled out her sketch. As she stared at it, she felt increasingly unsettled, uneasy. She really felt like she'd seen it before. But where?

An old memory covered with cobwebs began to shake loose in her head.

There was a party.

Her mother had wanted to go. She was feeling better after her chemo treatments, and she'd wanted to wish her friend a happy birthday.

She was fifteen, and bored with the adult conversation. The only kid at the party that she knew was Elena, and she'd disappeared. A housekeeper told her the teenagers were in the pool house. She'd gone down there and found a wild party scene. There were drugs everywhere. She couldn't believe this party was going on so close to the main house.

She felt awkward, uncomfortable, scared. She was way out of her element. She went toward the bathroom. She

thought she'd seen Elena go in there. She knocked. She thought she heard someone say something. The door was unlocked, so she opened it. Then she gasped, seeing Elena with a boy, her breasts hanging out of her shirt, the guy's hands under her skirt.

"Get out," Elena ordered, fury in her eyes.

She turned and ran out of the bathroom, bumping into a tall guy on her way through the pool house, her hair catching in the sharp edges of his ring.

She could almost feel the tug, the sting against her scalp.

She stopped as the guy swore and tried to disentangle her hair from the ring. It was a thick, male ring, with a red stone in the middle that looked like an eye.

Her heart beat faster as she tried to hold on to the memory. Who was the guy?

He'd had brown hair. He was tall. She had to look up at him. He wasn't smiling.

Suddenly, she saw his brown eyes, and it clicked in. It was Michael Brennan's son, David. He was five years older than her and very intimidating.

"Just hold still," he said, yanking her hair out of his ring. "What are you doing here anyway? You and Elena were supposed to stay in the house. Go back there now."

She didn't tell him Elena was in the bathroom. She scurried out of the pool house and ran to find her parents.

She wanted to tell them what was happening in the pool house, but her mom wasn't feeling well, and her dad was worried about her. So, she'd said nothing, and they'd gone home.

They'd never gone back to the Brennans' house after that.

Her mom had died several months later.

As the memory ran around in her head, she felt like she was on the verge of something big.

David Brennan had had a ring with the exact same design as the one she'd seen on the gunman's neck.

Had David been the gunman? Had Damon shot David Brennan in the storage unit?

No. That wasn't possible. Bree had reported that the FBI had no identity on that shooter. It hadn't been David.

Maybe the design was popular. Maybe it was just a coincidence that David had a ring with the same image.

She looked back at her phone and typed *Michael Brennan hedge fund investor and family* into the search box. An image popped up of Michael, his wife Katya and their two children, David and Elena. In this photo, the kids were teenagers, about the same age as they'd been in her memories.

David had his arm around his mother's shoulder, and she could see the ring she remembered on his hand. The image was too grainy to see the details, but she felt sure it was the same design.

She scrolled through more search results, wondering if there was a clearer picture of the ring.

In the next photo, everyone was older—mid-twenties, probably. And Michael was with another woman, a young, pretty blonde. She clicked on the article, which talked about Michael Brennan's new girlfriend, who was an actress. She remembered her father mentioning that

Michael had gotten a divorce, but she hadn't paid much attention. They hadn't spent time with the Brennans after her mother died, and she'd certainly never been interested in hanging out with Elena or her brother after that strange party.

She looked up from the phone and stared out the front window, thinking about the importance of Michael Brennan's son, David, having a ring with the very same design as the gunman's tattoo.

If the design was Eastern European in nature, David's mother's name suddenly stood out in her head—*Katya*. Where had Katya been from? *Czechoslovakia? Ukraine, Croatia?*

She felt like she'd been told at some point, but now she couldn't remember. All she remembered about Katya was a sweet, quiet woman, who liked to bake but always seemed a little sad.

She needed to talk to Michael...or maybe Katya. Who would be more likely to tell her the truth? Her father's friend...or his ex-wife? Somehow, she thought it might be the ex-wife, especially since she knew Michael had been meeting with Peter over the past few days. Anything she said to Michael could be immediately passed on to Peter, and she couldn't risk that.

A woman heading toward the intersection suddenly caught her eye. She had long brown hair almost down to her waist, straight and sleek. She looked ballerina thin—and exactly like Elena Brennan.

Sophie sat up straighter. *Was her mind playing tricks on her?*

The woman wore tight, white jeans and bootie sandals, a clingy, cropped top barely covering her midriff. She was talking on the phone and as the light changed, she walked with pace and purpose, going in the same direction Damon had.

Her breath stuck in her chest as she remembered the photo Wyatt had shown her. Was Elena the woman from last night's meeting with Karen and the Venturi boss? Were the Brennans involved with the Venturis?

Her earpiece suddenly crackled.

"I see Karen Leigh," Damon said. "It looks like she's alone."

As Wyatt and Bree confirmed his message, Sophie felt an overwhelming rush of fear.

Why was Elena in the park? If she was there, were other mob soldiers there as well? Had Damon just walked into the middle of a set-up?

"I don't think Karen is alone," she said into the phone, but Damon didn't answer, and she could hear him speaking to someone.

Karen was there.

She couldn't interrupt him now.

If she kept yelling in his ear, or rushed into the park to find him, she might distract him, and put him in more danger. She had to have faith in him and also in his friends.

Maybe it hadn't been Elena at all. She hadn't seen Elena since that horrible party. She could be wrong...but she didn't think she was.

"Please be safe, Damon," she silently prayed. She could not lose another person that she loved.

Damon heard Sophie's rushed words, but he couldn't respond, not with Karen a foot away. His gaze swept the area, but he didn't see anyone out of place. If Karen had brought someone, they weren't visible. Hopefully, they were just there as protection for her and not to take him out.

"What are you doing here, Damon?" Karen asked.

She was dressed in jeans and a baggy top, and he wouldn't be surprised if she had a weapon on her. She wore a baseball cap, her hair pulled back in a ponytail, sunglasses covering her eyes.

"We need to talk," he said.

"Where's Wyatt?"

"He's safe. He's putting together a very detailed case about you and Alan."

She didn't flinch, but her tongue came out and swiped her lips. "I don't know what you're talking about. Wyatt needs to come into the office. He's in danger. So are you, for that matter. And where the hell is Sophie Parker?"

"You're not here to ask questions. You're here to answer them. You saw the photo Wyatt sent you."

"That was a business meeting. I was looking for information on Wyatt, as a matter of fact. I've been extremely worried about him."

"Cut the crap, Karen." He purposefully used her first name, deliberately not acknowledging her status as an agent above him.

"I don't think you're going to last on our team, Damon," she said, snapping back at him. "But then you might be spending some time in jail for murder."

"You know one of the people I shot was working for the Venturi family, maybe both of them, the same family you're working for." He paused. "What do you think Wyatt has been doing for the last year, Karen? He's been collecting evidence against their organization, and you're right in the middle of it."

"I'm not. I haven't done anything."

"Stop lying. It's over."

"If it was over, you wouldn't be here alone. What do you want?"

Good. She was ready to negotiate. "I want to know who's calling the shots."

"If you don't know that, you don't know anything."

"I know enough to get you into a hell of a lot of trouble. But, hey, if you want to be the fall girl, that works for me. One less player off the game board."

"You don't have anything on me but a picture that I can explain. You're bluffing."

"I know you're dirty, Karen. And I don't just know it; I can prove it—with Wyatt's help, of course. He's not too happy about almost being killed the other day."

"I don't know what happened to Wyatt, but if anyone set him up, it was Alan. I've had my suspicions about him for a long time."

"Suspicions, huh? Yet you did nothing but cozy up to Alan. I'm not buying it. Try again."

Karen took a quick look around, as if debating her next move. He honestly wasn't sure what she was going to do. Then he saw her eyes widen in shock as she fell to her knees, putting a hand to her chest, to the blood suddenly spreading across her shirt. She crumpled awkwardly onto the ground.

"Karen," he yelled, stunned that she'd been shot right in front of him.

He dropped down next to her. She was writhing on the ground.

"Help me," she said.

He heard a woman scream, "She's been shot."

A man shouted "Gun!"

People went running.

He put his hands on Karen's chest, trying to stop the flow of blood from the gushing wound. She was gasping for breath, her eyes wide and terrified.

"Who did this, Karen? Tell me."

"I—I can't. Help me," she pleaded.

"I'm going to help you." He could see her gaze losing focus. "But you have to stay with me." He pressed harder on the wound. "This is your last chance to come clean—to tell your story."

"I didn't want to be a part of it," she said breathlessly. "I didn't have a choice."

"Why not?"

"He had pictures of me and Alan—together. They told me Alan wasn't keeping up his end of the bargain. If I didn't take over, they'd release the pictures. They'd let everyone know I was sleeping with the boss, and that's why..." She

struggled to breathe. "That's why I got promoted. My career is all I have. Alan didn't really want me. He was just lonely. He said it was a mistake. Oh, God, it was such a mistake. Now it's going to end like this. I don't want to die."

"You're not going to die. Help is coming. Who's in charge, Karen? Stefan Venturi? Peter Hunt? Who?"

Her eyes closed.

"Dammit, wake up," he yelled.

Bree appeared at his side. "Damon, get out of here," she said. "I called 911. Ambulance, police, and FBI are on the way. I've got my badge. I can talk my way out of this. You can't be here when they get here."

"She was just about to tell me—"

"I heard," Bree interrupted. "I recorded everything she said on the phone. Get out of here, Damon."

He jumped to his feet, looking around the now deserted area. "Who shot her? Who the hell shot her?"

"I didn't see."

"Where's Wyatt?"

Her silence spoke volumes.

"Dammit! Did he shoot her? Why? Because she was going to talk?"

"Maybe," Bree said, her eyes tormented. "I don't know, but you have to leave now. Get Sophie and go."

Sophie!

A new terror ran through him. "Sophie?" he said, hoping she could hear him through her earpiece. "Are you all right?"

There was no answer.

He sped through the trees as the sirens got closer, stopping for a second to wipe his bloody hands on the grass. He slowed his pace as he reached the sidewalk. He didn't want to draw attention to himself as someone fleeing from the scene.

Finally, he was able to get through the crowd, and he ran across the street.

Fear squeezed his chest so hard he could barely breathe. "I'm coming, Sophie," he said. "Please be there. Please be there."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY

SOPHIE WAS in the back of a van.

When she'd heard screams coming over her headset, she'd known something had gone terribly wrong. Damon and Karen had been having a tense conversation when all hell had broken loose.

It had sounded like someone had shot Karen.

Damon had been yelling at Karen to stay with him. Someone in the background had been screaming about a gun.

She'd yelled into the phone, but no one had heard her. Or they were too busy to answer.

So, she'd grabbed the key from the ignition and jumped out of the car. To hell with staying behind locked doors. She was not going to sit there and do nothing.

Unfortunately, she'd barely taken two steps when she'd been shoved from behind. The phone and the car key had gone flying out of her hand as she hit the side of the car and fell to her knees.

A man had hauled her to her feet. A van had come up next to her. She'd been thrown inside. Her head had

bounced off the inside wall, and stars had exploded in front of her eyes. She thought she might have passed out for a minute.

But now she was wide awake, and she needed to get her bearings, figure a way out of this mess.

She looked around the van. There were no seats. It was obviously a work van. There were some paint cans, rollers and tins in one corner next to some tarps. She wondered if she could use the paint to her advantage. *Paint was explosive. Maybe she could start a fire.* But she didn't have a lighter or a match.

Fear coursed through her as the van picked up speed. She couldn't see who was driving. She thought there were at least two people, and at least one of them was male.

Was the other one Elena?

It didn't seem likely. She'd gone into the park.

Had Elena shot Karen?

That seemed like a ridiculous thought.

Elena was a preppy, private-school educated, wealthy young woman with the world at her fingertips. *Why would she be involved in this dirty business?*

She wasn't even sure the woman she'd seen was Elena. Still, her brother had had a ring with the same tattoo.

She pressed a hand to her throbbing head, not sure if she was on the right track or the wrong one. She had to remember that the people most likely responsible for grabbing her were the Venturis. They were at the center of everything—or their new partner was.

Had someone followed Karen to the park and shot her before she could spill any information?

That might make sense.

But why hadn't Wyatt and Bree seen the shooter? Why hadn't they stopped him?

At least, Damon hadn't gone down. She could still hear his voice in her head.

He was alive. She had to hang on to that.

She just didn't know how long they were both going to stay alive...

The car key was on the ground, the door was unlocked, and Sophie's phone was lying next to the front wheel.

Damon picked up her phone and scoured the street. Police cars and an ambulance were pulling up down the block, near the entrance to the park. Help was on the way for Karen. He hoped she'd survive because she could provide valuable information, but right now his main concern was Sophie. If only she'd been able to keep the phone with her, he could have pinged her location.

Had she gotten out of the car when she'd heard the screams?

He remembered her voice in his ear, but he didn't think he'd answered her.

He should have said something. He should have told her to run.

It was too late now.

A car pulled up next to him; he was shocked to see Wyatt behind the wheel.

"Get in," Wyatt said.

For a split second, he hesitated. *Had Wyatt shot Karen? Was he the double agent?*

"Damon," Wyatt said sharply. "I know where they're taking Sophie."

Oh, hell. If Wyatt was the double agent, then he'd just said the one thing guaranteed to make him get in the car.

He opened the door and jumped in.

"Where's Bree?" Wyatt asked, as he sped down the street.

"She's with Karen—handling the scene. Did you shoot Karen?"

"Hell, no, I didn't shoot Karen." Wyatt gave him a dark look. "You think I'm the dirty agent?"

"If you didn't do it, did you see who did?"

"I saw a woman with dark hair running through the trees right after Karen went down. She looked like the woman I saw in the bar last night. I ran after her. When I got to the street, I saw a guy throwing Sophie in the back of a van. The woman jumped into a black SUV with tinted windows. The vehicles took off in different directions. I don't know where the woman is going, but I've seen the van before. It's used by Venturi Construction. There's a warehouse not far from here that they use."

"You think that's where they're taking her?"

Wyatt's jaw tightened. "Yeah. It's private. I've seen people brought there before," he said harshly.

Damon sucked in a breath, the reality of Wyatt's words making him sick. He knew exactly what Wyatt meant when he said he'd seen people brought there before. And he was

betting not all of those *people* had left the building alive or in the same shape in which they'd entered.

The thought of anyone hurting Sophie was torturous. He couldn't bear the thought. He wished to hell he could trade places with her, that he could take whatever pain was coming her way.

He'd let her down. He should have taken her into the park. He should have stayed with her. She hadn't wanted to be alone. She'd been terrified to be on her own, and he'd left her. He'd chosen the mission over her.

"Keep it together," Wyatt ordered, giving him another hard look.

"This is my fault."

"We'll get her back."

"We have to."

"We will. I heard Karen's confession—is she going to make it?"

"I don't know; doubtful. She didn't give me the name I wanted."

"That's why they took her out. They must have been watching her. They must have believed she was vulnerable."

"I don't think she realized they thought she was weak. She wasn't giving me anything until she was shot. Then the truth hit her—she was going to die for them. That's why she started talking." He let out a breath. "Dammit. I can't believe how badly we blew this. Where was the shooter? Why didn't either you or Bree see them?"

"I've been asking myself that, too. I thought we had the area covered."

He wondered again if he was smart to trust Wyatt, especially when Wyatt turned down an alley, heading toward the water.

Trust had never come easy for him, not after the number his parents had done on his head. But he'd trusted the men and women he'd served with in the Army, and he'd trusted Wyatt and Bree more than once. He could trust them again. At this point, he had to.

As his hand tightened around Sophie's phone, he felt as if he could still feel the warmth of her hand. She must be so scared. He silently willed her strength and prayed that Wyatt was taking him to the right place.

It suddenly occurred to him that maybe Sophie hadn't dropped the phone by accident. Maybe she'd left him a clue.

He turned on the phone. An Internet page came up. Sophie had been looking at a picture of her father's friend, Michael Brennan, standing with a girlfriend and his adult children—David and Elena.

His pulse sped up at the sight of the beautiful brunette with the long, brown hair. "Is this the woman you saw?" he asked, enlarging the photo so it was just the woman in the frame.

"That's her," Wyatt said, surprise in his voice. "Who is she?"

"Elena Brennan, the daughter of Michael Brennan."

"One of the Yale guys who met with Peter Hunt last night?"

"Yes. Maybe Brennan is the new player in the Venturi operation, and that's why his daughter was at the bar. I

wonder why Sophie was looking her up." He got out of the image and went back a page, seeing Sophie's search for a ring with a snake and an eye in the middle of a circle. Somehow, she must have connected the tattoo with the Brennans; he wasn't sure how she'd done that, but maybe it would help them later when they had to connect all the dots.

But first he had to save her life.

The people who had grabbed her probably wanted to know what she knew, which was why they'd taken her alive. But she wasn't going to stay that way long.

"There's the car," Wyatt said suddenly, coming to an abrupt stop behind a Dumpster in a back alley between two large warehouses.

The dark SUV was parked in front of a warehouse door. There was no sign of the van, but it could be inside.

"Looks like the players are here," Wyatt said, a light of battle coming into his eyes. "Ready to kick some ass, Damon?"

"More than ready."

"So, you trust me again?"

Wyatt had always been skilled at reading people. "I do," he said, pulling out his gun.

Wyatt nodded approvingly. "Then let's go get your girl back."

He almost said Sophie wasn't his girl. *But wasn't she? Hadn't she been for the last four years?*

Sophie struggled against the plastic ties that held her hands together behind the back of a chair. She was sitting in the middle of a large room in a dark, cavernous warehouse. They'd come in through a loading dock, and she hadn't seen any light when they'd taken her out of the van, so they'd obviously parked in a garage of some sort. A man had brought her into this room, tied her up and left. She hadn't recognized his face. And he hadn't said one word to her despite her begging him to let her go.

Now, she was waiting. If she could somehow get her hands free and off the chair, maybe she could find a way to escape. They hadn't tied her feet, so she could at least kick out, perhaps injure someone that way. But despite the optimistic thought, she knew her odds of getting out of this room were slim.

Someone had been after her for days, and they'd finally caught up to her.

Hopefully, she'd at least get some answers before they killed her.

A chill ran through her. She really wasn't ready to die. She had so many things she wanted to do. She couldn't help wondering if her father had had the same thought as someone rammed his car from behind, running him off the road. But unlike her father, she couldn't leave anyone a voicemail. She couldn't apologize or tell someone—Damon—that she loved him.

Perhaps it was better that way. Her father's messages hadn't really eased her mind; they'd only given her more to worry about.

A side door opened, and she caught her breath. A man came through first. He was short and stocky, built like a linebacker, like a man who knew how to fight.

Behind him came a woman—a woman wearing white jeans and a short top, a woman with long, brown hair and familiar brown eyes.

"Well, well, well," Elena said, a mocking expression on her beautiful, cold face. "Little Sophie Parker. You always end up in the wrong place at the wrong time, don't you? Just like that party when we were in high school. Only this time, you won't be able to run away."

"What are you doing, Elena? Why are you involved in this business?"

"Involved in what? Making money? It's not just business—it's the *family* business," she said. "We thought your father understood loyalty to family, but he didn't."

Anger ran through her. "He was not a part of your family."

"My father treated him like a brother. My mother took care of yours when she was sick. But how quickly you both forgot.

"Are you saying that you killed my father?" she asked in disbelief.

"He drove off the road. Sometimes that happens when you speed."

"It wasn't an accident. Someone was chasing him. Was it you?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes, it matters. Why? Why did you do it? Why did you drag my father into your business?"

"Drag him?" Elena challenged. "Your father asked my father for help, and he gave it. But when it came to collect on that favor, your father was not very helpful."

She hated Elena's mocking, condescending tone, but right now she wanted answers, and playing along seemed to be the only way to get them. "Why did my father need help? He didn't care about money."

"He did when your mom was dying—when she needed experimental treatment that insurance wouldn't cover. When she wanted to go to that clinic in Switzerland—do you remember that?"

"Of course, I remember."

"How do you think he paid for all that?"

"I don't know. He never said. I assumed he took out a loan on the house or something."

"Or something. My father gave him money, everything he needed to save your mother. And then when it was our turn, your father wasn't so generous."

"Your turn? What did you need? I don't recall anyone getting sick and dying."

"We needed someone at the FBI to take care of a few things for us—small things, nothing too difficult. He managed the first few, but then he started to balk."

"What did you do?"

"We made sure he knew that he was in too deep to get out. He got a little more cooperative. He even left Quantico and came to New York when we needed him to. We thought for a time he understood his role. But that changed. We realized he was starting to work against us. He was betraying our friendship. So, we had to make it clear that it

was no longer just about paying back his debt to us; it was about keeping his daughter alive."

"That's not friendship; that's blackmail."

"Call it what you like, it worked. You provided excellent incentive, but then there was one line Alan just didn't want to cross."

"What was that?"

"We needed him to take out an undercover in the Venturi organization, someone that Alan neglected to tell us was feeding him information."

"He wouldn't do it," she said, feeling remarkably thankful that her father had drawn the line there.

"No."

"You're the new partner. Your family business is joining forces with the Venturis, aren't they?"

"So, you've learned a little while hiding out with your hot FBI agent," she drawled. "It's too bad he's not here. But then he left you alone. He was more interested in getting information from that stupid FBI bitch than in protecting you. I probably should have killed him, too, but there's always time for that."

She could see the evil swirling in Elena's eyes, and she was reminded of the snake tattoo with the sinister red eye. "You shot Agent Leigh? How do you even know how to do that?" she asked in bewilderment. "I thought you were a fashion designer."

"You were supposed to think that."

"Is your whole family involved? Your mother was so nice to me when my mom died." She couldn't believe Katya was part of a criminal enterprise.

"My mother is nice, but she's also a Belenko. Her brothers have been running a very profitable business in the Ukraine for the last few years, but they wanted to expand. They asked me to help them."

"And your father's hedge fund?"

"It's an excellent place to make money."

"And launder dirty money?"

"Don't be ridiculous," she said with a laugh. "My father is as clean as the purest snow. That's why he can meet with senators and FBI directors and get useful information."

"But he knows what you do with the information. Is your brother involved?"

"David was involved for a short time, but he was too erratic, and he wanted too big of a cut. He's been on a world tour for some time now. No one knows when he'll be back—*if* he'll be back."

Bile rose in her throat. She'd never seen pure evil before; she was looking at it now.

"Why are you doing this? You're wealthy. You have everything you've ever wanted, Elena."

"I don't just want money; I want power—total and absolute power. I'm tired of being Daddy's little girl, David's little sister, the Belenkos' niece. My uncles don't hold women in particularly high regard, but soon they'll realize I'm in charge. I'm not just bringing in a partnership with the Venturis as they asked me to do—I'm taking over their operation. I've already gotten rid of one of them—Lorenzo Venturi. Stefan will soon be charged with his brother's murder; that information has already been passed on to Peter Hunt. You see, Sophie, we don't always need an

FBI agent to do something wrong to get our way. Sometimes we just have to help them do something right by pointing them in the direction we want them to go."

Elena's brain was a terrifying thing. "So, Peter Hunt has no idea you and your father and your whole family are running a criminal operation? How is that possible? Surely, he must know about your mother's family ties to organized crime in Ukraine."

"He has no idea. No one does. My mother changed her name when she came to this country. She didn't want to be part of the Belenko family anymore. She wanted to marry a rich American and live a different life. And that's exactly what she did. But as she got older, she missed her family. She was lonely. She was unhappy with my father. He didn't treat her well. So, she reached out to her brothers. They accepted her apology. And they invited David and me to visit when we graduated from high school. It quickly became clear to us that we were Belenkos not Brennans."

She shook her head in disbelief. "I don't remember your mother ever talking about being from somewhere else. But I guess I wasn't around her that much. Your dad never told Peter?"

"My father never told anyone. As I said before, his business is squeaky clean. Unfortunately, he made some mistakes in judgment that my uncles took advantage of. He probably wouldn't have made your father do anything if he hadn't felt pressure from them. But when you make mistakes, sometimes you have to pay."

"What kind of mistakes?"

"Like I said, he didn't treat my mother well," she said, her lips drawing into a hard line.

"You're not going to get away with this, Elena."

"Of course, we will. Recently, Peter Hunt discovered that your father was abetting the Venturis. Everything he did for us has been turned over to Peter. Peter believes that the Venturi brothers were paying your father to help them. And soon Agent Leigh's misdeeds will also be known."

"And then what?" she asked.

"With Alan and Karen dead, Peter Hunt will announce that all of the FBI leaks have been sealed. The Venturis' operation has been shut down. He'll send Stefan to jail for his brother's murder with the proof that we'll make sure he gets. It will be a big day for him. And then in a few months, or a year, we'll use him as we need to, because once Peter realizes he's been played, he won't be able to escape the trap he was so happy to get into."

"If only you would use your brain for good things," she murmured.

Elena smiled. "Believe me, I have very good things in my life, Sophie. When I see something I want, I go and get it."

"One day you're going to pay for all of this."

"Well, you won't live to see that day." Elena pulled out her gun. "I thought you might know more than you do, that your father might have shared information with you. That's why we let you live until now. But I no longer have any use for you."

Elena was going to kill her. She could see the intent in her cold, dark eyes. And there wasn't a damn thing she could do about it. She just hoped the truth wouldn't die

with her, that Damon would figure it all out, that he'd find a way to bring Elena and her family to justice.

She wished she could say good-bye to him, tell him she loved him, tell him that he had to find a way to allow himself to love someone back, because he wasn't meant for the lonely existence he'd chosen. He could find a woman who would stand by him, who wouldn't betray him, who would love him for the rest of his life. He just had to be open to it.

A crash came from somewhere in the warehouse, followed by the smell of smoke.

She stiffened, hope rushing through her veins.

Elena exchanged a look with the man behind her. "Find out what's going on," she ordered.

As the man moved toward the hallway, she caught a glimpse of someone moving along a raised platform behind Elena. She didn't want Elena to see him.

"Please, let me go," she told Elena, drawing the woman's attention back to her. She didn't want to beg, but she wanted to keep Elena focused on her. "I'm not involved in any of this. I'm not going to talk. I don't care what you do. I'll move away. You'll never see me again. No one will be looking for me; my parents are both dead."

"You're stalling, Sophie."

"What about the money? Don't you want that? My dad left me a suitcase filled with cash. I have it stashed somewhere. I could get it for you."

Elena looked marginally interested. "I'm sure I can find it after you're dead." She tilted her head, giving her a

thoughtful look. "Oh, I see. You think he's coming for you, don't you? He won't get here in time." Elena lifted her gun.

Sophie fought hard to keep her eyes open and not cower in her chair. She was going to fight to the last breath. She had to. She turned her head to the right, seeing nothing and no one coming to rescue her, but pretending like she was. "Thank God," she murmured. "You're here."

It was enough of a ruse to make Elena look.

In that split second of distraction, a shot rang out, and Elena went down.

She fell onto her back right in front of Sophie, a hole in the middle of her forehead, her eyes opened in shock and disbelief.

She had died in an instant.

Sophie found herself wishing Elena had suffered a little longer.

Pounding footsteps made her fear what was coming next.

And then she saw Damon, coming down a ladder. He dropped to his feet and ran toward her, his gun in his hand, relief flashing through his eyes. He stopped for a quick minute to make sure Elena was dead and then he came to her.

"Sophie!" he said in a voice choked with emotion.

"I'm all right. But there are other men here. I don't know where they are."

"Wyatt and I took care of everyone else. She was the last one."

"I thought I smelled smoke."

"Wyatt started a small fire to lure out Elena's bodyguard. Then he took him out." Damon pulled out his keys and used the small penknife to slice through the plastic ties. Then he kissed her on the lips and put his arms around her, pressing her into the tightest and most welcome embrace of her life. "Thank God you're all right."

She wrapped her arms around his neck, overwhelmed with gratitude that he was alive, too, that they were both safe. But then she heard sirens and the fear returned. "We need to get out of here. The police are coming, and I'm sure the FBI won't be far behind."

"No," he said, shaking his head. "We're not running anymore."

"We aren't?" she asked in confusion.

"I recorded your conversation with Elena," he said, reaching into his pocket to pull out his phone. "Wyatt called Peter once Elena confirmed that Peter is innocent. He's on his way. It's over, Sophie."

"I want to believe that, but what about Michael Brennan, and the Venturis, and—"

He put his fingers against her mouth. "We're going to take them all down."

"Do we have enough evidence?"

"If we don't, we'll get it."

"What about Karen? Is she dead? Elena said she was."

"She was alive when I left, but I don't know if she'll make it." He paused. "Did you hear what Karen said?"

"About sleeping with my father and being blackmailed? Yeah, I heard that. I wonder if she even cared about him at all or if she was just using him."

"I think a lot of things will become clear as we dig into this."

"I just don't understand why my dad didn't tell me that Michael and Elena were blackmailing him. At least I would have had that information."

"The more you knew, the more danger you would be in. He was trying to protect you. And I think, in some ways, he was trying to prevent you from knowing what he'd done. That's why he made plans for you to leave."

She stood up as Wyatt entered the room, followed by Peter Hunt and a half-dozen agents and cops.

Peter came toward her, apology in his eyes. "My God, Sophie. I am so sorry."

His words seemed bitterly ironic. "That's exactly what you said to me last Wednesday when you came to tell me that my father was dead."

"I meant it then, too," he said heavily.

"Why didn't you tell me that you knew my father was a double agent? Elena said that they fed you that information a few weeks ago."

"I was still reviewing it. I'm always skeptical of evidence that comes my way too easily. There's usually an agenda behind it."

Maybe Peter wasn't as dumb as Elena had made him out to be. "Did you know about Karen Leigh, too?"

He shook his head, as anger filled his eyes. "No, I didn't. Not until today. Agent Adams read me in at the hospital."

"Is Karen dead?" Damon asked.

"She's still in surgery," Peter replied. "There's a slim chance she'll make it. Agent Adams turned over the

recording she made of your conversation at the park. Even if Karen doesn't recover, we have her last words." He paused. "You should have come to me, Damon. That first night when I asked you into my office, you should have told me you were going after Sophie."

"I hadn't decided at that point," Damon replied. "I wasn't sure she was at the cabin; it was a hunch."

"One you should have shared."

"I'm not going to apologize when God knows how many people in the field office you oversee are compromised," he returned.

Sophie sucked in a breath as anger flared in Peter's eyes.

"I do not believe that anyone else is compromised," Peter said.

"You don't know that for sure," she said. "Elena told me her in-laws are part of a powerful crime family. How did you not know that Michael's ex-wife was tied to organized crime?"

"I never had any reason to look into Katya's background. And they've been divorced for almost ten years now. As for Michael, his business has always been clean. I know that hedge funds can be used to launder money; I checked him out a long time ago. I wanted to be sure our friendship could never be questioned."

"Well you didn't dig deep enough," she said.

"That's going to change. Wyatt played me the recording of your conversation with Elena. I'm on my way to see Michael now. If we get him to cooperate, and I think he will

considering his daughter is dead, we'll be able to nail the Belenkos and the Venturis to the wall."

"I want to come with you," she said. "Don't tell me I can't, Peter, because I have to see the man who lent my father money to save my mother's life, knowing that the Belenkos would then force him into becoming a traitor. Did you know that the Belenkos threatened my life? That they sent my father pictures of me, telling him that they could get to me at any time?"

"I didn't," Peter said.

"My father was trapped. He could do what they wanted him to do, or he could watch me die. But he couldn't kill Wyatt. That was the one thing he couldn't do. So, the Belenkos killed my dad, and Michael Brennan knew about it. He's going to tell me how he could do that to his friend. He owes me that. And, so, do you."

"Then let's go," Peter said grimly.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

DESPITE HER FORCEFUL plea to Peter, Sophie was a little surprised that he'd agreed to let her come along, but they were now driving to Michael Brennan's house in a bullet-proof, black Escalade. Wyatt and Peter sat in the middle row, discussing various aspects of the case, while she and Damon sat in the back row, their fingers intertwined.

She couldn't seem to let go of Damon, and he couldn't seem to let go of her. That would probably change when the shock wore off, but for now she was happy to hang on to him.

"Thanks for saving me again," she said quietly. "I was afraid it was going to be three strikes and you're out."

He gave her a smile. "You're channeling Jamie with the baseball metaphor."

"I am," she admitted. "By the way, how did you know where to find me?"

"Wyatt saw them grab you. He was chasing Elena out of the park after she shot Karen. When he saw the Venturi van, he guessed where they'd be taking you. He knew the way things worked there, the layout inside, where the

guards would be. We took out the two guys by the front door, then got inside. We would have moved in earlier, but you were getting some good information out of Elena. We thought we should let her talk."

"She was talking to me, because she wanted to brag, and she didn't plan on me living to tell anyone about our conversation. When I saw a shadow on a ledge behind her, I was hoping it was you, but I wasn't sure."

"I was getting into position. Thanks for distracting her by the way."

"It was all I could think to do. You made a tremendously good shot—one bullet right in the center of her forehead." A chill ran through her as she saw Elena's image again in her head. "I think she was stunned that she'd been caught. It was in her eyes when she fell to the ground. I'm glad she knew. She was so full of herself. She thought she could rule the world."

"Not with us in it," Damon said.

She smiled. "At least not with you in it."

"You did your part. I probably should have shot her in the arm, but I couldn't risk her taking a shot at you. Keeping her alive might have given us more evidence."

"I'm glad she's dead. I know that I probably shouldn't admit to that, but it's true. She was a bad person. I knew she was wild when I was a kid, but I didn't know how horrible she was. She had no heart, no soul. It was terrifying to see nothing in her eyes. I think she killed her brother, too. The family believes he's traveling around the world, but she made it sound like he's never coming back."

"I heard that. She didn't want to share her power."

"He was also bad." She paused, remembering what had made her look up the Brennans again. "Her brother had a ring with the same design as the tattoo. I knew I'd seen it before. When I was waiting in the car, I was thinking about the tattoo so I wouldn't worry about you taking on Karen, and I remembered being at a party when I was a teenager. I bumped into a guy, my hair got caught in his ring, and I shivered when I saw this red eye looking back at me. I think now the symbol is probably from Ukrainian culture and tied to the Belenkos."

"The man in the storage unit was probably tied to them, too; that's why there was no record of him in this country." Damon paused. "I found your phone and I saw the photos of the Brennans. I showed Wyatt the picture of Elena, and he confirmed she was the woman he'd seen last night at the meeting with Karen."

"I thought I saw Elena going into the park, but it seemed like such a ridiculous idea that I couldn't quite believe it. I tried to say something to you, but you were already talking to Karen."

A light came into his eyes. "You did say something about someone else being there."

"I guess I should have said it louder." She took a breath. "I'm glad you took out Elena, but I'm worried the rest of the rats are going to scatter."

"More likely they're going to talk. When the boss is dead, the first people to talk usually get the best deal."

"But only one boss is dead. Stefan Venturi is still alive and so are Elena's uncles."

"We'll get them all," he promised. "I'm not stopping until that happens."

"The one I want the most is Michael. Maybe he runs a clean business, but when it comes to my father, his hands have blood on them."

"I know."

"I hope he's home," she said, as the car stopped in front of Michael Brennan's home on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. The luxury home came with two security guards out front, but Peter's badge forced the men to step aside.

They found Michael Brennan on the second floor in his study, standing in front of his floor-to-ceiling windows with a spectacular view of the Hudson River, sipping what appeared to be a whiskey. He didn't look surprised to see them when he turned around. He looked resigned...

"Is my daughter alive?" he asked.

She couldn't believe the lack of emotion in his question. Maybe all the Brennans were devoid of heart.

"No," she said, taking the lead from the three men behind her. She took a step forward. "She's as dead as my father is. And you stand here, having your drink, as if nothing in the world has changed? What is wrong with you?"

"I'm very aware that everything has changed, Sophie," he said, meeting her gaze. "I never wanted your father in the middle of any of this, but he was desperate for my money. So, I helped him."

"You didn't help him. You made him your pawn."

"Not *my* pawn. I didn't force him to do anything."

"No, you let your family do that. Do you think that makes you innocent?"

"You don't understand. It didn't start out that way, but the more money he needed, the more interest he drew from my in-laws. I was under pressure to utilize his connections. I—I had my own problems to deal with—a wife who couldn't get through a day without a drink, a son who was willing to waste his life snorting coke and getting involved with under-aged girls, and a daughter who was, sadly, as evil as her uncles. She told them about my relationship with Alan, the money he owed me, owed the family, really, because Katya funded my business in the beginning. It was her money that she'd brought with her and the Belenkos made sure I knew that. I wasn't just lending my money; I was lending theirs. That's why I told your father no at first. But he begged me. He said he had to do everything he could to save Maggie."

"Did he pay you back?"

"He couldn't. He got too far in debt. You have no idea how much it all cost, and he spared no expense. So he did a few favors, small things, nothing that raised suspicion. But a few years ago, the family wanted more from him. They wanted to expand their operations in New York. They needed an agent in the New York office. Alan had to be that agent. I made sure he knew that more might be required of him. I urged him to retire, to leave the FBI, to make himself unimportant."

She was shocked to hear that. "Why didn't he do that?"

"He said he needed the money."

Her heart twisted. "For my schooling?"

"He didn't say. I knew he was going to be in trouble. Elena was making a play for power. She wanted to impress her uncles and also the Venturis. She was angry with me for leaving her mother. I didn't want her to hate me. I tried to get her to lay off of Alan, but she wouldn't."

"So, you gave her what she wanted—my father on a silver platter," she said bitterly.

"I didn't know how to stop her. I didn't see a way to contain her ambition. Your father was willing to do anything to save his family. I was willing to do anything to make my daughter love me again."

"Make her love you?" Sophie echoed in bewilderment. "She was incapable of love. Do you know where your son is?"

He paled. "He's traveling."

She could see the truth in his eyes. "You don't believe that."

He finished off his drink. "I've called my lawyer. He'll be here soon."

"A lawyer isn't going to help you," Damon said, stepping up next to her. "You're going to go down for multiple murders and a whole list of other crimes. If you turn evidence on the Belenkos and the Venturis, you may be able to shorten your sentence."

"He's right," Peter put in. "You should have told me, Michael. If you wanted to get out, you should have told me."

"He never wanted to get out," she said. "He just wants to pretend that he did now, so he can make himself feel better. If he has regrets, it makes it all okay."

"That's not true," Michael said. "It's not okay, and I know it. I never thought things would go this far. I never imagined that Alan would die. I'm sorry, Sophie."

"And I'm really tired of people apologizing to me for things they should have done differently."

Michael's gaze moved from her to Peter. "They're coming after you next, Peter."

"I know," Peter said. "Who else at the Bureau is involved? I need names, Michael, every single one."

"As far as I know—only the woman who was shot in the park today."

"You know about that?" Sophie asked.

"I was recently informed," he admitted.

"I'm surprised you didn't run," she said.

He gave her a tired smile. "The world is a very small place, and even if the FBI couldn't find me, the Belenkos could. There's only one way for me to be free. It's almost a relief," Michael added, his voice getting thick, his words slurring. "I don't know why I fought it for so long. I had so much in my life, but not the most important things—love and family. Maybe I'll find Elena again in another life, and she'll be the girl I remember, not the woman she grew up to be."

Sophie's gaze narrowed. "What's wrong with you?" she asked.

"He took something," Damon said, striding forward as Michael fell to the ground.

Peter rushed to Michael's side, putting his hand on Michael's neck. "There's no pulse." He pushed Michael onto his back and started CPR.

Damon called 911, requesting an ambulance.

For long minutes, Peter, Wyatt and Damon took turns working on Michael, trying to bring him back to life. But it was to no avail. By the time the paramedics arrived, he'd been dead for several minutes.

As the medics put Michael on a stretcher and carried him out, Sophie went over to Peter. He looked shell-shocked. It seemed as if he'd aged ten years in the last few minutes. "You did everything you could," she said.

"I didn't do nearly enough." He looked at her through strained, exhausted eyes. "And I'm not talking about Michael; I should have known your dad was in trouble. I should have asked more questions about why he left Quantico. He loved the academy. I didn't understand why he wanted to leave there to come to New York, but now I do. He still had a debt to pay."

"He should have asked for help," she said. "He should have told me about the money. I could have dropped out of school. I could have helped him. And if he didn't want to tell me because he was ashamed, he should have asked for help from one of his friends. I don't understand why he couldn't find a way out."

Peter stared back at her. "I think Alan was working on a way out. He was trying to play both sides without getting caught by either."

"He said something like that in his voicemail. He said he was trying to put things right, that there still might be a way out. Maybe he was using Wyatt to build a case against them all, but they figured it out." She turned to Wyatt. "Elena told me that my dad wouldn't take you out. That's

why they killed him. I know he was using you, and you probably can't forgive him, but I'm glad he didn't cross that line."

"I am, too," Wyatt said. "But he must have found out that someone else at the FBI stepped in and tried to make it happen without him. That's why he ran."

"And why he told you not to trust anyone, Sophie," Damon interjected. "He wasn't sure who else at the FBI was involved. He might have thought they'd already gotten to Peter and to Karen."

"I did tell him that I'd found some discrepancies in his cases," Peter said. "I asked him to sit down with me. I don't know if he believed I was going to pressure him to do what the Belenkos wanted, or if I was going to turn him in. But we never had that meeting."

"We'll probably never know everything," she said with a tired sigh. "But I have a pretty good idea now of what happened."

"You just need to remember that your dad loved you, Sophie," Damon said, as Peter and Wyatt moved away.

"I know that," she said, looking into his compassionate eyes. "And my dad loved my mom, too. He was willing to do anything to save her life. It doesn't negate what he did, but it makes it easier for me to understand." She let out a breath. "I am surprised Michael killed himself instead of running away. On the other hand, he was able to take his secrets to his grave. He protected his family, his daughter, his son, even in his death. We can't get evidence out of him now. He won't have to turn against them."

"Actually, I don't think Michael was trying to protect anyone," Wyatt interrupted, waving them over to the desk. "Looks like Brennan left us everything we need to take down the Belenkos. He couldn't do it himself, but with all this, we can."

"Really?" she asked, walking over to the desk.

"Michael wrote the whole story down—everything," Wyatt said in amazement, skimming through a handwritten letter. "It's all here. Names, contact information, bank accounts...and not just on the Belenkos, the Venturis, too. We're going to be able to take down both families." He handed Peter the letter.

"Damn," Peter said, shaking his head in disbelief. "Maybe he was a coward to take his life, but at least he left something good behind. I need to get a team in here as soon as possible."

"I'll help," Wyatt told Peter. "I'm going to personally make sure that no leads get dropped. There's likely still a hit on my head. I want all the players in jail."

"I'm in, too," Damon said. "Whatever I can do."

"No," Peter said, shaking his head. "Take Sophie home, Damon. Get some food, some rest, and then when you're ready, you can dive in." He paused, glancing at Wyatt. "You should do the same."

"No way, I'm good," Wyatt said, already reading through papers. "I think this information, combined with what we found at Alan's safe house in Brooklyn, will be a good start to making some arrests, and I'd like those to happen as soon as possible."

"Will tonight be soon enough?" Peter asked, as he pulled out his phone.

"That will be perfect," Wyatt said.

Damon turned to her. "Ready to go home?"

"If you want to stay—"

"Actually, I could use a break," he said. "I think we can leave this to Peter and Wyatt for tonight."

She was happy to hear that. As much as she wanted to know everything, her brain was already spinning from information overload, and a time-out was much needed. "Then let's go."

Taking Sophie home had been his first thought, but Damon got a better one a few miles down the road. "Change in plans," he said to the driver. "Take us to The Plaza."

Sophie raised a brow. "I thought we were going to my apartment."

"Your apartment was ransacked. I'm not sure what it looks like."

"Oh, I forgot about that," she said with a sigh.

"I don't think you need to deal with that tonight. I'd take you to my place, but the air conditioning isn't working, and you know how I feel about heat."

She smiled. "I do. So, it's The Plaza? Kind of fancy."

"We'll get the best room they have—my treat."

"It should be my treat. I still have a few hundred dollars in cash."

"And I have a credit card."

"Well, I have one of those, too. It's going to be weird to be able to use it again. Is this really over, Damon? I know Elena and Michael are dead, and Karen is in the hospital, but there are still other dangerous players out there."

"They'll be busy covering their asses. They won't be looking for us anymore." He paused. "It's going to take a little time for you to feel back to normal. Re-entry is never easy."

She cocked her head to the right, giving him a thoughtful look. "You've done it before?"

"Twice, but I was never undercover that long. One job was four days, another was two months, but it still felt strange to be operating under my own name again."

"It will be nice not to have to look over my shoulder every second, but I'm not there yet."

He nodded, seeing the tense lines around her eyes. "You'll get there." He wrapped his fingers around her hand and gave it a squeeze. "You were amazing today—in every possible way."

"I was terrified for most of it."

"You have so much courage, Sophie. Your father would be more than proud." He almost regretted bringing up Alan's name when he saw the shadows enter her eyes. "Sorry, maybe we should put a moratorium on discussing your father and his actions for a few hours."

"It's fine. Even if we don't talk about it, it's there. I just have to work through it all."

"You will."

He looked out the window as they made their way through the city. He couldn't believe he'd only arrived a few

weeks ago. So much had happened. And there was still so much up in the air.

"You're thinking about what's next, aren't you?" she asked. "You came to New York to work for my dad, to be part of his team, but I'm sure the team is going to undergo some massive scrutiny and reorganization."

"To say the least. I'm sure I'll be going through many interrogations myself."

"Do you think we're going to get in trouble for stealing that car?"

He smiled at the question. "That's probably the last thing we'll get in trouble for. But, no, it's going to be fine. The Bureau will take care of all that now that they understand we were operating on the right side of the law."

"I hope so. I am glad that Peter wasn't guilty, too. I thought he was a good guy, and it's nice to know I wasn't wrong about him. Not that I was right about much else."

Sophie had definitely lost some of her innocence this week, but she would bounce back. Deep inside, she just couldn't help wanting to believe in the good in people. It might take her a while to recover from the evil she'd witnessed this week, but she would find a way.

"Do you think you'll stay in New York?" she asked.

"I haven't thought that far ahead." Right now, he couldn't imagine leaving Sophie's side, much less the city she lived in. "We'll see how things go, what arrests are made, what kind of indictments go down, how Peter wants to reorganize the team, whether I'll be a good fit there."

"You already have friends there—Wyatt and Bree. I assume Wyatt won't go back undercover."

"No, not in this city at any rate. I have no idea what his plan will be. Bree seems to like her job. She doesn't work on organized crime. She finds missing kids. That's her passion. She only got involved in this to help me and Wyatt."

"She finds missing kids? That's a wonderful endeavor."

"She's good at it, too. But it can be heartbreaking."

"I can't even imagine."

"Don't even try. You've dealt with enough evil for one day."

"I really have. And I feel so amped up. I'm tired and wired. I don't know if I should sleep or run five miles."

"How about something in between?" he asked, as he put his arm around her, and she rested her head on his shoulder.

"This feels nice," she murmured.

"It really does."

She raised her head. "Do you think we should have gone back to Brooklyn? We did leave some things there," she said cryptically, obviously not wanting to mention the money in front of their driver.

"Wyatt told me as we were leaving that he'd go back there and collect everything of importance."

"Who will take charge of the suitcase and its contents?"

"I have no idea. I'm sure it will be locked away as evidence for a good long time, but you might be able to make a pitch for it."

"I don't want what's in that suitcase," she said with a shake of her head. "If anything, I'd give it away to someone

who really needs it, maybe someone with a serious illness, whose insurance doesn't cover everything."

He saw the moisture gather in her eyes and realized her adrenaline rush was probably starting to crash. "That's a good idea."

The cab pulled up in front of The Plaza. He paid the driver and led Sophie into the hotel. They were able to get a luxury suite on the top floor for an outrageous amount of money, but he didn't care. He wanted to take care of Sophie tonight. He wanted her to feel the beauty in the world instead of all the ugliness.

When they got into their room, her look of amazement filled him with pleasure.

"This is spectacular, Damon," she said, wandering around the suite, examining the plush sofas and chairs, the view of the city from their twenty-second floor windows, the fully-stocked kitchen with a bowl of fruit on the counter and a refrigerator filled with drinks.

He followed her into the bedroom, the sight of the king-sized bed also making him happy.

Sophie wandered into the bathroom and then came out again with an even bigger smile on her face. "There's an enormous tub and a shower for two, all the luxuries you could ask for. This must be costing you a freaking fortune, Damon."

He laughed. "I don't even care. We deserve it."

She threw her arms around him. "We so deserve it," she said, as pressed her mouth to his.

Everything else in the world fell away. It felt like forever since he'd last kissed her.

He pulled her tight against him, wanting to feel every inch of her body—from her silky hair, to her soft skin, sensitive breasts, curvy hips, hot center, and her smooth, sexy legs that wrapped around his in the most perfect way.

He wanted to take her to bed and never let her up. But it wasn't just sex he wanted, it was everything else. He wanted to spend the rest of his life talking to her, laughing with her, sharing their lives.

He'd told himself and her that he didn't do love...but this sure felt a lot like it.

He'd put steel bars around his heart a long time ago, wanting to protect himself from more pain. But Sophie was his kryptonite—in a good way. He didn't want to live in a cold, lonely fortress; he wanted to live with her.

She pulled away, and disappointment ran through him. He missed her already.

But then she smiled and grabbed the hem of her shirt and pulled it over her head.

His mouth watered at the sight of her luscious breasts peeking out of her lacy bra. His body hardened. "Did you say they have *everything* in the bathroom?"

"Yes. Second drawer on the left."

He raised a brow. "You checked?"

"After I saw this room—absolutely." She took off her bra. "Don't be long."

He made it into the bedroom and back in record time, stripping off his clothes along the way, more than happy to join a beautiful, naked Sophie in the king-sized bed.

"This bed is huge. I hope I don't lose you," she teased.

"Not a chance," he said, pulling her into his arms. "I don't intend to let go of you all night."

"I'm counting on that," she said, as he made good on his promise.

They'd made love three times, reaching for each other every time they woke up. Now, the sun was pricking at her eyelids, and she was almost afraid to open her eyes. The night had been amazing, but every night with Damon was like that.

It was the mornings that weren't so great. She didn't want to turn onto her side and see that he was gone, that his side of the bed was empty. She didn't want the night to be over yet.

He'd told her he was good in the dark, but not so great in the day.

That wasn't true. He was wonderful everywhere—the best man she'd ever known.

And now there were tears pricking at her eyelids. *She was not going to cry. She was not going to ruin whatever time they had left.*

"Sophie?"

His husky voice made her heart squeeze tight. "Yes?" she asked, her eyes still closed.

"Are you awake?"

"Maybe."

"How come your eyes are still closed?" he asked, trailing a finger down her bare arm.

"I'm not sure I'm ready to get up yet." His lips found hers, and she felt an overwhelming rush of love for him. Opening her eyes, she found his face just inches away. "Hi."

He gave her an intimate smile. "Good morning."

She licked her lips. "You're still here."

A gleam of understanding darkened his blue gaze. "So, that was the problem—why you didn't want to open your eyes."

"You'd think I'd be used to you getting up first, moving on with your day—your life. I know that's where we're headed, Damon. You don't have to tell me differently. It's okay. I get it. You have your life, and I have mine. The danger is over. You don't have to feel badly about leaving. It's all going to be fine."

"Are you done?" he asked. "Can I talk now?"

"If you want to."

"I told you I wasn't good at love, wasn't interested in relationships, didn't believe in soul mates or happily ever after."

"You did tell me all that," she agreed.

"Well, I was wrong."

"You were?" she asked, her heart beating faster.

"Yes. I am interested in a relationship with you, a long-term, happily-ever-after kind of thing, because you have definitely taken over my heart and my soul."

Happy shivers ran down her spine. "Really? It's not just the afterglow of amazing sex?"

He laughed. "I can say it again later if you want, but since I'm planning on having more sex with you, I don't know when there won't be an amazing afterglow." He

paused, his gaze turning serious. "But the part about me not being the greatest at love might still be true. I'm going to make mistakes, Sophie. I'm not going to share my feelings enough. I'm probably going to piss you off on a daily basis. But I will try to make you happy, too—that is, if you're interested in giving things a shot."

"Well, even with that glowing reference, I'm definitely interested." She drew in a breath and let it out. "I don't need you to change, Damon. I just want to love you. I fell for you the first second I saw you. But we weren't ready then. I think we are now."

"I do, too," he said in a husky voice. "And I don't want to change you, either, Sophie. I want you to have everything you want—your job at NYU, your digs around the world, whatever makes you smile."

"You make me smile. We can work it out. I love New York, but I could leave if you needed to be somewhere else. It's all negotiable."

He grinned. "I think I'm going to like negotiating with you." He kissed her again. "But we need to get one thing straight."

"What's that?"

"I don't want you to ever be afraid to open your eyes again, Sophie. I might get up before you. I might run out to pick up pancakes, but I will always come back. I will never leave you."

She nodded. "You're stuck with me, too."

"And there's another thing..."

She frowned, sensing a change in his mood as his gaze darkened. "What else?"

"I'm feeling a little guilty for rushing you into this big talk when you're in a vulnerable place. You still have a lot to deal with emotionally. We can have this conversation again. I just wanted you to know that I'm here, and I'm not going anywhere."

"I appreciate that. I do have a lot of emotions that I need to work through. But you and me—we're solid. We're good."

Relief flooded his eyes, and she felt a wave of protectiveness toward him.

Damon put himself on the line every day, but he never put his heart there. She felt incredibly touched that he'd done that for her.

"How about some breakfast?" he asked. "I'll order you anything you want."

"Well, that will be easy, because I want you. We'll get food later."

"Much later," he agreed, as he slid his mouth down her neck and sent her senses spinning again.

OceanofPDF.com

EPILOGUE

ONE MONTH LATER...

Sophie taped up the last box in her father's house and pushed it against the wall with the other four boxes that were ready to be moved. The furniture had already been picked up to be sold at consignment. Only the boxes of personal items were left.

She'd given most of her father's things to charity, but she'd saved photo albums and some family treasures for herself. As a lover of history, she just couldn't bring herself to get rid of everything. Someday, she would tell her children about her mother and her father, and she would pass along a few of their favorite things to the next generation.

As she looked around the empty room, she felt more relief than sadness. In the past four weeks, she'd finally had time to grieve. She'd even allowed herself a few more tears as she went through her dad's things and read the big book of instructions that she'd always tried to avoid.

She'd even held a small memorial dinner with a few of her father's closest friends, which had included Harrison

Delano, Peter Hunt, Diane Lewis and Senator Raleigh. They'd all claimed complete shock over Michael Brennan's part in everything, and while she didn't know if she completely believed all of them, she was happy that they had come out to pay their respects to her dad. Her father's reputation had been ripped apart in the press, but his longtime friends didn't care about that and neither did she. She'd made her peace with what her father had done. And she still loved him for being a good father, because he'd certainly done his best to be there for her in every way possible.

"Are the boxes ready to go?" Damon asked, entering the room, wearing jeans and a T-shirt, looking as sexy and appealing as ever. She wondered if she'd ever get tired of seeing him come through the door. She doubted it.

Damon had rented a truck for the day so they could not only move her father's things out of this house, but they could also move her stuff out of her apartment and his stuff out of his apartment. They had rented a new place together by the university. It was a perfect one-bedroom ground floor apartment with a small patio—an incredible find in the city. But more importantly, it had excellent air conditioning.

"What are you smiling about?" Damon asked curiously.

"You," she said. "I was thinking about our place, and how cool it will be on hot summer nights."

He grinned. "I like the AC, I must admit. But with you around, it's going to be hard to stay cool."

He was right about that. They'd had a lot of trouble keeping their hands off each other the past month. For a man who had always liked his own space, Damon had

definitely grown comfortable sharing whatever space he was in with her.

"So, where's our manpower?" she asked.

"Did someone say manpower?" Wyatt asked, coming through the door, with Bree on his heels.

"I think she meant womanpower," Bree said dryly.

"I mean all power," she said with a laugh. "I really appreciate you guys helping us with all the moves. I'm sure you have better things to do on a Saturday."

"I'm just happy to not be taking another polygraph test," Wyatt said. "How many lie detectors do I need to beat?"

"I didn't realize that was still going on," she said with a frown.

Wyatt certainly looked a lot better than he had the first time she'd met him. He'd added a few pounds to his frame, and his face didn't look so hollow or his skin so pale. She knew he'd spent the past few weeks in grueling, long interviews helping the Bureau build their cases against the Venturis and the Belenkos, as well as Karen Leigh, who had miraculously managed to survive her injuries. In exchange for her help, Karen would probably receive a lesser sentence than the other players, but she would serve time for what she had done, and Sophie was extremely happy about that.

"Hopefully, it's almost over," Wyatt replied. "By the way, while it appears that the Belenkos will be impossible to bring to justice in this country, we're sharing some of our intel with our friends in Eastern Europe, and it looks like they may do time over there."

"That's excellent news." She'd worried that while the Belenko's US operation had been shut down, Elena's uncles were still conducting business somewhere in the Ukraine. Now, it appeared that might end as well.

"So, what are you doing, Damon?" Wyatt asked. "I hear rumors you're leaving, then you're staying, but no one seems to know for sure."

"I'm curious, too," Bree put in. "And if you want my help on moving day, I think I should get some answers. Are you going to take over the organized crime unit?"

"No, definitely not," Damon replied with a shake of his head. "I was only interested in that area because Alan asked me to work for him. I think I'd like to do something else."

"Like what?" Wyatt asked curiously.

"Not sure. I'm thinking about it. I told Peter that I haven't had a vacation in about thirteen years, so I'm going to take some time off. If he's still interested in having me on staff in September in a position we both agree on, then I'm there."

"What are you going to do until September?" Bree asked with a grin. "Or am I getting too personal?"

Damon grinned. "Besides *that*," he said pointedly, "Sophie and I are heading to Egypt for an archaeological dig."

"Seriously?" Bree asked in surprise. "You're taking time off to dig in the dirt?"

"Real dirt for a change," he said with a happy smile. "I can't wait."

Bree shook her head in bemusement. "I don't know what you did, Sophie, but I like the new Damon."

"I didn't do a thing," she said, as Damon came over and put his arm around her. "But just for the record, I liked the old Damon, too."

Wyatt cleared his throat. "Okay, enough of the hearts and flowers, people. Are we moving boxes or what?"

"We're moving boxes," she said. "But first, what are you going to do next, Wyatt?" she asked the man, who still remained a bit of a mystery to her. "Are you going to stay in New York?"

"Nope. I'm going to London," Wyatt returned.

"What's in London?" Damon asked.

"Need to know," Wyatt said with a grin.

"Try to stay out of trouble," Damon said.

"What fun is there in that?" Wyatt retorted.

"Will you be undercover?" she asked curiously.

"Nope, not doing that for a while. What you see is what you get."

She wondered if that was true. With Wyatt, she didn't think anyone saw what he didn't want them to see.

She turned to Bree. "I hope you're staying in New York."

"I am. I love my work here. I hope to see a lot of you and Damon when you get back from your summer vacation."

"Definitely," she said. "I guess we should start taking boxes to the truck."

As Bree and Wyatt grabbed a box each and headed outside, Damon turned to her with a quizzical look in his eyes. "Everything okay, Sophie? Feeling any pangs of sadness with all of this?"

"A few," she admitted. "But not too many. This house doesn't really hold my memories. Our family home—the one we lived in when my mom was alive—was much harder to give up. But I've learned that love isn't in what we have; it's who we're with. I'm just glad I'm with you."

"Me, too." He gazed into her eyes with a tender expression. "We're going to be happy, Sophie. That might be hard to believe now—"

"It's not hard to believe at all," she interrupted. "I love you, Damon. And that's never going to change. We're good together—in the night and in the day."

He smiled. "I like mornings a lot better now when I wake up with you."

"So do I."

"I love you, too, Sophie." He kissed her and then grabbed a box. "Let's get started on the rest of our lives."

"I can't wait."

#

RECKLESS WHISPER

OceanofPDF.com

RECKLESS WHISPER - BOOK BLURB

FBI Special Agent Bree Adams has a personal secret, something she has managed to keep hidden for the past ten years—at least she always thought so... But a chance encounter on a train, and whispered words of chilling consequence change everything. Is the truth about to come out or is someone playing with her mind and her life?

Nathan Bishop knew Bree when she was a street kid like him. Their dark past once put him in her debt, and he had to pay up. The last thing he wants to do is help her again. He has a new life now—a life he could lose with one wrong move. But the beautiful Bree is desperate—how can he walk away?

To get to the truth—protect innocent lives and their own—they'll have to fight their way through the past, as danger stalks their every move, and heartbreaking choices must be made.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER ONE

"YOU'LL BE SORRY."

The hoarse, whispered words shook her out of sleep. Special Agent Bree Adams sat up in bed, holding her phone closer to her ear. "Who is this?"

Silence followed, but she could hear breathing.

"If you want to threaten me, don't you want me to know who you are?" she challenged.

The call disconnected.

She drew in a breath and let it out, looking around her shadowy bedroom. Through the curtains, she could see the New York City lights, and hear the loud noises from the garbage trucks making their way through the back alley behind her apartment building. The clock on the bedside table told her it was just past dawn.

Getting out of bed, she threw on a robe and shivered as she walked into the hallway of her one-bedroom apartment to turn on the heat. It was early October, and it definitely felt like winter was coming. The cold mornings were actually a welcome change from the long, hot summer, a summer where so many things had changed. There had

been a massive shakeup at the FBI New York field office in June, the fallout of which was still rippling through the building.

As she entered her kitchen and turned on the coffeemaker, she looked around her apartment. Everything appeared to be normal. Nothing was out of place. But she felt unsettled, which was obviously what the caller had been going for.

How had he gotten her number? As a federal agent, she used every precaution to protect her personal life. She'd ask one of the techs to see if they could trace the call, but it was doubtful that would be successful. Prepaid burner phones that could be dumped after every call made tracing criminals through their phones extremely difficult.

The male voice had also been deliberately altered, which meant that whoever was calling her had been smart enough to mask his voice. *Was that because she knew him?*

Since joining the FBI five years ago, she'd spent most of her career working child abductions and had become a member of the CARD program seven months earlier, making her part of one of several Critical Action Response Detail teams who sprang into action to help local law enforcement find an endangered child within the first critical hours after an abduction.

It was a job filled with highs and lows—sometimes frustrating, discouraging, terrifying and occasionally jubilant. But she loved it. Being able to put a family back together always made her feel a bit more whole.

Her phone rang again, and her nerves tightened.

Walking quickly back into the bedroom, she picked up the phone from the bed, steeling herself to hear the same creepy, cryptic voice.

But it was her team leader, Special Agent Dan Fagan, and she knew what that meant.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Ten-year-old disappeared from the backstage area of a school concert last night just after eight p.m. A broken white rose was found near the back door."

Her body tightened. This would be the fourth time in six months that a child had disappeared from a school event. The eleven-year-old girl in Newark had been found dead seven days later, the twelve-year-old girl from Albany had also been killed a week after her disappearance, and the twelve-year-old girl from Philadelphia had been found alive in an abandoned building, probably only one day before she would have met the same sad ending. While they'd been thrilled to save that child's life, the kidnapper was still in the wind.

Had he struck again?

Was the creepy phone call she'd just received somehow connected to this incident?

She'd been the one to track down the girl in Philadelphia. She'd been the face on the news. She'd been the one to promise that they would do everything they could to find the White Rose Kidnapper, as the press had dubbed him.

"Where did it happen?" she asked.

"Chicago. He's apparently moving west."

Her heart jumped into her throat, and the phone slipped out of her hand, the crash bringing her back to reality.

She picked it up, seeing a crack on the screen, which felt prophetic. She'd left Chicago a long time ago and vowed to never go back.

"Is the Midwest team on it?" She could barely manage to get the words out through her tight lips.

"Yes. But they want you to consult. You've been working up a profile on this guy for months. How fast can you get to the airport?"

"I'll be there within the hour. But you should know—I just got a threatening call, altered male voice. He said I'd be sorry."

"That was it?"

"That was it," she confirmed.

"I'll get Oscar to look into it," Dan said, referring to one of their techs. "You get yourself to Chicago and be careful."

She set the phone down and drew in several deep breaths. She would go to Chicago because it was her job, and a child's life was on the line.

But just because she was going back to Chicago didn't mean she was going home.

After landing in Chicago just after nine a.m. on Wednesday morning, Bree received a thorough briefing at the Chicago FBI field office, led by Assistant Special Agent in Charge (ASAIC) Warren Hobbs. Warren was a stern-looking man in his mid-forties with black hair and dark eyes, and from

what Bree knew of Hobbs, he was a smart, aggressive investigator, but he clearly had no patience for slow thinkers.

His briefing had been on point, from the AMBER alert, to the crime scene investigation, witness and family interviews, neighborhood searches, and media coverage. When it was over, Hobbs called on her to read the agency in on the details of the previous abductions linked to the White Rose Kidnapper and the behavioral profile they'd built so far.

Just like the three other girls, Hayley had vanished from her school, a place where she should have been safe. Bree had worked up several theories on why the school setting appealed to the kidnapper, why a white rose was left at the scene, and the fact that all three previously abducted children had been kept alive for seven days before they were either discovered or killed. If the timing held true, they had less than one week to find Hayley alive.

They had few details regarding the identity of the kidnapper, other than that he was male, around six feet tall, with a muscular build and brown hair. The surviving victim had been blindfolded through most of her ordeal, and on the few occasions the blindfold had been removed, the kidnapper had worn a ski mask to obscure his features. The victim had stated that the kidnapper's voice was deep and low and always menacing. He'd said very little, but he'd referred to her as his pretty little girl and occasionally had quoted a phrase from the Bible about redemption or revenge.

Bree thought that the seven-day timeframe might possibly be tied into the biblical idea that God had created the world in seven days, and that the kidnapper might be creating his own world in that amount of time. Whatever the reason, every minute counted if they were going to find the latest victim, Hayley Jansen, alive.

When the briefing ended just before eleven, she took a cab across town to meet with Hayley's parents. While she'd be retracing steps already taken by the Chicago special agents and the local police, it was important for her to make her own assessment, and also determine whether this could be a copycat event.

The Philadelphia case had hit the national news, and someone in Chicago might have decided to make their own play, ride someone else's coattails toward their own fame.

There were a few small differences in the abduction scenarios. The other three girls had all been blonde with brown eyes while Hayley had brown hair and brown eyes. The white rose found near the back door of Hayley's abduction had been a hybrid tea rose while the other three roses had been floribundas. They were small details and might mean nothing, or they might mean a lot.

The Jansens lived in Lincoln Park, an upscale neighborhood on the north side of Chicago. Their two-story, three-bedroom home was on a beautiful tree-lined street, not far from the Lincoln Park Zoo, Lake Shore Drive and Lake Michigan.

This neighborhood was a far cry from the city streets she had roamed as a child, which was both reassuring and disturbing. As a kid, she'd always believed that children who lived in houses like these had everything they needed, that they were safe and protected. Of course, now she knew better, but it still felt wrong when she went into a community where residents weren't used to being exposed to the dark side of humanity.

As she got out of the cab, a blast of cold wind almost knocked her off her feet. The Windy City was living up to its reputation, but she was okay with that. Maybe the cold would freeze her heart and keep the memories away.

She made her way across the street, through the crowd of reporters getting ready to file their stories for the noon news. After flashing her badge, the local police officer waved her inside.

Stepping into the entry, her practiced eye swept the interior, noting quick details. The home was nicely decorated with paintings on the walls, sleek hardwood floors and furniture that looked comfortable and remarkably clean, considering there were apparently three children living in the house. Hayley had a younger brother who was six and a sister who was four.

The children seemed confused and out of sorts, the little girl crying, as she and her brother were taken into the kitchen by their grandparents. Other assorted family members and close family friends made themselves scarce as she sat down with Hayley's parents, Mark and Lindsay Jansen, in the living room.

She knew quite a bit about the Jansens already. They were an attractive, fit couple, in their early forties. They had met in college and married shortly thereafter, celebrating their twentieth wedding anniversary three weeks earlier. Mark was the chief financial officer for Buckner Investments. Lindsay was a former teacher, now a stay-at-home mom.

Hayley was their oldest child. She had been adopted after the Jansens experienced eight years of infertility and two years on adoption waiting lists. To their shock and amazement, when Hayley was four years old, they'd conceived their son Connor, and two years later, their daughter Morgan.

Hayley's adoption had been closed, and while the Jansens knew nothing about the biological parents, a local judge had unsealed the records shortly after Hayley's disappearance. The biological mother, Samantha Harkness, had been a sixteen-year-old teenager living in Hammond, Illinois, a poverty and crime-ridden suburb of Chicago. She'd died of an overdose, six months after Hayley's birth. The biological father was unknown. While the police couldn't completely rule out the possibility that someone from the bio family was involved, it didn't seem likely, especially not with the white rose connection.

Mark took Lindsay's hand as they settled on the couch. He had the look of a runner, long, lean, and thin. He wore gray slacks and a light-blue, button-down shirt. Lindsay had on black yoga pants and a form-fitting zip-up jacket. Neither looked like they had slept. They were pale, with

shadows under their eyes and desperation written across the lines of their faces.

"What can we tell you to help us get our daughter back?" Mark asked quickly. "The other FBI agent said you're some kind of expert?"

"I've investigated similar cases. I know you've already told your story several times, and I promise this won't take long, but I need you to tell me again when you realized Hayley was missing."

"All right. Whatever it takes to bring my baby home." He drew in a breath. "Hayley was supposed to perform a ballet number at the fall concert last night," he said, his voice thick with pain. "When the curtain came up for her group, she wasn't on stage." He swallowed hard. "We went into the back to find out what was wrong. We thought she had gotten stage fright. She can be shy at times. The teacher said she'd seen her go into the bathroom with Grace before their group performed."

"But Hayley wasn't there," Lindsay continued. "I went into the restroom, and there was no one inside. I looked all around for her. You can't imagine the terror that ran through my mind. It was her school, a safe place. Everyone backstage knew her." Her voice broke as a tear ran down her face.

"The back door to the stage was open," Mark said, when his wife faltered in the story. "We ran into the staff parking lot. Hayley wasn't there, but one of the other kids said she saw Hayley leave with someone. That's when the police were called."

"That child would be Grace Roberts?"

"Yes. She's a year younger than Hayley, but they have been taking ballet together for the last two years, and they've become good friends," Lindsay put in. "Grace said she thought Hayley had just gotten scared and decided not to perform." Lindsay took an anguished breath. "You have to find my daughter, Agent Adams. She must be so scared. I can't imagine what she's thinking." More tears ran down Lindsay's face, and Mark pulled his wife into a tight embrace.

"Please," he said, heartbreak in his voice, as he looked back at her. "Find her. She's our baby girl. I've already told the detective I'll take a polygraph. I'll do whatever needs to be done, as will Lindsay and anyone else in the family. I know the father is always the first suspect. Do what you have to do to cross me off the suspect list, so we can figure out who took her."

She nodded, seeing sincerity and candor in Mark's eyes. "Is there anyone who has a problem with you or your wife? Any incidents with neighbors, friends, coworkers? A road rage incident you might have forgotten about? Any small problem that you don't think is connected but might be?"

"No," he said. "We've thought and thought all night long. We don't have problems with people. Our lives have been drama free until now. We can't imagine anyone who would want to hurt us or Hayley. She's just a sweetheart."

"And no one has contacted you?" she pressed, hating to put them through this, but finding Hayley was all that mattered. "There hasn't been any request for money? No one has told you not to tell the police or work with the FBI?"

"No," Mark said, shaking his head again. "I wish someone had contacted me. I'd sell everything we own to get Hayley back."

Mark and Lindsay were saying everything she would have expected them to say, and their behavior was absolutely consistent with what they were going through, but she wanted to split up the husband and wife team for at least a few moments.

"Mrs. Jansen—can I see Hayley's bedroom? I want to know as much about her as I can, and it helps to see where she sleeps," she said, getting to her feet.

Lindsay stood up, wiping the tears off her wet cheeks. "Of course. I'll show you."

Bree was happy that Mark chose not to accompany them upstairs. He seemed to have the bigger, strong personality, and she wanted to know what Lindsay would say on her own, if her husband wasn't in the room.

As Bree stepped into Hayley's bedroom, she felt like she was walking into a childhood dream. Everything was white and pink and purple. There were pillows and stuffed animals on the bed, shelves filled with books, an overflowing toy box, and a big bay window that overlooked the front street.

She couldn't imagine what it would feel like to grow up in a room so special, so safe, so comforting and then to be ripped out of it.

Hayley Jansen was not a tough, street kid; she was a pampered princess, just as she should be, and they needed to find her fast.

Walking across the room, she paused in front of a family photo. It had been taken before Hayley's siblings had been born, and the brown-haired little girl was about two years old. She looked happy and well loved.

"That's one of my favorite pictures. I like to have photos of each one of my kids on their own," Lindsay said.

"I understand Hayley was adopted."

"Yes. She's our miracle. We tried for ten years to have a child or to adopt, and we'd almost given up hope when Hayley came along. She was the prettiest baby I'd ever seen, even though she was bald as could be, with only about three strands of hair on her head." Lindsay gave her a sad smile. "She smiled at me, and I knew she was mine. She was home. She was where she was supposed to be."

Lindsay's heartfelt words tugged at her heart. Interviewing the parents was always tough, and it took all she had to keep it together and focus on the job.

"I understand your other two kids are your biological children?"

"Yes. It was crazy. All those years of trying and nothing. Then Hayley turns four, and I find out I'm pregnant with Connor. Morgan came two years later. I love them all so much. I don't love Hayley less because I didn't give birth to her. She's my child—one hundred percent."

"I believe you," she said, feeling as if Lindsay needed some sort of reassurance.

"The police asked me about her biological parents, but we never knew anything about them. The mother wanted a closed adoption, and we did, too. We wanted to be Hayley's parents. We didn't want anyone else in the mix. Maybe that

sounds selfish, but it felt like it would be too complicated any other way."

"Does Hayley know she's adopted?"

"No. We're going to tell her when she's older."

"You're not afraid someone in the family will say something to her?"

"My parents know, and they feel the same way we do—that Hayley isn't ready to deal with it. Mark's parents are deceased."

"What about friends, cousins, neighbors?"

"There are a few other people who know, but they would never say anything." Lindsay paused, giving Bree a questioning look. "Do you know anything about the biological parents? I asked the detectives, and they wouldn't say. Are they involved in this?"

"I honestly don't know. But we're going to run down every lead as fast as we can. I can promise you that."

"The waiting is torture."

"I know. Now, tell me what Hayley is like."

"She's shy, but she can be funny when she's with her friends, when she feels comfortable. She's very caring. She loves animals, especially bunnies," she said with a watery laugh as she tipped her head toward the pile of animals. "Unfortunately, my son Connor is allergic, so we haven't been able to bring a pet into the home. It's crazy now that there are dogs searching for her. The detectives took some of her things, so the dogs could pick up her scent." Lindsay's mouth shook again. "I want them to find her alive. I can't bear the thought that they won't."

"Try to stay positive."

"You've worked on cases like this before? Something to do with the white rose?"

"Yes."

"What happened to those other children?"

"The last one was found alive. She's going to be okay." Bree hoped that piece of news would give Lindsay a little hope.

But Lindsay focused in on three words. "The last one? What about the others?"

"We don't know if Hayley's case is tied to the other abductions."

"But it sounds like it might be."

"We're going to do everything we can to find your daughter. You have a huge team looking for Hayley."

"I know. Mark and I are so grateful. We just want to bring her home, take her in our arms and never let her go."

"I hope that happens really soon," she said, as they headed downstairs.

When they reached the entry, Mark came out of the living room and pulled his wife into an embrace. She left the two of them in their anguish as she walked out of the house, pushing her way past reporters who asked her if she had anything new to report. She made no comment. She was definitely not the official spokesperson for this case.

As she reached the end of the block, she pulled out her phone to check on the other address she'd been given. She wanted to check in with their only eyewitness—Grace Roberts. She lived just three blocks away. While Grace had also been interviewed extensively, Bree wanted to ask a few of her own questions. Now that some time had passed since

Hayley's abduction the night before, Grace might remember more than she had previously.

She was almost to Grace's house when her phone vibrated.

Pulling it out of the pocket of her navy-blue slacks, she saw an unidentified number. Her pulse sped up. "Agent Adams," she said crisply.

"So formal," the altered voice said. "You and I are going to get very close...Bree."

"Then maybe I should know who you are."

"That would take the fun away."

"What do you want?"

"What you want—a worthy competitor."

"I'm not competing with you."

"Aren't you?" He paused. "I like it better when you wear your hair down." At the end of his statement, the call disconnected.

Her gut tightened as she looked around the neighborhood. *Was he watching her?*

She thought she saw a curtain flutter in a window across the street, but that could be anyone, or just her imagination.

"You want to compete," she muttered. "You better be ready to lose."

She slid her phone into her pocket, wondering what the game was, and if Hayley was also an unwilling player.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWO

"DO THE POLICE HAVE ANY LEADS?" Nathan Bishop asked, as he slid onto the stool at his sister's kitchen island and watched her fix lunch for her daughter Grace, who would normally be at school. But since Grace's friend, Hayley Jansen, had disappeared from the concert last night, Josie had kept Grace at home. His sister and niece were both shaken and terrified about what had happened to Hayley, and he couldn't blame them. He was just happy to see that Josie had calmed down since the night before.

"Not that I know of," Josie replied, pausing from making tuna fish sandwiches to pull her dark-brown hair into a ponytail.

His sister looked exhausted and anxious, taking him back in time to the life they'd lived as kids, when sleeplessness, hunger, and anxiety had plagued their every step. He hated to see her back in that state of mind. She'd been doing so well the last several years, and Grace needed her mom to be whole. He was going to do everything he could to make sure she stayed that way.

"The police keep sending people over to talk to Grace, and I really wish they'd stop," Josie added. "She has told them all she knows, and it upsets her to think about what has happened to Hayley."

"Where is Grace?" The house seemed unusually quiet. Grace was a high-energy, talkative kid, and when she was around, she was always noticeable.

"She's in my bed, watching a movie. I really wanted Kyle to stay home with us today, but he couldn't. It's always work, work, work with him. Even after the night we had, he still puts his clients ahead of us."

He really didn't want to ask about her marriage. He'd never been a super fan of her husband Kyle, but he tried to keep that opinion away from his sister. He told himself that as long as Kyle took care of Josie and Grace, he could deal with Kyle's over-the-top arrogance.

Josie suddenly squealed as she accidentally stabbed herself with the knife. "Damn, damn, damn." She moved to the sink to run water over her finger.

"You need to take a breath, Josie."

She grabbed a paper towel and wrapped it around her finger. "How the hell am I supposed to do that when Hayley is God knows where with God knows who? It could have been Grace, Nathan. She was right there. She went into the bathroom with Hayley. If she had stayed there with Hayley..."

He saw Josie's bottom lip start to tremble, and he slid off the stool and walked around the counter, putting his hands on her shoulders the way he'd always done when she was a

little girl and the world was getting too scary. "It's going to be all right. They'll find Hayley."

"You don't know that. She could be—"

"Stop. Don't think the worst."

"But the worst happens." She gazed into his eyes. "We both know that."

He couldn't argue with that statement. "Well, I hope it doesn't happen this time. Can I help you finish the sandwiches?"

"I've got it." She slipped away to grab a Band-Aid out of the drawer. As she put it on, she said, "Let's talk about something else."

He was immensely relieved by the suggestion. "Go for it."

"What's happening with you and Adrienne?"

He inwardly groaned as he grabbed a bottled water from the fridge. "How about a different subject?"

"We can't talk about your girlfriend?"

"She's not my girlfriend. We've just been hanging out."

"For two months," she said pointedly. "In which time, I've only seen her once. I want to get to know her better. Why don't you bring her around?"

"I will."

"When?"

"Sometime."

"I can keep secrets, you know."

He frowned at her comment. "I'm not worried about that."

"Good. Because you've moved beyond your past, Nathan. You're a completely different person."

"Exactly, so no reason to talk about it."

"But who you used to be—where we come from—it's part of you. You're going to have to share it with someone at some point."

"Why would I do that?" he challenged, taking a swig of water.

"Because it won't be a real relationship until you're completely honest."

"Who said anything about having a real relationship?"

She made a face at him. "Don't you want what I have? A family? The kind of family we always wanted?"

"I have you and Grace for that." As he finished speaking, the doorbell rang. "Are you expecting someone?"

"No, and the police promised me that they'd keep Grace's name out of the news, but I'm worried a reporter will find us."

"I'll get it. I'll send whoever it is away."

"Thanks," she said with relief. "Once they're gone, we'll have lunch."

He walked down the hall and opened the front door, prepared to get rid of whoever was there. But the woman on the porch stole the breath out of his chest... her light-brown hair, her compelling green eyes, the hot, sexy mouth that he'd spent too many nights dreaming about.

Damn!

He hadn't seen her in over ten years, but the time in between suddenly vanished, and he felt like he was once again standing on the edge of a ledge with a woman who could save him or push him off.

Her jaw dropped as the same kind of wonder filled her gaze.

"Nathan?"

Her sweet voice socked him in the gut.

"Bree? What the hell are you doing here?" The question came out more aggressive than it probably should have, but he wasn't ready to see her again.

"I was going to ask you the same question." She licked her lips. "I'm looking for Grace Roberts."

"Are you a reporter now?"

"No." She pulled open her navy-blue blazer, revealing navy-blue slacks and a white shirt, but it was the shiny piece of metal at her waist that shocked him for the second time in the last sixty seconds. "I'm an FBI special agent."

"No way!"

"It's true."

"You? You became a fed? How did they let *you* in?"

She frowned at his attacking words. "They let me in, because I'm good at the job. Who is Grace to you?"

"She's my niece."

Now it was Bree's turn to be surprised. "Seriously? Grace is Josie's daughter? Josie is okay? Last time I saw her, I wasn't sure..."

"She's been okay for a while," he said shortly. "Up until last night when one of her daughter's best friends was abducted. Now she's a mess, terrified for Grace and for Hayley."

"That's why I'm here. I need to speak to Grace about what happened. Let me in, Nathan."

He suddenly realized he was blocking the door. He took a step back and waved her into the house, which felt like the absolutely wrong thing to do.

Letting her into Josie's house, into his life—was he crazy?

But this wasn't about the past; it was about Hayley.

"I'll get my sister. Wait here." He walked down the hall and into the kitchen, still having trouble taking in a full breath.

"Who was it?" Josie asked. "A reporter?"

"No." He closed the kitchen door behind him. "It's an FBI agent. She wants to talk to Grace."

Josie frowned. "But Grace already spoke to the police—several different detectives. It's just going to upset her all over again. Can't you get rid of her?"

"Believe me, I want to," he said tersely. "But she's not going anywhere."

"Then I'll talk to her. I'll tell her Grace isn't up to it."

"Wait." He grabbed her arm as she came around the counter.

"What?" Josie asked, a question in her eyes.

"It's Bree."

She blinked in confusion, and then that confusion turned to shock. "Bree? No."

"Yes."

"She's an FBI agent? How—how is that possible?"

"No idea. But she showed me her badge. She's working on Hayley's disappearance."

Josie stared back at him. "I didn't think she'd ever come back to Chicago."

"I didn't, either."

"I don't know exactly what happened between—"

"And it's not important," he said, cutting her off. "Just don't say anything personal about you or me or what we're doing now."

"What are you worried about, Nathan?"

"Everything," he muttered, letting go of his sister's arm.

As Josie left the room, he drew in a deep breath. He needed a minute to get his head together.

Bree—he'd never thought he'd see her again.

The years had been good to her. In fact, she looked better now than she had the last time he'd seen her. Then she'd been pale, scared, and a little broken. Now, she was sharp, clear-eyed, confident, and...strikingly pretty.

She'd clearly gotten her life together.

Well, so had he, and he wasn't going to let her drag him backward.

Bree paced restlessly around the living room, her nerves on edge, her stomach churning with nausea, her head aching with tension. She'd told herself that coming back to Chicago did not mean going back in time, but that's exactly where Nathan Bishop had taken her.

Nathan! How could he be here? How could the only eyewitness be connected to him?

It was improbable and yet it was true.

The last time she'd seen him had been at the bus station. She'd been eighteen; he'd been nineteen—skinny and long-

haired and...angry. He didn't want to be there, but she'd called in an old debt, and he'd paid up.

Apparently, his anger at her hadn't diminished over the years. He had definitely not looked happy to see her.

But he had looked good. He'd become a man—a muscled, fit, handsome man. He still had the thick brown hair that always looked windblown, a shadow of beard on his jaw, and light-brown eyes that could be kind and friendly but also piercing and judgmental.

When they were kids, she'd mostly seen the friendly side of Nathan, but as they got older, as they moved into their late teens, that had changed.

A woman entered the living room, and the butterfly tattoo on her neck told her it was Josie, Nathan's little sister. Josie's hair was darker than she remembered. Her skin was healthy, her eyes worried, but she looked far more alert now than she had as a drug-addicted teenager.

She'd actually gone with Josie when she'd gotten the tattoo against the wishes of her big brother. Josie had wanted a symbol of freedom, something to strive for, something to believe in, and Bree had wanted that for her, too.

In return, Josie had not treated her very well.

Her relationship with both Bishops had certainly been fraught with problems.

Josie shook her head in bemusement. "Nathan said it was you, but I can't believe it—Bree Larson."

"Actually, it's Bree Adams now."

"You got married?" Josie asked.

"No, I just changed my last name."

"To become an FBI agent?"

"I had a lot of reasons. But, yes, I am an agent. I'm part of a critical action team that assists with child abductions, and I need to speak to Grace." If she could keep this all business, it would be better for all of them.

Josie stiffened, the bewildered look in her eyes turning into protective maternal fierceness. "Grace has already told the police everything she knows, and it upsets her to talk about it. She and Hayley are very close."

"I understand," she said gently. "I know she's scared—as are you, because Grace was so close to Hayley when this happened."

Josie's eyes watered. "It could have been her."

"But it wasn't. Grace is safe, and I promise I will do everything I can not to upset her, but I need to speak to her now."

Josie stared back at her. "You were always so strong. I admired that for a long time. But then you changed into someone else."

"Look, I don't want to cut you off, Josie, but time is important right now. And I'm not here to talk about the past. We need to find Hayley, and we need Grace's help to do that."

"I'll get her. But be careful, Bree. I may not have ever stood up for myself, but I will stand up for Grace."

"The last thing I would want to do is hurt your child."

As Josie left the living room, Bree let out a breath of relief, but her calm was short-lived as Nathan returned to the room.

He'd always been tall, six foot one or two, but he had a much stronger presence now, or maybe she was just very aware of his angry wariness. His eyes were shooting sparks at her, and she didn't know if the emotion was coming from the past or from right now.

But she couldn't find the words to ask. There was too much to say and too little time.

Thankfully, Josie came back into the room with a little girl wearing leggings and a big pink sweater, her long, dark-brown hair loose around her shoulders.

Grace was the spitting image of Josie as a little girl. "She looks just like you," she murmured, the words slipping out before she could stop them. She wanted to keep this professional, not personal, but already she'd stumbled.

Grace blinked and looked at her mom. "She knew you when you were my age, Mommy?"

"Yes," Josie said. "Bree is a—friend—from a long time ago. And like I said, she has a couple of questions to ask you."

"Why don't we all sit down?" Bree suggested, taking a seat on the couch.

Grace and Josie sat down on the sofa facing her, while Nathan took up a protective position by the entryway, his arms folded across his chest.

"I heard you're a really good ballet dancer," she said to Grace, giving the little girl a warm smile. "I always wanted to take ballet, but I never had the chance."

"I'm not as good as Hayley," Grace said solemnly. "Do you know where she is?"

"No. But I'm looking for her. You told the police that you saw Hayley leave through the stage door with someone."

Grace nodded and looked at her mom.

"Just tell her what you remember." Josie put her arm around Grace's shoulder.

"You went to the bathroom with Hayley," Bree encouraged. "What happened after that?"

"Hayley was taking too long. She was really nervous. The bathroom smelled bad, so I left. I went over to our group. Our teacher, Miss Delancey, told us to stay close, because it was almost our turn. When it was time to go on, Hayley wasn't there. I was at the back of the line, so I went to find her, and I saw her going through the door. I thought she decided not to dance. She was scared about forgetting the steps. Then Miss Delancey called me, and I went on the stage. I didn't know someone took her until after our dance."

Grace was a smart, articulate girl. Now, if she could just get her to remember a few more details. "You said the person was wearing a puffy black coat and a blue beanie, is that right?"

Grace nodded.

"You couldn't see their hair?"

The little girl shook her head.

"Do you remember if there were any words on their clothes? Like for a sports team or something?"

"I didn't see any."

"And you couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman?"

"I think it was a man, because he was so tall, but I don't know for sure."

"Do you remember what kind of shoes he was wearing? Tennis shoes? Boots? Work shoes?"

Grace thought for a moment, then shook her head. "I don't know."

"Was he holding Hayley's hand?"

"No, he had his arm around her. Is Hayley going to be all right?"

"I hope so. You're doing really good, Grace. You're being very helpful."

"Hayley is scared of the dark. Do you think she's in the dark?" Grace asked, fear in her eyes.

Bree could hear the terror in the little girl's voice, and she wanted to reassure her, but she also didn't want to lie to her. "Is there anything else you remember, Grace? Did you see a car through the open stage door?"

"There were lights outside. They were bright. I think they came from a car."

"Was Hayley yelling or kicking her feet or trying to pull away from the person?"

Grace's mouth turned down in a frown, and then she slowly shook her head. "She wasn't doing anything."

Was that because Hayley knew the person who had come into the backstage area of a school concert? Was the kidnapper someone who was familiar to people at the school so that they wouldn't be questioned?

The police were already looking into the janitorial staff and everyone else at the school, but it wouldn't hurt to keep what Grace had just told her in mind. "Did Hayley ever talk about anyone bothering her? Was she mad or upset with anyone?"

"She said her dad was mad at her for not cleaning up her room, and she might not be able to go to the park with me this weekend."

"Anyone else?"

"Carter told her she was clumsy, and she was going to fall during our show," Grace added. "I told him not to be mean and that Hayley wasn't going to fall."

"Who is Carter?"

"He's a boy in our class. He always says rude things."

She didn't think this Carter had anything to do with Hayley's disappearance, but the more Grace talked, the more she might remember.

"I want Hayley to come home," Grace said, her bottom lip starting to waver.

"I think that's enough," Josie interrupted, obviously disturbed by her daughter's distress.

"You did good, Grace," she told the little girl.

Grace sniffed. "I should have run after Hayley. I should have saved her."

"No. That wouldn't have helped. And you're doing exactly what you're supposed to be doing now. You're telling us what you remember."

"Why don't you go upstairs and finish watching your show?" Josie said. "I'll bring up lunch in a few minutes."

Grace slid off the couch, then paused, something odd in her eyes as she looked back at them. "There was something shiny on the man's hand. The hand that was on Hayley's back. Like Daddy's big ring."

"Your daddy's wedding ring?" she probed.

"No, the baseball ring."

"My husband has a ring from the Chicago Cubs when they won the World Series," Josie put in.

"Really? What does he do for the Cubs?"

"He doesn't work directly for the team. He's a real-estate developer, and he has been working with the organization to buy up some of the properties adjacent to the ballfield for additional expansion of outfield seating. You know how small Wrigley Field is, how close the apartment buildings are."

"Part of its charm," she muttered.

"At any rate, since the team hadn't won a world series since 1908, they gave out 1908 rings to staff and employees," Josie continued. "Basically, anyone who had anything to do with the team got one. They're not as nice as what the players got, of course."

Was there defensiveness in Josie's voice? Had Josie just picked up on the fact that her daughter had identified the kidnapper as having a ring similar to the one her father wore?

"Was your husband with you at the concert last night?" she asked.

"No, he had to work late. Are we done here?"

She could see that Josie was finished talking, and she'd probably gotten all she could from Grace. "That's all for now."

"Go on upstairs, honey," Josie told Grace.

Grace paused by her uncle on her way out of the room. "Do you want to watch a movie with me, Uncle Nathan?"

"I'll be up in a bit," he told her, giving her a smile.

As Bree saw Nathan's lips curve up in kindness and affection, she was reminded of a much younger Nathan—the kid who'd once been her friend, who'd given her the last bite of a shared candy bar, who'd dreamed with her about a better life, a pretty house by the sea.

But that kid had disappeared long before she'd left Chicago.

Josie stood up. "I need to get Grace her lunch."

"Thanks for letting me speak with her," she said, getting to her feet.

"I really hope you can find Hayley. She's a sweet little girl who doesn't deserve this," Josie said.

"I'm going to do my best."

As Josie left the room, Nathan moved from his post by the entry to block her way.

"What are you thinking?" he challenged.

She shrugged. "I don't know. Just taking it all in."

"Really? You're not wondering if Kyle had something to do with this, because Grace thought the person was wearing a ring like her father's?"

"As Josie said, a lot of people have that ring."

"Exactly."

"What is Josie's husband like?"

"He's...fine."

The slight hesitation told her a lot. Nathan didn't like his brother-in-law. But then Nathan had always been protective of Josie. Maybe no man would be good enough for his sister.

"Kyle takes care of Josie and Grace. He provides well for them," Nathan continued. "He works for a large real-estate

development company. He makes a good living. Josie gets to live in this nice house, and Grace gets to go to a good school. That's what's important."

"Sounds like you're trying to convince yourself."

"Kyle had nothing to do with this, Bree."

"I didn't say he did. And I don't jump to conclusions."

He raised an eyebrow. "Seriously? You don't jump to conclusions?"

She hesitated for a split second. "Not anymore."

"I still can't believe you're a fed. Do they know all the shit you were involved in? Do they know about Johnny?"

She stared back at him. "Why are you so angry, Nathan? Weren't we friends once?"

Her direct question seemed to take him aback. "Now you remember that we were friends? Because it seemed like you forgot that a long time ago. You got on a bus and never looked back. But even before that, you changed."

"So did you," she reminded him.

"I don't like you being back here," he muttered. "My life is different now. I don't need a reminder of how things used to be. I don't need to get back in that mud pit."

"Believe it or not, I feel exactly the same way. My life is different now, too. And I'm not thrilled to be back in Chicago, but it's only until we find Hayley. Then I'll return to New York, where I live."

"New York, huh?"

"Yes."

His tension seemed to ease with the reminder that she was only in town temporarily.

"When did you get to New York?" he asked.

"Last year."

"And before that?"

"Lots of places," she said vaguely. "What about you, Nathan? I thought you wanted to leave this city."

"I did, but Josie met Kyle and got pregnant..." He shrugged. "My family is here. I had to stay."

"What do you do for a living?"

"I'm a contractor."

His words made her smile. "You always wanted to tear down the bad buildings and build new ones. And now you're doing it. That's cool. You and your brother-in-law must have a lot in common, if he's a real-estate developer."

"Actually, we're usually on opposite sides when it comes to development. He's in it purely for the money. The bigger the project, the better—never mind how many neighborhoods get displaced or ripped apart in the process."

"I knew you didn't like him, Nathan."

"I never said that."

"You didn't have to. I can hear it in your voice."

"Look, he's a blowhard, and he's greedy, but he's harmless." Nathan cleared his throat. "Do you think Hayley was kidnapped for money? I know Mark has a very good job."

"You know Mark Jansen?"

"We run together. We did a triathlon last year. I can't imagine what he's going through. He adores Hayley and his other kids. He's a real family man."

"You still run," she mused, thinking of the times Nathan had tried to convince her to go on a run with him, but she

had almost always refused.

"My go-to sport," he acknowledged.

"If you run fast enough, the pain, the sadness, and the fear can't catch you," she said softly, remembering the words he'd spoken to her on more than one occasion.

His gaze darkened. "Still holds true—most of the time."

"I—I need to get back to work," she said, realizing she was getting lost in the past.

Nathan stepped aside but dogged her heels on the way to the front door. Then he barred her way once again. "I don't want Josie's life messed up again, Bree. She's good now, and Grace needs her mom to be good, if you know what I mean."

She knew exactly what he meant. Josie had had issues with drugs when she was a young girl. "I only wish Josie the best."

"If that's true, don't go after her husband."

"I'm going to follow every lead, Nathan, no matter where it goes. Hayley deserves that."

"I get that. I want you to find Hayley. I just don't want you to hurt Josie in the process. Kyle can't be a suspect. He's not that kind of guy."

"Right now, everyone is a suspect. Are you going to let me out?"

He opened the door for her, then said, "Bree..."

She stepped onto the porch and looked back at him. "What?"

He seemed to have some debate going on in his head and then he said, "I'm glad you made it."

She was surprised by his words and felt a wave of unexpected emotion. "I'm glad you made it, too."

"Let's try not to mess up each other's lives."

"That's the last thing I want to do." She walked away, feeling Nathan's gaze on her back until she turned the corner.

Nathan Bishop was an unexpected complication, but she'd handled it.

Hopefully, that would be her one and only encounter with the past.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THREE

"Is BREE GONE?" Josie asked, as he entered the kitchen.

"Yes."

His sister let out a sigh. "Good. Because you've got that look in your eyes again, Nathan. And you should not go there."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"You always had a thing for Bree—even when she was with Johnny."

He would have liked to deny his sister's words, but it would be pointless. "We don't need to talk about her."

"Of course we need to talk about her. She's back. She's in our lives."

"Not for long. As soon as Hayley is found, she'll return to New York."

"I hope so, because I like seeing you happy, and you were rarely happy when we were younger."

"That wasn't because of Bree."

"Sometimes it was. I may have been out of my mind a few of those years, but I didn't miss everything. You did things you wouldn't have normally done, and I've always

thought they had something to do with Bree. It's like she's your kryptonite."

He shook his head at the worry in her eyes. "Bree is not *my* anything. She never has been, and she never will be."

"If you say so," Josie said, as she wiped down the counter.

"I do." He took a breath, knowing his next question was going to get her worked up even more, but he had to ask. "How could Kyle miss the concert? Grace was so excited about performing. He really couldn't get away?"

"No, he couldn't," she snapped. "He was supposed to be there, but something came up. It happens. I wasn't thrilled, and I know Grace was disappointed, not that she's had much time to think about that. But what can I say? Kyle works hard to support us. Complaining is being ungrateful."

"Is that what he tells you?"

"He doesn't have to tell me. After the way we grew up, Nathan, I appreciate everything Kyle does for us. He is a great provider, and I get to stay home with my daughter. I have everything I ever wanted. Don't try to poke holes in my happiness."

"I'm not doing that. I'm just concerned."

"About what?"

"About where Kyle was last night when Hayley disappeared. When did he show up? Did he come to the school? To the police station?"

"I called him when the police arrived at the school. They wouldn't let anyone leave until they had searched the area.

It took him a little time to get my message. He ended up meeting us at the police station."

"Was he working with a group last night? Was he on his own?"

"I don't know. Why are you asking me all these questions?"

"Because Grace said she saw a ring similar to the one her dad wears on the kidnapper's hand, and Bree asked me about Kyle after you left."

"What did you say?"

"That he had nothing to do with this."

"Of course, he didn't. I mean, my God, how could anyone think he would kidnap a child—and Grace's best friend at that?" Angry tears spilled out of her eyes. "He's a good man. He works too much, but that's his only fault."

He didn't think that was Kyle's only fault by a long shot, but he kept that thought to himself. "It's going to be okay, Josie. Don't cry. I'll talk to Kyle. I'll let him know that Bree might be heading his way."

"I didn't say where he worked."

"She's FBI. She can probably find him in less than two seconds."

"And she probably still has a grudge against me for what I did to her. Maybe I was wrong to tell you to stay away from her. Maybe she needs to see us as friends again."

"No. You were right. We should both stay away from her. Hopefully, Hayley will be found soon, and Bree will be gone from our lives."

"And we'll get back to normal," Josie said, meeting his gaze.

"Normal," he agreed, not even sure what that was.

Bree felt even more tightly wound after seeing Nathan and Josie again. She'd thought she wouldn't run into anyone from her past if she stayed away from the old neighborhoods, but that had been a foolish idea. No one stayed in one place. She'd moved on, and so had they.

Josie was married to a successful man. She had a beautiful home, a sweet daughter, and a brother who still watched out for her. Nathan had also made himself into the man he'd always wanted to be. And she'd turned her life around, too.

It was all good, so why did it feel like everything was about to crash?

Shaking her head, she called for a car and while she was waiting for her ride, she punched in Dan's number.

"Fagan," he said crisply.

"It's me."

"How's it going in Chicago?"

"The usual full-court press—all-hands-on deck. I may have discovered a small clue. The young witness thought she saw a replica of the Cubs World Series ring on the kidnapper's hand."

"That might be more than a little clue."

"Apparently over a thousand rings were handed out, but it's something. I'll get the team looking for those rings as soon as I get into the office."

"The girl in Philly said the man didn't wear any rings. That's different."

"I know. And I'm also thinking that anyone wearing a Cubs ring would probably be from Chicago. The other three kidnappings were states away. I feel like something is off, Dan."

"He's on the move. He's changing up the game."

"Yes. I got another threatening call, too."

"What was said this time?"

"He told me he and I were going to get close, that he wanted a worthy competitor. He added that he likes it better when I wear my hair down, implying that he had eyes on me. Did Oscar ever turn up anything on the first call to my phone?"

"Unfortunately, no. Whoever is calling you knows what he's doing."

"It's weird that he hasn't mentioned Hayley specifically. Why wait? If he's ready to play the game, why not let me know the stakes—remind me that a little girl's life is in jeopardy?"

"Good questions. I wish I had some answers."

"So do I."

"Have you read the Chicago team in on the calls?"

"I mentioned the first one when I got in this morning. I haven't been back to the office since the second call came in."

"They definitely need the information, Bree."

"And I intend to share it, but I have to say, Dan, that while I know ASAIC Hobbs asked for my help, the rest of the team has been polite, but they don't seem excited to

have me around. And there's one woman on the team that I went to Quantico with, who is definitely not a fan of mine."

"Who's that?"

"Agent Tracy Cox."

"I don't know her. Why doesn't she like you?"

"She was an outsider at the academy. She didn't like that I got closer to people than she could. I don't think working with her now is going to be a picnic. She barely said hello to me when I arrived, and I could feel her sharp, irritated glance on me throughout my report."

"Well, do your best. The team may be territorial, but they still want to find that kid."

"I know. I just don't have patience for politics and territories in situations like this. Anyway, I'm going to keep doing what I do, and hopefully we'll get a break."

"Keep me posted, and I'll have Oscar check your phone again, see if we get lucky tracing the second call."

"It's going to take more than luck."

On her way downtown, Bree looked up information on Kyle Roberts. His employer, Skye Developments, took up the entire thirty-ninth floor of a downtown skyscraper that the company had built ten years earlier and was one of Chicago's most impressive buildings.

Kyle was vice president of sales, only a few rungs down on the corporate ladder from Donovan Skye, who had founded the company forty years earlier and his sons,

Lawrence and James Skye. The Skyes were one of Chicago's most prominent and wealthiest families.

At age thirty-eight, Kyle Roberts had a bright future ahead of him, and kidnapping his nine-year-old daughter's friend seemed about as farfetched an idea as any she could possibly have. But she still needed to talk to him. She'd been at her job long enough to know not to discount anyone as a suspect.

She wondered where Josie had met Kyle, how the street junkie kid had ended up with a graduate of Yale and a now very successful businessman. Kyle was also ten years older than Josie, and Grace was nine. She frowned, doing the math in her head. Josie was a year younger than her, making her twenty-eight now, so she must have been nineteen when she had Grace. Kyle would have been twenty-nine at the time. She couldn't imagine that he and Josie had run in the same circles then, unless Kyle had a past, too.

Did that change anything? Probably not. She needed to rein in her speculation and focus on the facts. With that thought in mind, she got out of her cab, and headed upstairs.

Kyle had an administrative assistant guarding his door, a red-haired woman dressed in a black sheath dress. She promptly told Bree that Mr. Roberts was on a call and couldn't be disturbed.

At the flash of Bree's badge, and the mention that a missing child's life was at stake, the admin reluctantly interrupted her boss and then waved her inside.

When she entered the room, she was impressed with the opulent furnishings, the luxuriously thick carpet under her feet, and the jaw-dropping view from Kyle's floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out over Lake Michigan.

Kyle Roberts was just as impressive as his office. He was a handsome man, with dark-blond hair and blue eyes dressed in an expensive gray suit and navy-blue patterned silk tie. He didn't look like a man who ever got his hands dirty, which also made him less likely to be the man who had kidnapped Hayley Jansen the night before. The only ring he wore was a narrow gold wedding band.

Kyle gave her a wary, polite smile. "My assistant said you're here about Hayley Jansen's disappearance. I'm not sure what I can tell you." He motioned for her to take the chair in front of his massive desk. "But, of course, I'm happy to help."

"I just spoke with Grace and your wife. Josie mentioned that you weren't able to attend the concert last night."

"No, I had a lot of work to do. I couldn't get away."

"You were working here in your office?"

"Yes."

"Was anyone else here?"

"There were other people in the company working late. Is this about my ring? Josie said that Grace remembered the kidnapper wearing a ring like the replica World Series Cubs ring that I received."

"I did want to talk to you about that. Do you have the ring?"

"It's at home, in my dresser. I can assure you that I did not kidnap Hayley Jansen."

Kyle had barely finished speaking when the door to his office flew open, and Nathan strode in, followed by the admin, who gave Kyle an apologetic look.

"I told him you were tied up," the admin said.

"It's fine. Shut the door on your way out," Kyle replied, frowning at his brother-in-law. "What are you doing here, Nathan?"

"Don't tell her anything, Kyle." Nathan shot her a dark look.

She was surprised that Nathan was treating her with such hostility, but she wasn't going to back down from doing her job just because he was worried she might shake up his sister's perfect life.

"I have nothing to hide," Kyle said.

"I still don't think you should be talking to the FBI unless you have a lawyer present," Nathan said.

"Does he need a lawyer?" Bree cut in.

"I don't." Kyle sent Nathan an irritated look before he turned his gaze back to her. "There are thousands of people who have the same ring I do, or a variation of it. I'm glad that Grace remembered such an important detail. I hope it will provide you with a good lead, but you're not going to get anywhere focusing on me."

Despite Kyle's attempt to be polite and firm, there was something in his tone that gave her pause. "Is there anyone who can corroborate your whereabouts between eight and eight thirty last night?"

"I don't know. My assistant left around seven. I wasn't aware of what was going on outside my office." He pressed his fingers together, giving her a speculative look. "When

Josie called me, she also warned me that you might have a personal grudge against her. She said she took some jewelry of yours when you were kids."

"This is not about that, and I don't have a personal grudge against your wife."

"But you did have a problem with her."

"We were teenagers. It was a long time ago. I'm happy that Josie is doing so well now."

"Are you?" Kyle murmured, looking from Nathan to her, obviously sensing the discord between them as well. "What do you think, Nathan?"

"I think you should stop talking," he said.

"Well, perhaps I'll follow my brother-in-law's advice," Kyle said, getting to his feet. "I have a meeting, so if you'll excuse me..."

She stood up, knowing this interview was over. "Thank you for your time, Mr. Roberts."

"I hope you bring Hayley home very soon."

When she left the office, she couldn't help noticing that Kyle's admin was now nowhere to be seen. *Was that deliberate? Had she not wanted to be questioned?* Maybe she hadn't left the office at seven. Maybe she knew something about what her boss had been doing the night before.

Of course, she had absolutely nothing to base that thought on, but there had just been something very evasive in Kyle's tone.

Nathan caught up to her at the elevator. "You shouldn't have come here."

"No. You shouldn't have come here. This is FBI business. And if your brother-in-law has nothing to hide, he shouldn't be bothered by a few questions. The fact that you felt it necessary to run down here and warn him also doesn't put you or him in a good light. Why do you think he needs protection?"

"Because law enforcement sometimes spins the facts. It's not like you and I didn't see that happen when we were teens, Bree."

His pointed comment was impossible to deny. "Well, I wouldn't do that."

"You did it before—you spun a story for Johnny to save his ass."

"That's not even close to being true. You don't know what happened back then."

"I know a lot."

"I'm not talking about that with you." She punched the elevator button several more times, wishing it would arrive, so she could get away from Nathan.

"Leave my family alone, Bree. They don't have anything to do with Hayley's disappearance."

"I'm just following the facts. And you know I forgave Josie for stealing from me all those years ago. She was a drug-addicted mess at the time."

"She had a lot of good reasons for needing to escape from reality."

"I know that, Nathan," she said, softening when she saw the pain in his eyes. "That's why I let it go. For you and Josie to suggest I would come after her husband because of that is ridiculous. You're both overreacting."

"Maybe we just know how fast good can turn to bad."

She knew a little about that, too. "Okay. Fine. I get it. And it's done." She was relieved when the elevator finally arrived.

"Is it done?" he asked, getting into the elevator with her. "You're going to leave Kyle alone?"

"I'm going to follow up on all the rings that were distributed by the organization. That's the best I can give you."

"Why did they call you in from New York? Aren't there enough agents in Chicago to work this case?"

"Hayley's abduction might be linked to other cases I've been investigating. You need to stay out of this, Nathan. You're dangerously close to impeding a federal investigation."

"Is that a fact?"

"Yes, it is. I know that protecting Josie is deeply ingrained in you. But you have to back off. Bringing home Hayley is all that matters."

"I want that, too."

"Then focus on that."

She stepped out of the elevator, hoping they were finished, but he remained right behind her until they reached the sidewalk. Then he put a heavy hand on her shoulder.

She turned around, feeling an odd jolt at the personal touch, the familiar gesture. She'd tried to walk away from Nathan a lot of times before, but he'd always made the same move.

His gaze darkened as she looked back at him, and she couldn't help wondering if he was thinking the same thing.

He pulled his hand away. "Sorry," he muttered. "Look. I won't get in your way again, but I'd like to help if I can."

"So you can help me focus on someone besides your brother-in-law?"

"Do you really believe Kyle went into the auditorium and kidnapped his daughter's best friend without anyone recognizing him?"

"I don't know," she said honestly. "Kyle could have easily explained his presence backstage if anyone questioned him."

Nathan did not look happy with her answer. "Seriously, Bree?"

"He was hiding something, Nathan."

"If he was, it wasn't that."

"Well, if you really want to protect Josie, and Kyle has a secret, maybe you should try to find out what it is."

"I don't think Kyle is going to tell me. We're related by marriage, but we are not the best of friends."

"I can see why. He is not the kind of man you would respect."

He raised an eyebrow at her comment. "Really? A lot of people respect Kyle. He's very well-connected in this city."

"He's slick and cocky and very impressed with himself."

"You got all that in your short conversation?"

"I got all that in the first minute, and I didn't need FBI training to figure it out."

"You're better at reading people than you used to be."

"And you're a lot worse at the not-so-subtle digs."

"Then I'll stop being subtle. You were a sucker once upon a time."

"I was a desperate, lonely girl once upon a time. And one of my friends stopped being my friend, and that hurt."

His lips tightened. "You didn't want to be my friend. You had Johnny."

"I don't want to talk about Johnny." She groaned. "Why are we even having this conversation?"

"Because you came back to Chicago."

"It wasn't by choice."

"When you got on that bus, and you told me you'd let me know where you settled, I thought I'd see you again before more than ten years had passed. But you vanished."

"You knew why I had to disappear."

"I knew why you had to leave Johnny, not why you couldn't have any contact with me."

"Talking to you...talking to anyone from the old neighborhood was too risky. I couldn't chance it." She paused, her heart beating hard against her chest. "Did you ever tell anyone?"

"Not a soul. Just like I promised. You called in my debt to you, and I paid up." The anger returned to his voice. "Although my silence put me in the hospital for a few days."

"What?" she asked in surprise. "What are you talking about?"

"Johnny came after me. He wanted to know where you were. He tried his hardest to get me to talk, but I didn't tell him a thing."

"He beat you up?"

"Him and two of his friends."

She shook her head. "I had no idea. I'm so sorry, Nathan." She felt an enormous wave of guilt. "I didn't think Johnny would find out you'd helped me."

"He was desperate to get you back. I'd never seen him like that." Nathan drew in a breath. "You made the right decision when you left. But you made the wrong decision to come back now. Johnny still lives here. If he hears you're in town, he'll come looking for you."

"I can't imagine how he would hear I'm in town, unless you're going to tell him?"

"I haven't seen him since that day he beat me up. I left the neighborhood as soon as I got out of the hospital. I took Josie as far across the city as I could get. And I have never been back there."

"Well, I'm going to be in and out of this city, a couple of days, maybe a week at most. And even if he did find out, I can protect myself now. I'm not that scared girl anymore. I'm a trained federal agent. I don't run from bad guys; I take them down."

A reluctant smile crossed his lips. "Well, I must say this is a new side of you."

"I grew up, Nathan. So did you. Can we move forward?"

"I'd like to say yes, but I just have this sick feeling in my gut."

"I've had the same sick feeling since I found out I was needed in Chicago. But I am here to do a job. That's it. So, what's it going to be, Nathan? Are we going to be friends? Enemies? People who once knew each other but really don't want to have anything to do with each other now?" She paused, waiting for him to immediately choose the last

choice, but he dug his hands into his pockets, his gaze running across her face, down her body, and the air between them seemed ridiculously tense. "Well?" she prodded.

"When I figure it out, I'll let you know." He turned and walked away.

As she watched him leave, she was filled with mixed emotions. But one thing was very clear. Nathan was a complication she didn't need. A very sexy, attractive complication, her brain couldn't help pointing out.

She frowned. Maybe she'd had a teeny, tiny little crush on Nathan a hundred years ago, when they were young teens, when they were friends. But then they didn't see each other for a few years and when they reconnected in the last two years of high school, Nathan had become harder, moodier, angrier. He'd been so critical of all her choices that they'd ended up closer to enemies.

What they were now was anyone's guess. But hopefully, she wouldn't be staying in Chicago long enough to find out.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FOUR

BREE RETURNED to the FBI office a little past three, determined to put Nathan out of her mind.

After briefing her fellow agents on her interviews with Grace and Kyle Roberts, as well as the disturbing phone calls she'd received, she grabbed a salad from the on-site cafeteria and sat down at an empty desk. As she ate, she got onto her computer, reading through the reports being posted by the numerous teams working on the case.

They had agents and analysts tracking down locally known child predators, surfing the dark web for chatter about a kidnapping for ransom or any other motivation, running computer patterns to compare Hayley's case with the three other known child abductions involving a white rose, coordinating with volunteer and police-led neighborhood searches, and continuing to interview and re-interview everyone who had been at the concert the night before. There were also numerous personnel dedicated to tracking down every lead that came in from the public, no matter how incredible it might appear.

Despite the massive manpower at work, they were unfortunately no closer to finding Hayley now than they had been the night before, and everyone was acutely aware that in cases like these, every minute counted.

After finishing her salad, she typed up her own notes, thinking again about her conversations with the Jansens, Grace Roberts, and Kyle Roberts. Aside from the ring, she hadn't gained a lot of new information, but the ring could still be significant. One of the Chicago team members had already volunteered to contact the Cubs and get a list of those lucky people who had received rings. It was a long list and a long-shot lead, but it was something and right now all they had to go on.

Thinking about the Cubs reminded her of the baseball chat forum she and her tight-knit group of friends from Quantico had set up during their training in order to coordinate assignments. Later, it had become a place to ask for help outside the usual professional channels, a place that was all theirs.

They'd adopted monikers from the 1986 World Series Mets, which had been Jamie Rowland's favorite team. Jamie had been their leader until he died in a tragic accident during a training mission. She still missed his smiling face. They'd dated for a few weeks during their time at Quantico. He was the first man in a long time she'd been able to trust. She didn't know if she would have loved him forever, but his death had torn away another piece of her heart.

It would be five years tomorrow that he'd died. Jamie's father Vincent and sister Cassie had invited her to attend a small gathering at their house to celebrate Jamie's life, and

she'd planned to attend, but now she doubted she'd make it back to New York by then. She'd been looking forward to it and hoping to catch up with at least one or two of her friends. It had been too long.

On impulse, she pulled out her phone and opened up the forum. It had gone unused since June when Damon and Wyatt had been running for their lives and had needed her help.

It was a good thing that no one had needed a lifeline since then, but she missed her buddies. They were spread out all over the world and most of the time she had no idea where anyone was, but she still felt connected to them. They had saved each other's lives. They had gone through tragedy together. And when there was no one else to trust, they knew they could trust each other. In her world, trust was a rare commodity, proven even more rare this past summer when they'd found a traitor among them.

Pushing that thought out of her mind, she started a new thread, speaking in the baseball code they used. *Looks like Cubs are on their way to another pennant. Can't make tomorrow's celebration. Anyone close enough to catch a game with me?*

She signed off with her moniker Knight, in honor of Ray Knight, a third baseman for the Mets the year they won the World Series. She'd picked his name because she fancied herself a knight. And since there weren't any females on the team, she and Parisa had been stuck with male names. Parisa had chosen Dwight Gooden, because she liked what a star he was and how much money he made.

Smiling to herself, she clicked out of the forum. She'd check it later to see if anyone responded. She wouldn't mind seeing a friendly face. The Chicago team had their own way of working, and while they were polite and professional, she'd felt a distinct tension when she'd told them about the ring on the kidnapper's finger.

No one, especially Tracy Cox, had liked that she'd broken the only lead. They also hadn't reacted well to her mention of the threatening phone calls, questioning whether they were really about this case. Tracy seemed to feel she was trying to make the case about her, which was ridiculous; she just wanted to find Hayley and catch the kidnapper and put him away for good.

Speaking of Tracy, she inwardly sighed as the assertive and critical agent in her late twenties sat down in the chair adjacent to her desk. Tracy had short blonde hair that was straight and angled and steel-blue eyes. Despite her attractive face, there was a hardness and a coldness to Tracy. She was smart, but she was also sharp, prickly, easily angered, and obsessed with protocol and policy.

"You should have called me regarding the information on Mr. Roberts before you went to his office," Tracy said. "We could have interviewed him together."

She could have done that, maybe *should* have done that, but she was used to tracking down leads on her own. And she and Tracy had never worked well together. "I wanted to catch him before his wife gave him the heads-up," she said. They hadn't talked about their past relationship, and she was hoping to avoid that by sticking to the case.

"But that didn't happen."

"Unfortunately, not," she admitted.

"Do you really like him for this?" Tracy asked. "Kyle Roberts is a very successful, well-connected man, with top-level connections in the city, and he's never been in any trouble."

"That's true. But the fact that Hayley didn't struggle, and Grace identified the ring on the kidnapper's hand as looking like the one her father wears, I thought it was worth having a conversation with him."

"Well, you won't be speaking to Mr. Roberts again," Tracy said, unable to hide the note of satisfaction in her voice. "We've had a complaint from his attorney. He says you have a conflict of interest, and if you attempt to contact his client again, he'll bring charges of harassment."

"Excuse me?" she asked in surprise.

"Mr. Roberts said that you know his wife and brother-in-law. That you're going after him to avenge some problem you had with his wife years ago."

"That's ridiculous. I followed up on what his own daughter told me."

"But it would have been helpful if you'd taken one of us with you, or even called us as soon as you got the information, in light of the fact that you apparently have a relationship with our only witness's family. You conveniently left that out of your briefing."

"It wasn't relevant, and I haven't had a relationship with the witness's family in over a decade. I knew Mr. Roberts's wife and brother-in-law when I was in my teens. But I didn't even realize Josie Roberts was the Josie Bishop I knew until I went to interview her daughter Grace."

"What problem did you have with Mrs. Roberts?"

"She stole some money and jewelry from me. She was a teenager and a drug addict at the time."

"Did you press charges?"

"No. Look, it was not that big of a deal. She gave some of it back to me, and I'm certainly not carrying out some personal vendetta."

"I would hope not, but Agent Hobbs asked me to let you know that while we appreciate the insight you bring to this case, you won't be doing any further interviews with potential suspects or witnesses unless one of us is with you."

"He's benching me?"

Tracy shrugged. "Call it whatever you like. You can still be helpful, of course. But we'll take the lead; we'll do the field work. You find clues, bring them to me. We want to work with you, but we're also much more versed in the minefield of Chicago politics than you are. If you make a wrong move, this agency risks alienating people, who might be instrumental in finding this child."

"I grew up here, Tracy. I understand Chicago politics. And I am the one who got Grace to remember something," she couldn't help adding.

"Good job on that," Tracy said with a complete lack of sincerity.

"Do we need to talk about Quantico?" she asked.

"Why would we need to talk about the academy?"

"Because if anyone seems to be holding a grudge, it's you."

"You think I've given you even one thought over the last five years?" she asked incredulously. "I've been busy building my career, and I've done that on my own, unlike you, who still seems to be getting into trouble with your gang of friends."

"You're talking about New York, about Damon and Wyatt."

"And Alan Parker, our fearless mentor at Quantico, who turned out to be a double agent. That was quite remarkable. And amazing that you and Damon and Wyatt were all taken in by him. You thought he was so fantastic."

"Alan changed over the years," she said, trying not to rise to Tracy's bait. "And the only reason you hated our gang, as you liked to call it, is because you weren't one of us."

"I didn't want to be one of you. You relied too much on each other. A good agent should be able to think and act completely independently."

"Teamwork can also be effective."

Tracy shrugged. "We can agree to disagree." She got to her feet. "I heard about Jamie Rowland's memorial celebration. Is Diego going to that?"

"He was invited, but I don't know if he's going. Last I heard he was in Ecuador." She gave Tracy a thoughtful look, remembering how interested in Diego she'd always been. "Have you stayed in contact with Diego?"

"No. I haven't stayed in contact with anyone." She paused. "I'd appreciate it if you would keep me updated on any leads you stumble upon."

"Of course," she said, very aware that Tracy thought her break in the case was pure accidental luck. But she didn't care. She wasn't looking for credit, only answers. She was, however, relieved when Tracy walked away.

Glancing at her watch, she saw it was past five. She'd never been one to leave the office early, but it had been a very long day. She decided to head back to her hotel and work from there.

She'd just gotten into her hotel room when the phone rang. She was relieved to see it was Dan. She could use a friendly voice. "Checking up on me?"

"I hear you're causing problems in Chicago. I had no idea you ever lived there. Why didn't you mention it?" he asked.

"It wasn't a happy time in my life. Who did you speak to?"

"Hobbs. He asked me if you were a loose wire that needed to be cut."

"What did you say?"

"That you're one of the smartest and most intuitive agents I've ever worked with, and he'd be a fool not to listen to you."

"Thanks, I appreciate that. But at the moment, I seem to be benched. Apparently, he is a fool," she said dryly.

"He's trying to keep a lot of people happy."

"Keeping people happy is not my concern. Finding one ten-year-old girl is. We both know Hayley doesn't have a lot of time. And it's frustrating not to be able to just run my investigation the way it needs to be run."

"Are they making mistakes, missing things?"

"I wouldn't say that. They're following all the protocols we follow, but it's just not enough, at least not for me."

"I get it. You work better from the front."

"I do," she admitted, knowing that was one reason why she liked working with Dan; he respected her need to cross boundaries when necessary.

"You want my advice, Bree?"

"Always."

"Do what you do. That kid needs you at your best. Sort out the politics later."

She appreciated his words, because Hayley was the only one who mattered right now. "That's exactly what I'm going to do."

"Good. Now tell me something else."

"What?" she asked warily.

"What's the deal with this family you're at odds with? They're related to your eyewitness?"

"Yes. Josie is the mother. Josie's husband Kyle is a person of interest. And Nathan Bishop is the child's uncle. Josie and Nathan and I knew each other as kids."

"Got it. Hobbs said you have a grudge against one of them."

"Which is a complete fabrication created by Kyle's lawyers. A long time ago, Josie stole some stuff from me. But it wasn't that big of a deal. We were street kids, Dan. We met at a time when we were all in survival mode."

"You were a street kid?"

"Yes."

"Tell me about it."

"You really want to hear all this now?"

"Considering how concerned the Chicago team is about you, I think I need to hear it."

"It's really not relevant, but here are the highlights. My mother had me when she was sixteen. She didn't know who my father was or if she did, she didn't tell me. Her father, my grandfather, was a widowed military man, and he threw her out of the house when she came home pregnant. My mom had a lot of trouble taking care of me. She had problems with drugs, problems with relationships. We were broke. We were homeless. Sometimes, we lived in shelters. Eventually, my mom died of an overdose when I was ten. I went to live with my aunt then, who was not in much better shape than my mom. When I was fourteen, I ended up in foster care, and that's where I stayed until I aged out."

"That is a much rougher story than I was expecting."

"I survived, and it made me tougher. Anyway, there's no deal with Nathan and Josie. In fact, it was actually good to see them. I wasn't sure they'd make it. But they did. They're doing well."

"So are you."

"Most days, except today, when I managed to piss off the entire Chicago office."

"Only because you were better than them."

"Thanks, Dan. You always know what to say."

"Tell my wife that. She says I have a great talent for sticking my foot in my mouth."

"But she adores you. How is her pregnancy coming along?"

"She's doing all right now. But she's making a lot of noise about me being around more when the baby is born."

"Would you quit the team?" she asked, hoping that wouldn't be the case but completely understanding if it was. Getting called out at a moment's notice was easier when you weren't leaving behind a family.

"I'm thinking about it," he admitted. "But nothing is decided. If I do change things up, you'd be a good leader for this team."

"I don't even want to think about taking your job."

"Well, you don't have to. Just find that little girl and that monster before he strikes again."

Thursday morning, Nathan hit the pavement just before seven, putting in a good six miles along the river, hoping each pounding step would drive thoughts of Bree out of his head. But it didn't work. He couldn't stop thinking about her.

She'd changed her last name from Larson to Adams. She'd changed her demeanor, too, not nearly as soft and kind and insecure as she'd once been. Now, she was a strong, determined, federal agent doing one of the hardest jobs in the world. And he found himself liking her more, which was exactly the opposite of the way he wanted to feel.

He'd spent far too much time in his life liking Bree, lusting after her, thinking she might finally wake up one day and see him, instead of every other idiot guy chasing after her.

She'd told him last night that he'd changed when they reconnected in high school after a few years apart. That was true. A lot had happened in those years that she hadn't known anything about—still didn't know anything about—and he hadn't been able to tell her.

But it wasn't just his secrets that had pushed them apart; it was realizing how much he wanted her when she clearly did not want him.

Instead, she'd chosen Johnny Hawke, the oldest of three boys born into a criminal family that ran a boxing gym as a front for their gambling and drug business.

Johnny was funny, charming, a talker who liked to flash his cash and his car in a part of town where that kind of money came with a lot of power. Bree had gotten caught up in Johnny's world. And for a short time, he had as well, mostly because he'd wanted to stay close to Bree, not because he'd wanted to hang with Johnny.

Frowning, he picked up his pace, trying to outrun the past, but that was going to be impossible with Bree in town. He'd already checked the news upon waking up, and Hayley was still missing, which meant Bree wasn't going anywhere.

He didn't know if she was truly done with Kyle; he hoped so—for Josie's sake. But there was nothing more he could do about it. He needed to keep his distance from Bree and from the past. When he ran out of path, he turned around and headed home. He'd just entered his apartment, when his phone rang. It was Adrienne.

Good. He needed a reminder that he had a different life now.

"Adrienne."

"You didn't call me back last night," Adrienne complained, a little whine in her voice that was starting to grate on him.

"Sorry. I was hanging with Josie." That wasn't really true. He had spoken to Josie again after the incident at Kyle's office, but he'd spent the rest of the night at home watching the Cubs and trying not to think about Bree.

"Is Grace okay?" Adrienne asked.

"She's hanging in there, but it's a bad situation."

"I'm sorry. I know you have a lot on your mind, but my college friend, Kari, is in town tonight. I really want you to meet her. Can you come to dinner or drinks after?"

None of that sounded appealing. "Maybe drinks," he hedged. "Can I call you later?"

"Sure. I just miss you, Nathan. It doesn't seem like we're seeing each other too often these days. I want to get back on track."

"We will," he muttered, feeling like the biggest asshole when he hung up the phone. He hadn't given Adrienne one single thought since he'd run into Bree.

It was ridiculous. He should be over Bree by now. Hell, he should have been over her twelve years ago—fifteen years ago. He didn't know what it was about her that stuck with him...

Actually, he did know.

It was the girl he'd met when he was thirteen, who'd captured his heart. Her smile had felt like the sun coming out after a relentless series of storms. Her friendship had been sweet and generous. They'd whiled away the hours

watching silly cartoons and then being ruthlessly competitive at card games.

They'd roamed the city streets, made up stories of how great their lives were going to be one day, pretending that the reality they were actually living would one day completely vanish.

She'd been his escape. And he'd been hers. But then life had gotten in the way.

Years had passed.

When they came back together, everything was different.

And then there was Johnny.

He'd thought she'd come out of her crush eventually. He'd thought she'd wake up much sooner than she had.

But then there was her secret, which had become his secret, too.

Shaking his head, he jumped into the shower. Running hadn't worked; maybe some ice-cold water would at least dull the memories.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FIVE

SHE WAS NOT CUT out for desk work, Bree thought, as she sat through another briefing Thursday morning and then watched various agents head out the door to chase down leads in Hayley's case. After spending three hours reviewing surveillance videos near Hayley's school, answering the lead line, and running through the Cubs' list of ring owners, she was feeling frustrated and restless.

She was at her best when she was in the field. She was good at engaging people in conversation, at reading witnesses, at assessing situations. Dan had told her to do what she did and worry about the politics later. She needed to follow his advice.

Plus, sitting around the office was giving her way too much time to think about Nathan.

It had been so strange seeing him the day before. And their conversation outside of Kyle's office had been surprising on a lot of levels.

She felt guilty that Nathan had taken a beating for her. She'd forced him into helping her, so the fact that he'd also been hurt made her feel terrible. Now, she had a better

understanding of why he'd been so angry when he'd first seen her, why he hadn't been able to answer a simple question as to whether they were friends or enemies or just people who used to know each other.

Obviously, he had very mixed feelings when it came to her. *How could she blame him?* She'd brought him into her crisis, gotten him hurt, and then never talked to him again. No wonder he'd thought she was selfish and made bad choices.

But she was different now. And seeing him again reminded her of the good times before all the bad stuff, the times when they had been the best of friends. They had had fun together. They had laughed and talked and dreamed together.

That connection had been broken when she'd gone into foster care and had had to live farther away. Three years had passed before she made it into the same high school as Nathan and by then everything had changed.

Well, it didn't matter now. She was happy he'd gotten his life together, that he was building houses and that his sister had a family who loved her.

She was also glad she'd come back a better person. At least, Nathan could see that she'd changed, improved, and turned her life around. His help had not been for nothing. She wished that she'd told him that the day before.

She also kind of wished that she'd have a chance to see him again, but that was probably unwise. He'd told her he didn't want to get dragged back into the mud with her, and while she had no intention of getting caught in the mud,

maybe it was best if they just let things stand where they were.

Tapping her fingers restlessly on her keyboard, she shut down her computer. She needed to get out of the office and at least get some air. But what could she do that would be helpful?

The one place she hadn't been yet was Hayley's school and perhaps seeing the actual site of the abduction would help her figure something out. According to the investigators who had gone over the stage area with a fine-tooth comb, there was nothing to find, but they hadn't seen the school sites where the three other children had been abducted. Maybe she would view the scene differently.

Gathering her things together, she headed downstairs. She unsuccessfully tried to flag down a taxi, then checked her app for any available rideshare cars nearby, but prices were surging, and cars were scarce. It was one o'clock—lunchtime—and everyone seemed to be on the move.

The rumbling of the train a few blocks away told her she did have another option. She just really hated riding the L, which was short for Chicago's elevated train system. It was always crowded, usually hot, often dirty and smelly, and the rickety, rocking curves often made her feel sick.

In the past, the body-to-body cramming on the train had also brought forth some unwelcome touching, and she still shivered when she thought about those moments.

But she did need to get across town...

She'd give it another five minutes.

While she was waiting for the next light to change and hopefully send a taxi in her direction, her phone rang. The

unidentified number sent a jolt through her system, and she mentally prepared herself to hear the creepy altered voice once more. But this time she was ready. She used a new app the tech had recently put on her phone to record and trace the call.

"Agent Adams," she said crisply, confidently.

"I missed seeing you at the news conference," he said.

"I was busy. Are you ready to tell me what you want?"

"That wouldn't be much fun, although at the moment, I feel quite bored. You seem to have no idea who I am, where I might be. How can I run if you don't get closer?"

"Why don't you give me a clue?"

"There's not much challenge in that," he said, the noise from a loudspeaker cutting off his last word.

Her brain sharpened. It sounded like he was at a train station.

Another rumble echoed through the phone. She strained to hear what the voice on the speaker was saying. It sounded like Park Station. She knew where Park Station was. It was, in fact, quite close to her old neighborhood. *That couldn't be a coincidence.*

"She's waiting for you," the voice said, sending a shiver down her spine.

It was the first time he'd mentioned Hayley.

"Don't hurt her."

"That's entirely up to you."

The phone clicked off. She drew in a deep breath as blood rocketed through her veins. She glanced back at the building behind her. She could go back inside and turn over the recording...but then what? Someone else would

eventually get to checking out the train station? She could easily do that herself. She was going to take the train after all.

Turning, she walked down the block to the nearest station. She was probably playing into the kidnapper's game. He'd no doubt made the call knowing she would hear the speaker behind him.

But it was a crowded, public place. She wasn't worried he was going to go after her. She just needed to figure out if there was some area around that station where he might be keeping Hayley.

On the way to the train, she called Tracy. Thankfully, she did not pick up. She wanted to be up front with the Chicago team, but she also didn't want to get stopped in her tracks.

Leaving a voicemail, she said, "I heard from the kidnapper again. I'm going to check out a hunch. Call me when you get this, and I'll fill you in. The good news is that I think Hayley is still alive." She called the tech who had set up her phone next. When the woman answered, she said, "Eva, I got another call. I'll send you the recording." She punched a button to do that, and then slipped her phone into her bag. She bought a ticket from the machine and hopped onto the next train.

As she'd expected, despite the brisk weather outside, the train was hot and steamy, with tons of people on board. She grabbed a nearby rail as the train lurched down the track. Within minutes, she was regretting her decision.

Knots formed in her throat, and she felt a wave of motion sickness as the train screeched around a corner.

She could have just waited for a taxi and taken a cab to Park Station. But that could have taken too long.

Maybe coming back to Chicago was a good thing. Perhaps facing her past and fears like these were just what she needed to really break free of who she'd once been. She wasn't Bree Larson anymore. She was Bree Adams. She'd turned herself into her own person.

Mental pep talk over, she managed to stay on the train as the doors opened at the next stop. One more stop, and she'd be at Park Station. She could make another minute or two.

The train swayed again as it started to move. Thirty seconds later, she felt someone's hand on her back.

Turning her head, she looked down and saw a young girl tugging on the hem of her coat. The girl appeared to be about ten or eleven with straight, brown hair, a pale, dirty face and big, wide, green eyes.

"Mommy?" the little girl said.

"What?" she gasped, sure she hadn't heard her correctly. "What did you say?"

"How come you never came back and got me?"

Shocked at the question, she could barely draw a breath. "I—What?"

"I was waiting," the little girl said. "For a long time."

"I'm not—I'm not your mother," she finally bit out.

The train came to a halt, and the little girl slipped away from her as the doors opened, and a mass of people exited.

She hesitated one second, then got off the train, and ran after the girl, wondering who she was, why she'd said what she'd said. There were so many people, she quickly lost

sight of the child, and when she went down the stairs to the sidewalk, the girl had vanished.

The train rumbled overhead as it continued on its way. She looked back up, seeing a sign on the stairs—*Park Station*.

She'd gotten to where she needed to go, and it had been a trap.

She'd just never expected the trap to include a young girl—a girl who wasn't Hayley.

Who was she? How had she known to get on the train? Why had she said what she'd said? And where the hell was she now?

She looked up and down the street, feeling unseen eyes upon her.

He was close by. She could feel it.

He'd lured her to this spot, and the stakes had just been raised in a manner she never could have anticipated.

Her phone buzzed, and she reached for it. *Was he calling her again?*

No. It was Tracy returning her call. She sent the call to voicemail. She couldn't talk to Tracy right now, not while she was feeling so raw and so very confused.

The kidnapper had done his research on her. He obviously knew more about her than just about everyone else in the world—except one.

She'd had a feeling her good-bye to Nathan was not going to stick.

Nathan stood on the third floor of the duplex he was building in Lakeview. As a general contractor, he ran a crew of two and subbed out the rest of the work. One of his employees was on vacation, and his foreman, Joe Kelly, was about to run out and pick up some supplies, leaving him with not much to do until Joe got back.

With the framing done, and no drywall up yet, he had a good view of the surrounding neighborhood. Being up high and outside reminded him of the times he and Bree had sat on roofs overlooking the city, dreaming about a different life.

As he heard Joe speaking to someone, he walked closer to the edge and peered down at the street. It was Bree. *She was back.* Just like that, every resolution he'd made about not seeing her again, not letting her get into his head, not allowing himself to be dragged into the past, went out the window.

She was dressed in black slacks and a white shirt and a black blazer. Her hair was down today, falling in pretty waves around her shoulders.

His chest tightened, along with just about every other part of his body.

Why did Bree have to be so damned beautiful? Hell, she even looked sexy in her serious federal agent clothes—clothes he wouldn't mind stripping right off her body to find the curves he'd dreamed about as a teenager.

What the hell was wrong with him?

He needed to get a grip. If Bree was here, it was because something bad had happened. He needed to remember that. She certainly hadn't come here just to see

him. She'd made it clear the day before she wanted to put the past behind her as much as he did.

He saw Bree show Joe her badge. Then his foreman gave him a quick glance.

He nodded, and Joe handed Bree a hard hat, and sent her up the stairs. He walked over to meet her.

"Hi," she said tentatively as she reached the top step. "All right to come in?"

"Looks like you're already in. What are you doing here, Bree? When you said good-bye to me yesterday, it didn't sound like you were planning on saying hello again any time soon."

"Things changed."

"What things?"

"I need to talk to you."

"About Kyle?"

"No. Something else."

"Hayley?"

"Not exactly." She cleared her throat, looking away from his questioning gaze. "This is a big house."

"It's a duplex, so it's two homes."

"And you're building the whole thing?"

"It's my job, but others work on it."

She turned her gaze to the view. "Is this the master bedroom?"

"It is."

"I wouldn't mind waking up to a view like this."

"Even if the view is in Chicago?" he said dryly.

"Good point. I would prefer it be somewhere else."

"Like maybe a beach in Southern California with colorful sailboats catching the wind and the waves," he murmured, the words coming from a lifetime ago.

Her gaze shot back to his, and he thought he saw pain in her eyes.

"I can't believe you remember that," she said.

"Really? You cut out magazine pictures of beaches in California and put them up all over your walls: Newport, Laguna, Santa Monica, Malibu. Did you ever get out there?"

"Not yet."

"I'm surprised. Why not?"

"I'm not ready for the beach yet. What about you? Have you ever thought about leaving Chicago?"

"I've thought about it a million times, but Josie got pregnant at nineteen, and even though she had Kyle, I wanted to stay close to make sure she could handle things. Plus, I adore her kid. Grace is a gutsy little firecracker. She's like Josie in some ways, but in other ways, she's completely different. She definitely has more confidence than her mother ever had, but then, thankfully, Grace hasn't had to live through what Josie did."

"Thankfully," Bree echoed. "How did Josie meet Kyle? It doesn't seem like they would have been running in the same circles. He's a lot older than her, and from what I learned about him, he's well educated and comes from a fairly wealthy family."

"Josie was working as a hostess at the Waltham Club and Kyle did a lot of networking there. She got pregnant by accident and was shocked when Kyle told her he was going

to marry her. She couldn't believe that such a successful and smart man not only fell for her but wanted to take care of her. To be honest, I was surprised that he stepped up. But Kyle said he took one look at Josie and fell hard. He didn't care that she came from nothing or she hadn't been to college."

"She is a beautiful woman. She always has been."

"Yes. That beauty got her into a lot of trouble, but in this case, it got her out of it. I have to give Kyle credit for helping Josie stay on a better path. I think he likes having someone who really looks up to him, which Josie does. But I worry that things aren't as good as they once were."

"Because Kyle works late a lot?"

"That's part of it." He paused. "Why are you here, Bree?"

She gave him a pained look. "I probably shouldn't have come. You're just the only one I can talk to."

"I'm the only one you can talk to?" he asked in surprise. "Isn't there an entire building of FBI agents you can talk to?"

"Not about this."

"About what?"

Before she could answer, Joe came up the stairs. "I'm going to take off, Nathan. You need anything before I go?"

"No, I'm good." He ignored Joe's very curious look.

"All right."

As Joe left, Nathan folded his arms across his chest and gave Bree a thoughtful look. "You're stalling. This must be bad."

"It is bad," she admitted. "I didn't mention this before, but I've had a couple of calls from a man who I think is the

kidnapper. He alters his voice, so it's difficult to decipher any kind of tone or accent."

Her words shocked him. *The kidnapper was talking to her?* "What does he say?"

"Each call has been short and cryptic. He is basically taunting me, making it sound like he's watching me, playing some sort of game with me." She licked her lips. "Anyway, the third call came in about an hour ago. He was chatty this time. He said he was a little bored, that he wondered why I didn't seem to know where he was. He sounded impatient, like I wasn't smart enough to keep up with him."

"That's crazy," he muttered, not sure what to think about the calls.

"I wasn't sure it was the kidnapper in the beginning. The first time, the voice just said I'd be sorry. The second call came when I was walking over to Josie's house. He implied that he could see me. He mentioned my hair being up. He said he wanted a worthy competitor. And then he hung up. But he never mentioned Hayley in those two conversations."

"But he did this third time?"

"Not by name. But he said she was waiting for me."

He frowned. "Okay. Then what happened? I assume there's more and it has something to do with why you're here. You don't think it's Kyle, do you?"

"No, I don't. While I was on the phone, I heard the announcement for a train coming into Park Station. I decided to go down there, to see if I could locate a place where he might have stashed Hayley."

"It sounds like he wanted you to hear that."

"I'm sure he did. But I figured I'd be safe enough at a crowded train station in the middle of the day. So, I got on the train."

"You got on the train?" he echoed. "You hate the train. You always preferred to walk whenever you could avoid taking it."

"Well, it was the fastest way to get there. Anyway, it was really crowded as always, and I was almost to the stop, when this little girl tugged on my coat and asked me if I..." Indecision flashed through her eyes.

"Well, don't stop there. What did she ask you?"

"I can't believe I'm going to say this out loud."

His pulse started beating faster at the look in her eyes. "Just say it."

"She called me *Mommy*, and she asked me why I had taken so long to come back for her."

Shock waves ran through his body. "What?"

"You heard me, Nathan," Bree said, panic in her voice. "She thought I was her mother. I told her I wasn't, and she just said she'd been waiting for me for a long time. She had brown hair and green eyes—just like me. And then the train stopped, and she jumped off. I followed her, but she disappeared into the crowd."

"Are you sure about what she said to you? Sometimes the train is loud."

"I'm absolutely positive, Nathan. She looked right at me. And she wasn't confused. There was a purpose in her eyes."

He had no idea what to say. He was completely stunned.

Bree stared back at him, her heart in her eyes. "The kidnapper set me up. He knew I would go down to the train station. He wanted me to meet her. He wanted me to think —"

"You can't think that. It's ridiculous."

"How can I not? She was about the right age. I saw myself in her, Nathan, I swear I did." Her gaze filled with anguish. "What if that girl really was my daughter?"

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SIX

HIS HEART POUNDED against his chest, and he struggled to take a breath, Bree's words spinning him back into the past.

Bree had barely been showing when she'd gotten on the bus eleven years ago, despite the fact that she was almost six months pregnant. He'd been worried about her that day. She'd been so scared, so pale, and she could barely keep food down, throwing up twice in the bathroom before getting on the bus. He hadn't wanted her to go, but he knew she had to leave.

He'd wished he could go with her, at least help her get settled somewhere, but Josie was having a hard time. He couldn't leave his sister for Bree. And it wasn't as if Bree had asked him to go. All she'd wanted from him was a bus ticket, a ride and a promise not to tell anyone.

"Nathan?" Bree asked, her voice bringing him back to the present.

He looked into her anguished green eyes and said the first thing that came into his head. "I didn't know you had a girl."

"Oh." Her mouth trembled, as she fought against what had to be an overwhelming rush of emotion. "I guess you wouldn't have known that."

"You said you didn't know when you got on the bus."

"I had an ultrasound a week later."

It was so strange to think that Bree had had a daughter, that there was a little girl somewhere in the world, with her hair and her eyes. But he didn't think it was the girl on the train. "You said the girl on the train spoke with purpose. Did it sound like she was coached?"

"Maybe." Bree nodded. "Probably."

"How did he know you'd actually take the train and not just cab it over there?"

"All I can think is that he was watching me."

"Or someone else was. If the call came from the location of the train station, and you were in front of the FBI building at the time you were speaking to him, then there are two people involved in this."

"As well as a little girl. Maybe they were just going to have the girl come up to me at the train station, but when I got on the train, they decided to make it happen there." She blew out a breath. "I don't know. But it's bad. It's all bad. This person knows way too much about me. And if he's trying to freak me out, it is definitely working."

"Why don't you just change your phone number? Stop talking to him?"

"Because I can't cut him off. The more he talks, the more likely it is he will make a mistake and reveal something that will help us find him."

He wasn't so sure about that. It sounded like the kidnapper knew exactly what he was doing.

Bree tucked a strand of loose hair behind her ears, as she adjusted the hard hat on her head. "What shocks me is how deep he's dug into my past. He's found a secret that no one else knows. How did he figure it out?"

"I never told anyone, Bree. Did you?"

"I told two people when I was at Quantico."

"Really?" He was surprised by that.

"I didn't have a choice. We did an assignment where we had to discover each other's secrets. That's when it came out. But one of those people is dead, and the other person, Parisa, is not in Chicago, and she would never set anything like this up. She's my friend."

He hoped that was true, but seeing the pain and uncertainty in her eyes, he had a feeling that the thought that someone she trusted had betrayed her was worse than whatever mind game the kidnapper was playing on her.

Bree wrapped her arms around herself, and the familiar gesture tugged at his heart. There had always been a lonely quality about Bree. She hadn't had many people in her life who'd hugged her, protected her. He'd wanted to put his arms around her a million times, but he'd always stopped himself, always thought it was a line he couldn't cross... *shouldn't* cross.

But now she looked so lost and alone, he found himself breaching the distance between them. He wrapped his arms around her shoulders and pulled her close.

She stiffened in surprise, her gaze widening, but she didn't push him away.

"Just take a second," he whispered, pressing her head against his shoulder, his mouth so close to her ear, he could smell the sweet, sexy scent of her shampoo. "Breathe."

She didn't just breathe; she surprised him by sliding her arms around his back and taking the hug to another level.

He could hardly believe he was holding her and that she was holding him back.

Now *he* was the one having trouble catching his breath.

What the hell had he just started?

And how was he ever going to let her go?

Before he could come up with an answer, Bree pulled out of his embrace, giving him a shaky, uncertain smile.

"Thanks," she said.

He didn't want her thanks; he wanted her back in his arms. But the moment had passed.

"Nathan, I need something else," she began.

"What? What do you need?" Right now, he wanted to do anything that would take the anguish out of her eyes.

"I need you to tell me it wasn't her. I need you to make me believe it."

"It wasn't her, Bree. It wasn't your daughter on the train." He didn't know who the girl was, but he just didn't believe that it was her child.

"It couldn't be, right?"

"No. And just because someone found out you had a child doesn't mean they know where that child is. You took steps to make sure your child didn't end up in Chicago."

"I know. I was so careful. I didn't even go to Cleveland like I told you; I went to Detroit. The woman from the

agency you set me up with suggested I do that, so that no one, not even you, would know where I was."

"I had no idea."

"The woman—her name was Diane—said my child would not be adopted by a family in Illinois. That she would be kept far from Johnny's sphere. But now I don't know if that's true. I need to find the girl on the train, Nathan."

"I don't think she's your daughter, Bree. A kid wouldn't act like that unless someone told them to. And if she really thought you were her mother, she wouldn't have run away from you."

"Then someone used her to get to me, which means she could be in trouble. I need to find her."

"How?"

As she pondered his question, he could see the fear receding from her gaze, replaced by strength, determination, fight—another side of Bree he remembered very clearly. She knew how to put her emotions away, to compartmentalize, to focus on the reality of the moment and nothing else. It had been a necessary trait to survive the unpredictability and sadness of her childhood.

"I'll check the security cameras at the train station," she said. "Maybe they caught the girl leaving or meeting up with someone else."

"Good idea. But is it possible that the kidnapper wants you to chase this girl instead of Hayley?"

She met his eyes. "Oh, I'm sure that's part of his goal. But at least I know what this girl looks like. If she can lead me to the kidnapper..."

"Then you're right—she might be in very big trouble," he said somberly. "Can I ask you a question? How did this kidnapper get so fixated on you?"

"I found his last victim in Philadelphia. I saved her before he could kill her. The press was on the scene. I was on the news. I became the face of his adversary."

He did not like the idea that some deranged kidnapper was stalking Bree. "What is the FBI doing to protect you?"

"I can protect myself. At the moment, he is not trying to hurt me; he just wants me in his game."

"For now. This could end with him trying to kill you."

"My concern at this moment is for Hayley and the unknown girl on the train. I should go."

"Bree, wait. I haven't heard you say anything about another person who could be involved in this."

Her face paled. "Johnny doesn't know about the baby. You said so."

"I said I didn't tell him, but beyond that..." He shrugged. "Have you looked him up? Do you know what he's doing now?"

"No. I have never wanted to know anything about him."

"Because you were afraid you'd go back to him?"

Anger flashed in her gaze. "Definitely not. I would never have gone back to him. I may have been young and stupid and lonely when I first got together with him, but I was sixteen, Nathan. Two years later, I knew a lot more about him, and I had seen his dark side."

"You were way too good for Johnny."

"I didn't think I was back then," she whispered. "I didn't think I was good enough for anyone."

His heart turned over at the candid admission. But then how could he blame her? Bree had been thrown away by a lot of people who were supposed to care about her. "You were always good enough. You just didn't pick the right people."

"I didn't."

"You might need to look into him now."

"I really don't think he's part of this. This kidnapper has been operating out of the Northeast. Johnny is in Chicago."

"He could have expanded his operations. You don't know."

"My gut says he's not involved."

"Well, forgive me if I don't completely trust your gut where Johnny is concerned."

"I guess I can't blame you for that. But for now, I'm going to assume he's not involved. And whether or not that girl on the train is my daughter, I am going to find her. Now, I better get back to the office."

"Will you call me if you get a lead on the girl?"

"I thought you wanted me to stay out of your life."

"Well, that doesn't seem to be working, does it?"

"I didn't know who else to go to."

"I'm glad you came here. And now I'm intensely curious as to what's going on." He pulled his phone out of his pocket and handed it to her. "Put in your number."

She punched it in and then sent herself a text, so she'd have his number as well. "I'll let you know if I find out anything," she said.

She'd barely finished speaking when his phone rang. He saw Adrienne's name flash across his screen as Bree

handed him back the phone.

"You can take that if you want," she said. "I'm going to go."

"It's fine." He silenced the call and put the phone back in his pocket. "I'll walk you down."

When they reached the bottom of the stairs, he took her hard hat and then walked her out to the sidewalk.

"I'm going to call for a car," she said. "I think I'll stay off trains for a while." She glanced down at her phone. "There's one only five minutes away."

"I'll wait with you."

A minute of silence followed his comment, and then she said, "Is Adrienne your girlfriend?"

"We've gone out for a few weeks; I wouldn't call her a girlfriend."

"Still noncommittal when it comes to relationships?"

"I've never liked labels."

"That's true. Have you ever come close to getting married?"

"Nope. I've been busy building my company. What about you?"

"There was someone in my life a few years back, but he died."

He thought about her words. "Was that guy at Quantico with you? The other person who knew your secret?"

"Yes. His name was Jamie Rowland. He was a military man turned FBI agent, and we clicked for a while. I don't know if it was a forever kind of thing; I certainly wasn't looking for that, and he wasn't, either. But he was funny and generous and just a really good person. His death was

a tragedy. It happened during a training exercise. I almost quit after that. But I knew Jamie would have wanted me to keep going, so I did."

He found himself feeling a little jealous of this unknown man. At least when she'd been with Johnny, he'd had someone to hate for a lot of reasons, but this military hero and justice fighter seemed to have had a lot of things going for him.

"Sorry," he muttered.

"I only knew him a few weeks, but he made an impact on my life. He encouraged me to turn my painful secret into something positive. That's why I decided to get involved in finding missing kids. I know my child isn't missing, and I gave her up by choice, but I do know what it's like to lose a piece of yourself. And if I can help some other family get whole again, I will."

"I'm sure you do a lot of good. I'm sorry I was an asshole when you first showed up at Josie's house. You threw me," he said candidly.

"I was shaken, too. I was not expecting to see your face. I honestly had no idea that Grace's mother was Josie. I just had Grace's name. I don't even think I saw the names of her parents. But then everything was happening really fast. I got a call at six a.m. yesterday to get on a plane and come to Chicago. It's been a lightning blur since then."

"When did you first hear from the kidnapper?"

"Actually, I got that call right before my boss got in touch with me about Hayley's disappearance."

"That's interesting. The kidnapper knew they were going to call you in."

"Sometimes, I think this whole case is about me and my past. And that's why he picked Chicago and moved out of the Northeast. He wanted me in his game, and this is where he could make me the most vulnerable. But I'm not going to let him win. I'm going to find Hayley and this girl on the train, and I will make sure this kidnapper ends up in jail for the rest of his life."

"I believe you."

She checked her phone and groaned. "Now it says five more minutes."

"There's a lot of traffic this time of day. That's why the trains are usually faster." As he spoke, he glanced around the neighborhood, wondering if someone was watching her even now.

She followed his gaze. "I didn't see a tail," she said. "I watched on the way over here."

And he didn't see anyone sitting in a car or hanging out in the doorway of a building, but he had to admit he felt decidedly tense.

"So, what does Adrienne do?" Bree asked.

"She's an event planner."

"That sounds fun."

"She seems to like it." Standing next to Bree, he could barely remember what Adrienne looked like. *How was that possible?* Two days ago, he'd been thinking she might be someone he could think of as a girlfriend. Now, she seemed like a very pale comparison to Bree and all her fiery passion. Of course, that passion also came with a lot of problems. Bree was drama and pain. Adrienne was light and fun.

Hadn't he had enough darkness in his life?

"Have you told Adrienne about your childhood, your stepfather?" she asked.

"Why would I? It's not important to our relationship. And we're definitely not to the point where we're sharing secrets. Hell, I haven't even told her I don't like Brussels sprouts."

Bree raised an eyebrow. "You don't like Brussels sprouts?"

"No. I don't care if they're roasted or steamed or covered in garlic and cheese. I just don't like 'em."

"That sounds very definitive," she said with a light smile. "Why haven't you told her that?"

"Because she loves Brussels sprouts—all vegetables, in fact. She is passionate about her health. And it seems too soon to confess such a dark secret."

"How are you going to have an honest relationship, if you can't come clean about a vegetable?"

"Honesty is overrated."

"I don't agree with that."

"Really? You think telling people what they don't want to hear makes them like you more?"

"I wouldn't say that, but maybe Adrienne needs to date a guy who shares her love of Brussels sprouts."

"So, I'm depriving her of the opportunity to find her perfect vegetable match? I guess I need to break up with her."

"Or come clean. How long have you been dating?"

"Two months."

"That's a fair amount of time."

"Is it?"

"What is she like?"

"Why are you so interested?"

"Because I just am. You used to date a lot of blondes. You had a new girl every week in high school."

"Well, I always heard blondes had more fun, and I was a teenage boy."

"Do you ever think about getting married?"

"Whoa, you are getting way ahead of yourself."

"You're not getting any younger, Nathan. You're thirty years old."

"That's not that old. I'm busy with my career. What's your excuse?"

"I'm busy, too. I'm always on the go. I get called out of town on a moment's notice. Not many guys appreciate that." She paused as a silver Prius came down the street. "There's my car."

He felt both relieved and unhappy that it was time for her to go.

She gave him a grateful smile. "Thanks again for talking me off the ledge, Nathan. I feel better now."

She might feel better, but he felt very conflicted.

He didn't know what to make of the mysterious girl on the train, but one thing was clear. Bree was in trouble.

Was he going to go back to his old ways and try to protect her, rescue her? Or was he going to walk away and let her take care of herself?

She was more than capable of doing that. He just had to let her.

Yeah...it wasn't really a question...

After Bree left, Nathan tried to work. But as the afternoon shadows deepened, and five o'clock approached, he put his tools away and got into his truck. He started toward home, but halfway there, he turned around and made his way toward Craig's, a small sports bar in River North.

He'd met Alan Craig in middle school, and they'd been friends during most of their teen years, but after Johnny's beat-down, he'd left his old neighborhood and gone dark on all of his friendships.

Ten years had passed before he'd run into Alan at a market last year. Since then, he'd hung out a few times at the bar, happy to see Alan had taken his grandfather's bar in the old neighborhood and moved it to River North, where he'd found a good clientele of locals and tourists.

When he entered Craig's, he was immediately enveloped by a warm, friendly feeling. The wood-paneled walls featured sports memorabilia from all of Chicago's teams, the Cubs, the Bears, the Bulls, the White Sox, and the Blackhawks. In addition to a long bar with three TVs behind it, there were a dozen or so tables in the middle of the room facing additional flat-screens, most of which were currently playing a White Sox game that was just about to start.

There were about fifteen people in the bar: a group of young male executives who looked like they'd just left an accounting or law firm, a trio of twenty-something women who were working their way through a platter of Craig's

famous chicken wings, as well as a few other couples and singles sitting at the bar.

He slid into an empty stool as Alan gave him a nod. Alan had dark-red hair, pale skin, and a multitude of freckles across his face. He'd added a few pounds to his square, stocky build, probably the result of testing out too many of those wings. Or maybe it was because he'd moved in with his girlfriend, Beth, a few months ago.

"Long time no see," Alan said with a grin. "Thought you'd ditched me again. And it was going to be another ten years before I saw you."

"Not a chance. I've been working a lot."

"Glad to hear business is good. I've got a Tank 7 Farmhouse Ale on tap."

"Sold."

"How are things going?" Alan asked, as he filled a glass and set it in front of him.

"Not great."

Alan's eyebrow shot up. "Problems with Josie?"

"Not this time. Well, not exactly. Did you hear about that girl who got kidnapped from the school concert?"

"Yeah, I saw it on the news. That's terrible. You know her?"

"I do. She's friends with Josie's daughter, and I know her dad."

"I'm sorry. Are they close to finding her?"

"I hope so." He took a sip of his beer. "The FBI is involved."

"That's good, right?"

"It is good, but one of the FBI agents working the case is Bree."

"What?" Surprise flashed through Alan's eyes. "You're kidding me. Not Bree Larson?"

"She changed her last name to Adams, but it's her. She came to interview Grace, Josie's daughter, because Grace was a witness to the abduction. I could not believe it when I saw Bree standing on the porch."

Alan shook his head. "I can't believe she's in the FBI. That's something else. How did she look?"

"Really good," he said, taking another long draught of beer.

Alan laughed. "Man, you still have a thing for her."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Come on, Nathan. I knew you back then. You and her always had some weird dance going on. I never knew exactly what was between you, but there was something."

Alan's words echoed Bree's from the night before when she'd said she didn't know what they were—friends, enemies, or people who used to know each other. It seemed that they had been all three at some point or another. But she definitely felt more like a friend after their last conversation, after she'd shown her vulnerability, after she'd admitted that dating Johnny was a huge mistake.

"Is she single?" Alan asked.

"That's what she said, but that's not important."

"What is important?"

"Johnny Hawke."

"I should have figured his name was coming after you mentioned Bree." Alan glanced around, making sure that

the other bartender was taking care of the customers and then leaned forward. "Does Johnny have something to do with the kidnapping? Is Bree going to take him down?"

"I don't know if he's involved, but someone is messing with Bree, someone from our past, and Johnny is a good suspect. Unless you can tell me he's in jail now, or better yet—dead."

Alan frowned. "Sorry, but from what I hear, Johnny's business is better than ever. He's taken over his dad's boxing gym on Hayward. He and his brothers also run an automotive shop. I heard he operates his side gigs out of there—drugs, guns, gambling...the usual. He's made the family more powerful than it used to be. I don't think he lives in the old neighborhood anymore, though. He has other, more expensive, properties."

He sighed. "Not what I wanted to hear, but thanks."

"He's living with Sierra Littman now. Remember her?"

"Sure." Sierra had been friends with both Josie and Bree. She had always been looking for love in all the wrong places, and apparently, she'd found it in Johnny. "I'd like to say I feel sorry for her, but she was not a nice person. She was always lying and stirring up drama."

"That's true."

"Do they have kids together?"

"Not sure. His family has been expanding, but I don't know if they're his kids or his brothers' kids."

That was interesting. While Bree didn't think Johnny was involved, if he was, he probably had access to all kinds of kids who could pull off a con job like the girl on the train.

"Don't mention to anyone I was asking," he said.

Alan gave him a disgusted look. "You think I'd do that? I know what Johnny did to you. My advice is to do what you've been doing: stay out of the neighborhood, stay out of the past, and stay away from Bree. She almost got you killed once."

"It wasn't her fault."

"You were protecting her."

He tilted his head, giving Alan a speculative look. "I never told you why Johnny beat me up."

"It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure it had something to do with Bree, especially since she disappeared around the same time. Hey, if Bree is an FBI agent, maybe she can arrest Johnny's ass and put him away for good. Unless you think she still has feelings for him?"

"I don't think that, but I also don't think she wants to go anywhere near Johnny."

"Probably wise if she doesn't. Speaking of women, how are things going with the tall blonde you brought in a few weeks ago?"

"Damn. Adrienne," he muttered, looking down at his watch. He'd told her he wasn't going to do dinner, but she was still waiting to hear from him about drinks, and the last thing he wanted to do was hang out with her and her college friend when he was completely and utterly distracted.

"She went right out of your mind when you saw Bree, didn't she?"

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to. Do yourself a favor, Nathan. Figure out what you want from Bree once and for all. And then go

get it."

"It's not that easy."

"It might just be. You won't know until you put it all on the line, but that's not something you've ever been willing to do with her."

"I didn't think I'd ever see her again." His phone buzzed, and as he took it out of his pocket, he saw Bree's name on the screen. "It's Bree."

Alan smiled. "Maybe this is your second chance to get it right."

"Or screw it up again."

"Looks like you're going to have an opportunity to find out." Alan moved away as he took the call.

"Hello?"

"The security camera caught the back of the little girl as she left the train station. She went into a café down the street, but I never saw her come out," Bree said, excitement in her voice. "I'm heading there now. Someone might have seen her or know who she is."

"I'd like to go with you. Why don't I pick you up?"

"I'm sure it's out of your way."

He was sure, too, but he wasn't letting her do this alone. "I can be at your office in about fifteen minutes."

"I'll meet you in front of the building."

"Stay inside until I get there. I'll text you." Getting up, he took a ten out of his wallet and put it on the bar. "I'll see you soon, Alan."

"That's way too much."

"It's cheap for the therapy session you just gave me."

Alan laughed. "Good luck."

"Thanks. I think I'm going to need it."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SEVEN

DESPITE NATHAN'S suggestion that she stay in the office until he arrived, Bree packed up her things and walked quickly to the elevator.

The Chicago team was even less happy with her now than they had been earlier. When she'd returned to the office, she'd had a rather heated discussion with both Tracy and the ASAIC. They didn't like that the kidnapper had called her or that she'd gone down to Park Station on her own. They were happy that she'd recorded the call, but that analysis was still ongoing and the trace had led to a café that was miles away from Park Station. No phone had been found dumped in the trash or anywhere else in the café. So, once again the kidnapper had played his hand very well.

One thing she had omitted from her story was what had happened on the train with the little girl. When she'd requested access to security cameras around the train station, everyone had assumed she was looking for Hayley. And, of course, she had looked for Hayley, but she had also looked for the brown-haired, green-eyed girl in the ragged gray sweatshirt and ripped jeans.

Maybe it was wrong not to have come completely clean with them, but she hadn't been able to summon the will to confess her personal secret to people she barely knew. Plus, she had as much experience, if not more, than anyone on the Chicago team, and the second she thought her secret would save Hayley's life, she would tell it, but right now she needed to play things out on her own and try to find the girl on the train. If she could get to her, she would be one step closer to the kidnapper.

When she got downstairs, she waited in the lobby for Nathan, her thoughts turning to the man who had played such a pivotal role in her life at various times. She probably shouldn't have gone to him this afternoon, but he had seemed the perfect person to turn to.

It wasn't just that he knew about the baby; it was because he knew her—the real her, the person that no one else knew.

And it had felt so damn good to lean on him. Even now, she could feel his arms around her, and the memory made her nerves tingle. She and Nathan had had odd moments of attraction over the years, but they'd never acted on them. *They certainly couldn't act on them now.*

She really shouldn't have called him. She was pulling him into a dangerous situation.

Was that fair? Hadn't she already put him through hell once before when Johnny had almost killed him because of her?

But it was too late now. She could see his truck pulling up in the loading zone, and her phone buzzed with his text. She typed in a quick *ok* and headed out the door.

When she hopped into the truck, she gave him a nervous smile, and felt another jolt of attraction as his brown-eyed gaze met hers. *This was not good.*

She looked away and fumbled with her seat belt, reminding herself that she needed to focus on finding the girl and nothing else.

"Are you okay?" Nathan asked her.

She forced a neutral expression onto her face. "I'm fine."

"Did you tell the other FBI agents about your experience?"

"I shared the call with them, but not the rest. I will tell my secret if it will help Hayley."

"I know you will," he said evenly.

"You do?" she asked with a bit of surprise. "You haven't always liked my decisions."

"That's true, but I'm okay with this one. I know you won't jeopardize Hayley's life for any reason, not even to protect your secret."

"Thank you. The one good thing about this sick game is that I'm pretty certain Hayley is alive, and that gives us a chance to find her."

"I hope you're right. What's the name of the café we're going to?"

"It's called the Hummingbird Café. I looked it up, and it's open til nine; they serve breakfast, lunch, and dinner. It's owned by Viola and Jonas Montclair, a middle-aged, African-American couple, who opened the restaurant five years ago."

"You did your research. Is that important to know?"

"I have no idea. But I'm trying to find a way to get ahead. Since the girl went into the café and never left, she's either still there or there's a back door."

"If that's the case, she could have gone through the place in two minutes, and it's possible no one saw her."

"That would be depressing, but I'm hoping that's not the case. The girl was no more than ten or eleven, and she was alone, so I'm thinking she lives nearby, knows the area. She walked with confidence."

"Interesting that you said earlier that she spoke with purpose and now you say she walked with confidence. It doesn't really sound like she's scared or in trouble."

"No, it doesn't, but maybe she's too young to know she's being used."

"True." He paused. "By the way, I saw Alan Craig earlier. Do you remember him?"

"I do, but I thought you said you didn't see anyone from our past."

"Actually, I do see Alan now; I ran into him last year after not having seen him since we were teenagers. He runs a bar in River North. He named it Craig's after the one his grandfather used to run in the old neighborhood. He has a girlfriend he lives with. Beth is a sweetheart."

"You were good friends with Alan. How come you let that end?"

"Because once Johnny beat the crap out of me, I didn't want to hang out with anyone who might get hurt in my wake. Alan knew what had happened to me. I actually stayed at his house for a night before I was able to get Josie and move out of that neighborhood."

As Nathan was telling the story, she sensed there was a reason behind it that she wasn't going to like. "Where are you going with this?" she asked, pretty sure she knew.

Nathan gave her a quick look. "I wanted to find out if Alan knew anything about Johnny's current activities. I know he has a few friends who still live in the neighborhood."

"Did you tell him why you were asking about Johnny?"

"Not really."

She didn't like his answer. "You told him I was in town, didn't you?"

"I told him you were looking for the missing girl."

"And then you asked about Johnny. Dammit, Nathan, he's going to start putting things together. You said he knew you got beat up. Did he know why?"

"No. I told you I didn't tell anyone. He did say earlier tonight that he figured it had something to do with you, because you disappeared, and Johnny was going crazy trying to find you."

She shook her head. "I wish you hadn't brought him into this."

"He's not into anything, and aren't you a little curious as to what he said?"

She really didn't want to be, but if it could help the case... "Fine. What did he say?"

"Johnny has taken over for his dad. He's grown the family business of criminal activities. He's very powerful now."

"Awesome."

"He's with Sierra Littman."

"Well, things really haven't changed all that much, have they? She was always trying to get Johnny's attention. Are they married? Do they have kids?"

"I think they're just living together. But Alan said there are a lot of kids around. Could be Johnny's or they could belong to his brothers."

"Johnny always talked about having sons, carrying on the family legacy. I tried to tell him that he could be better than his family. I thought there was more good in him than there was in his brothers. He used to say I was crazy; there was nothing better than power, and that's what his family had."

"And what he wanted more than anything."

"I suppose so. But isn't that what we all wanted back then? We were in our late teens, looking at adulthood. We wanted to control our destinies, but we still needed money and school and opportunities." She turned her head, looking out at the city streets passing by. "Do you remember all those nights we used to just walk around? Especially in the summer when it was so hot? It seemed like we'd walk for miles, but we never got anywhere. It was like we'd run into those invisible fences that keep pets from leaving their yard. We couldn't step beyond a particular curb, go past a corner. The future was always just beyond where we could get to."

"That's a good way to describe it." He paused. "I know you don't think Johnny is part of this, but he would know how to get a kid to play a con like this. He used to do this kind of shit when he was a kid."

She frowned as she turned back to him. "I still don't think it's him. But I take your point."

"Just something to consider."

A moment passed, and then she said, "I feel like I should apologize again for what happened to you after I left, Nathan. I was caught up in my own problems, but I should have seen how much danger you put yourself in for me. I shouldn't have called in my debt."

"You kept Josie out of jail; I owed you. I paid up."

"Yes, you did. But you paid more than you owed. And I shouldn't have forced your hand like that."

"Well, maybe someday I'll need a favor, and you can pay me back."

"I would try, Nathan. You probably don't believe that, but I would."

He looked away from the road to meet her gaze once more. "Actually, I do believe you."

His words warmed her heart. "I'm glad."

Their gazes clung together for a long moment, and she felt as if whatever had been holding them apart suddenly fractured.

Then Nathan squared his jaw and turned his attention back to traffic.

Maybe there was still a wall between them after all.

As they neared Park Station, she realized how close they were getting to the old neighborhood. They weren't there yet, but it was only a mile or two away. She was quite sure the station had been picked for a particular reason, and perhaps that was it.

It took Nathan a few minutes to find a parking spot. Then they walked down the street and under the train tracks. As the train rumbled overhead, her mind went back to earlier that day. She could hear the girl's voice so clearly, see the question in her eyes, but then she was gone.

"I assume the café is the building with the bird on it," Nathan said, waving his hand toward the end of the block.

"Yes."

As they headed toward the restaurant, she wondered if someone was watching them, if someone was waiting, and she found herself moving closer to Nathan.

Or perhaps he was moving closer to her...

His hand suddenly covered hers, and she jumped, startled by the unexpected touch, by the surprising heat.

"I just want to keep us together," he said, in answer to her unspoken question.

She should let go, but her fingers seemed to have a mind of their own, curling around Nathan's. And it felt right... better than right, if she were being honest.

She was so used to being on her own but at this moment it felt really good to have Nathan with her.

When they reached the café, Nathan opened the door for her, and she stepped inside. Despite the fact that the restaurant was bright and charming, with a dozen or so tables and a glass display case by the register filled with cakes and cookies, she felt as if she were walking into a trap. She scanned the restaurant quickly. There were about fifteen people seated at various tables, but no girls of the right age.

She moved over to the counter, where a young woman in her early twenties greeted her.

"Can I help you?" the woman asked.

"Yes. I'm looking for this girl." She took out her phone where she'd captured a screenshot of the little girl. It was of her back, but she was hoping the woman might recognize her from her clothes. "She was in this café a few hours ago, between one and two o'clock. Were you working then?"

"Right. Yeah, I saw her. You're her mom? The FBI agent?"

Her pulse leapt at the question. "Who told you that?"

"The kid. She said you'd be in, and I should give you this." The woman reached underneath the counter and pulled out a piece of paper.

She took what appeared to be a flyer out of the woman's hand. "What's this?" she asked in confusion.

"Beats me. The kid gave me \$20 and said to give it to her mom, the brown-haired FBI agent with the green eyes. The kid looked just like you." She paused. "If you don't mind, I have some other customers..."

Bree stared down at the flyer in confusion but stepped to the side as the clerk helped a young father and his son.

"Open Heart Refuge," she murmured, her stomach twisting into another painful knot. She felt hot, sweaty, dizzy, weak... "I have to sit down." She stumbled a few feet away to an empty table.

Nathan sat down across from her and took the paper out of her hand, a deep frown crossing his lips. Then he lifted his gaze and met hers. "He is pushing all your buttons.

Someone is seriously screwing with you. Someone from your past—*our* past," he added, a hard light entering his light-brown eyes. "Open Heart Refuge is where we met."

"I know. I was twelve. I was there with my aunt. You were thirteen, and you were there with Josie and your mom."

"One of several times she tried to leave my stepfather," he said, a harsh note in his voice. "It just never lasted longer than a few weeks. She always went back, and she always took us with her. But for that short time..."

"Everything felt almost normal," she murmured, meeting his gaze. "We played cards after school—hearts and spades."

"And poker," he reminded her. "I taught you how to play seven card stud."

"And you made up stories to entertain Josie, so she wouldn't be scared. There were a lot of tales about soldiers and white knights and magical spells that would protect us."

"But they weren't real." He set the flyer down on the table, giving her a speculative look. "You know what you're supposed to do with this."

"I'm supposed to go to the shelter."

"Do you really want to walk through those doors again, Bree?"

She thought about his question for a long moment. "I really don't."

"But you're going to."

"It's the next move. I have to find that girl. Maybe she's there."

"She's not. That would be too easy. I think you should stop playing his game."

"I've had the same thought."

"I sense a *but* coming."

"But the Chicago office has a lot of manpower on Hayley's case, and if I follow these clues, maybe he'll make a mistake. Perhaps he'll reveal something that will lead us to Hayley."

"He doesn't seem like someone who is going to make an easy mistake."

"No, but if I don't go, I'm just going to spend all night wondering what I would have found there." She paused, glancing down the hall. "There's a back door. The little girl must have left through that door. Although, it appears to be locked now." She got up and went over to the counter, waiting for another opportunity to speak to the cashier. "Do you have a security camera off the back door?"

"We did, but it broke last year, and the owner hasn't gotten it fixed."

"You didn't see anyone with the little girl? She didn't meet up with someone here in the café?"

"Nope. As far as I know, she was alone. Sorry."

"Thanks."

Nathan got up as she returned to the table. "I'll drive you to the shelter."

"You don't have to do that. I can take a cab." She licked her lips, knowing she should send him away, but she wasn't quite feeling it. She liked having him around.

"You're not taking a cab, and you're not going there alone."

"You're not the one in charge," she said, feeling it necessary to remind him.

"You're not, either, Bree. The person in charge is the one sending you on this sick scavenger hunt."

She frowned. "You're right. It is sick, and I need to find that girl, because she's a pawn in this game, and even if she isn't my daughter, I need to make sure that she's safe."

"Then we'll go to the shelter, and we'll take it from there." He grabbed her hand. "And, yes, I am going to hold onto you until we get to the truck, so get over it."

She didn't have to get over it, but she wasn't going to tell him that. "If it makes you feel better, fine."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER EIGHT

NATHAN ONLY FELT BETTER until he had to let go of Bree's hand and usher her into his truck. As he walked around the vehicle, he felt a cold chill and a deep sense of foreboding that only got worse as he got behind the wheel and started the engine.

Bree was being targeted in a destructive, terrifying manner, forcing her to walk back through the darkest moments of her past. He didn't know if he agreed with her decision to keep the Chicago FBI team out of this, but she knew her business more than he did, so he had to go along with it. What he wasn't going to do was let her go to the shelter on her own.

He rationalized that helping her was also helping Hayley, but deep down, he knew he was still with Bree because he couldn't walk away from her. He'd never been able to do that completely. Sure, he'd kept his distance at times, especially when she was with Johnny, but he'd always been close enough if she'd ever needed him.

And she had. She'd needed him to help her leave town. Even though he'd let her believe that she'd blackmailed him

into helping, it wasn't really true. And helping her exit his life had been one of the hardest things he'd ever done. Even when she'd been with someone else, she'd still been in his life; he could still see her smile, hear her laugh...

Knowing that he would probably never see her again had gutted him.

But knowing that she'd be out of Johnny's power and that she and her child would be safe, would have better lives, had helped him get through it.

He really didn't want her to get sucked back into the quicksand that had once been her life.

But she wasn't going to quit—at least, not yet.

Neither was he.

Glancing over at her, he wondered what she was thinking. She hadn't spoken a word since they'd gotten in the car, and her gaze was on the dark city streets, blocks that were becoming more and more familiar. Mack's Deli, where they'd saved up change to buy a Mack special, which was really just a lot of processed meats and cheese: bologna, pepperoni, Swiss cheese, a mound of lettuce, a couple of tomatoes, and a lot of red onions. They'd loved those sandwiches, usually sharing a half-footer, washing it down with a soda, chasing it with some gummy worms.

It was any wonder they'd survived on the food they'd eaten.

But some days there hadn't been much food at all...

He could still vividly remember the feeling of hunger in the pit of his soul, gnawing away at him, making him feel hollow. But the hunger hadn't been nearly as bad as some of the other emotions he'd had to get through. He'd take an

empty stomach any day over the alternative—having to deal with his stepfather, a mean-assed son-of-a-bitch.

Clearing his throat, he was tempted to turn the truck around and speed away as fast as he could.

Bree turned her head, gazing back at him, as if she sensed his sudden discomfort.

"I know," she murmured. "All this sucks. We both have our lives together and now we're going to relive a painful time in our past."

"Are you sure you want to do this now? Maybe you should think about it, sleep on it, come back in the daylight."

"I can't afford to waste any time, Nathan. There's a clue at the shelter, and I have to get it."

"How can you be sure?"

"Because he wouldn't be sending me there unless he has something else to show me."

"Or he wants to hurt you."

"I don't think he's ready to do that yet. He's still in the slow build...savoring the game that he has so carefully put together. He wants to watch me twist in the wind, wonder if this girl is my daughter, worry if I'll find her in time."

"Okay, I have to bring something up," he said abruptly.

"What is it?"

"You've become fixated on the idea that the girl on the train is your daughter."

"That's not true. I know she's probably not."

"There's a part of you that is unsure."

"Well, you did hear the cashier at the café say she looked like me, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I get it. She has brown hair and green eyes. Lots of girls do."

"What's your point?" she snapped.

He made a quick decision and took a turn at the next intersection, then pulled over.

"Why are we stopping?"

"Because we need to have this conversation, and I don't want to be driving while we're having it."

"Okay. What do you want to say?"

He threw the truck into park and turned to look at her. "What about Hayley?"

"What do you mean?"

"If this kidnapper has Hayley, why didn't he just use her to get to you?"

"Well...because she probably wouldn't have done it. This girl might have been paid. She could have been a street kid, who was ready to make some cash. She wasn't afraid. Hayley wouldn't have been able to pull this off."

"All right. That makes sense. But what about Hayley?" he repeated. "Come on, Bree. It has to have crossed your mind that Hayley is also the right age to be your daughter. And she was adopted. If this kidnapper knows you had a kid, and wants to torture you in the worst way possible, how can you not consider the fact that Hayley might be your child?"

Her eyes glittered in the shadowy light. "I did think about it. But her birthdate isn't the same. Hayley was born in Joliet, Illinois, five days before I had my daughter."

"Five days isn't very long."

"But my child was born in Detroit. And the mother listed on Hayley's birth certificate checked out. We verified that she did give birth in that hospital on that day. Nothing points to Hayley being my kid. She doesn't even look like me."

"Then why did the kidnapper pick her? Why did this person, who you said has been working in the northeast, come to Chicago and pick Hayley as his next victim?"

"I think he came to Chicago because of me. After I botched his last abduction, he wanted revenge, and obviously he did a lot of research on me. He probably thought I'd be weaker here in Chicago, not just because of my past, but because I wouldn't be with my normal team, the team that has been chasing him for months."

He supposed that made sense.

"As for why he picked Hayley?" Bree continued. "All I can say is that she matches the other victims for the most part. Her hair is brown, not blonde, but she has brown eyes, just like the other three girls, who were also around the same age. She lives in an upper-class neighborhood, goes to a good school, and comes from a happy family—also just like the other three girls. Her abduction follows the same patterns as before. She was taken from a school, a place where she should have been safe."

"Were any of those other girls adopted?"

"No, but I'm not sure how he would know that in advance."

"So that's different."

"Yes, and the other difference is that he's pulling me into his game, as well as this other little girl from the train."

She blew out a breath. "When I say it all out loud, it sounds crazy. I know that. But there's a good chance this kidnapper is not sane."

"All right. I get it. Hayley fits the pattern. But if he knows you gave up a kid, why didn't he try to find her, take her?"

"Because he can't find her. He might have found out I got pregnant and left town and had a baby, but he doesn't know where my child is. My daughter is safe and far away from here," she said, a desperate note in her voice.

He knew she needed to believe that, and he didn't want to take her hope away, but he wasn't as convinced as she was.

"Can we go now?" she asked.

"One second. Tell me about Detroit."

"There's not much to tell. I lived in a studio apartment about as big as a closet. I had a part-time job in a taco shop, and I was there for three months until I gave birth." She sucked in a deep breath, slowly letting it trickle out. "Giving up my daughter was the most difficult and painful thing I've ever done. I was in labor for hours, and I was all alone. I should have been used to it by then, but it was still so lonely and terrifying. And when she was born, I heard her cry, and then she was taken away."

A tear slid out of Bree's eye, and his heart ached for her.

She ruthlessly wiped it away with her fingers. "All I saw was a tiny bundle in a hospital blanket. I didn't even see the color of her hair or her eyes."

"Why not? Why didn't they let you hold her—say good-bye?"

"Before I went into labor, I had told them I didn't want to see her, but after she was gone, I really wished I hadn't said that. I thought it would be easier if she just disappeared, but it wasn't. I cried the whole night and most of the next few months."

"You shouldn't have been alone. I wish you had called me."

"I couldn't call anyone. I had to make a clean break from my old life."

"What happened after that? Did you stay in Detroit?"

"No. I left three weeks later. It was too painful to stay in the apartment where I'd been pregnant. For months, it had just been me and her. I didn't make any friends there. It was too risky. At night, I'd read to my baby, play her music, tell her she was going to have a great life. Once she was gone, I couldn't stand being there."

"You left Detroit and went where?"

"Colorado. I was given a bonus of five thousand dollars for delivering a healthy baby. I enrolled at a community college and got a part-time job and eventually made it to the University of Colorado Boulder, where I majored in criminal justice and psychology. I made a new life for myself, and several years after graduation, I got into the FBI. That's when I really came into my own. Now I'm trained in multiple weapons, I understand criminal behavior, and I can win at hand-to-hand combat. I don't need anyone to rescue me anymore. And I've been doing good work the last five years. I like who I am now."

"I like who you are, too," he admitted.

She flashed him a smile. "Really? I know I disappointed you a lot back in the day. You were pretty critical of my choices."

"Johnny was bad for you."

"I didn't find out how bad for a long time. I hate that we're going down this road into the past, Nathan."

"I think you're supposed to hate it."

"I still don't understand how the kidnapper knows my secrets. But it doesn't really matter. I just have to find him before he hurts Hayley or this other little girl. We only have a couple of days at most. The other girls didn't make it past the seventh day."

"Then we better get to it."

She couldn't believe she'd told Nathan about the night she'd given birth to her child. She'd never told anyone, and now she was feeling overwhelmed with emotion, remembering those first few minutes after the birth, when she'd yearned to see her baby's face, her eyes, her first look at the world.

For that entire first year, she'd thought about her child every single day, hoping she'd made the right choice. As time went on, she'd never forgotten, but she had found a way to move on, secure in the knowledge that she'd done the right thing. She'd imagined her child with loving parents, a beautiful home in a nice neighborhood, pretty clothes and good food and nothing but joy.

Had that been a fool's dream?

Had choosing total secrecy to protect the child from Johnny actually put her daughter in more danger because she'd used someone working outside of the law?

She needed to know. She needed to find her daughter. She'd told Nathan that her child was not the girl on the train and not Hayley, because none of the facts supported either scenario. He hadn't tried to argue with her, but she'd seen the doubt in his eyes.

She wanted to believe that her child was still living the dream life she'd given her away to get, but she needed to find out for sure. And the only way to do that was to keep playing the game, until she had a chance to make her own move.

A few moments later, Nathan parked under a streetlight, a block away from the shelter. She hoped the tires, the rims, and everything else would still be there when they were done, but in this neighborhood, you never knew.

Nathan took her hand again as they hit the sidewalk, and she didn't quite know what to think about that. She just knew that she liked it, probably a little too much. But she had enough to worry about right now, and her relationship with Nathan—whatever it was—would have to be dissected later.

When she saw the bright-blue door with the sign Open Heart Refuge, her heart sped up again. This particular shelter, housed in an old three-story hotel, was for single mothers with children, and instead of one or two big rooms filled with cots like most shelters, each of the eighteen hotel rooms could house one to four family members.

Having a room that she only had to share with her aunt had made her feel more normal. There had also been a large multi-media room downstairs with card tables, a big television, and plenty of games, as well as a smaller quieter room for reading and homework. Adults had their own computer center and private room for when they needed a break from the kids. There was also a kitchen and a dining room that actually provided decent meals.

They'd spent four months at the shelter before moving into an apartment. She'd been sad to leave, but the shelter was very good at helping their residents move into longer-term situations. Unfortunately, longer term for her and her aunt had been about seven months. Then her aunt had ended up in rehab, and she'd been put in foster care, the first of several homes, all of them disappointing.

As they drew nearer to the door, Nathan's steps began to slow, and his fingers tightened around hers.

She paused, giving him a curious look. "Everything okay?"

His lips tightened. "I never thought I'd be back here."

"Nothing bad happened at this place," she reminded him. "Right?"

"Right."

"The director—what was her name?"

"Lucy Harper."

"Yes. Miss Lucy, we called her. I wonder if she's still here. Although, she seemed like a hundred years old when I was twelve."

"She was probably fifty," he said with a tight smile.

"She was fierce. I remember her chasing off bad boyfriends and bad husbands and just anyone who seemed like a threat. It was the first time I'd really seen anyone do that."

"She had a baseball bat behind the desk. She threatened to use it on my stepfather when he showed up one night. I only wished she'd done it. It would have saved us all a lot more pain."

She didn't know all the ins and outs of Nathan's life, but she knew he'd had a lot of trouble with his stepfather, and that hadn't ended until his stepfather had died when they were in high school.

"How is your mother doing now?" she asked tentatively.

"She's in a good place, but we don't need to talk about her. Let's get this over with."

She nodded, and they headed toward the door.

As they stepped inside the building, she felt as if she were stepping back in time. She had to remind herself she wasn't a scared kid looking for shelter or a safe place anymore. She was an FBI agent trying to save a child's life. That was what mattered.

She walked up to the desk, which was manned by a woman with a nametag that read Christie. She had blonde hair, blue eyes and appeared to be in her late thirties.

"How can I help you?" Christie asked.

"My name is Bree Adams. I'm a special agent with the FBI." She showed her badge to Christie, whose expression immediately turned wary. "I'm working on a case involving a missing child."

"The one on the news?" Christie asked.

"Yes, but there's another little girl that we're concerned about at the moment, and I have a lead that she might be staying here at the shelter. This is a photo of her. It's obviously taken from the back, but maybe you recognize her?" She handed her phone to Christie.

Christie looked at the picture. "I'm sure you know that I can't give out any personal information on our residents. It's for their safety." She gave Bree back her phone. "I'm sorry."

Judging by the uncomfortable gleam in Christie's eyes, she had recognized the girl.

"I completely understand," Bree said. "But this is a matter of life or death. And I know you would want to help us."

"This little girl is in danger?"

"Yes."

"I can ask the director..." Christie began, stopping as the door to the office behind her opened.

Bree was shocked to see the older woman with white hair and piercing blue eyes that she and Nathan had just been talking about. "Miss Lucy," she muttered. "You're still here."

Lucy Harper's gaze swept across her face and then moved on to Nathan. "Well, well. You two look familiar. Let me think." She gave Bree a long look. "Bree Larson."

"I can't believe you remember me."

"Brown hair, beautiful green eyes that were always hopeful," Lucy said, then turned to Nathan. "And you are Nathan...oh, what was your last name?"

"Bishop."

"Of course. Nathan Bishop, the very protective big brother and devoted son."

"You have an excellent memory," Nathan said. "I was thirteen years old when I was here. That was a long time ago."

"I like to think of the people who stay here as family. And I have to admit your mother's face still haunts me, Nathan. When she left, I was very worried about her. She never came back. I didn't know if that was good or bad," Lucy said with concern in her gaze. "Dare I ask?"

"She's okay now," Nathan said tightly.

As Bree heard the words, she wanted to feel relieved. But she felt like there was something Nathan wasn't saying. Now, however, was not the time to get into it.

"Oh, I am so happy to hear that," Lucy said. "Now what brings you two back to our shelter? You don't look like you need help anymore."

"They're with the FBI," Christie put in.

"Actually, I'm with the FBI," Bree corrected. "I'm looking for a little girl. She's in danger, and I need to find her. I know you can't give out confidential information, but this is really important. I have a picture of her. I just showed it to Christie."

Lucy gave Christie a nod of encouragement. "Go ahead."

"The girl's name is Emma Lowell," Christie said. "She came in two nights ago with her sister Tasha. Tasha showed me her ID. She's eighteen years old. Emma said she was ten. They told me that their mother was sick and couldn't pay the rent and they needed a place to stay until she got out of the hospital."

"You didn't call DCFS?" Bree asked.

"Since Emma was with her adult sibling, we did not," Christie said, a defensive note in her voice. "We try to help families stay together, not get ripped apart."

"She knows that," Lucy said, giving her a pointed look. "Don't you?"

"I do. And I'm not here to make trouble. I just want to find Emma. Is she here now?"

Christie shook her head. "She and her sister checked out a few hours ago. They said they'd found a better place to stay. They seemed quite happy, as if things had turned around in an unexpected way."

"Did they say anything else? Like where they were going?"

Christie thought for a moment. "Emma said something about getting a part in a play. That's all I know."

A part in a play or a part in a con?

"Have the cleaners gone through their suite?" she asked, wondering if Emma had left anything behind. It seemed unbelievable that the flyer would bring them to the shelter and then there would be nothing. "Did they leave anything behind?"

"The cleaners won't be in there until morning. We don't have a full house right now, so there wasn't a rush."

"Can I see where they were staying?"

"Well, I suppose there's no harm in that," Lucy said. "But you'll have to wait here, Nathan. As you might recall, no adult men are allowed upstairs."

"I understand," he said.

She gave Nathan an apologetic look. "I won't be long."

"Take your time. I'll be here."

As Bree walked up the stairs with Lucy, she noticed that the shelter had definitely been updated. There was fresh paint on the walls and tiled floors instead of the old, stained carpet that had always smelled bad.

"How does it feel to be back?" Lucy asked, giving her a sharp look.

"Weird. But this place was good for me and my aunt for the time we were here."

"What happened to your aunt?"

"I'm not sure."

"You don't keep in touch?"

"No. I haven't seen her in years. She fell apart after we left here. Like my mother, she was toxic. She just couldn't get herself together, and she certainly couldn't take care of me. I ended up in the system. I kept thinking she would get better and come looking for me, but that never happened."

"Well, I'm glad you're doing well now. How do you like working for the FBI?"

"I love my job. I spend most of my time looking for missing kids, and while it's difficult at times, it's also rewarding."

Lucy smiled. "I'm sure they are all very lucky to have someone like you on their side. You were always a stubborn girl. I bet that works well for you now."

"I'd like to think so."

"And Nathan. You two are together? I remember you were very close when you were here."

"How do you remember us? So many people come through here. It seems unbelievable."

"I look at people. I listen to them. I almost always remember their names and at least some part of their story. It's actually much harder to forget some of the things I see and hear than to remember."

She saw a sadness in Lucy's eyes and could only imagine some of the horror stories she'd had to hear, to live through. "The people who come here are lucky to have you."

"I was on the streets when I was a little girl. I understand the needs, the despair, the dreams of the people who come here. I do what I can to make life a little better for a short while."

"You do a great job. This is the best place I ever stayed." She paused. "Do you know any more of Emma's story than what Christie told us?"

"Unfortunately, I don't. I didn't meet Emma or her sister. I've been in and out the last couple of days." Lucy paused in front of Suite 2102. "This is it."

Bree sucked in a quick breath. "This is it? But this—this was my suite."

"Is it? I didn't realize. That's odd."

She didn't think it was odd or a coincidence. "Did they ask to be in this suite?"

"I don't know. I can check with Christie. I don't know why they would have. They'd never been here before. It's not like they wanted to go back to a favorite room." Lucy opened the door and waved her inside.

As she stepped into the room with two double beds, it felt much smaller than she remembered. Both beds were

unmade, covers tossed about. There was a pizza box on the dresser and a couple of empty soda cans.

There was also something on one of the pillows—a large white envelope.

She walked across the room with a growing sense of trepidation that worsened when she saw her name scrawled across the front of the envelope. She'd just found her clue. Inside, she found two newspaper clippings. It took her a moment to realize the clippings were actually of one photograph that had been ripped down the middle. And that photograph was of her. After high school, she'd done some modeling to make some cash, and she'd made it into the newspaper while walking the runway at a charity fashion show.

She couldn't believe someone had dug up this old clipping, ripped it in two and left it for her.

"Can I ask what's going on?" Lucy enquired.

She saw the concern in the older woman's eyes. "Someone is trying to drive me mad."

Lucy frowned as she showed her the ripped photo.

"I don't understand. What does this mean?" Lucy asked.

"That someone knows my past and is digging it up piece by piece. I got a lead to come here, and now I find this. Only problem is I don't know where to go next."

"How are Emma and Tasha involved?"

"I don't know. Emma told Christie she had a part in a play. Maybe they were paid to come here, ask for this room, leave me this note, and then they left. I just hope that means that they're safe." She took another look around the room and the adjoining bathroom. There were no other

items of interest. "Thanks for letting me up here," she told Lucy as they made their way downstairs.

"If I can be of any more help, I'll certainly try."

"Will you let me know if Emma or Tasha come back?"

"Of course."

She left her phone number with Lucy and then joined Nathan, who got up from the bench by the door, a questioning gleam in his eyes.

She handed him the ripped photo.

His gaze narrowed. "I remember this event."

"Yes. I thought I was going to be famous when I made the paper."

"Johnny called you his supermodel," Nathan said, a terse note in his voice. "What the hell is this supposed to mean? Was there a note?"

"Nope. I think it means that they can rip me apart whenever they want, or am I being too literal?"

"Let's get out of here," he said, giving her back the clippings.

She put the envelope in her bag and they headed outside. She shivered as the wind gusted down the street, the temperature having dropped at least ten degrees. It was after seven now, and she was happy that the truck was close by, also happy that no one had tampered with it.

"What do you want to do?" Nathan asked, as they fastened their seat belts.

"I have no idea," she said with a sigh. "I need to think, but I'm tired, I'm hungry, and I'm pissed off that I am playing puppet to some master I don't even know."

"I can't do anything about the puppet master, but I can do something about food. You want to get some dinner?"

"I would like to eat something, but you don't have to babysit me, Nathan."

"I'm hungry, too. Where are you staying?"

"In a hotel by Michigan Avenue and the river."

"I know a place in that neighborhood, which is not tied to our past in any way."

"Thank goodness for that." Maybe after some food, she'd be better able to put some of the clues together in a pattern that made sense and would hopefully lead them to whoever was sending her on a sad trip down memory lane.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER NINE

IN A COZY RESTAURANT, over one of Chicago's infamous deep-dish pizzas laden with vegetables and spicy pepperoni, Bree felt her tension begin to ease. Part of that was because of the pizza and the glass of wine she'd consumed, but most of it had to do with Nathan.

She'd forgotten how much she'd liked him when they were kids, how easy he was to talk to, how he seemed to know what she was thinking or where her brain was going even before she got there. Since they'd tabled all subjects involving the past for the duration of their pizza, it had been fun to hear him talk about his construction business and the triathlon he planned to do in the spring. He also clearly adored Grace, talking with great affection about his niece's love of reading and drama, how she was always roping him into playing imaginary games when he babysat for her.

Nathan had always loved his family beyond compare. She didn't think she'd met anyone who would go to the kind of lengths that Nathan had to protect the people who

shared his blood. Certainly, her family had never done that for her.

But she shoved that thought aside, preferring now to concentrate on Nathan's very attractive face, his light-brown eyes that darkened with his moods, his strong jaw that could be incredibly stubborn, his sexily tousled brown hair, his full mouth that could utter both incredibly sharp but also incredibly kind words.

The years had put a few lines around that mouth, but his lips looked full and inviting, and she wondered what it would be like to kiss him. She had a feeling a lot of women wondered that. Their waitress had certainly made more than the normal number of stops by their table to ask if they needed anything, her gaze always on Nathan when she asked the question.

She'd always thought Nathan was attractive, but he'd put up a lot of walls between them as they'd gotten older. Actually, he'd put up a lot of walls around himself in every area of his life. He'd been much more open and outgoing in his early teens. By the end of high school, he'd been closed off, guarded, always on the edge of anger, and her behavior had certainly annoyed him.

"Where are you?" Nathan's voice cut through her reverie.

She started, realizing she was still staring at his mouth. "Sorry. Just thinking."

"About what?"

She raised her gaze to his. "I was actually thinking about you—how different you seem now in some ways, and yet very much like your old self in others."

"Do I want to ask you to explain?" he asked dryly, taking a swig of his beer.

"I'm not sure I could. It's weird how we seem to meet up at critical junctures in our lives. The first time we met was at the shelter. My mom had died a few years earlier, and I was living with my aunt, who had her own struggles. You and your mom and sister were escaping from an abusive situation. But being friends with each other made everything seem better. You were like Grace back then. You loved to tell stories, too, act out imaginary scenes, and I liked being part of that. You made me believe things were going to get better."

He tipped his head. "You made me believe that, too."

"No way."

"Yes, you did. You had the ability to compartmentalize in a way that I didn't even understand back then. But you could turn all your focus onto whatever we were doing, and that's all you cared about, whether you were beating me at board games or conning some street vendor out of a pretzel with some pretty real tears. You were a brilliant and competitive genius."

"I'm glad you said genius. For a minute there, I thought you might go with freak," she said with a smile.

He grinned back at her. "That might have been a better word, but it's what you're doing right now that always made my day better."

"What's that?"

"It's your smile. It didn't come that often in the beginning, and it became a challenge to me to see if I could make it appear."

"Really?" She couldn't imagine he'd cared that much.

"Yeah. Because somehow when you laughed, when you were happy, I felt happy, too."

She was touched by his words. "I think it worked both ways." She paused, tilting her head, as she thought about their past. "But that changed when we met up again in high school. We hadn't seen each other in several years, and I was so excited when I first saw you. I'd been in three foster homes by then and two other high schools, but when I saw you in the gym, it was like my world tilted upright again. I thought, this is going to be okay—Nathan is here."

His gaze darkened. "You never told me that."

"Well, I didn't want it to go to your head. But that first great feeling faded over the next year. Once I got involved with Johnny, you didn't want much to do with me."

"I couldn't believe you couldn't see what he was really like."

"But was it that obvious then?" she challenged. "I mean, Johnny was funny, right? He was popular. We knew his parents were probably criminals, but a lot of kids had parents who did bad shit—yours and mine included."

Nathan frowned. "He was funny, but there was a core of ruthlessness and cruelty that you didn't see or that he didn't show you. I thought your relationship would be over as fast as it started, because just about nothing lasted back then for more than a few weeks, but you and Johnny just kept getting closer. I tried to warn you a lot of times, but you stopped talking to me."

"You stopped talking to me," she countered. "You were super critical. And when I wouldn't do what you wanted,

you were done."

"You were throwing yourself away; I couldn't watch it," he said harshly. "I'd seen that show before. I hated that helpless feeling of watching someone I cared about heading straight for pain and suffering."

Seeing the dark depths in his eyes now, she sensed they were talking about more than just her. "You haven't told me anything about your mom. Is she well? Does she live in Chicago?"

He cleared his throat and sat up straighter in his chair. "We weren't going to talk about the past, remember?"

"That was during pizza." She tipped her head toward the empty platter. "We're done."

"Yeah, and we should probably get going," he said, picking up the check.

"We can split that."

"I've got it." He pulled out his wallet and put some cash down on the table. "Ready to go?"

She wasn't ready to go. She'd been having a lovely conversation with him, and he'd just pulled the plug. But he was already on his feet, so she had no choice but to put on her coat and follow him out the door.

"I can walk to my hotel," she said, as they stepped onto the sidewalk in front of the restaurant, which was situated along the river and only a few blocks from where she was staying.

"I'll walk with you."

"I don't need a bodyguard. In fact, I could probably take someone out faster than you."

"Oh, yeah?"

"I'm very well trained."

"I didn't notice a weapon tucked under your jacket."

"Well, I don't usually need one when I've been relegated to desk work."

"Maybe you should think about actually staying at that desk, considering everything that is going on."

"I probably should," she agreed, as they headed along the path that wound itself along the river.

A party boat came down the dark canal with its lights on and music wafting across the water. "I really like this area. I don't know why we never came down here."

"That invisible fence," he reminded her.

"I guess so. And if we did come, it was to pick some cash from some distracted tourist."

His eyebrow shot up. "You never told me you did that."

"It was once or twice, and I wasn't very good at it. I felt bad that I was taking someone's money. You never did it?"

"Nope."

"Well, you always walked a higher moral ground than I did."

"That's not true," he said sharply, anger suddenly filling his voice.

"What did I say?"

"Nothing. Never mind."

"Really? It seems like you had a rather intense reaction just now."

"I have a lot of intense reactions when you're around," he said dryly.

"I do seem to set you off." She paused along the rail, seeing her hotel just up ahead and not wanting to get there

quite yet. "This is pretty. In my head, I only remember the ugliness of Chicago, but this is nice."

"They've made a lot of improvements along the river: new restaurants, bars, lots of space for walking and jogging and just hanging out." He leaned against the rail, and then gave her a curious look. "I've been wondering about something. When did you change your name to Adams?"

"In Detroit. The woman who helped me with the adoption also helped me with the name change. She got all my paperwork updated and said I was going to have a new start. I definitely needed that to complete my escape from my life, so I went with it."

"I'm sure the FBI did a background check on you. Surely, your old name came up."

"Of course. But it didn't matter. I hadn't changed it because I had done something illegal. I just wanted a new name."

"How did you pick Adams?" he asked, then a smile spread across his face. "Wait, I know the answer. It was because of that movie—*The Addams Family*. We must have watched that tape a dozen times at the shelter. You liked that girl—what was her name?"

"Wednesday. She was so weird and magical at the same time. And she always spoke her mind. But I do not spell my last name with two *d*'s. That would have been odd, and I wanted to be even for the first time in my life," she said with a laugh. "I'd been odd far too long."

"You were not odd. You were beautiful; you still are, Bree."

His gaze swept across her face, bringing with it a rush of heat.

"You shouldn't say things like that, Nathan."

"Why not?"

"Because..." She had no idea how to finish her statement. "We—we're friends, well, maybe not friends, but we..." She stumbled to find appropriate words.

"You can't define us. We defy definition."

"Well, that's true." Her mouth went dry as his gaze settled on her lips. "But I don't know what you want."

"Yes, you do."

He straightened suddenly, his hands sliding around her waist, setting off a wave of anticipation. He gave her a long look that made her heart race. And then he lowered his head—so slowly her nerves were screaming.

Finally, his mouth was on hers.

She felt like she'd been waiting for his kiss forever.

Nathan took possession of her mouth as if he owned it, and she couldn't quite believe how much she liked that. His need for her was compelling, drawing forth a deeper need for him than she had expected.

And as he slanted his head to get a better angle, she went with him, putting her arms around his neck, opening her mouth to his, letting go of all the reasons why they shouldn't be doing this and grabbing on to all the reasons that they should.

Nathan, the imaginative boy, and Nathan the somewhat angry teenager, merged into this Nathan, this incredibly sexy, powerful, strong man who kissed her like he was never going to let her go.

But, of course, he did eventually let her go, raising his head, his eyes gleaming in the moonlight.

She stared back at him in amazed confusion. "So, that happened."

His hands dropped from her waist, and he took a step back. "I'm not going to apologize."

"I didn't ask you to."

"You kissed me back," he said, a hint of surprise in his voice.

"Didn't you want me to?"

"I did. I just..." His voice drifted away. Then he said, "I didn't know if you would." He ran a hand through his hair. "I've been wanting to kiss you for a long time."

His words sent her heart racing again. "I—I didn't know that."

"I think you did," he said quietly. "But you wanted someone else."

Their gazes clung together. *They had been so close at times but also so distant at others. Was he right? Hadn't she known he liked her as more than a friend? Hadn't she thought at times that his teenage anger was jealousy? But sometimes it had also just felt like dislike.*

"You were hard to read in high school, Nathan."

"Maybe." He turned and looked out at the water. "It doesn't matter."

She could feel him pulling away, and she didn't like it. She put her hand on his arm and his gaze swung around to hers. "Putting our past aside, what happened just now...it was good."

His eyes brightened. "It was."

"So maybe we just agree on that, and let it be..."

"I don't know if I can just let it be—that's the problem." His phone buzzed. Taking it out of his pocket, he frowned and then silenced the call.

"Who was that?" she asked.

"It doesn't matter."

"It was Adrienne, wasn't it?" She let out a breath, seeing the answer in his face. She'd completely forgotten he was seeing someone. "You should call her."

"We're not done here."

"We should be. You have a woman in your life, and I'm leaving as soon as this case is over. We can't start anything now."

"We started all this a very long time ago, Bree. One of these days we're going to finish it."

"Maybe we finished it now. We had our kiss. It was good. That's it." She started walking, and he reluctantly fell into step alongside her.

They didn't speak until they got to the front door of her hotel. Then he said, "What if I told you I don't want this to be it? What would you say?"

She let out a breath, wrestling with reckless temptation. "I want to say—then come up to my room."

He drew in a sudden breath.

"But," she added quickly. "You have someone in your life who cares about you. Your home is here, and I'll never ever want to live in this city. This can't go anywhere, Nathan. And when I saw you at Josie's house yesterday, you said, 'let's try not to mess up each other's lives.' So, I'm going to

try not to mess up your life, and I'm going to say good night."

His mouth tightened. "I liked your first answer better."

She smiled, then stole a quick kiss. "One for the road," she said, and then she turned and walked into her hotel.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TEN

BREE TOOK the elevator to her room and then bolted the door behind her. She tossed her bag on the dresser and flopped onto the bed, staring up at the ceiling, her senses spinning, her emotions in utter turmoil.

She'd kissed Nathan. She could hardly believe it. Talk about the past and the present colliding...

She wished she could say she felt good about her decision to end things with a kiss, but she didn't.

Her senses were clamoring for more Nathan, and even though her brain knew she'd done the right thing by shutting it down, her body was tingling with the idea of Nathan's mouth on hers and his hands all over her body.

Groaning, she sat up, knowing she was going around in circles.

And she had many more important things to think about.

She took her computer out of her bag and turned it on. She had no emails that needed to be answered immediately, so she went on the internet and entered the baseball forum, wondering if anyone had answered her earlier message.

Smiling, she saw a message from Parisa.

Sorry I missed you today. Still at the same number if you want to talk. Spending a boring night watching Wyatt pick up women. Could use a break. Call me.

Seeing that the message had come in a half hour earlier, she scrambled off the bed and dug out her own burner phone to call Parisa.

Parisa had been her roommate at Quantico. A beautiful, dark-haired, dark-eyed woman, Parisa had the ability to blend into many different cultures. She also had the language skills to back up her appearance—fluent in French, Portuguese, Spanish, and Farsi as well as various Russian dialects. Parisa was the daughter of a former diplomat and having traveled the world, she brought an international experience that served her well. Parisa spent a lot of her time overseas, and it had been over a year since she'd last seen her.

Parisa picked up the call a moment later. "Hello?"

"It's me, Bree."

"Hang on a sec."

Bree heard some music in the background and then it got quieter, although there was now street noise in the background.

"That's better," Parisa said.

"Where are you?"

"Some bar by NYU. We came here after Jamie's celebration of life."

"How was it?"

"Sad but also oddly happy. It was bittersweet to see so many old friends, but not to see our dearest friend Jamie."

"Were there a lot of people there?"

"More than I expected—not just our tight group, but a lot of the people we went through Quantico with. It was fun to catch up. Now, however, Damon and Sophie are snuggled up together and Wyatt has two grad students hanging onto his every word. I miss my wing-woman, Bree."

"Those days feel like a long time ago."

"It has been forever," Parisa agreed.

"What about Diego?"

"He didn't make it."

"That's too bad. How are the Rowlands doing?"

"They tried to make it a joyful dinner, but I could tell that Vincent is still destroyed by the loss of his son. Cassie seems to be doing better."

"Vincent blamed himself because he'd always wanted Jamie to follow in his footsteps at the FBI. If Jamie hadn't made that decision, he might still be alive."

"Yes. He seems to carry a lot of guilt," Parisa said heavily.

"How is Wyatt doing? He wouldn't tell me where he was going after the big dust-up in New York last summer."

"Same old Wyatt—mysterious, brooding, can't really figure out what he's thinking or what he's doing. He said he's been doing some special assignments—whatever that means. Beyond that, I have no idea. Since we came to this bar, he's been all about finding some babe to hook up with." Parisa paused. "It has been nice getting to know Sophie. She's a good match for Damon."

"She is. I've gotten to know her better since she and Damon came back from their summer archaeological digs."

"Yes, they described some of their findings in great, boring detail," Parisa said with a laugh. "I never thought Damon would be into digging up old bones."

"He's in love."

"And love makes you crazy," Parisa said.

"What about you? What are you up to?"

"I'm heading to London on Sunday."

"To do what?"

"I'm not sure yet," Parisa said. "But let's get back to you, Bree. Your post had a slight note of desperation in it. Everything okay?"

"No," she said with a sigh. "I came to Chicago to consult on a kidnapping case."

"Damon told me you've been tracking someone called the White Rose Kidnapper."

"Who had been working his evil in the northeast until he made a sudden jump to Chicago. Now it seems that the kidnapper has decided to put me in the middle of his twisted game. He dug up my secret, Parisa, the one I told you about during training. He's forcing me to go back into my past, and I can't seem to stop him."

"Seriously? I thought all that was buried as deep as it could go."

"I did, too. There's a girl's life on the line, maybe the lives of two girls, and I don't know if it ends there. The kidnapper is trying to make me think that one of these girls is my daughter, the one I gave away."

"My God, Bree. That sounds bad."

She could hear the worry in Parisa's voice. "I don't know how he got all this information on me. Worse, I don't know

where he's going with it."

"Maybe someone from your past is helping him. Have you run into anyone?"

"I have. But Nathan isn't helping this guy; he's trying to help me."

"Nathan, huh? Where do you know him from?"

"We grew up in the same neighborhood. He's actually the one person who knew about the baby. He helped me get out of Chicago. He helped me find a private adoption agency."

"Are you sure he's really helping you, Bree? It sounds like he could be the leak."

"It's not Nathan. I trust him completely," she said, realizing how true that was.

"Your voice just changed," Parisa said. "It got a little softer, sultrier. Is this Nathan more than a friend?"

"He wasn't...until about twenty minutes ago."

"Now we're getting to the good stuff," Parisa said with a laugh.

"Not really. I put a stop to everything."

"Why on earth did you do that?"

"There's no point in starting something that can't be finished, right?"

"Oh, I don't know. Living in the moment isn't always bad, especially in our line of work. But don't ask me about love; I never seem to make the right call." She paused. "Hang on, Wyatt is talking to me."

A moment later, Wyatt's voice came over the phone. "Where the hell are you, Bree? You should be here tonight."

"I wish I could be. How are you, Wyatt? What have you been doing?"

"Laying low."

"Is someone paying you to do that?" Of the five of them, Wyatt did the most undercover work, although his last stint had almost killed him.

"You don't think I work for free, do you?"

"Good point."

"Everything okay in Chicago?"

"I'm not sure yet. Still figuring things out. You know who is here, though? Tracy Cox."

"Cool, calculating Tracy?" Wyatt said. "Has she warmed up to you?"

"Not even a little bit. She's definitely enjoying having me report to her."

"That's a change for her. You were always out in front of her at the academy. But I have to say that even though she was a pain in the ass, she was smart."

"I'm trying to remember that. She asked me about Diego. I always wondered if something went on with those two."

"Not that I ever heard. I have to run. Keep us posted if you need anything."

"I will," she promised.

Parisa came back on the line a moment later. "As Wyatt said, if you need any help, Bree, I'm here for a few more days. Call me or post a message in the forum."

"Thanks for the offer. You guys sound like you're having fun," she said wistfully.

"We'd be having more fun if you were here. We'll have to reunite at another time."

"Definitely."

"Stay safe. And this guy—Nathan? Be careful of men from your past. It's always better to look forward than to look back."

"I'll keep that in mind." As she set down her phone, she felt both better and worse.

It had been nice to talk to Parisa, but now she felt more alone than ever. She wished she could be with her friends, celebrating Jamie's life. She wished Hayley was home safe with her family and that a little girl named Emma had never been brought into this twisted game. Most of all, she wished she knew where her daughter was, and if she was still safe.

And she really wished she knew what to do about Nathan...

Bree, Bree, Bree...

Her face went around in Nathan's head all night. He tried to shake her with every toss, every turn, but he couldn't get her or the kisses they'd shared out of his mind.

He'd wanted to kiss her forever, and it had been far better than his best dream. What had really surprised him was the way Bree had kissed him back. There had been no hint of shyness or restraint—just passion and fire and need.

And when she'd told him she was tempted to invite him upstairs to her room, he'd been tempted to push the idea,

to follow her through those hotel doors and make her see that it didn't matter what happened tomorrow when they had tonight.

But he hadn't done that.

Some age-old self-defense mechanism had kicked in, reminding him that this woman had stomped on his heart more than a few times.

At dawn, he gave up trying to sleep, threw on track pants, a sweatshirt and his running shoes and headed out the door. He ran down to the lake and then along the shoreline, hoping he could outrun his thoughts, but every mile brought new ideas.

What if he kissed her again? What if he took her to bed? What if he showed her what she'd been missing out on all these years?

But where the hell would that get him?

She'd eventually say good-bye again, and he probably wouldn't see her for another decade, if then.

It was just a fluke that she'd come back now. It certainly wasn't because she'd been dying to see him.

And he certainly hadn't been dying to see her. He'd gone on with his life. He'd put her out of his head. He had Adrienne.

Adrienne! He'd never called her the night before, nor had he answered any of her texts. She was going to be pissed that he hadn't met up with her and her college friend, but he hadn't been able to bring himself to go see them. Not after what had happened with Bree.

He'd never been one to fool around with more than one woman at a time.

And the fact that he could barely remember Adrienne now that Bree had returned was probably a sign that he needed to end things with her.

But was that the smartest idea?

Adrienne was easy, fun, light, bright. She came from a normal family. She didn't have dark secrets. She didn't carry emotional scars and still-healing wounds. She wasn't a magnet for trouble.

That's who he should want.

But, no, he had to be hung up on a woman who had always been a thorn in his side, who had almost gotten him killed. And it wasn't like the present was any different than the past. She was surrounded by danger and shadows, and he was getting tangled up again in her problems.

So, what was he going to do?

Walk away from Bree? Let her figure things out on her own?

Call Adrienne back and apologize? Meet her after work? Tell her he'd make last night up to her?

He picked up his pace and sprinted the last mile, hoping the right answer would come to him.

When he got home, he took a quick shower and got dressed, debating his next move—a move that didn't need to include either Bree or Adrienne.

He wanted to do his part to help Hayley, so maybe he'd go by the Jansens' house.

While Bree had dismissed the possibility that Hayley was her child, he still wasn't completely convinced. And since the Chicago FBI investigation team had decided to keep Bree out of the field, maybe he could discover something on

his own. It was probably a long shot, but he was going to take it.

He stopped to pick up coffee and pastries from a bakery that he and Mark occasionally went to after a run and then headed to their house.

He was surprised to find the street empty and quiet. For the past two days, there had been tons of news vans and reporters. He hoped that didn't mean the media was losing interest in Hayley's story. But it was only nine a.m., so maybe they'd be arriving later.

When Mark answered the door, Nathan's first thought was that his friend had aged ten years in the past two days, with dark shadows under his eyes, pale, pasty skin, and desperate eyes.

He felt terrible that all he had to offer were sweets and coffee. "I wanted to drop these by, Mark. I thought Connor and Morgan might like the sweets, and I got you your usual coffee."

"Thanks." Mark took the coffee container out of his hand. "That was thoughtful. Do you want to come in?"

"If I'm not intruding."

Mark waved him inside and shut the door. "I'd welcome the conversation. Lindsay's parents took the kids to their house last night. I was glad to get them out of here. I thought I'd be happy with fewer people around, but now the silence is...terrifying."

"Is Lindsay here?" he asked, following Mark down the hall to the kitchen.

"I'm hoping she's getting some sleep now. She was up all night sitting in Hayley's bedroom, holding her stuffed

animals and rocking back and forth. She's not doing well."

"I'm so sorry, Mark."

"Thanks."

Nathan sat down on a stool at the kitchen island. Seeing the boxes of donuts, pastries, cookies, and pies on the counters, he realized he'd had a very unoriginal idea. "Looks like you were already well stocked."

"People don't know what to do so they bring food. You should see all the casseroles in the refrigerator. And the irony is that I've never felt less like eating in my life. I will take the coffee, though. I was about to make another pot." Mark pulled one of the coffee cups out of the cardboard container and sat down across from him.

"Is there any news?" he asked.

Mark shook his head. "No. I don't know if you saw, but we made a public plea on the news last night. It generated some leads, but none of them have panned out. I spoke to both the police and the FBI this morning, and they assure me that they're still devoting every minute of every hour to Hayley's case. There's going to be another full-scale volunteer search starting in about an hour, expanding the grid that was searched yesterday. The last kid who was taken was found in an abandoned building so they're concentrating on properties like that." He ran a weary hand through his hair. "I can't bear the thought of Hayley sitting in the dark and the cold in some condemned building. But then, I can't bear the thought of anything that could be happening to her."

Mark's pain rolled off him in thick waves, and Nathan had never felt more helpless to comfort someone in his life.

There was nothing he could say to make Mark feel better and trying almost seemed insulting.

But seeing Mark's grief also made him more committed to doing whatever he could to help find Hayley. "It sounds like there are a lot of people looking for your daughter," he said quietly, wanting to give Mark some reassurance, no matter how hollow it might be.

"The police have been good. Better than I expected."

"Why do you say it like that?" he asked curiously.

"I haven't found the cops to be too helpful in the past. We've had a lot of car break-ins on this street the last month, and they can't seem to catch anyone."

"Your car was broken into?" An uneasy tingle ran down his spine.

"Actually, it was Lindsay's SUV. Luckily, she didn't have anything of value in there, just some kids' toys and soccer shoes and a pair of expensive sunglasses. But they hit five other cars that night, and one of our neighbors had left a computer tablet in the car, so they lost that." Mark paused as Lindsay came into the room.

She wore black leggings and an over-sized long-sleeve sweater that enveloped her thin frame. Like Mark, she looked completely exhausted and emotionally spent, her eyes and nose bright red from crying.

"Oh," she said, stopping when she saw him. "Nathan. I didn't know anyone was here."

"He brought us coffee and pastries," Mark put in.

"Thanks," she said, without much meaning in her voice.

Mark grabbed the second coffee from the cardboard holder and handed it to her. "Why don't you start with

this?"

She took a grateful sip. "Caffeine has become my best friend."

"Is there anything else I can do for you guys?" he asked.

"The FBI said that Grace remembered that the man had a World Series Cubs ring on his finger," Mark said. "Has she remembered anything else?"

"No. I'm sorry."

"It's not her fault," Lindsay said, leaning against the counter.

"You want to sit down?" he asked, ready to give up his seat.

She put up a hand. "It's fine. I need to move around, find some energy. I have to be strong for Hayley."

"You are strong."

A phone rang on the counter, and both Lindsay and Mark jumped, but Mark reached it first.

"Is it the police?" Lindsay asked impatiently.

"No. It's work," Mark said. "I'm just going to take it, all right?"

"Sure," she said in a dull monotone.

Despite Lindsay's earlier statement about wanting to find some energy, when Mark left the kitchen, she took her husband's seat.

"Is Grace all right?" she asked. "We were practically yelling at her the other night. She must have been scared. I feel badly about that."

"Don't feel bad. Grace is okay. She just wants Hayley to come home."

"Even though they're a year apart, they've really become close since they started ballet together. They both love to dance, and that bonded them."

"Grace can't seem to stop twirling, even when she's supposed to be doing her homework."

"Hayley is the same way."

"Did you dance as a kid?"

"No, not at all. I have two left feet, and it never interested me, but Hayley was drawn to ballet from the time she could walk. She just loves it." Lindsay bit down on her bottom lip. "But I keep thinking that if I hadn't pushed her to be on stage, none of this would have happened. Hayley didn't want to perform. She was nervous about being in front of people. She really just likes to dance for herself. But I didn't want her to miss out, and all the kids were doing it. If I hadn't pressed—" She stopped abruptly. "Everything would have been different if I had just made other decisions."

"What you're going through, Lindsay—I can't imagine. It must be hell on earth."

"It really is. I feel her calling out to me, Nathan. Every time I close my eyes, I hear her voice asking me to come and find her, and it just breaks my heart. She was such a miracle baby. It was just by chance that I became her mother, and now I feel like I failed. I didn't protect her the way I was supposed to. I was going to give her the better life that her own mother couldn't. But I didn't do that."

He was shocked that Lindsay was talking about Hayley's adoption. According to Bree, no one except the family knew about the adoption, and Hayley was completely unaware

that she had different birth parents. But clearly Lindsay was distraught. She was rambling on, and he wasn't sure she was even aware of what she was revealing. However, now that she'd given him the opening he needed, he had to squeeze through.

"I didn't realize that Hayley was adopted," he said, thinking that was the most normal response he could make.

"Oh." She suddenly realized what she'd said. "Yes. I shouldn't have said anything. Not a lot of people know. I haven't really thought about it in years, but since she was taken, and the police asked a lot of questions about her birth parents, I can't stop thinking about it."

"Do they think the birth parents have something to do with this?"

"I don't believe so. The mom died very soon after Hayley was born. No one knows who the father is. And no one has ever reached out to us."

"What do you know about the biological mother?"

"She was young, seventeen, I think. She didn't have parents around. She said she wanted to give up her child, so she would have a better life."

"Did you meet her?"

"No, it was a closed adoption done through an agency. Mark handled most of the details. After so many disappointments, it was hard for me to keep getting my hopes up."

"I can't imagine how tough that was."

"But after we got Hayley, I did write the birth mother a letter. I was sitting in the nursery that I never thought I would fill, and Hayley was sleeping so peacefully in her

crib, and I picked up a pen and paper, and I told this young teenager how grateful I was. I said I would guard Hayley's life with my own. I would give her everything I could. But I didn't do enough." Lindsay blinked back tears. "You'd think I'd be out of tears, wouldn't you?"

"I don't think there's a limit when it comes to heartbreak. Did you ever send the letter?"

"I didn't know where to send it. I was going to give it to the agency, but Mark didn't think it was a good idea. He said we should let things be the way they were set up—no contact whatsoever. We didn't want to risk the birth mother changing her mind, so I put it away. One day I'll give it to Hayley. I hope she won't hate me for not telling her she was adopted all these years."

"When are you planning to tell her?"

"I don't know. We didn't want to do it when she was really young, so we kept putting it off. She's only ten, but it feels almost too late and yet too soon at the same time. I can't think about it right now." Lindsay gave him another pained look. "Do you think it's wrong that we haven't told her?"

"I wouldn't presume to say what's right or wrong, but I do know that you're a great mother, Lindsay. And this isn't your fault."

"How can it not be? It happened on my watch." She drew in a breath. "I keep thinking that she must be terrified, and she doesn't even have her bunny."

"Is that her favorite stuffed animal?"

"Yes. It's a tiny little thing, but she always has it with her—in the car, in her backpack—it goes with her everywhere."

She loves it so much. My mother gave it to her when she was a baby. Unfortunately, it was lost a few weeks ago, so it didn't go with her to the school concert."

"How did she lose it?"

"It was in our car when it got broken into. I don't know why anyone would take it, but then they took everything that belonged to the kids that had been left in the car. I guess they sell the stuff somewhere. Hayley was so sad. It was the first time I'd seen her cry in forever. She's usually a pretty happy kid." Lindsay paused as Mark returned to the kitchen.

Nathan was surprised by the change in Mark's appearance. He'd changed out of his sweats into slacks and a shirt. His eyes were bright. He looked like he'd found some energy and a new purpose.

"Are you going out?" Lindsay asked in surprise.

"I have to go to the office for about a half hour."

"Why? What could possibly be important now?" she demanded.

"It's my biggest client, Lindsay. All I have to do is pull something off my work computer, and hand it off to Brian. Then I'm home again."

"Brian can't do that himself?"

"He can't. I'm sorry. I swear I'll be back soon. And to be honest, I need the break, Lindsay. I need a few minutes out of the house. I'll have my phone. If anything happens, you'll call me."

"I just don't understand how you can think about work right now."

The doorbell rang, interrupting their tense conversation. "Why don't I get that?" he suggested, sensing that the two of them had more to say to each other. He jogged out of the kitchen and down the hall. When he opened the door, he was surprised to see Josie on the porch. "Josie—what are you doing here?"

"I wanted to check on Lindsay and Mark. What about you?"

"The same."

"Is Bree here, too?"

"No."

She gave him an assessing look. "But you've been talking to her, haven't you? Is she still going after Kyle? He told me what happened in his office. He said his attorneys are on it, and I shouldn't worry. Should I believe him?"

"You should."

"Good, because I can't believe anyone could think that Kyle would take Hayley. I really hope no one suggested that to Mark or Lindsay."

"They did not mention that to me, so I don't think they did."

Relief filled her eyes. "Thank goodness. Are they here? Are they busy?"

"They're here. Actually, Mark has to run into work for a brief time, and Lindsay isn't happy about it. Maybe you can stay with her."

"Of course. Are you going to work?"

He hesitated. "Eventually."

His sister gave him a knowing look. "It's Bree, isn't it? You're getting tangled up with her again. You took one look

at her and you were right back where you were before."

"Bree is focused on finding Hayley. And so am I."

"I don't want to see you get hurt again, Nathan. You have Adrienne now."

"You don't have to worry about me. I know what I'm doing."

"You always say that, and most of the time I believe you. But when it came to Bree, you never knew what you were doing. You were blinded by love or lust or something very, very strong."

He let Josie have the last word, because there was a big part of him that knew she was right. He'd made a lot of mistakes when it came to Bree. And there was a good chance he'd already made one more by kissing her the night before. "I'll see you later."

As he walked across the street to his truck, he was surprised to see Bree get out of a car a few doors down. He walked down to meet her. "I thought you were benched."

"I need to talk to the Jansens."

"Has something happened?" he asked quickly.

"Yes. I received two texts this morning." She turned her phone, so he could see a photo.

The picture was of a baby about a year old. The child was sitting in front of a Christmas tree. She was dressed in a pink dress with a pink bow on her head, and a happy smile on her face. Across the photo, someone had scrawled the letter *I* in black marker.

"Who is this?" he asked.

"I don't know. There's one more." She swiped the screen.

He found himself staring at a toddler, probably about three. Her back was to the camera, but she was blowing soap bubbles in the middle of a playground. Her hair was brown, but he couldn't see her face. Across this photo was the word *am*.

"What does this mean?"

"I think he's going to tell me who my daughter is, starting with the words *I* and *am*," she replied. "I'm pretty sure the next word is going to be *your*. The texts came in thirty minutes apart. I was waiting for the next one, but it's been sixty minutes. What I need to know is if this is Hayley. All the photos in her FBI file are of her at age ten. I know Lindsay had a baby photo she showed me the first time we spoke, but I didn't look at it closely enough to know if that child is the same as this one. I need to see it again, and I need Lindsay or Mark to tell me if these photos are of Hayley."

"Who else could it be?"

"Emma," she said, giving him a helpless shrug. "I know you don't agree, but I can't ignore what happened on the train."

"It's possible. But I still lean toward the idea that Emma is more of a little con artist, and that she and her big sister are just pawns in the game. Her sister could even be involved with the kidnapper."

"I have considered that. Frankly, it's not a huge leap to think my daughter could be a con artist. When I was ten, I would have taken money and told some woman she was my mother without thinking twice about it. I just hate the idea that my child might be living my horrible childhood."

He felt a wave of compassion at the pain that filled her eyes. "This is what the kidnapper wants—to get in your head, to make you second-guess your decision, to drive you crazy with guilt."

"Unfortunately, it's working. But I am trying not to focus on myself and my feelings. This is about Hayley."

"Have you showed your fellow FBI agents these texts?"

"I forwarded them to Agent Cox. Tracy is my main contact within the Chicago team. I told her I was going to stop by the Jansens and verify that the photos are of Hayley."

"What did she say?"

"She hasn't answered yet. I didn't want to wait."

So, Bree had decided to take things into her own hands. He couldn't blame her. These photos were the biggest clues they'd had so far.

"Are the Jansens home?" she asked. "Is there a big crowd at the house?"

"Actually, no. My sister Josie just arrived, and she's with Lindsay now. Mark got a phone call when I was inside the house, and he told Lindsay he needs to go down to his office for some quick hand-off of files or something. Lindsay is not happy about it. But then they're both exhausted and stressed out. I think Mark is probably looking for an excuse to get a little air. He said Lindsay sat up all night crying."

"This situation is awful."

"It is. But I did find out a little information. I was actually going to call you when I saw you."

"What did they tell you?"

Before he could reply, the front door opened, and Mark walked quickly out of the house. Instead of heading straight to his car, which was parked in the short driveway, he walked around to the other side of the house and grabbed a backpack from the ground.

"What's he doing?" Nathan muttered.

"Nothing good," Bree said, a frown on her lips.

Mark jogged toward his car, threw the backpack onto the passenger seat and peeled off down the street.

"What the hell was that about?" he wondered aloud.

"We have to follow him," Bree said, running toward his truck. "Give me your keys, Nathan. I want to drive."

"I can drive," he protested.

"You don't know how to follow someone; I do." She held out her hand.

He tossed her his keys and got into the passenger seat as she slid behind the wheel.

He winced as she crunched the gears, then braced his hand on the door as she sped down the street and around the corner.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"THERE HE IS," Nathan said a moment later, spotting Mark's car up ahead. "He's turning on Crawford."

"I see him."

"Why are we chasing him?"

"Because he's acting suspiciously."

She maneuvered her way through traffic with confident speed, but his truck wasn't built for a car chase.

"He could just be going to work," he suggested.

"With a backpack he hid in the side yard?" she challenged. "I don't think so."

He didn't think so, either. "Then what?"

"I think he lied to me the other day when he said he hadn't heard from the kidnapper. Or he was contacted after our conversation. I'm betting there's a lot of cash in that backpack."

"He's delivering ransom?" That idea seemed incredible to him.

"That's my guess. He told you and Lindsay he was going to work?"

"Yes. He got a call when we were together in the kitchen, but he took it in the other room. He was gone about fifteen minutes. When he came back, he had changed, and he looked like he was energized."

Had Mark gotten a call from the kidnapper? But why wouldn't he have said anything? Why wouldn't he have told the police or the FBI or his wife?

He pressed his hand against the door as Bree took another turn on two wheels. "You might want to slow down."

"I've got this. Trust me."

"Hard to do that when I'm the one who taught you how to drive."

"I'm a lot better now."

He could see that. There was no hesitation in her decisive movements, no doubt. She was a woman on a mission, and she wasn't going to lose her target. For the first time, he really saw her as she was now: a well-trained, fearless and determined FBI agent.

"Where is he going?" he questioned, as Mark made another unexpected turn.

"Probably someplace deserted, empty. The kidnapper likes abandoned buildings."

"Has there ever been a ransom demand before?"

"No, but this case has been different in several ways. I just wish I knew Chicago better. It's changed since I was last here."

"Somewhat and yet not that much," he said, one destination coming to mind as they headed toward the outskirts of the city. "He could be heading to the Damen

Silos," he said referring to the abandoned and once majestic fifteen-story grain silos. The silos had been abandoned in the seventies, but they had been a target for graffiti artists, homeless encampments, and other criminal activities over the years. "You said he likes abandoned buildings, and those have certainly been a favorite criminal destination for decades. Although, I thought they had shut them down, locked them off awhile back."

"We had a team check the silos the first night, but the kidnapper could have moved Hayley, or he just chose that location for the ransom drop, and Hayley is nowhere nearby. I need to call this in to the team. Can you grab my phone out of my bag?"

As he opened her bag, he saw a 9 mm Glock, and his gut tightened—another reminder of how Bree had changed her life. His hand slid past the gun to grab her phone. He handed it to her and set her bag on the console between them.

She punched in a button and said, "Tracy? Yes, I want to talk about the photos, but not right now. Why? Because I'm in pursuit of Mark Jansen. I think he's meeting the kidnapper."

Bree paused, and he could hear a torrent of conversation coming from the other end of the line.

"I will call you as soon as I know for sure where he's going," she said. "I'm guessing he might be going to silos, but I'll have to let you know."

Nathan heard more loud comments on the line, then Bree disconnected the call and tossed the phone into her open bag.

"Tracy didn't sound happy," he said.

"Tracy is never happy with me, but I don't care. This could be the break we're looking for. I don't have time for office politics. I don't have time to make someone feel better. It doesn't matter who finds Hayley; we just need to save her life. And I can do this job as well, if not better, than any of the agents in Chicago."

He smiled, and Bree gave him a sharp look.

"What?" she demanded.

"I like your confidence, that's all. You are a different person now."

"I'm proud of that."

"Me, too."

She cleared her throat. "So, you said you found out something at the house. What was it?"

"Oh, right. Lindsay told me Hayley was adopted."

"She just volunteered that?"

"Not exactly. She was rambling on about letting down Hayley's birth mother. She said she was supposed to protect Hayley and give her a better life. She didn't realize what she'd said until I asked her about it. Then she admitted it."

"Well, okay, but that's not really new information."

"I'm getting to the new information," he said dryly. Bree had never had a lot of patience when she was ready to act. "Lindsay mentioned that Hayley is probably missing her favorite toy, a small bunny, that she always had with her, except Tuesday night, because it was stolen from Lindsay's SUV a few weeks ago."

"Wait. There was a car break-in? That wasn't in the file."

"Mark said they reported it to the police several weeks ago. There were other cars on the block broken into that night that had more valuables taken. He said the police didn't seem to think they could do much about it."

"They usually can't," she murmured. "But the fact that Hayley lost her favorite bunny..."

"Do you think it's tied to the kidnapping? That means the abduction was planned weeks in advance."

"Every abduction by the White Rose Kidnapper has been meticulously planned out. I definitely think it could be connected. Hayley was lured out of her school by someone who didn't cause her to panic or scream or struggle. She either knew him, or he used something she loved to entice her, to make her trust him. I'm thinking it's this special bunny that he took out of her mom's car."

"That makes sense." He braced himself again as Bree pressed her foot down on the gas pedal and they took another turn at full speed. He didn't know if Mark had any idea he was being followed, but he was certainly driving fast, running red lights to get to where he was going.

As the silos came into view, his blood began racing as fast as the car. "What are we going to do when we get there?"

"I'm not sure."

"Really? You're not sure? You don't have a plan?"

"I'm making it up as I go along."

"I've seen how great that worked for you in the past."

"This isn't the past, and you're going to have to trust me, Nathan. I have better instincts now. They don't usually let me down."

It was the second time she'd said that to him since they'd gotten into the car, and he realized she needed to hear the words. "I trust you, Bree."

She gave him a hard look, then nodded and turned her focus back to the road.

As Bree neared the silos, she eased back on the gas, not wanting Mark to catch sight of them. It was possible he might recognize Nathan's truck, although he seemed more intent on getting to his destination than looking over his shoulder.

But even if Mark wasn't looking for a tail, whoever he was meeting with would be. She didn't want them to get spooked.

She didn't know if Hayley would be at the drop; she didn't think so, but she couldn't discount the possibility that the kidnapper would swap Hayley for ransom. It didn't seem likely based on her work experience and also on the fact that the kidnapper was looking for more than money. Why else would he be threatening her, sending her through the painful places of her past and sending her baby photos?

The ransom call just didn't make sense, unless she was off base on where Mark was going, and what he was doing, but she couldn't get the sight of that large backpack out of her head.

"Looks like he's heading toward the south entrance," Nathan said, breaking into her thoughts.

She took out her phone and connected with Tracy once more. "He's about to enter through the south entrance of the silos," she said. "We're not far behind him. Come in quiet. We don't know if Hayley is there."

"Wait for us to get there," Tracy said.

She didn't reply. She might wait, or she might not. She was going to play this out in whatever way was necessary to ensure a good outcome.

She slowed down even more, staying a good distance behind as Mark drove through a broken-down fence a quarter of a mile away. She pulled off on to a side road and hid the truck behind a dumpster at the back end of a warehouse and turned off the engine.

Grabbing the gun out of her bag, she looked at Nathan. "I'm going to check things out. Stay here."

"I don't think so," he said, immediately following her out of the truck. "That agent told you to wait."

"Nathan, I don't want anything to happen to you."

"And I don't want anything to happen to you. So, we're sticking together. If you're going, I'm going."

She didn't have time to argue with him. And if she didn't let him come, he'd just wait ten seconds and follow her anyway. "All right, but stay close behind me, and don't make any moves."

"Got it."

They crept along a brick wall, and then scooted between two pillars just before the entrance that Mark had turned in to. A few feet later, Mark's car came into view. It was in an open area surrounded and hidden by the towering silos.

Mark got out of the car and looked around, then glanced down at the phone in his hand.

"He's waiting for a call," Nathan murmured.

Bree nodded as they stayed out of sight.

Her nerves were screaming at the silence. All she could hear was the wind blowing through the large, abandoned cement structures. It felt as if they were the only ones there, but that wasn't true. Mark was also present, and he was waiting for someone—someone who might already be here.

She needed to get closer. Moving with sure-footed confidence, she kept Mark in view as she got closer to the scene. She wanted the kidnapper to show his face before she showed hers. One wrong move, and the situation could go bad in any number of ways. She had to protect Mark, keep the kidnapper alive long enough to tell them where Hayley was, and then find Hayley. At any time, the FBI and the police could storm in at the wrong moment and create more chaos.

She wished she was in better communication with them, but at this point even the slightest whisper could carry.

A car turned in to the entrance and pulled up thirty feet away from Mark's vehicle, a cloud of dust hiding the identity of the driver. As the dust cleared, the man stepped out. He had on a dark ski mask, a gun in his hands, and he kept the door of his vehicle open in front of him.

She could feel Nathan's tension as his body slid forward next to hers.

"Just wait," she murmured, sensing his impatience. "We need to know where Hayley is." The little girl didn't appear

to be in the sedan, but it was possible she was in the trunk.

"I've got the money," Mark yelled.

"Show me," the man said.

While the two men were engaged with each other, she crept forward another few feet, then settled into position, putting the gunman in her sight. She would take him down but not kill him. She needed to keep him alive, so he could be forced into telling them where Hayley was.

Before she could pull the trigger, Mark moved into her line of fire.

"Where's Hayley?" Mark yelled.

"Give me the money, and then you'll get your daughter back," the man said.

"I want to see my daughter. Where is she?"

"She's safe. Throw the bag to me."

Mark tossed the bag into the air, and it landed about five feet from the kidnapper. "I did what you wanted. Now give me my daughter."

Bree shifted position, trying to line up her shot, but Mark kept moving around, making it impossible for her to hit her target.

The gunman came from behind the car door and walked forward to get the bag. She waited for her opportunity.

"Tell me where she is," Mark demanded. "Please. She's just a little girl."

The man grabbed the pack off the ground and started backing away.

He was going to leave, and Mark was going to get nothing.

She held her breath, ready to fire... One more step, and she'd have him.

But then Mark let out a blistering, frustrated yell of rage, as if he'd just realized his last hope was leaving and he charged toward the kidnapper, right into her line of fire.

The man fired his weapon, and Mark fell to the ground.

She immediately fired back, hitting the gunman in the right shoulder. He dropped the gun and stumbled backward in surprise, the bag of money hitting the ground.

She jumped up and ran forward.

Mark was alive, writhing on the ground in pain.

"I've got him," Nathan said, right behind her. He dropped to the ground next to Mark, as she moved toward the kidnapper.

The man's face was still hidden by the mask, but she could see panic in his eyes as he struggled to get up.

"Where's Hayley?" she demanded, aiming her gun at him. "You've got one second to tell me before I kill you."

"You'll never—"

His words were cut off as a bullet blast hit him right between the eyes. He fell backwards, dying instantly.

She whirled around.

Where had the shot come from?

Nathan was applying pressure to Mark's wounds and there was no FBI, no police, in sight.

There was a second shooter. But why had he shot this guy and not her? Not Mark? Not Nathan?

She needed to protect them. She scanned the surrounding structures, looking for some glint of metal in the sunlight, but the shot could have come from anywhere.

And another shot could be coming any second.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWELVE

NATHAN STARED DOWN AT MARK, fear racing through him when he saw his friend's glassy, shock-filled eyes. He was clutching his abdomen, and there was a massive amount of blood dripping through his fingers.

He heard Bree call for an ambulance, and prayed it would get there fast, because he didn't know how much time Mark had. Taking off his jacket, he pressed the material against Mark's wound. He didn't know what was going on with the shooter. He assumed he was dead or unconscious.

Bree had checked the trunk of the shooter's vehicle, which had apparently been empty.

Now, she seemed to have taken up a protective stance in front of them, and she was as tense as she'd been before.

She didn't think the danger was over.

He didn't want to think about what that might mean, because there was no way they were moving Mark to a safer location. He'd bleed out before they could do that.

"It's going to be okay," he told Mark, lying with as much sincerity as he could muster. He'd seen a few gunshot

wounds in his life, and this one was bad. But he needed Mark to hang in there.

"Hayley," Mark choked out. "Love her so much. Tell her."

"You're going to tell her yourself. You have to be strong, Mark. Stay with me."

"I—I was desperate."

"I know."

"Tell Lindsay...I'm sorry. Had to...take the chance. Said they'd kill Hayley if I didn't come alone...and bring the money. Should have known...trap."

"We'll find Hayley. Don't worry."

Relief flooded through him as police cars and unmarked vehicles came screaming through the entrance, followed by pounding feet, officers with guns drawn, and paramedics running toward him with a stretcher. *Thank God!*

He got up and stepped back as the EMTs took over, stabilizing Mark, so they could get him into the ambulance. He could see his friend going in and out of consciousness, and he hoped he'd done enough to stem the bleeding. He glanced down at his blood-soaked hands and felt a wave of nausea.

A female police officer came over to him and handed him a towel. "Are you injured?" she asked.

"No, I was just taking care of him," he replied, wiping the blood from his hands.

"Can you tell me what happened?"

He drew in a breath. "I don't know where to start." Glancing across the way, he saw Bree and a circle of FBI agents surrounding the gunman, who appeared to be dead. As happy as he was that the shooter would not be able to

hurt anyone else, he couldn't help worrying about what was going to happen to Hayley if this guy didn't come back with the money.

"Start with how you came to be here," the police officer said, interrupting his thoughts.

"I was following my friend, Mark Jansen. His daughter was kidnapped. I saw him leave his house in a big hurry, acting suspiciously, and I—we—decided to follow him. Me and Agent Bree Adams," he said, tipping his head to the group of FBI agents. "She can fill you in on the rest."

"I still need your side of the story."

"Wait, what's happening?" he asked, seeing not only more police cars coming into the area, but officers and agents heading up and into the abandoned silos.

"We're searching the area."

"For Hayley? Do you think she's here?"

"We don't know. But she's not the only one we're looking for."

It suddenly clicked in: the second blast, Bree's frenzied movements after that, the way she'd positioned herself in front of him and Mark. "There was a second shooter, wasn't there?"

The officer met his gaze. "Did you see someone?"

"No. But I heard the shot. I thought it was Bree—Agent Adams. I was rushing to Mark's side. I didn't see who fired the weapon."

"We're going to need you to come down to the station and answer a lot more questions," the officer said.

"Sure, whatever you need."

"Stay here." She walked over to speak to another officer, one who appeared to be in command of the scene.

Despite her suggestion that he stay where he was, as soon as the circle of agents around Bree broke up, he headed in her direction.

She must have also been told to stay put, because she was suddenly alone, her gaze on the deceased gunman.

He quickly made his way to her side. "Are you okay, Bree?"

"Fine," she said with distraction. "I know this man, Nathan."

"What?" he asked, wondering how often he could keep feeling complete and utter surprise. But as he moved around her to look at the shooter, an icy chill washed over him, an old memory tugging at the back of his mind.

The ski mask had been removed—and while blood from a forehead wound covered the man's face and had made its way through dirty-blond hair and a scruffy beard, the hazel eyes shocked open in death were very familiar. He knew this man, too, but he hadn't seen him since he'd left the old neighborhood. "Calvin—"

"Baker," she finished, meeting his gaze. "He used to run with Johnny. He was two years younger, and Johnny was his idol. He was always asking him if he could do jobs for him."

"This guy is tied to Johnny," he muttered.

"Or was tied to him," she said quickly.

He frowned. "Your go-to move—always defend Johnny, always look for another explanation."

Her gaze turned angry. "I'm not doing that. I'm just stating a fact. Neither one of us knows what Calvin Baker

has been doing the last ten or eleven years."

She had a point, so he would let it go—for now. "The police said there was another shooter."

"Yes. He took the kill shot. I just wanted to disable this guy, so we could talk to him. I should have moved faster. I should have stopped Mark before he ever got here."

He could see the guilt rolling through her eyes, and he shared some of those feelings. But the situation had been tense, and dynamic, and completely unpredictable. "If you'd stopped Mark before he got here, we wouldn't have found Baker. He might be dead, but he's still a good lead. There could be a trail to who he was working with. That could take us one step closer to finding Hayley."

"I just hope Mark survives."

"Me, too," he said heavily. "Why do you think the second shooter took out Baker? Why not aim for you? You were completely in the open. Or he could have hit Mark or myself."

"He wanted to stop Baker from talking, and he probably didn't have time to take us all out. If he was up in one of the silos, he could have seen the police cars coming down the road."

"What's going to happen next?"

"Every inch of the grounds will be searched for evidence."

"You don't seem to be a part of that."

"I was told to stay out of it. Tracy said I've helped enough," she said grimly.

"How much trouble are you in?"

"Probably a lot. But I don't really care about that. What I want to do is keep working the case." She paused, looking around. "Let's get out of here."

"Can we just leave?" he asked, surprised by her suggestion. "The police officer I spoke to told me to stay close."

"Well, you're with me, and at the moment, I'm still a federal agent. I want to go to the hospital and get an update on Mark's condition. I'm betting Lindsay is already headed down there, and I still want to show her the photos I was texted earlier."

"If she confirms those photos are of Hayley, and you now know that Calvin Baker, a former associate of Johnny's, was involved in a ransom demand, are you going to consider the fact that Johnny is the one who is tormenting you?"

"I'm already considering that, Nathan. I'm not an idiot," she snapped.

"I know you're not, but it just doesn't seem like the Johnny blinders have come off yet."

"They've been off for a long time. Let's get out of here while we have the chance."

Bree only had to flash her badge once at a police officer cordoning off the scene before they were out of the silos and crossing the road. The truck was still where they'd parked it, and he held out his hand for the keys.

Bree gave them to him without comment and he slid behind the wheel. It felt good to be back in control of something. "So far, so good," he said. "No one stopped us."

She gave him a weak smile. "Not yet."

"For what it's worth, I think you handled yourself really well back there. It was Mark who kept getting in the way. He kept moving around, blocking your shot. And if you'd waited for backup, Mark would definitely be dead. He would not have made it out of there alive."

"I just wonder if I shouldn't have pulled him out of there before Baker arrived."

"There wasn't time, Bree. And if there hadn't been a second shooter, the gunman would be alive, and we'd have a link to find Hayley."

"But there was another person there, an associate of Baker's. And ruthless enough to take out his partner to stop him from talking," she said grimly.

"Yes," he agreed, worrying again about how the unfolding of events might affect Hayley.

"I don't understand the ransom call, either," she muttered. "It doesn't fit the pattern."

"I think you're going to have to throw out the patterns and the rule book on this case."

"I agree," she said, glancing over at him. "I'm not so sure the rest of the agency will consider that a good option, though."

"Won't your fellow agents understand and appreciate the complexity of the situation you just faced?"

"They should, but I'm not part of this office. It would be different if I were in New York. I have friends there who would support me. But the Chicago team has been annoyed with my presence since day one. They don't like that the kidnapper is obsessed with me. They don't like that I'm the one getting clues. They're not happy about my interview

with Kyle or my relationship with you. And they definitely are not excited about what went down here. The more days that pass without us finding Hayley, the more pressure everyone is under. And now the missing girl's father is in the hospital, fighting for his life." She paused. "Maybe I did botch this."

"You didn't choose to be the kidnapper's target. You had no idea that I was connected to the Jansens or the only witness." He paused, thinking about that. "You know, if Johnny is behind this, it's pretty ironic that I am tied to Grace. He wanted me out of your life from the first time he realized we were friends. And now we're connected again."

"That is ironic. He didn't like me having any other friends but him. As a teenager, I thought his possessiveness was sweet." She let out a heavy sigh. "I don't know. Maybe it is Johnny. If I had to pick someone who could really hate me, the only person I can think of is him."

He was glad she'd finally admitted that.

"At any rate, I will deal with the fallout of my actions, when I don't have a choice. Until I'm suspended, I'm going to do my job the best way I can. What else do you remember about Calvin Baker?"

"He got in a lot of fights. He was dealing drugs. Nothing more specific. He wasn't anyone I hung out with." He glanced over at her. "What do you remember? You probably saw him more than I did."

"He was always looking to score points with Johnny, offering to work at the gym or do whatever he needed done. Johnny would get annoyed that Cal would continually text him. And I would get annoyed that Johnny was always

on his phone. But that wasn't just because of Cal. In the beginning of our relationship, Johnny was just running the gym for his dad, or at least that's what I thought. Obviously, I discovered later that he was engaged in a lot of other criminal activities and that he wasn't ever planning to get out of the family business."

"I didn't realize he'd ever said he would do that."

"Usually, it was in response to me suggesting he do something more with his life. Johnny was smart. He just didn't use his brain in the right way. He was too ambitious and too greedy." She took a breath. "Back then, I thought Johnny had so much more than I did. He had money and a car, and he had a legitimate family home. Granted, it wasn't that great, but it was better than anything I'd lived in. In retrospect, I can see now that Johnny was a small-time thug in a small-time organization that didn't make enough money to get its owners out of the lower-class neighborhood they were living in. The Hawkes might have run our neighborhood, but they weren't running the city—not then anyway. I need to find out how much power he has now. And I want you to know, Nathan, that if Johnny is involved in this, he will pay, and I will go after him with everything I have. Please don't have any doubts about that."

"I believe you."

"Thank you." She straightened in her seat as her phone buzzed with an incoming text. "Oh, God."

"Is it from the kidnapper?"

"Yes. It's another photo."

He pulled over to the side of the road as she handed him the phone. It was a picture of a girl about six or seven. Her back was to the camera, but she was wearing a soccer uniform with the number eleven on it. Across the picture was written the word *your*.

He stared at the photo for a long moment and then handed it back to her. "I'm pretty sure this is Hayley."

"We can't see her face."

"No. But the park she's at—it looks like the place where Grace plays soccer, and that's about two blocks from Hayley's house."

"You know what the next word is going to be, don't you?"

"I think so, but I don't believe it's coming for a while. He wants you to wait, to wonder, to worry."

"I won't stop worrying or wondering, but I'm not going to wait."

He could see a new fire in her eyes. The picture might have been meant to discourage her, but it had actually had the opposite effect. Bree was charged up, ready to do battle, and failure wasn't an option.

Bree put her phone into her bag when they turned into the hospital parking lot. She didn't know how much time she would have before Tracy and the other agents caught up to her, but she hoped to speak to Lindsay before then.

They checked in at the information desk and then headed to the fifth-floor surgical center. There was a police

officer stationed outside a small waiting room. Bree was happy to see that someone was watching out for Lindsay.

She showed her badge to the officer, who then allowed her and Nathan to enter the room.

Lindsay was sitting with her father, who looked angry and protective of the fragile woman he had his arm around.

When Lindsay saw them, she jumped to her feet. "Did you find Hayley?"

She hated to dash the hope out of her eyes. "Not yet," she said emphasizing the second word of her reply.

"I don't understand what has happened. The police said that Mark went to pay a ransom at the silos and that someone shot him. He told me he was going to work. He told you that, too," she said to Nathan.

"He did," Nathan agreed. "But he didn't do that. He apparently answered a ransom call."

"Who shot Mark? Where is Hayley? What's going on?" Lindsay asked, her eyes pleading for more information.

"Why don't we sit down, Lindsay?" she suggested. "I have a couple of questions."

"More questions?" her father interrupted. "Isn't it about time someone brought us some answers?"

"We're doing everything we can," Bree said, knowing her words would do nothing to console them. "I can tell you that the person who was meeting Mark is dead. But it looks like he was not acting alone. And Hayley was not with him."

Lindsay bit down on her lip. "Is she more in danger now, because they didn't get the money?"

"I wish I could answer you; I just don't know. I hope not."

"You hope not," Lindsay's father said scornfully. "Like that does us any good."

"It's okay, Dad," Lindsay said. "Let me talk to them. Maybe you could call Mom and check in on the kids. Make sure they're not watching the TV. I don't want them to see any news about their father."

"Are you sure you want to do this alone?"

"Yes, I'm fine."

"All right. I'll be back in a few minutes."

As her father left, Lindsay turned back to them, her gaze running down Nathan's shirt. Her face paled. "That's blood on your sleeve. Is that—" Lindsay put a hand to her mouth and then stumbled back into the chair she'd recently vacated. "It's Mark's blood, isn't it? I can't lose my husband, too. I just can't."

Bree took the empty chair next to her, while Nathan pulled over a chair and sat across from them.

"This is a really good hospital, Lindsay, and the doctors are going to do everything they can to save Mark's life," Nathan said.

"Were you there when Mark was shot?" Confusion filled her eyes again. "How were you there, Nathan? You were at my house. But you left before Mark did."

"Yes, but I ran into Bree across the street. While we were talking, we saw Mark come out of the house and grab a backpack out of the side yard. He was acting oddly, so we decided to follow him. I wish we could have prevented what happened. But I know Mark is a fighter."

"Did he say anything?"

"He said he was sorry that he hadn't told you where he was going, what he was doing, but he was desperate, and he hoped you would understand," Nathan replied.

Lindsay's mouth trembled. "That sounds like good-bye."

"He didn't mean it that way. He will do everything he can to survive," Nathan said forcefully. "I know he will."

"I pray that's true."

"I know you're scared," Bree said, drawing Lindsay's attention back to her. "And I hate to ask you more questions, but I need information, and you're the only one who can give it to me."

"Go ahead."

"I want to show you some pictures." She pulled out her phone.

"Pictures of Hayley?"

"I don't know. That's what I need you to tell me." She showed the first picture to Lindsay. "Is this Hayley?"

Lindsay nodded. "Yes. It was her first formal portrait. My parents took her to a photographer in town and had it done as a gift for me for Mother's Day." She licked her lips. "Why do you have it? Why is the word *I* written on it?"

"It was texted to my phone, Lindsay. There are two more." She flipped to the next one. "Is this Hayley, too?"

"Yes," she said tightly.

"And this one?" she asked, moving to the photo that arrived several minutes ago.

"Oh, God, what's going on?" Lindsay asked, putting a hand to her mouth. "Why is someone sending you pictures of Hayley through her life, and what do the words mean—*I—am—your...* What's next?"

Looking into Lindsay's eyes, Bree knew she had to tell her. It was not something she wanted to do. And she wasn't sure how to say it—especially in this moment, with Lindsay hanging on by a thread.

She gazed over at Nathan, silently imploring him to tell her what to do, but his eyes held the same uncertainty.

If they were wrong about her being Hayley's mother, then they'd be upsetting Lindsay for nothing. If they were right, then everything would change. Nothing would ever be the same.

Was she ready to take that leap?

"What's next?" Lindsay repeated, more strongly this time, her gaze moving back and forth between them. "What aren't you two telling me?"

"I don't know what the next word is," she said carefully.

Doubt filled Lindsay's eyes. "I don't believe you. You have some idea where this is going. Just say it. Tell me whatever it is."

She hesitated one last second and then decided that Lindsay had the right to all the information she had. "I think the next word is going to be *daughter*."

Lindsay stared at her in bemusement. "*I—am—your—daughter?* But why would he send this to you? I don't understand. Was it meant for me?"

Bree licked her lips, knowing she was about to rip Lindsay's life apart one more time. "It was meant for me, Lindsay."

"You? What are you talking about?"

"Ten years ago, I gave up a baby for adoption, and the kidnapper seems to be saying that the child he has is my

biological child—that I am Hayley's birth mother."

"What!" Lindsay's eyes widened, the blood draining out of her face, until she looked like a ghost. "That—that isn't possible."

She swallowed back a growing knot of emotion, knowing she had to find a way to get all the words out, to tell her secret to the one person who probably needed to hear it the most.

"I didn't believe it was possible, either. When I first met you, I had no inkling that Hayley could possibly be the child I gave up for adoption. I came to Chicago because Hayley's case was exactly like three others that I had recently worked. But I'm fairly certain now that the white rose was just meant to get me to Chicago."

"None of this is true." Lindsay gave a vehement shake of her head. "Hayley's biological mother is dead."

"It's probable that the records—the birth certificate—everything was doctored."

"Why?"

"Because you were going through back channels. You were working through the black market. Did you know that, Lindsay?"

"No. It was a legitimate agency. They did private adoptions. They had photos of happy kids and happy families on their walls."

"That agency went out of business a few months after you got Hayley."

"Businesses go under all the time. So what? You're mistaken. I'm sorry, but you're wrong. And maybe the

message on the phone isn't going to end with *daughter*. It could be something else."

Lindsay was fighting hard to hang onto her reality, and Bree couldn't blame her, but in the end, the truth would come out.

"I'm not telling you any of this to hurt you. I am as shocked as you are that Hayley could be my daughter. I had specifically been told that my baby would not go to a family in Illinois."

"But we live in Illinois, and we picked up Hayley from a hospital in Joliet. Is that where you had your baby?"

"No. I had my child in Detroit. But you didn't pick up Hayley until she was several days old, right?"

"But she was born at that hospital." Lindsay paused. "I mean—I assumed she was born there." Suddenly, uncertainty was in her voice.

"We both made assumptions that weren't true," she said gently. "I was a teen mom. I willingly gave up my child, so she could have a better life. And I would have hoped beyond hope that she would have gone to a family like yours."

"Why did you give her up? Because you were young?"

She'd expected the question, but it was still difficult to hear. "I was eighteen, and I had lived a very difficult life. My mother had me when she was a teenager, and I grew up in chaos, poverty and crime. My mom died when I was ten, and I lived with my aunt for a few years, and then I went into foster care when she couldn't take care of me. When I realized I was pregnant, the only thing I knew for sure was that I didn't want my baby to live my childhood. I wanted

her to have what you've given Hayley—two loving parents, grandparents, siblings, a pretty pink and purple bedroom with all the stuffed animals she could ever want." Her eyes filled with tears as she thought about Hayley's room.

A tear slid out of Lindsay's eye. "I tried my best. But now...you must hate me."

"I don't hate you. I hate the people who took Hayley. They're the only ones who are responsible."

"You're Hayley's birth mom," Lindsay muttered, as she still tried to make sense of it. "But she doesn't have your green eyes. Hers are brown." She paused. "The father—we never knew anything about Hayley's father."

And the last thing she wanted to do was tell Lindsay about Johnny. "He's not important right now. I just want you to know that I'm going to find Hayley, and I'm going to bring her back to you."

"To me? Or to you?" Lindsay whispered, anguish in her eyes. "You're her mother. Maybe you want her back."

Did she want her back?

She shook her head, forcing the silent question out of her head. "No. You're her mother." She blinked back the tears that so desperately wanted to fall, and looking at Lindsay, she could see the same heartbreaking emotion. "And Mark is her father," she managed to add. "He's going to be all right, and Hayley will come home to you. We're going to put your family back together."

"Promise me."

It went against all of her training to make that promise, but she did it anyway. "I promise."

Tense silence hung between them, and then the door opened, and Lindsay's father returned to the room. She felt relieved at his interruption. Lindsay would have more questions, but for now she'd told her enough.

"Everything all right in here?" he asked, obviously noting the heavy atmosphere in the room and not sure if it had to do with Mark or Hayley or whatever else they'd been talking about.

Lindsay gave her a helpless look, as if she didn't know how to answer her father.

Bree didn't want to get into anything with Lindsay's dad, so she just said, "I'll be in touch, Lindsay."

"Just keep your promise. That's all I ask."

Nathan leaned over and gave Lindsay a hug. "I'm praying for Mark."

"Thank you," she said tightly.

As they left the room, Bree paused in the doorway. Lindsay's father sat down next to his daughter and put his arm around her shoulders. Then Lindsay lost control and started to sob.

"I made things worse," she muttered.

Nathan took her hand and pulled her into the hallway. They moved a few feet down the corridor, away from the police officer. "You had to tell her, Bree."

"It was one of the hardest things I've ever done," she said, looking into his understanding eyes. "But I thought she needed to know."

"She did need to know. I just wished you hadn't made her a promise you might not be able to keep."

"I'm going to keep it," she said fiercely. "I'm going to save my daughter. Whatever it takes."

"I'm not arguing with you. I know you'll do everything you can, but I noticed you didn't tell her about Johnny."

"I didn't want to scare her more by telling her that Hayley's father is a criminal. But I'm going to have to tell everyone else. The pictures coming to my phone are putting together a phrase that will directly name me as Hayley's mother, and if I don't share my suspicions, I could be putting Hayley at more risk. I have to come clean. I have to get the police and the agency on the same page, so we can find her."

"I know it's not what you wanted, but it's the right thing to do. Do you want to get out of here before..." His voice trailed away. "I guess it's too late for that."

She nodded, seeing three members from the Chicago FBI office get off the elevator. They were followed by two men in suits. One was the lead detective on the case, Vance Cooper, but the other man was new to the investigation. He wasn't, however, new to her. "Is that Detective Benedict?" she asked Nathan, wary surprise running through her.

"I think so," Nathan said tightly. "What is he doing on this case?"

She didn't know, and she didn't like it. Benedict had been good friends with Johnny's father, and she'd always thought he was a dirty cop. The fact that he was suddenly showing up now when Calvin Baker, a former associate of Johnny's, had just been ID'd as the ransom negotiator made her very nervous.

Was he here to get information for Johnny?

"Be careful what you say to him," she told Nathan. "Don't let on that you remember Calvin."

"Don't worry. I know how *not* to talk to the cops."

"I don't know when I'll be in touch. The police will take over your questioning, while I'll be tied up with the agency. I wish I could protect you from the questions—"

"I'm not worried about it," he said, cutting her off. "I'll tell them exactly what happened, how we came to follow Mark to the silos, and how you took down the gunman before he could kill Mark."

"I shouldn't have taken you with me. I should have commandeered your truck and left you on the sidewalk."

"Like that was going to happen," he said dryly. "I will be sure to tell them I went willingly and actually forced you to take me. But don't waste your concern on me. I'm fine. And when you're done on your end, I'll be waiting."

She liked the sound of that.

"And, Bree," he added. "The promise I made to you at the bus station still stands. You tell your secret however and whenever you want. As far as anyone else is concerned, I know nothing."

"Last time you didn't talk, you got beat up. This time, you might go to jail. I don't want you to lie for me."

"The cops don't know as much as we do, and at the moment, neither does the FBI. My interview will probably be over before the police know you're Hayley's birth mother."

"You might be right."

"I'll handle myself," Nathan added. "You take care of you. And try to remember you didn't do anything wrong,

Bree. You loved the wrong guy a long time ago, but everything else you did right. And you're still doing it right. You're Hayley's best chance at survival. Don't let anyone try to convince you otherwise."

Her heart swelled with gratitude. Nathan had always been the one person she could count on. "We'll meet up later," she said. But judging by the intent looks on her fellow agents' faces, she didn't think that would be any time soon.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

AS BREE HAD PREDICTED, the police detectives had zeroed in on Nathan, taking him down to the station, while the FBI had hustled her back to the office for a long chat.

She'd been in a conference room for the last five hours, having gone through every detail of her past: her relationship with Johnny, her teenaged pregnancy, the time she'd spent in Detroit, and the woman who'd set up the adoption. Then they'd moved forward in time to last year: the previous kidnapping cases, the news coverage in Philadelphia, and the text messages she'd received from the kidnapper. Finally, they'd zeroed in on her actions today: her arrival at the Jansens' house, her discussion with Nathan, which had led to them following Mark to the silos together, and the shots that were fired—one to disable and one to kill.

While most of the questioning was led by Tracy and/or ASAIC Hobbs, various other agents had come in and out of the conference room to ask questions and/or give updates on the investigation into the crime scene at the silos as well as Mark's condition. He was now out of surgery, still

critical, but holding his own for the moment. She was tremendously grateful to know that he was going to make it.

The texts and the photos she had received from the kidnapper were being analyzed, but she doubted they would find anything. The kidnapper was too smart, always staying one step ahead. In fact, she wouldn't be surprised if he had some background in law enforcement. He seemed to know exactly how to mask his actions from the bureau, an agency with tremendous resources and technological expertise.

The fourth photo—the one she was sure would say *daughter*—had still not arrived. She had no doubt that another message would be arriving at some point. The game was not over. The kidnapper was not done.

As early evening shadows darkened the conference room, Tracy flipped on a light and sat down at the other end of the table as she took a call. It was just the two of them now, and Tracy seemed to be doing more listening than talking, which was unusual since Tracy always seemed like she had a lot to say.

Bree glanced at her watch. It was almost six. She was exhausted and starving. And she was getting tired of playing good little FBI soldier to Tracy and a bunch of colleagues who didn't like her much for mucking up their investigation and withholding what they considered to be important information. Never mind that it had been less than forty-eight hours since she'd arrived in Chicago, even though it felt like a lifetime had passed since she'd gotten on the plane.

Everything had been happening at lightning speed. Maybe they were pissed at being left out of the loop for a few hours, but she was getting angry about being cooped up in the office for so long and treated like a criminal instead of an agent.

"Are we done?" she asked when Tracy got off the phone and moved down the table to sit across from her.

"Almost. That was Detective Benedict. He said that Calvin Baker was living in an apartment on Hayward Street until a week ago."

"Hayward Street is where the gym is—the boxing gym that is owned by the Hawke family."

"We're aware," she said shortly. "The landlord said Baker moved out last week, leaving a half month's rent on the table. His whereabouts after that are unknown. Neighbors had nothing to say."

"No one on Hayward Street ever has much to say. Was there anything else?"

"Baker has been in and out of jail the past ten years. He's done just about everything from drug deals, to gun running, car theft, and assault."

"And his ties to Johnny Hawke?"

"Nothing recently."

Wasn't that convenient, especially since the information had come from Detective Benedict?

"What do you know about Detective Benedict?" she asked. "Because a long time ago, he appeared to be very close to Johnny's father. Suddenly today he shows up at the hospital. He hasn't been involved in this case at all, so why is he now a part of it?"

"Because he works organized crime, and he actually put Baker in jail four years ago after a drug bust. We contacted him looking for more information. We brought him into this, Bree."

She frowned. "It still seems odd to me. I'd swear he was a dirty cop when I lived here. I know I saw him talking to Johnny and his father. There was something between them."

Tracy shrugged. "If he's dirty, he's good, because he's had his job for over twenty years."

"Well, I need to talk to him. I want to speak to Johnny as well." She was dreading that, but it had to be done.

"No. You're not talking to anyone," Tracy said definitively. "My team will be conducting all the interviews."

"But I know Johnny."

"Obviously," she said sarcastically. "But you would be emotionally compromised in any interview with Mr. Hawke, so we will take it from here."

"He would tell me more than he would tell you."

"Would he? You did steal his child from him."

She sighed, knowing she couldn't argue that. "All right. Then let's end this now. There's nothing more to be said." She pushed back her chair and stood up.

Tracy gave her a hostile look as she also got to her feet. "That's not your call, Bree."

"I think it is. Despite the fact that you're treating me like a suspect, we are on the same side."

"It feels like you've been playing both sides," Tracy returned. "You should have told us that you thought this

little girl was your daughter."

"I honestly didn't think that until about five minutes before I went to the silos. But we've been over all that a hundred times already. I didn't come to Chicago to make trouble; I came because this was a setup. I was lured here. Hayley's kidnapping wasn't done by the White Rose Kidnapper; it was just made to look that way, so I'd be called in. There's still a little girl out there we need to find, whether she's my daughter or not."

"I am very aware of that."

"Then why are you talking to me instead of looking for her?"

"Because you made a mess of things, and I have to clean it up."

"I didn't make a mess of anything," she snapped. "And if you weren't holding some grudge against me from the academy, you'd be acting a lot differently."

"No, I wouldn't. I go by the book, Bree. I follow protocol. I don't act out of passion and emotion. I always use my head. I'm logical. I plan my every move. I don't jump into trucks with a civilian friend and drive him to a ransom drop."

"I needed a vehicle, and Nathan was right there. At the time, I didn't know where we were going. But I'm done explaining my actions. This interview is over. I have told you everything I know. If I am out of the investigation, then I'm going to my hotel. But I will need my phone back. If the kidnapper calls again, I have to be able to answer."

They'd already argued about the phone several times, and while Tracy had disagreed, ASAIC Hobbs had decided

Bree should hang on to the phone and keep her connection with the kidnapper alive.

Tracy reluctantly handed over the phone. "You will let us know if any calls come in?"

"As soon as it happens."

"I still think you should have protection."

Another topic they'd already discussed at length. "I don't need a visible presence between me and the kidnapper," she reminded Tracy. "He needs to think he can still get to me."

"Which means he *can* get to you," Tracy couldn't help pointing out.

"I can handle myself." She grabbed her bag and headed out of the room before Tracy could come up with any more reasons for her to stay.

When she got outside, she flagged down a taxi. As it pulled away from the curb, she stared at the phone, knowing there was another reason they'd let her keep it. They wanted to track her.

Not so fast. She quickly disabled the GPS. They could trace and triangulate any calls she made, but for now, she was free.

"I'm going to change my destination," she told the driver, giving him a new address. Then she sat back and looked out the window at the city that was continuing to beat her down.

Tracy's boastful words about being a better agent because she acted from a place of logic seemed laughable to her. She knew without a doubt that she wasn't going to get Hayley back by following protocols. She was going to

have to get down in the mud and fight like the street kid she'd once been.

Nathan opened the door of his apartment just after seven on Friday night, thrilled to see Bree in the hallway. They hadn't been in touch since she'd left the hospital, and that had been hours ago. She looked exhausted. He pulled her into his apartment and into his arms, kicking the door shut behind her.

She rested her head on his shoulder and they hung onto each other.

He could feel the tension in her body, the stress of the last few days, the fear, the worry—everything. But then he'd always been in tune with Bree. He'd never really been able to divorce his emotions from hers. When she hurt—he hurt. It was just a fact. It had started when he was thirteen years old, and it didn't seem to be ending any time soon.

It didn't matter that they hadn't seen each other in years before this week.

This was Bree. This was the girl of his dreams.

She was here. And she was in his arms. And that was all that mattered.

She lifted her head and looked up at him with her beautiful green eyes. "Hi."

He gave her a smile. "I wasn't sure the FBI didn't have you locked up somewhere."

"They're not happy with me. There was talk of suspending me, but I'm the only link they have to the

kidnapper, so for now I still have my gun and my badge. I'm not sure how long that will last." She let go of him and stepped away. "Let's see your place."

"It's not much."

She walked down the short hallway that led into his one-bedroom apartment and put her bag on the kitchen counter. Then she headed straight for the balcony.

"You have a view," she said with delight, moving through the small living room to the sliding glass doors.

He followed her outside, smiling at the change in her demeanor as she took in the city from the thirty-fifth floor.

"Oh, Nathan, this is amazing," she said, waving her arm toward the city skyline. "The lights are beautiful."

"Better than the rooftops we used to get up on?"

"So much better. We never had access to anything higher than twelve floors. This is crazy."

"I have to admit the view is what enticed me to pay more rent than I planned. Someday, I'd like to own a house and put down some deeper roots, but when I took this place, I was looking for a way to feel on top of things."

"You're on top of the world up here."

"It's not the beach. I don't see sailboats," he said, reminding her of her dream view. "But for now, this is good."

"It's better than good." She drew in a breath and let it out. "It's been a long day."

"That's an understatement."

Turning to look at him, she said, "I heard Mark came through surgery. How long did you stay at the hospital?"

"I was there until about an hour ago. Mark is not completely out of danger, but he seems to be holding his own."

"I'm so relieved."

"Me, too." He could see the unspoken question in her eyes. "Lindsay didn't say much about your revelation, except to ask that I not tell anyone else in her family. I assured her that information wouldn't come from me, but with the police and FBI being filled in on the connection between you and Hayley and the kidnapper, I didn't know how long anything was going to stay secret."

"Probably not long."

"I reminded her that the only thing that matters to anyone right now is finding Hayley. Everything else can be sorted out later." He paused. "She did ask me how I knew you. She wondered about our relationship and what I thought of you."

"What did you say?"

"I told her we met when we were kids and that you are a really good person. I said I was there when you decided to give your baby a better life, and I knew how much it cost you, but I also knew how sure you were that you were doing the right thing."

She met his gaze. "Thanks for the character reference."

"I told the truth. You are a good person. You're a good agent, too. I hope the bureau knows that."

She shrugged. "Time will tell." She paused. "Lindsay is probably worried I'm going to try to get Hayley back after all this."

"And/or blame her for what happened," he said. "She is carrying a ton of guilt."

"I don't blame her or Mark for the kidnapping. That had nothing to do with them. The Jansens have given Hayley a great life. She has the family I always wanted for her. I just can't believe that she ended up in Chicago. I thought I was doing everything I could to keep my child out of Johnny's orbit. That's why I lived in Detroit, of all places. What was the point of me going there if they were going to give my child to someone in Chicago?"

"I don't know. Maybe the money was right. I'd like to know what Mark and Lindsay paid for that adoption."

"Ten thousand dollars," she said. "To a now defunct agency. I looked it up. But I'm guessing there was an additional cash payment that was not recorded."

"Probably."

She let out a sigh. "I've been keeping myself sane by telling myself that Johnny wouldn't hurt his own child. Family and blood are everything to him."

"I've been telling myself that, too. I also don't think he would feel a need to hurt Emma," he said, bringing up the little girl from the train. "I know you have been worried about her, but I think she's probably someone in the neighborhood, who was happy to make some extra cash. Her older sister might have put her up to it."

"It's possible."

"So, do you want to fill me in on what happened on your end?"

"A million questions. I answered many of them several times. The FBI and the police are working hard to track

Calvin Baker's whereabouts over the past several months. He disappeared from his apartment last week. Detective Benedict, who works in organized crime, assured my colleague, Agent Cox, that Baker has no ties to Johnny Hawke's operation."

"But you don't believe him?"

"No. And I think Benedict is still on the Hawke's payroll."

"Good chance. I talked to Benedict, too. It was right after you left, so it was before he knew anything about Hayley being your daughter. His questions to me were about Mark leaving the house, our actions at the silos, whether Mark said anything to me before he was taken to the hospital. I think he wanted to know if Mark knew who the kidnappers were, and if he'd shared that information with me."

"I hope you said no."

"I did, because it was the truth. He didn't tell me anything. He just said he was sorry he'd done what he did."

"Did Benedict ask you anything about me?"

"Yes. He was aware that you'd grown up in Chicago, that you and I were friends in our youth, and that Kyle had filed a complaint against you."

She raised an eyebrow. "That's a lot of information for a detective from organized crime to have, especially since he had just come on the case."

"I thought so, too. I told him we reconnected when you came to interview my niece."

"Did he mention my relationship with Johnny?"

"He did not, and I didn't bring it up."

"Thanks for that."

"No problem. My impression of Benedict is that he's slick and smart. I don't like the timing of his entrance into the case, and I don't think we should underestimate him."

"I agree. I'm sure the bureau will share my relationship to Johnny with the police and with Benedict."

"And he'll tell Johnny."

"If he doesn't, the bureau probably will. They're going to interview him tonight."

"Without you?"

She nodded, anger in her eyes. "They think I would be emotionally compromised."

"I know you hate that idea, but it's probably true."

Her mouth tightened. "Maybe it is. I can't say that I'm not personally invested in the outcome of this case. Hayley is my daughter—my daughter," she emphasized, as if she were still trying to believe it.

"And you love her. That's why you're compromised. You'd do anything to get her back."

"I would," she admitted. "I'd even talk to Johnny."

"He's not going to be surprised when the FBI tell him about Hayley and their belief that she is his daughter with you. He already knows. He's not in the dark on this, Bree. He can't be. Baker had to be working for Johnny. I don't care what Benedict said. We know their past relationship. We were there."

She nodded. "I'm not arguing with you."

"That's a change. Usually, when Johnny is in the conversation, things get heated."

She made a face at him. "I'm not defending Johnny. And I'm not scared of him anymore. If I have to go through him to get to Hayley, I will."

He saw the steel determination in her eyes and had no doubt about that. "Any more photos come in?"

"Not since the third one. The agency let me keep the phone, because it's the only connection we have to the kidnapper." She paused. "I did, however, disable the GPS before I came here."

"So, they don't know where you are?"

"They could do some call triangulating if I get on the phone, but for the moment, I feel free. Not that they probably couldn't just guess I'm with you," she said with a wry smile. "But I need a little time to regroup, and it felt like I was taking back a bit of my power when I disabled the GPS. Silly, huh?"

"Completely understandable. While you're regrouping, do you feel like eating? I picked up some Chinese on my way home from the hospital."

"Chow mein and chicken fried rice?"

"You know it," he said, smiling as she named her long-time favorites. "Mongolian beef and potstickers, too."

"That sounds awesome, but right now I'm enjoying the fresh air. Maybe in a few minutes?"

"Sure. We'll have to heat it up anyway."

"You're being so great, Nathan. I didn't have a chance to say that earlier, but the way you handled yourself at the silos, taking care of Mark, dealing with the police, and then supporting me with Lindsay at the hospital. The past few days, you've listened to me ramble on and on about every

new theory that comes into my head. You've gone above and beyond, and I feel a little guilty at how entangled you are in all this."

"Don't worry about me. I want to find Hayley—for her, for you, for the Jansens, for Josie, and for Grace, whose heart is still breaking for her friend." He took a breath. "I also want to help you, Bree. You don't deserve the gaslight treatment you've been getting. I want to help you find whoever is threatening you and make them stop."

"Thanks. It feels good to talk to you, Nathan. You always make things seem manageable. I was working myself into a lather on the way over here, furious with my agency for treating me like a criminal, irritated with myself for not handling the situation at the silos better, being unable to figure out the kidnapper is tied to Johnny, and being led astray by Emma instead of realizing that Hayley is my daughter until today. You saw it yesterday."

"Only because you couldn't bear the idea that your daughter had been kidnapped. Emma was a safer choice. You saw her as being okay, being part of a con, not being held captive."

"I guess. I know there is more coming Nathan. I told the agency that the game isn't over. He has more plays, and I need to be able to act. But they've taken me off the investigation. I can't even use agency resources anymore. They cut off my access, took away my security clearance. Because I'm the biological mother of the kidnap victim, I'm vulnerable to blackmail. I understand it, but I feel isolated, angry, frustrated and overwhelmed."

He could see that she was quickly working herself into another lather. "You can't do anything but live in this moment, Bree. You can't stop the thunder. You just have to let it roll over you. And then when it's done, you get up and keep going."

A smile suddenly spread across her lips. "Oh, my God. You just gave me a *Nathanism*."

"I'm afraid to ask what that is," he said warily.

"You used to have all these sayings that would make me and Josie feel better. We called them *Nathanisms*. You said that one about the thunder when we were at the shelter. I remember huddling with you and Josie in the downstairs room when the lights went off, and thunder was rocking the building. You sat between me and Josie, and you held our hands, and said, 'We'll get through this. We'll be okay. Just let the thunder roll over us and go on its way.'"

"I don't remember that," he lied, some self-protective instinct kicking in. In truth, that was the first night he'd ever held her hand, and he'd never been able to forget it.

"Well, I do. You were good for me. For a while, I was good for you, too."

"More than awhile. And we'll get through this round of thunder as well. You may not be officially on the case anymore, but I know that isn't going to stop you from working it, and I'll be there to help you. Tomorrow we'll get back on it. Or before tomorrow, if you get another clue."

"It seems to be taking a long time. I don't know if the kidnapper got put off their game because of what happened at the silos, but it's been hours since I received that third photo. Where's the next one?"

"Maybe they're afraid you're getting too close."

"Or they just want to drive me crazy for a while longer."

"You still don't want to call the kidnapper, Johnny, do you?"

"I know there were two people at the silos, and I'm guessing someone was left behind with Hayley, so right now I have to say *they*. Maybe Johnny is in charge, but I don't know if he's the actual kidnapper. I can't see him going into Hayley's school and grabbing her."

"No. That sounds like a job for one of his minions. He would have been somewhere else that night, with a perfect alibi ready to go."

She frowned but didn't say anything, turning her gaze back to the view.

He didn't know where she'd gone in her head, but from the set of her jaw, he could see it was nowhere pleasant. "You may be getting pulled back into the dark past, Bree, but you won't go under, you won't get trapped there. You won't let that happen and I won't let that happen. We're strong now. Stronger than we've ever been, and stronger because we're together. Johnny is no match for us. I don't care how big his army is now."

She turned her head, her tension easing. "You're right. And we don't just have each other. My agency may not be thrilled with me, but they will be there if we need them." She paused. "Do you mind if I hang out here? I don't want to go back to my hotel."

"I want you to stay. I was actually going to insist on it."

"Okay then. I'll stay."

As their gazes clung together, the air between them started to crackle and sizzle. He knew he should say something, but he had no idea what. And Bree, likewise, seemed to be suddenly speechless.

Thirty-five floors up, and he wasn't scared of falling over the rail; he was scared of falling into her.

He could feel the tug between them, the relentless pressure of desire and need that had gone unfulfilled for so many years. This wasn't the right time or the right place, but then what was?

In the past, he'd walked away from so many moments like this, and he'd always regretted it. He didn't want any more regrets, no more missed opportunities.

"Nathan?" she whispered, her voice like a soft song on the wind.

Was it a plea or a question?

"I want you, Bree." There it was—right on the table, out in the light, words for her to stomp on or to embrace. He couldn't quite believe he'd said the words aloud after so many years of keeping them to himself.

Her green eyes darkened, and her lips parted, but it seemed to take forever for her to say something.

Would it be worth the wait?

"I want you, too," she said.

Definitely worth the wait.

He swallowed hard, not sure he'd heard her right, but her green gaze was gleaming in the moonlight. He bridged the distance between them, framing her head with his hands, his fingers sliding into the silky strands of her brown hair, his thumbs brushing the soft skin of her

cheeks. Her lips parted, her breath a cloud of sexy heat in the cold night air.

He lowered his head, taking his time, wanting to savor every moment, because who knew if it would ever happen again?

When his lips covered hers, a wave of delicious warmth enveloped him. Everything else faded into the night—the lights, the traffic, the city. It was just the two of them, and that's really all he'd ever wanted.

She opened her mouth and invited him inside with an impatient sweetness that put him over the edge.

Bree had always been impatient to get what she wanted. She'd never been methodical or plodding; she'd always dived in—head first. And he'd always thought twice before he followed—*if* he followed.

But he wasn't following her now. And neither was he leading.

It was give and take, push and pull, one kiss blending into the next.

His hands moved through her hair, resting on her shoulders and then running down her arms to her hands. His fingers curled around hers as their mouths met again. It was the perfect kiss, the perfect touch, the perfection connection.

He didn't feel the chill of the night anymore.

He didn't feel the cold of his life anymore.

He just felt her.

Her mouth. Her hands. His Bree.

Maybe it wouldn't be forever. Maybe it wouldn't last until tomorrow. But he'd take what she was willing to give.

"Inside," he murmured against her mouth, pulling her back into his apartment, and closing the door behind them.

She took off her coat and tossed it over a nearby chair. Her gun and badge moved onto the coffee table, and then she went to work on the buttons of her blouse. He felt as if she wasn't just stripping herself of her clothes: she was stripping herself of the pressures and trappings of her life.

As she slipped her blouse off, he became entranced by the sheer white lacy silk of her bra. *She might look all business on the outside, but on the inside...*

"You're falling behind, Nathan," she said, a playful light in her eyes. "Just like that strip poker game we once played. I was down to my panties while you had only lost your shirt."

"That's because you were not very good at poker. Your excitement at getting a good hand always gave you away. You have very expressive eyes."

She made a face at him. "So, you were a better poker player. What's your excuse tonight?"

"I'm enjoying the show," he said, as she shimmied out of her black slacks, revealing a matching white lace thong and slender bare legs that he wouldn't mind having wrapped around his waist.

Despite his words, he was done watching. He moved forward, taking another kiss, as his hands cupped her sweet ass. And then she was doing just what he'd wanted, throwing her arms around his neck and wrapping her legs around his waist as he carried her into the bedroom.

He tossed her onto the mattress, then made quick work of his clothes while she took off her lacy lingerie.

Seeing her naked, in his bed, waiting for him, with her gorgeous brown hair spread across his pillow, her green eyes so intent and passionate almost stopped his heart.

"God, Bree," he murmured. "You're amazing."

"Get down here, and I'll show you how amazing I can be."

"We're really doing this," he muttered, still in a little disbelief.

"Oh, we're doing it, Nathan," she said, pulling him on top of her. "Kiss me already. I feel like I've been waiting forever."

He felt exactly the same way.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BEING with Nathan had been surprising and hot and really, really satisfying, Bree thought, as she snuggled against his side, her head on his shoulder, her arm across his waist, her leg over his.

She hadn't really known what to expect. Nathan had been many things to her. He'd been the kind, sweet, imaginative boy who had protected her and made her feel safe. He'd also been the fun, attractive teenager, who all the girls had wanted, but he'd still hung out with her. And then he'd been the brooding, mysterious, scowling man who seemed to disapprove of everything she did. And that had been the early years...

When she'd returned to Chicago a few days ago, he'd been angry and resistant, but then he'd gotten tangled up in her life and her problems, and he'd been a friend again, someone to lean on, someone to talk to, someone to trust...

Now, he was her lover.

She shivered at the memories of his hands on her body, his mouth on her lips and her breasts...his whispered words of passion as they moved together in perfect sync.

They hadn't always been on the same page, but tonight they'd both wanted the same thing—they'd wanted *everything*.

She hadn't felt so connected to anyone in a long time—if ever.

It was almost shocking to think it was Nathan who had made her feel so complete.

And yet it also made sense.

He'd always been able to read her. He'd always known what she wanted.

She'd had a lot more trouble figuring him out, but not tonight—tonight hadn't been about the past, but the present, the *now*...and the now had been wonderful.

Her stomach suddenly rumbled, and she felt a wave of embarrassment when Nathan laughed.

Lifting her head, she looked into his smiling eyes, feeling a bit smug that he was so happy, and it was because of her. "I think I'm ready for that Chinese food."

"I'll get it just as soon as I can move again," he drawled. "That was something else, Bree."

"We were very good together. I want to do it again and again and again," she said, playfully poking his chest with each repeat of the word *again*.

"Sounds like an excellent plan."

"But first..."

He groaned. "Food?"

She nodded and got off the bed, smiling to herself as Nathan gave her bare ass a little whistle of appreciation.

After using the bathroom, she wrapped herself up in Nathan's soft dark-green robe and joined him in the

kitchen.

He'd put on his boxer briefs and jeans but thankfully he'd left his shirt off. She moved up behind him as he opened the refrigerator and wrapped her arms around his waist, pressing a kiss on his back. "I'm glad you left your chest bare. I like a view while I'm eating."

He turned around in her arms. "I like a view, too. Maybe you should take off this robe."

"Not a chance. I know what will happen then, and I want my noodles."

He laughed and handed her a container. "I'll get us some plates, and we can heat everything up."

She opened the carton he'd given her. "I like it cold. And I'm too hungry to wait."

"You've reminded me several times tonight of how impatient you can be," he said with a wicked smile.

"I didn't hear you complaining a few minutes ago." She twirled some noodles around her fork and popped them into her mouth. "Yum. These are delicious."

Nathan poured food from several other cartons onto a plate, heated it up in the microwave, and then sat down next to her.

"Ooh, I want some of that, too," she said, eyeing the Mongolian beef on his plate.

He playfully pushed her fork away. "You like it cold, remember?"

"I like it hot, too," she said, making a quick move to spear a piece of beef. She put it into her mouth and savored the hot, spicy flavors. "Everything tastes so good when you're hungry."

"And you've just had really good sex," he said dryly.

"That, too," she agreed with a laugh. "Why didn't we ever do that before?"

A shutter came down over his eyes. "You know why. Do you want something to drink?" he asked, getting back up and moving toward the fridge.

She decided to follow his change of subject. "What do you have?"

"Beer, orange juice, water from the tap?"

"I'll take some orange juice."

He filled two glasses and brought them over.

"I'm sorry I brought the past up," she said, taking a sip of juice.

"We are our past. There's no escaping it. If anything has been proven the last few days, it's that."

"I know." They ate in silence for the next few minutes, and she didn't know how to get things back on track. By the time she had finished her noodles, she was starting to get annoyed. "You always did this," she said.

"Did what?" he asked warily.

"Get close to me, be all funny and sweet and then you'd shut it down. You'd back away, give me some scowling look, and disappear for a few weeks."

"I didn't do that."

"Oh, yes, you did—a lot. And you're doing it right now. You let me in and now you have to push me back out."

"It's not like you ever wanted to stay in," he said tersely.

"Why do you say that?"

"You were with Johnny."

"I'm not going to try to rewrite history. Yes, I was infatuated with Johnny for a time. We both know that. But he never had anything to do with you and me. It wasn't like he broke us up. You were shutting me out long before Johnny came along. I thought when I first saw you again in high school, when we reconnected, that I was so lucky because I had my friend back, this wonderful guy who I could count on, who I could be myself with. And you were back for a while. Then you disappeared again. It was actually while you were on one of your long breaks from me that I got involved with Johnny."

"So, now that's my fault?"

"I didn't mean it like that. I'm just telling you how it felt on my end."

He stared back at her, dark emotion in his eyes. He looked like he wanted to say something, but he couldn't get the words out. "Let's not talk about this now."

"Why not?"

"Because I want the *again* and *again* and *again* that you mentioned before to happen, and I don't think this conversation is leading in that direction."

"I actually think clearing up past misunderstandings would be a good thing. Let's be completely honest with each other."

He groaned. "Complete honesty, huh?"

"Yes. And we're not just going to discuss your hatred of Brussels sprouts, although I think I could convince you that they can be good if you eat them the way I cook them."

"I've tried every way."

"Fine. Getting back to more important issues. I know you disapproved of a lot of my choices back in the day. And I know that I deserved some of that disapproval. I acted impulsively. I jumped into relationships, so I wouldn't have to be alone. I was scared of the silence, the quiet. It gave me too much time to think, to stress, to be aware of how bad my life was."

"I know your childhood was hard, Bree."

"It was lonely," she said, feeling that deep, wrenching ache of memory. "I always felt as if I were on an island. There were people around me, but they weren't really with me. I wanted to be with them. I wanted to feel a part of someone else's life. But no one wanted me. Not my family, certainly, and the foster homes that took me in just wanted the cash."

His gaze narrowed. "I'm sorry it was so bad."

"You don't have to be sorry. It wasn't your fault. To be really truthful, it wasn't anyone's fault. I was just born to a mother who couldn't be a mom. And then I decided to make matters worse by following in her footsteps, picking the wrong men, making the same mistakes, getting pregnant when I had no ability to raise a child. I was stupid and reckless, and you could see I was heading for a cliff." She paused. "You were a mirror to my bad decisions. I'd take one look at your face and know I was on the wrong ride. But I couldn't seem to get myself off."

"Was I really that judgmental?" he asked quietly.

"You were—especially that last year before I left. That's why we stopped spending time together. I didn't want to look into your eyes and see everything I was doing wrong."

And you probably didn't want to have to watch me screw up. You always walked a moral ground that was much higher than mine."

"That's not true," he said sharply. "You said that before, and it's just wrong."

She wondered why he was suddenly getting so heated. "How is it wrong? Isn't that the reason why you pulled away from me, why we stopped being friends? You didn't want to hang out with someone as messed up as me?"

"No. It's not the reason—not the whole reason anyway." He frowned and shook his head.

"Then why?" she asked, when he didn't seem inclined to continue. "What am I missing?"

He got up from his chair and walked over to the window, staring out at the night.

Suddenly she wondered just what she was digging up. An uneasy feeling was moving through her, but it was too late to backtrack. Whatever was in his head, whatever he was holding back, she needed to hear it.

She stood up and walked over to him. "Nathan, talk to me."

He turned to look at her, and there was a new torment in his eyes.

"What is wrong?" she asked in bewilderment. "What did I say?"

"You didn't say anything."

"Then why is there so much pain in your eyes?"

His jaw tightened. "I've never told anyone."

Her uneasiness deepened. "Told anyone what?"

"What happened."

"Then tell me," she urged. "Tell me now."

He hesitated for a long minute. "I didn't pull away from you because I didn't approve of your decisions. Not that I agreed with all of them, but I had a far more selfish reason. I didn't want to have to lie to you."

"Lie to me?" Now she was confused. "You're going to need to spell this out, Nathan. You're being too cryptic. Why would you have had to lie to me?"

He folded his arms across his chest, as if he were putting on some armor. "Because when we talked, we didn't hold back. We were honest with each other. Sometimes brutally so. No topic was ever off-limits."

"That was what was so great about us. What I missed the most. Why did you have to shut me down?"

"Because I had a secret."

"What kind of a secret?" she asked, surprised by his words.

"It had to do with my stepfather."

Her gut clenched. She knew his stepfather had been a horrible person, so whatever this secret was, it had to be bad. "Okay," she said tentatively. "Can you tell me now?"

"When my mother married my stepfather, I was ten and Josie was eight. My mom thought she was giving us a father after my real dad died. But she gave us a monster. She put us into a trap we could not get out of. My mother didn't have the strength or the will to get us away from him. She was convinced we couldn't survive without him. That's why she kept going back to him."

Her heart turned over in her chest, seeing in his eyes now the painful young boy she'd first met, the one who'd

been so consumed with trying to protect his mom and sister from the evil that lived with them. "I know he hurt you all a lot."

"Yes. He almost killed my mom twice. I watched her go from a vibrant, happy woman to a sad, despairing shell of herself. And Josie was..." His jaw tightened. "She had to endure even more pain than I did."

She waited for him to go on, sensing that there was a lot more coming, because she had known most of what he'd just said already.

"So, you know he died in a car accident," Nathan continued.

She nodded. "We were having pizza when you got the call from your mom."

"It wasn't exactly an accident."

His dark words stirred her uneasiness. "I know you were not driving the car that hit him, Nathan. You were with me that night."

"Yes, but earlier that day, two men had come by the house looking for my stepfather. They worked for a bookie named Jose Ortiz. They told me if my stepfather didn't pay up, he was going to get hurt really bad. I guess they thought that I would encourage him to pay so that wouldn't happen."

She heard the hard note in his voice and had a feeling where all this was going, but she had to let him get there on his own.

"I almost didn't say anything. I almost let them leave. They were at their car when I ran out of the house and down to the sidewalk. I told them if they wanted to talk to

him, they could find him at Smokey's Bar on Sycamore. And then I went back inside. My mom was in the kitchen. She was upset because she'd been so depressed she hadn't cleaned the house that day, and she was crying that my stepfather was going to be mad. I helped her with the dishes and told her not to worry, hoping that that night would end differently than the others." Nathan drew in a breath. "Nothing happened for hours. I waited for my stepfather to show up or for us to get a call, but neither occurred. I went to meet you for pizza, thinking that my big plan was a bust. I thought they'd let him off the hook. I thought things might be even worse once he realized I'd told them where he was."

"But they hadn't let him off the hook," she guessed. "They ran him down with a car."

"Yes. I heard they went into the bar, and my stepfather was stinking drunk and belligerent. Witnesses said there was an argument, but that my stepfather left on his own. He was hit two blocks away, and no one saw anything. He died in the middle of the street. And when my mom called me down to the hospital, she was crying, but I saw relief in her eyes. She wasn't going to have to worry anymore."

"You never told her you sent the men there."

"No. I never told anyone, not even Josie—until now."

She was humbled by his trust in her. "I'm glad you told me," she whispered.

He met her gaze. "I wasn't driving the car, Bree, but I knew they were going to hurt him, maybe kill him, and I helped it happen. When the police came around, I never mentioned the men coming to the house. I pretended I

didn't know anything about his debts. My mom didn't have to pretend, because he had kept her in the dark. And Josie was so drugged out of her mind half the time, she was just glad she could finally sleep at home again." He drew in a ragged breath. "When I realized how much weight was lifted off of us after his death, I wished I'd found a way to get rid of him sooner. I'd had chances to kill him myself, but I never did. I hated myself for being weak."

"Oh, Nathan, you weren't weak."

"How else do you explain it?"

"You're not a killer. It's not easy to take someone's life. That's why most people can't do it."

"It should have been easy; he hurt us so badly."

Her heart went out to the guilty anguish in his eyes. "You were a boy. And your mother loved that man even when she hated him. I remember how conflicted you were when I first met you. You wanted her to be safe, but you wanted her to be happy. You didn't know how to make both happen at the same time, but that's because you were thirteen."

"I wasn't thirteen forever. Things got worse after we left the shelter."

"You were still young." She moved closer to him and put her hands on his shoulders. "I really wish you'd told me before."

"I couldn't get the words out. You thought I was your mirror of truth. You were mine, too, Bree. I didn't want you to be disappointed in me. I didn't want you to think I was capable of setting someone up to be killed. I was really no better than Johnny; I just didn't want to admit it."

"So many things make sense now—why you suddenly got so distant. I thought it was all about me. How selfish was that?"

"I wanted you to believe that."

"If I'd known, things would have been different."

"Maybe not."

She frowned at his words. "What does that mean?"

"Since we're being completely honest, I had another reason for staying away from you."

"Your hatred of Johnny?"

"No. My love for you."

Her heartbeat quickened. "You were not in love with me, Nathan."

"I was—helplessly and hopelessly in love with you," he confessed. "I didn't completely understand it at the time. You were my friend as a kid, but then in high school, I just really wanted to kiss you. But if I did that, I knew we wouldn't be friends...so I didn't know how to act around you."

"You never said anything. You never even hinted. You had other girls around, too."

"I knew you didn't feel that way about me. I had to hang onto a little of my pride. Then Johnny came into the picture, and there was no reason to say anything. You'd made your choice."

"Made my choice? You didn't give me a choice."

"You know what I mean." He raised a hand as she opened her mouth. "Before you say anything else, I want to make something perfectly clear."

"What's that?" she asked warily.

He wrapped his arms around her. "Tonight was not about the past. We have a history, yes, and it's complicated, but being with you tonight was about the present. I was living in the moment."

"So was I," she murmured, happy with his words. "And you're right; it wasn't about the past. We are not the same people we were when we were thirteen or sixteen or eighteen. We've grown up. We've built lives. We've become our own people. We weren't ready to be together when we were teenagers. I'm really glad we came together now. I don't have any regrets."

He leaned down and gave her a long, tender kiss. "I have never regretted a minute with you, Bree."

"That might be overstating things," she said with a smile.

"Not a minute—not when we were fighting, not when we were making up games, not even when we were playing strip poker, which, by the way, just about killed me. I don't know how I got through that night."

"Our game got broken up."

"Right. That's how I survived." He tilted his head, giving her a thoughtful look. "I really can't believe you never knew how I felt about you."

"I knew things felt weird at times between us, but I wasn't the most perceptive person at that point in my life. I guess I was worried about hurting our friendship, too. I also didn't know how to connect with people. I didn't know what sex and love really meant. And I was never confident that anyone would really love me for longer than a minute. I think that's why Johnny swept me away. He was bold in

his intentions. He didn't hide how he felt about me. I didn't have to guess. And it felt good to be wanted."

Nathan's gaze darkened. "I wish I'd been able to show you how I felt. I was juggling so many balls, trying to keep my family together, trying to hide my secret. I thought if I said anything about setting up my stepfather to be killed, I might end up in jail, and I knew my mom and Josie wouldn't survive without me."

"I totally get that. It all makes a lot of sense now. We were both broken, Nathan. But we're not broken anymore. We're whole and we're healed. We had our bad times. We got through them, and we'll get through whatever Johnny has in store for us."

"I like that," he said approvingly. "You're right. It's our time now."

"Tomorrow is a new day." She smiled. "You always used to say that. Another *Nathanism*."

"I really did speak in clichés, didn't I?"

She shrugged. "They always made me feel better."

"Well, the sun won't be up for several more hours, so..."

"So..." she echoed, as he gave her a long, hot kiss that stirred her senses.

But it wasn't just the kiss, it was the honesty they'd shared. She felt a deep connection to Nathan, a sense that being with him was where she was always meant to be.

"Let's take this back into the bedroom," he said. "I want to go slow this time."

"Seriously? You think you can manage that?"

"You're the impatient one," he said with a laugh. "I like to savor things."

"I can savor things, too."

The smile that came out at her words was like the sun appearing after a long, cold Chicago winter. And that's exactly where Nathan had spent most of his life, both literally and figuratively. She'd spent a lot of years there, too. But not anymore.

He kissed her again, and as he pulled her against him, she could feel his need building.

"No way you're going to last," she teased.

"That's because you're so damned beautiful. We'll go slow the next time."

"That's a lot of confidence for an old man of thirty."

He suddenly swept her up in his arms and carried her into the bedroom. "I'll show you what old is..."

"Show me," she said eagerly.

She didn't just want to make love with him—she wanted to drive all the bad away. She wanted to be the one to ease the pain of his life and make him happy.

But what then? They might have a past and a present, but did they have a future?

She shoved that thought out of her head. As Nathan had said, reality would be here soon enough.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

WAKING up Saturday morning with Bree was a dream come true. But as Nathan watched her sleep in the early morning light, he couldn't help but wonder what condition his heart would be in when this all ended.

Which it would...

Bree was only in Chicago for her daughter, and as he thought about poor little Hayley, he felt guilty that he was worrying for one second about his happiness. Finding that little girl was all that mattered, and with the sun coming up, they needed to get back to it.

He just had to hope that Johnny's anger was toward Bree and not Hayley, that Hayley was safely tucked away somewhere.

Not that it made him feel better to know that Bree was a target, but having seen her in action, he knew she was very capable of defending herself. She didn't need him to protect her, and even though he wanted to do just that, it felt good to know that she wasn't looking for him to be her knight in shining armor.

He'd spent a lot of time in that role for his mother and his sister. Not that he wouldn't throw himself in front of a fist or a bullet to save Bree's life, but he also knew she would do the same for him.

Their relationship was the most honest one he'd ever had. She knew him, really knew him, and after he'd shared his one last secret with her, he'd felt as if a huge weight had fallen off his shoulders, that the last brick in the wall between them had come down.

They'd made love for the second and third time with nothing in the shadows: no secrets, no lies, no misunderstandings.

And he wanted to be with her *again* and *again*.

He smiled, remembering her overuse of that very same word. Maybe they could get in one more round before they had to get up. But her phone buzzed on the bedside table, chasing that hopeful thought right out of his head.

Bree lifted her head, giving him a sleepy, happy smile, and he wished he could have captured that brief moment before she became aware of all the problems surrounding her.

He tipped his head toward her phone, which continued to buzz.

She jerked upright, pulling the sheet over her breasts as she reached for her phone. "Hello?" she asked, clearing her throat of the last bit of sleep. "Dan?"

She listened for a long moment.

"Oh, my God," she murmured. "But I guess I'm not really surprised."

He could hear a man's voice on the other end of the phone, and he assumed Dan had to be an FBI agent. Judging by the emotions playing across her face, there was news of some sort, and it wasn't good.

"Yes, I know I have a lot to tell you. Everything has been happening really fast. And this terrible news makes total sense now, because the case here is clearly a copycat. I wish I could help you, but I can't leave Chicago until I find Hayley." She listened once more. "I miss you guys, too. Keep me updated on your end, and I'll do the same." She set the phone back on the table.

"Who was that?" he asked, sitting up.

"Dan Fagan, my boss in New York, and one of my closest friends. There was a kidnapping this morning in Brooklyn, a ten-year-old girl taken from a before-school program, a white rose left at the scene."

His body tightened. "That's terrible."

"It is, and it's another confirmation that Hayley's kidnapping was done by a copycat. I wish I could help my team find this girl in Brooklyn, but—"

"You need to find Hayley first."

"Yes. And I have a lot of respect for Dan and my fellow agents in New York; they'll do a great job even if I'm not there. I just really want to catch that guy, too."

He stared at her, a niggling feeling in his head that he couldn't quite shake. "It's so strange that Johnny went to such lengths to lure you back here. It seems like a very roundabout way to do it. Why impersonate this other kidnapper? How would he know for sure that you would

come, that the Chicago agents wouldn't just handle the case?"

"Because I was on the national news during the last incident—I would assume. Maybe that's when he saw me, when he got the idea."

"But he'd have to have known about Hayley and then seen you and then concocted this plan."

She frowned. "You've been the one pushing for Johnny to be the kidnapper all along. Now you're having doubts?"

"Not doubts exactly. I still think, in light of Baker's appearance on the scene yesterday, that Johnny is involved. The setup just doesn't quite make sense to me."

"It has always felt off to me; that's why I was slow to jump on the Johnny bandwagon. The threatening phone calls were one thing, even the girl on the train. But why send me to the shelter, why give me that photo of me at the charity fashion show? What did that mean?"

"Well, the photo was ripped, which was threatening, too. He wanted you to know he knew a lot about you, where you came from, where you lived, what you did."

She nodded, but there was still serious doubt in her eyes. "I would have thought Johnny would be more direct."

"Maybe someone else brought the creepy creativity to this plan."

"Someone else..." she murmured, grabbing on to part of his statement with a new light in her eyes.

"What are you thinking?"

"Sierra. You said she's with Johnny now. She definitely hated me at one point."

"She hated a lot of people. I was fairly high on the list of enemies as well."

"That's because you didn't want to sleep with her."

"I definitely did not," he agreed. "But I have to say that Sierra was not a particularly smart girl."

"She could be cunning and sneaky. I need to find her, Nathan. Sierra could be our way in."

"If she's with Johnny, she'd never turn on him."

"That might depend on what we have to offer."

"What do we have to offer?"

"I don't know yet. I have to think about it. But since I can't confront Johnny directly without going against agency orders, I have to try someone else, and she's a good choice."

"She'll go straight to Johnny."

"It's a risk. But at this point, I have to take it. I have to trust my instincts, and unfortunately, so do you."

"I do trust you. I let you drive my truck, didn't I?"

A slow smile spread across her face. "I think I took that decision out of your hands."

"Yeah, and my truck will never be the same."

"It needed a good, fast run," she said with a laugh. "Blow out the cobwebs."

"You are a very good driver now."

"I was one of the best at Quantico."

"What was training like?" he asked curiously, still having a little trouble seeing how she'd gotten from the girl she'd once been to the woman she was now.

"It was intense. I didn't expect them to get into our heads the way they did. There were a lot of mind games, a

lot of ripping down of emotional barriers. And when you're living and working with people twenty-four seven, you get to know them really well. It's an incredible bonding experience. My best friends in life right now are from my training class."

He saw a hint of sadness in her eyes and remembered her friend who had died. "Do you see much of them?"

"Damon works out of the New York office, so I do see him. Wyatt used to be there, but his cover was blown, and he had to move on. Although, I guess he's back in New York this weekend. There was a memorial celebration for Jamie on Thursday night. I wish I could have been there. I talked to Parisa on the phone, but it wasn't the same."

"So, there's four of you now?"

"Five. Diego is the fifth. He's been working in South America the last year. We're spread out all over the world. But if any one of us is in trouble, the others try to show up. Last summer, that happened with Wyatt and Damon, and I was able to help them through their situation."

"Well, maybe we should call them and get them out here."

"I have thought about it, but I didn't want to take them away from Jamie's celebration. I know his family would have been very upset if a majority of the group didn't show up. Although, I'm sure they didn't mind that I wasn't there. Jamie's dad was never a fan of mine. He thought I distracted Jamie while we were in training, that Jamie wasn't completely focused on becoming an agent worthy of following in his father's footsteps."

"You can be a distraction."

She tucked her hair behind her ear. "You can be, too, Nathan."

"Want to distract each other awhile longer?"

"I do, but..."

"We need to get started on the day," he said.

"Rain check?"

"You got it." He pulled her toward him for a quick kiss. "I'll even let you take the first shower."

"Such a gentleman," she said with a laugh. She started to get up, then stopped. "I have a feeling today is going to get crazy, and I just want to say before it starts that last night was wonderful."

"It was."

"Whatever happens next..."

"Yeah," he said, knowing this wasn't the time to think too far into the future. "We'll figure it out. While you get dressed, I'm going to call Lindsay and see if I can get any information on Mark's condition."

"Good idea. I wonder if Lindsay told him I'm Hayley's mother yet."

"She might wait until he's stronger, but then again, he's her rock. She might not be able to keep it from him."

"I know she was shaken up by the news. I wish I'd spent another second reassuring her that I do think she's done a good job as Hayley's mom."

"I'm sure you'll have another chance to speak to her. Just like I'm sure she'd like another chance to thank you."

"Thank me?" Bree asked in surprise.

"She told me yesterday, when she first mentioned the adoption, that she'd written a letter to the biological

mother a few days after they took Hayley home. She wanted to thank her for the beautiful gift she'd been given—the daughter she already adored. She wanted to express her gratitude. She knows how lucky she was that you gave up your daughter to her."

Shadows filled Bree's eyes. "I wish I could have read that."

"You might still be able to. She never sent it. She said Mark talked her out of it. He didn't want to open any communication in case it changed things."

"I can understand that."

"Bree, I have to ask you a tough question."

"A tough question?" she echoed warily. "Okay, give me what you got."

"Can you be objective? Can you make smart moves knowing your daughter's life is on the line? Would it be better to let your agency make those moves?"

"That's three questions," she said with annoyance. "And I don't think being objective is going to be helpful in this case, because it's not like the other kidnappings. It's different and it's personal and it's about me. I don't actually believe anyone else will be able to find Hayley but me."

"You think the kidnapper is going to tell you where Hayley is?"

She nodded. "Yes. When he's ready. He wants me to see Hayley. And if I can't find her on my own, he's going to keep dropping clues until I figure it out."

"And lure you straight into a trap."

"Not if I find him first."

"All right. Let's do it. Let's find him." He saw the sudden worry in her eyes. "Don't even think about trying to get rid of me. You may not have agency or police backup, but you have me, and where you go, I go. I helped save your child once from Johnny; I'm going to make sure she's safe now, too."

Nathan's protective and loyal words rang through her head as Bree showered and dressed. She'd never felt so loved as she'd felt the night before. And she was very grateful that Nathan was back in her life. She was also very, very aware of the bittersweet and probably short-term nature of her happiness. But she wouldn't regret the night she'd spent with Nathan, whether it was the first of many or just once in a lifetime.

When she walked out of the bedroom and into the kitchen, she smiled. "Bacon and coffee—my two favorite aromas."

"I made eggs, too," he said. "Have a seat. It's all ready."

"It looks great." She slid into a stool at the kitchen counter.

"Don't get too excited. I'm not in the running for any Michelin stars and breakfast is probably my best meal of the day," he said dryly, as he buttered toast. "What about you? Do you cook?"

"I can make a few things, mostly salad and the occasional soup. I work long hours, and frankly, take-out in

New York is fabulous. You cannot believe the different kinds of food you can get at any hour of the night."

"So, you like living there?"

"I do—for now."

"For now?" he echoed, as he set a platter of bacon and toast on the counter and took the stool at the end of the counter.

"Manhattan has a frenetic energy that I like, but sometimes it's a little too much. I still dream about my house by the sea. One of these days..."

"You'll get there," he said confidently.

"Maybe sooner than I want. Who knows where my career will be at when this is all over? I may have plenty of time to lay by the ocean and work on my tan."

"There are worse things in life."

"As we both know," she agreed, helping herself to some eggs. "Is Chicago going to be home for you forever?"

"I've thought about leaving a lot, but Josie is here, and I adore Grace. She's a great kid. She's funny, stubborn—like her mother, but much stronger than Josie. That kid is tough."

"I could see that during my first interview with her. She was a very composed nine-year-old. Josie has done a great job with her."

"Josie is a really good mother. I wasn't sure she would be, to be honest. But she's very attentive, and it's great that Kyle's career allows her to stay home."

"That is nice. I always wanted a mom who would be home when I got out of school, but mine was rarely there, and when she was, I never got the response I wanted. I

know she cared about me, but she was absorbed in her own problems. And my aunt struggled from the same battles. I feel sorry for them now. I wish they'd both had better lives."

"Do you ever talk to your aunt?"

"No. I haven't seen or spoken to her since she bailed on me and social services swept me up. I don't even know if she's alive. What about your mom, Nathan? I asked you about her before, but you didn't answer."

"She's in Texas. She moved down there a couple of years ago. She had a friend from high school who had a big house and her husband had just died, and she invited my mom down for a vacation. She never came back. She has visited a few times, but I think she likes being out of Chicago. If we want to see her, we go there. She's a different person now, too. She rides horses, for one thing. Who would have thought my city-raised mom would get on a horse? But she does."

"Well, I'm glad. She deserves to be happy. So, do you."

"I have been happy the last several years."

As he said the words, she realized that the one thing they hadn't talked about was the woman in Nathan's life, but she didn't really want to bring her up. Then she'd have to deal with the fact that she'd slept with another woman's man, and that Nathan had cheated on his girlfriend with her. Maybe they weren't as new and improved people as they thought.

"What are you thinking?" Nathan asked.

"Nothing," she said quickly. "Actually, I was wondering if you still run every morning."

"I don't believe that's what you were thinking, but yes, I still run. That's how Mark and I met."

"That's right. You were training for a triathlon. I guess that means you swim and bike, too."

"I'm a triple threat," he said with a smile. "What about you? Do you work out?"

"I run more now than I used to. I have to stay in shape for my job. You never know when you're going to have to chase someone down."

"Do you do that a lot?"

"I wouldn't say a lot, but I've definitely done it."

"I'm surprised you became an agent, knowing you'd have to run."

She made a face at his teasing comment. "It's not my favorite part, I'll admit, but I'm actually pretty fast."

"That's because you're trying to get it over with."

"You know me too well," she said with a laugh.

"I do know you well. I like that about us, Bree."

"I like it, too," she admitted. "I don't think I've ever been with anyone who knew everything about me. Not that we've been together in recent years. I'm sure there are still some things to find out about you, Nathan."

"Nothing that important," he said, finishing his eggs. Then he got up and took his plate to the kitchen. "Can I get you anything else?"

"No. I'm full. Thanks for breakfast."

"Any time."

"Were you able to get a hold of Lindsay?"

"No. Her phone went to voicemail."

"I hope Mark is hanging in there."

"Me, too." He set their plates in the sink. "I'm going to hop in the shower. What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to get on my computer and see what I can find out about Sierra."

"I thought you didn't have access to agency resources."

"I don't. But I can still get on social media, and if Sierra is anything like I remember, I'm betting she's online somewhere. She always loved attention."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

BREE FOUND Sierra's profile on three different social media sites in less than five minutes. As she'd predicted, the attention-getting Sierra, was still in the business of getting attention. She now ran a hair salon in Logan Square and when she wasn't styling hair, she was taking selfies of herself in lingerie and bikinis, with sometimes nothing more than her hands strategically placed over her very large breasts, which had to have been enhanced at some point.

Sierra had also transformed herself into a confident woman with black hair that hung down to her waist, dark eyes, and olive skin. She was also into jewelry: multiple rings on her hands, several piercings in her ears, and a nose ring. She looked nothing like the skinny, needy girl she'd once been—the girl who'd always been hanging around Johnny, wanting him to notice her, and sleeping with his friends when he didn't.

She was a little surprised that Johnny had finally hooked up with Sierra, but then Sierra fit Johnny's lifestyle more than she ever had.

Maybe she had been the anomaly in Johnny's life and Sierra was the kind of woman he'd always been meant to be with.

She typed in Johnny's name and while mentions of the gym on Hayward and the auto shop on Hudson came up, as well as some information on the Hawke family in general, there were no current photos of Johnny. Had he changed as well? She wished she had looked him up before she lost access to the FBI database. She'd been so determined to keep him out of her life, out of her thoughts, that she'd refused to go there. Now it was too late.

Thinking about Johnny made her wonder how his conversation with the FBI had gone the night before. Pulling out her phone, she called Tracy.

"Did you get another text or call?" Tracy asked, not bothering with a hello.

"No, nothing. I was wondering if you got any information from Johnny Hawke."

"I can't tell you anything, Bree. You're off the case."

"You can tell me something. Did he seem surprised that he has a daughter, that his daughter was kidnapped? That his former associate was killed at a ransom drop for that child?"

"Look, I understand that you're very invested in this case," Tracy said. "But I've also been instructed to keep you out of it."

"The kidnapper isn't going to keep me out of it."

"Well, when he contacts you, let me know, and we'll go from there."

"You're enjoying this, aren't you? Keeping me in the dark. Putting me in a box."

"Actually, not as much as I expected I would," Tracy replied, a note of candor in her voice. "I've learned a lot about you in the past twenty-four hours. I suspect some of our mutual associates at the academy already knew about some of what you lived through as a child."

"Some of them did," she admitted. "Friends confide in each other."

"It's usually those confidences that make people cross lines they shouldn't cross."

Which was another way of saying that Tracy wasn't going to cross any lines for her. She let out a small sigh. "Is there anything you can tell me?"

"I think you should watch your back and stay out of sight."

"Because Johnny will be gunning for me?"

"You said that; I didn't. If you want to reconsider protection, I'll talk it over with Warren."

"No. I can take care of myself."

"We're doing everything we can to find Hayley. Nothing that happened yesterday has changed that."

"Have you had a chance to speak to Mark Jansen? Was he able to provide any information on the person who contacted him for the ransom?"

"Bree. What part of I can't tell you anything don't you understand?"

She blew out a frustrated breath. "Fine."

"You're going to have to trust us to do our jobs. You need to stand down. Stay put wherever you are, although I

suspect you're not too far from Nathan Bishop. Let us handle this. Don't go to Johnny. Don't get in the way. You have to think about your daughter, not yourself."

"Believe me, that's the only person I'm thinking about. I'll be in touch if I hear anything." She set down the phone, thinking that had gone about as badly as she'd expected. She was out of the loop. She was cut off from all communication. She definitely couldn't confront Johnny, which was what she really wanted to do. If Johnny had done this, then this was between him and her. But if he had kidnapped Hayley then he wasn't ready to have that meet yet, or it would have already happened. He was calling all the shots.

She did wonder how Johnny was planning to keep Hayley out of sight. His business, his family, his life was in Chicago. And Hayley's face had been all over the news.

He had to have stashed her somewhere outside of the city. Maybe it was close enough to where he could visit her but far enough away that no one would put the two of them together.

Someone in his family could be watching her—like his mother. She'd always adored Johnny. He was her oldest son, and he could do no wrong.

Tapping her fingers restlessly on the table, she thought about her next move.

The answer was right in front of her—Sierra. It was possible Tracy had spoken to Sierra, too, or would be speaking to her. But she might be farther down the list. And Bree might have a better chance of getting information from Sierra than Tracy would. Not that Sierra had ever

been a fan, but they did come from the same place. She had to give it a shot.

Getting up from the table, she walked over to the balcony door and opened it.

The weather was gray and cold, and the clouds sweeping over the city were foreboding—perhaps a portent of what was to come.

She shivered, but she was ready to fight back, whatever it took.

"I don't think this is a good idea," Nathan said as he drove Bree across town to the Bella Beauty Salon run by Sierra Littman.

"I'm not going to be in any danger at the salon," she said. "And I can't just do nothing. Sierra is a former friend. Maybe I can turn her to our side."

"How are you going to do that? The girl has always been mad for Johnny. And she might have liked you before you hooked up with Johnny, but after that she hated you. Why would she tell you anything now?"

"Because the last thing Sierra wants in Johnny's life is the child he had with his ex-girlfriend. If I can convince her that helping me get Hayley back will return her life to normal with Johnny, I think she might be willing to help."

He had to admit it wasn't a completely bad strategy. "Sierra was always very selfish."

"Exactly. And I doubt she wants to be a stepmom, not judging by the lifestyle photos she posted online."

"But you're overlooking the fact that Sierra is controlled by Johnny and she might be more scared of him than she is concerned about being a stepmother to your daughter."

"I don't think Johnny hurts the women in his life. He never lifted a hand to me."

"You were scared of him when you left, Bree."

"That's because I was starting to see what he did to other people. I was overhearing odd conversations. The police seemed to be very interested in Johnny's actions. I was questioned several times about several incidents, including that one with Stix. I knew I had to get out of the relationship, but it still took me almost too long to get up the nerve to go. You know when I actually made the decision to leave?"

"I know when, but I don't know why."

"My jeans wouldn't snap."

He raised an eyebrow. "Okay. I was not expecting you to say that."

"I knew I was starting to show. Johnny was going to notice. He was already asking me why I'd stopped modeling when I was getting so many calls after my photo was in the paper. It was just a matter of time before he would know I was pregnant. That's the day I called you to help me get out of town."

"I'm glad you finally did make the decision, even if it was just due to the snap on your jeans. As for Johnny's potential for violence, I certainly saw the raging, willing-to-kill side of his personality after you left, and I suspect that's grown stronger in the last decade. I think Sierra will be scared of

going against him. He has a lot of power over her. I'm sure he bought her the salon she's running."

"Well, I won't know until I talk to her, until I get a read on the situation." She paused, glancing over at him. "You need to stay outside, Nathan. Sierra hated you even more than she hated me. I don't think double-teaming her is a good idea."

"I hate for you to be alone with her."

"You don't think I can handle a hundred-pound hair stylist?" she asked dryly. "Believe me, I have taken down men much bigger, much stronger, and definitely more dangerous than her."

"She might have security at the salon."

"I doubt Johnny's bodyguards are hanging around the salon, at least not during the day. They might drive her and pick her up, but I think she'll be on her own."

"If she's there."

"It's Saturday, a busy day in the business. I have a good shot. So, you'll stay in the truck this time?"

"I'll consider it," he reluctantly agreed, putting his attention back on the road. He didn't want to let Bree out of his sight for a second, but Sierra would probably react negatively to his presence, so he'd go with Bree's plan.

A few moments later, he was able to find a parking spot a few doors down from the salon. From his vantage point, he could see the front door, and if Bree needed help, he could get there quickly.

"It's going to be fine," she reassured him.

"That's usually my line to you," he muttered, having a bad feeling about it all.

"And when you say it, I try to believe it. You should do the same."

"I'm working on it. Good luck, Bree."

"I'll be back soon." She got out of the truck and walked down the street.

He kept his gaze on her until she entered the salon, and then watched the door for several minutes after. He didn't see anyone follow her inside. Hopefully, she was right about the salon being a safe place for this very dangerous conversation.

But all he could do was wait.

The salon was busy as Bree had expected, with eight stylists working on clients, and two people waiting in the reception area. She didn't flash her badge; she simply told the receptionist to tell Sierra that Bree wanted to speak to her.

She had a feeling that Sierra would be curious enough to find out what she wanted. Sierra had always had a fear of missing out on anything, so she'd always been eavesdropping, hanging on to conversations, trying to stay in good with anyone who might have something going on.

She straightened as she saw Sierra walk through the salon. She wore black jeans and a loose gray crop top that fell off one shoulder and revealed her flat abs. Her long hair was sleek and straight, her expression a mix of surprise, wariness, and dislike.

"So, it is you," she said. "I can't imagine what you're doing here."

"I need to talk to you. Do you have a minute?"

"I'm very busy."

"It won't take long. Is there some place we could speak in private?"

Sierra considered her question. "All right." She turned and walked away, and Bree quickly followed her.

They moved through the salon, into a back hallway, passing by the restrooms, a small kitchen and finally entering an office with a desk, a love seat, and a table upon which there were dozens of beauty product samples.

Sierra didn't sit down, just crossed her arms and waited. "Well?"

"Do you know why I'm in town?" she asked.

"Why would I know that?"

"I work for the FBI now." She saw surprise flash across Sierra's face. *That was interesting. Sierra didn't know about her job. Did that mean she also didn't know what Johnny was up to?* "I came to Chicago to look for a kidnapped child."

"What does that have to do with me?" Sierra asked.

"It has to do with Johnny. I understand you're with him now."

"I bet that kills you," Sierra drawled. "Once he dumped your ass, he came crawling to me, just like I always knew he would."

She ignored that comment. "Do you live together?"

"Of course, we live together. We're in love."

"But you're not married."

A hard light entered Sierra's eyes. "Not yet, but Johnny bought me this beautiful ring," she said, flashing the diamond-and-emerald ring on her right hand. "It's only a matter of time."

She had a feeling Sierra was trying to convince herself as much as she was trying to convince her. "You got what you always wanted."

"I did. And I make Johnny happy—happier than he ever was with you."

She licked her lips, debating how to make her play. "Are you going to have kids?"

"Why are you asking all these questions?"

"Because Johnny is in trouble, and I think your life is about to change in a way you never imagined. Did you know he spoke to the FBI last night?"

"He was at work last night. He didn't say anything about the FBI."

"He doesn't want you to know what he's doing, but you need to know."

"If you're trying to scare me, it's not going to work. Johnny can handle whatever trouble you're bringing. I'm not worried. He knows very important people. They will always help him."

"They won't be able to help him this time, and you should be worried. Johnny kidnapped a child."

Wariness entered her eyes. "That's ridiculous. He doesn't go after kids."

Meeting Sierra's gaze, Bree had the feeling the woman thought she was telling the truth. She remembered that feeling. She'd once been told that Johnny had assaulted and

almost killed a man, and she'd said the exact same thing—that that was ridiculous. Frowning, she brought herself back to the present. "Sierra—"

"No. We're done talking. I shouldn't have even let you back here. Johnny wouldn't like it."

She could see that Sierra was quickly pulling away. Like a turtle, who'd suddenly been shocked by a bright light, she was tucking her head back inside of her shell.

"Wait," she said, as Sierra moved toward the door. "The child means something to Johnny."

Silence followed her words. Slowly, Sierra turned her head. "What do you mean?"

"The girl is Johnny's daughter."

Sierra couldn't stop the gasp that came from her lips. "You're lying. He doesn't have any kids. He and I are going to have children. I will be his baby mama. No one else."

"He might not have known about the child until recently. Have you heard him talking to anyone about getting someone to look after a kid, or going to meet someone outside the city? Does he have a safe house somewhere? A place no one else knows about?"

Sierra stared back at her. "Oh, my God," she said slowly. "It's yours, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"You and Johnny had a kid." She shook her head in confusion. "But that doesn't make sense. You left."

"I left because I was pregnant, and because I didn't want my child to be swept up into Johnny's world. I was young. I was scared. I couldn't take care of a baby at that point in my life, so I gave her up for adoption. I didn't know where

she went or who adopted her. But then last Tuesday, someone kidnapped a little girl, and yesterday I found out that that girl is my daughter. She's also Johnny's daughter. And I think he took her. He has her somewhere, Sierra."

"He doesn't have a kid at our house."

"He'd put her somewhere else."

"You're making all this up. You're trying to put Johnny in prison for dumping you all those years ago. You hate him. This is all crazy."

Despite Sierra's words, Bree could see that the truth was setting in. It also seemed apparent that Sierra was completely in the dark—unless she was the greatest actress in the world, and Bree didn't think that was the case.

Now that she had Sierra's attention, she had to get her on her side. "You want your life with Johnny to stay the same, right? You don't want my child around. You don't want to share Johnny with a ten-year-old girl. And you won't have to, if you help me find her. I can keep you out of it, Sierra. I will never tell Johnny whatever you share with me. I give you my absolute word on that."

"I could never trust you. You stole Johnny from me."

"Oh, come on," she said, exasperated in spite of her plan to remain calm. "I didn't do that, and you know it. Look, I don't care that you're with him now. I even hope that you're happy. I know life wasn't easy for you. We come from the same neighborhood." She let that sink in, then continued. "I just want this girl to be back with her adoptive family. Her name is Hayley. She has a loving mother and father and two siblings."

"You're going to take her back to them?" Sierra challenged. "Why wouldn't you keep her? Now that you know where she is."

"Because she has a better family than I could give her."

Sierra gave her a long look, then shook her head. "Well, I don't know where she is."

"Think, Sierra. You know where Johnny's houses are, right? She has to be somewhere safe."

"You'll put Johnny in jail."

"I won't," she lied. "I just want my daughter back."

"Johnny must hate you," Sierra said. "You stole his child, his blood. He's going to kill you."

"Even if that wouldn't bother you, I don't think you want to raise the child he had with me, do you? I'm offering you a way to keep the life you have. It's a good deal."

"I don't know..."

A knock came at the door, and they both jumped. A young woman poked her head in. "Sierra, I need you to check Deb's color. She's freaking out that it has been in too long."

"Okay. I'll be right there." Sierra turned back to her. "I have to take care of this."

"I'll wait for you."

Sierra's lips tightened, but she hurried out of the room. Bree just hoped that when she came back, Sierra would make the right decision for all of them.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

IT WAS TAKING Bree a long time, Nathan thought, impatiently tapping his fingers on the steering wheel. Maybe that was a good sign.

It might mean that Bree and Sierra were actually having a productive conversation. He knew Bree could be persuasive, and he also knew that however much Sierra had envied Bree, she'd also looked up to her back in the day. Perhaps that would come into play now.

His phone rang. It was Adrienne—again. She'd called him several times yesterday, and he'd never returned her call. He wasn't being fair to her, and that had to stop.

Taking a deep breath, he picked up, knowing that he was about to have a very difficult conversation, and one he should have had before last night.

"Where have you been, Nathan?" Adrienne demanded. "I've been calling and texting you for days."

Had it only been days? It felt like years had passed since he'd last seen her.

"I know. I've been really busy."

"Doing what? I went by your job site yesterday. Joe said he hadn't seen you, and he didn't know where you were. I felt marginally better that I wasn't the only one you were ghosting, but what's going on?"

"The little girl who was kidnapped last week is the child of a friend of mine. I've been helping out on the case."

"What? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I haven't had time."

"How are you helping? You're not a cop."

"That's true, but I'm trying to be a good friend."

"Maybe you should think about being a good boyfriend," she said tartly, then immediately backtracked. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. I just miss you. I really wanted to introduce you to my friend, Kari, and it just feels like something is off with us, Nathan."

He felt a wave of guilt for letting things go so far with Bree without talking to Adrienne first. "Something is off," he admitted. "We need to talk in person."

"What are you doing right now?"

"Actually, I'm still helping out on the case, so tomorrow would be better."

Silence followed his words. "You want to break up with me, don't you?"

"We should have a conversation face-to-face."

"So you can tell me it's over? Just say it now. Why wait?"

"Because I don't want to hurt you."

"I'm a big girl. Just tell me what happened. I thought things were going well. I know it's still pretty new, but we've been getting along. We've been having fun. What changed?"

He could hear the surprise and pain in her voice, and it bothered him that he was responsible for that. They had been doing well before Bree had come back into his life. But in retrospect, his version of "well" with Adrienne was nothing close to what he felt with Bree.

And even if Bree left him again, which was probably going to happen, Adrienne wasn't the right person for him. He knew that now. He had to be with someone he really connected with, someone he could talk to about anything and everything, and Adrienne wasn't that person. She was great; she just wasn't great for him.

"Nathan," she pressed. "Just talk to me."

"You deserve someone who really loves you, Adrienne."

"And you don't?"

"I care about you—"

"Oh, please, caring is an insulting word in this context."

"I'm not trying to insult you. It's complicated."

"It's not complicated, Nathan. At the end of the day, you either want to be with someone or you don't."

She made a good point. "I am sorry. I should have said something sooner."

"I'm sorry, too. Good-bye, Nathan."

"Good-bye."

He felt both relieved that the relationship was over and angry with himself for letting it go on as long as it had. He'd thought it was enough that they had fun together, and maybe it would grow into something, but if it didn't, it didn't. That's why he'd never opened up with Adrienne. Instinctively, he'd known it wasn't going to last. It wasn't

that he hadn't trusted her; it was that he hadn't cared enough.

He hadn't cared about anyone the way he cared about Bree. She'd taken his heart a long, long time ago.

For so many years, he'd hidden his feelings away, but last night, he'd laid himself bare. He'd opened up and made himself vulnerable. In doing so, he'd woken himself up from the numb fog he'd put his heart and his emotions into when she got on that bus eleven years ago. Now, he was living again. He was feeling things. *He was in love.*

He sucked in a breath at that thought.

Bree could very, very easily break his heart again. But he wasn't going to regret taking the risk. This time he'd left everything on the field. If he lost, it wouldn't be because he hadn't tried. Because he hadn't told her how he felt. It was up to her now.

Tapping his fingers against the steering wheel again, he checked his watch. It had been almost thirty minutes since Bree had left.

A bad feeling shot through him. That was way too long.

Jumping out of the truck, he ran down the street and into the salon, raising a lot of questioning looks by his sudden appearance. His gaze swept the room, but he didn't see Sierra or Bree.

"Can I help you?" the receptionist asked.

"Where's Sierra?"

"She's in the back. Do you have an appointment?"

"No, but she'll want to see me," he said, striding through the salon.

Sierra was standing by a back door that led into a parking lot.

"Sierra," he said sharply.

She whirled around at his approach, her gaze widening. "Nathan Bishop? What are you doing here?"

"I'm looking for Bree."

"Well, that hasn't changed, has it? You were always looking for Bree."

"Where is she?" he demanded. He pushed open a nearby door and found himself looking at an empty office.

"Is everything all right, Sierra?" the receptionist asked, coming down the hall, her phone in hand, ready to dial 911.

"It's fine," Sierra said shortly. "Go back to the desk."

"Where is Bree?" he repeated, his hands knotting into fists to prevent himself from shaking the truth out of Sierra.

"I don't know. She was waiting for me in the office. I had to fix someone's color, and when I came back, she was gone, and this door was open. I assume she left."

He didn't assume that at all. "You're lying. Someone took her. Who? Johnny?"

"Johnny would not take Bree back in a million years. He has me now."

"But Bree had his baby, and you know that. What did you do? Did you tell her where Johnny is? Did you call Johnny?"

"I didn't tell her anything, and I didn't call Johnny. I also don't know anything about this girl that Johnny supposedly took. He's been with me every day, every night, the past week. I think you're both lying. And I want you out of my salon."

"Not until you tell me where she is."

"I have no idea."

"She wouldn't go out the back door when I was waiting in the front."

"Don't you ever get tired of waiting for Bree?"

"No, I don't. I love her. I always have."

"You think that's a surprise to me?" she asked harshly. "But she doesn't love you. And she never has. If she's with you, it's because she needs something. She always used you, and you always came running."

"Johnny went running to her, too. You had to wait until Bree was gone before you could get him. But you're going to lose him, Sierra. Because he's in deep shit. He kidnapped a kid. He's going down for that, and you're going to go with him, if you don't help me. Tell me where Johnny is."

"If you go looking for Johnny, he'll kill you this time. He won't let you make it to the hospital."

"You knew what he did to me?" he asked, shocked by her words.

"Yes. I was the one who called the fire department. I told them the old school was on fire. I figured they'd send a truck to check it out."

"That was you?" he asked in astonishment, remembering the sirens that had made Johnny leave him with breath still left in his body.

"Yes. Because believe it or not I didn't want him to kill you."

Sierra had saved his life and risked her own at the same time. "Why would you have done that for me?"

"I honestly don't know. Luckily, Johnny never found out."
He gave her a long stare. "Thank you."

She shifted her feet and gave a shrug.

He glanced beyond Sierra, seeing something glittering in the sunlight beyond the door. He walked outside to get it. It was Bree's phone. There was no way she'd left of her own free will. She'd ditched it on purpose, so he would know she was in trouble. He looked back at Sierra. "Someone grabbed her."

"I don't know who."

"You have an idea. Help me, Sierra. You're not like Johnny. You don't want Bree to die. She was your friend once."

"I can't remember that."

"Yes, you can. We were all the same, Sierra. We were all wounded, struggling to survive. We helped each other. And Bree helped you."

"That was a long time ago."

"You remember."

"I'm with Johnny now," she said, a note of worry in her voice. "I love him. He loves me."

"Then save him from himself."

Her lips drew into a taut line. "If he ever finds out..."

"He won't."

"He might. He had to have had people following Bree, because I didn't call him. I didn't call anyone."

If that were true, then maybe he was putting Sierra's life in danger. "I'll tell him I was following Bree. I saw her get grabbed. Your name won't come up."

She stared back at him. "Howie's Automotive on Hudson. Johnny has an office on the second floor. There's a fire escape on the side of the building. It goes into the storage room. There will be a guard in the hallway."

He was surprised at the level of detail in her answer. But then Sierra had always noted everything when it came to Johnny. "Thanks."

"I'm not helping you, Nathan. If Johnny sees you, he'll kill you. I'm probably sending you to your death. Are you willing to die for Bree? Because that's what it's going to take to save her."

He saw the cold truth in her eyes. He also knew the answer to that question. "Yes, I am." He paused. "Don't go home tonight, Sierra. Stay with a friend."

"Now you're worried about me?"

"I'm worried about everyone."

"Johnny would never hurt me."

"Don't bet your life on that."

Bree winced as the car she was in hit a pothole. She couldn't see anything with the hood that had been thrown over her head and tied around her neck so tight she could barely breathe. A zip tie had also fastened her hands behind her back.

She'd only seen one of the men who'd grabbed her out of Sierra's office, but there were at least two. They hadn't said anything to her; they'd just thrown her into a car and taken off.

Sierra must have called in Johnny's guards. Which meant they were taking her to Johnny.

Her heart raced at the thought of seeing him again. By now he knew she'd stolen his child, his blood, his heir. She'd told Nathan that Johnny had never gotten physical with her, and that had been the truth, but she knew now there was violence in Johnny's soul. What he'd done to Nathan after she left—what he'd probably done to a lot of other people—showed who he really was. And she'd hurt him in a way that no one else had. There was a good chance he was going to kill her. She'd known going to Sierra was a risk, but for a moment there, she'd really thought that Sierra might help her.

She'd been wrong.

Nathan had been right. He'd told her she was taking a huge risk.

It was one she'd thought she'd had to take, but now a terrible despair ran through her. If she'd blown this, Hayley might never be found.

She tried to reassure herself that no matter what happened to her, Nathan would keep looking. He'd make sure the agency continued to go after Johnny. He'd find her daughter.

Her heart filled with so much pain she almost couldn't handle it. She wanted to see Hayley in person. She wanted to look into her daughter's eyes. She'd been denied that opportunity when Hayley was born, but she wanted it now, wanted it with a fierce sense of desperation.

The car came to an abrupt stop and she hit the side of the door with her shoulder. A moment later, that same door

opened, and she was hauled out, a gun pressing into her back, as a low voice ordered her to move.

A man had a tight grip on her arm, so there was no chance of escape, not that she could go anywhere in her current state. She didn't think she was outside. They must have pulled into a garage. She smelled gasoline, and the floor was hard, probably concrete.

"Up," the man said. "Stairs."

She stumbled up the steps as he dragged her along. In the distance, she could hear a clanging—metal on metal. She heard the roar of an engine.

Was she in an auto shop?

But why were there stairs?

She tried to make a mental note of everything. When they reached the landing, they turned to the right. The light brightened behind her hood. There was daylight coming in from somewhere. A door opened.

She was shoved inside another room. This room felt darker.

Someone undid the tie around her hood, and it was yanked off her head.

She blinked in the shadowy room, trying to see who was there. A door closed behind her.

The man sitting behind a desk got up and came around, stopping in front of her. He had brown hair and dark-brown eyes and a ruthless, hateful look on his face.

Johnny!

"Bree," he murmured. "As pretty as ever." He set the gun in his hand down on the desk, but close enough to reach if he needed it.

"Johnny," she said, a lump growing in her throat.

Eleven years had passed since she'd run for her life, but now it felt like yesterday.

Johnny had aged, but unlike Nathan, he hadn't gotten more attractive with time. She'd once thought of Johnny as darkly handsome. Now, his thick hair had thinned, receding off his square forehead. There were numerous lines around his eyes and mouth—hard, bitter, angry lines. There were scars on his cheek, his jaw, and a long one down his neck.

There was no hint of the boy who had been funny and charming. That kid had completely disappeared. Johnny had become a man—a man who had clearly lived a life of violence, and she was even more glad she'd taken Hayley out of his reach.

She looked over her shoulder. Whoever had brought her here was gone. She was fine with that. One less person to take down. Although, taking Johnny down with her hands tied behind her back was probably optimistic.

"It's just us," Johnny said, drawing her gaze back to his.

Despite the situation, she refused to be intimidated by him. Straightening her shoulders, lifting her chin, she said, "Were you following me?"

"I didn't have to. After my conversation with the FBI last night, I figured you'd go find Sierra."

"If you wanted to see me, you didn't need to kidnap me. You could have just called—like you've been doing all along—and told me where to go."

His gaze narrowed. "I haven't been calling you."

"Oh, come on. Isn't the game over now? You're here. I'm here. Tell me what you want."

"I want to know where our daughter is."

Her jaw slackened in shock at his words. "You know where she is. You have her."

What kind of sick game was he playing with her?

"I don't have her," he said harshly. "I didn't even know about her until yesterday when the feds showed up, telling me the daughter I had with you was missing. They accused me of kidnapping her. Are you setting me up, Bree?"

"Setting you up? No. You're the one who took Hayley and lured me to Chicago by pretending to be the White Rose Kidnapper. You sent Calvin Baker to shake down Hayley's adoptive father for ransom. And then you killed Cal."

The expression in Johnny's gaze grew more incredulous with each word.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," he said. "I didn't kidnap anyone. I've never heard of this White Rose Kidnapper. And I haven't seen Baker in years."

A tiny seed of doubt took root in her mind. *Why was he lying? What did he have to gain by trying to maintain the pretense?*

"Do you think I'm just going to go away if you deny it?" she asked. "Because I can assure you that won't happen. I'm a federal agent, Johnny. I'm not the shy, insecure girl I used to be."

"I can see that." He gave her a long, harsh stare. "You're FBI now, and you want to take me down, so you made up this story about a kid. But you wouldn't have left town, pregnant with my child. You wouldn't have stolen her from me. You loved me."

The anger in his eyes burned through her. "I did love you then. But I loved my daughter more."

"There really was a child?"

"You know there was. You took her," she said again. "Did Detective Benedict help you? Is he involved in this, too? Did he get you my phone number? Did he help you dig up my past? I know you had to have had help from someone in law enforcement."

"Benedict?" he echoed. "I haven't talked to him in years."

"He was your father's friend."

"Not mine. I have my own allies in the CPD."

"Someone helped you."

"No one helped me, because I didn't do anything." He paused. "Why didn't you tell me you were pregnant?"

"I was scared."

"I never hurt you. I treated you like gold. I gave you everything you could want. I was your knight in shining armor. That's what you used to tell me."

She had told him that. But those had been the words of a teenage girl, who'd thought Johnny was the answer to her sad, hard life. "You didn't hurt me, but you hurt other people."

"Not women—or children."

She couldn't help noticing he'd left men out of his answer. "I was a young, stupid girl when we were together. I was naïve to think you could be better than your parents, your brothers. I thought you had more good in you than you did. But I gradually came to see the truth. You were going down a dangerous, terrifying path, and I couldn't go with

you. I didn't want my baby to live your life, to be in your family, to have bodyguards, to be constantly questioned by the police just because of her last name."

"My life is great. I run a lucrative business. I take incredible vacations. I have more money than you could dream of."

"Blood money. You run a criminal enterprise."

He shrugged. "I'm a businessman and a capitalist. Let's get back to you. You stole my child from me. I was her father. I had a right to see her, to raise her. It wasn't your decision."

"I made it my decision," she said forcefully. "And, to be honest, I wasn't just protecting her from you but also from me. I didn't want her to live my life, either. I wanted her to have two parents who were in love with each other, who adored her, and who could give her a safe, happy life."

"We were in love with each other."

"Infatuated, maybe, but it wasn't love. Because we didn't know what love was."

"You can't deny what we had."

"I was desperate for someone to love me, to protect me, so I saw in you what I wanted to see."

"Nathan helped you leave. He knew where you went, didn't he?"

She didn't answer, not wanting to bring Nathan into it.

"I almost killed him, you know," Johnny said in a conversational tone.

She shook her head. "Nathan was your friend once."

"Was he?" Johnny asked scornfully. "He'd been trying to get me away from you since we first met. And he finally did

it. My only satisfaction was that you left him, too. That's the only reason I let him live."

"See, right there, you just showed me who you really are. You almost killed Nathan, and you act like it's no big deal. Whatever good I saw in you was just in my imagination. And none of this even matters because all that's important right now is our daughter." It killed her to include him in the relationship with Hayley, but it was looking more and more like he hadn't taken Hayley. And if he hadn't, she was going to need his help.

"Our daughter," he echoed, as if he was still getting used to that thought. He folded his arms across his chest as he perched on the front edge of his desk. "Did you name her Hayley?"

"No. I didn't name her. I didn't hold her. I didn't even see her eyes. They took her away right after she was born. I thought it would be easier if I didn't bond with her, but it wasn't." A torrent of emotion rose within her. "Sending her away broke my heart. I gave away a piece of myself."

"And you gave away a piece of me," he said sharply. "How could you deprive me of my own child? What gave you the right?"

"I just wanted what was best for her. And it was a good decision. Hayley has a great life now. You should see her bedroom. It's like a princess lives there. She has books and games and stuffed animals. She has a brother and a sister, grandparents."

"She would have had all that with me."

"Maybe you would have given her those things. But she would have also grown up with guns, with thugs, with drug

deals and gamblers and addicts. She would have never been free. She would have always been looking over her shoulder, wondering if someone her father had crossed would come after her. I didn't want that life for her. You told me once that you sometimes wished you'd been born into another family. Maybe you don't remember that now. But I do."

Johnny's dark eyes glittered with surprising emotion. "I remember."

As they stared at each other, it felt like the anger shifted, eased. *Was it possible the good part of Johnny was still inside this hard, ruthless criminal?*

She had to appeal to that side. "Look, you can hate me for what I did. You can hurt me. I don't care. I just need to find Hayley."

"I don't have her, Bree."

"Come into the light. Let me see your eyes."

He straightened and moved away from the desk, stopping a foot away from her. Their gazes met for a long tense moment. So many emotions ran through her. He had lied to her before. But he wasn't lying now.

"Oh, God," she whispered. "You're telling the truth. But if you don't have her, who does?"

"I don't know."

She wanted to ask him to help her, but if Johnny found Hayley, he would never give her back.

On the other hand, what choice did she have? If anyone could find the kidnapper, it was probably him.

A loud crash came from the hallway. A shout. Then a grunt and a heavy thud.

Johnny started for the desk, for the gun, but he didn't get there.

The door burst open, and her heart jumped into her throat as Nathan barreled into the room, tackling Johnny to the ground.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

BREE STARED in shock as Nathan and Johnny fought with each other, fists flying, bodies rolling around on the ground. She wanted to help Nathan, but she couldn't do much with her hands behind her back. While she suspected Nathan had taken out whatever guards were in the hall, there would be more men coming. Johnny always had plenty of backup.

She moved toward the desk, thinking if she could find something to cut the ties, she could free her hands and get Johnny's gun, which was still on the desk. Or at the very least, she could put his gun out of reach, so he couldn't use it on Nathan.

But she'd barely taken a step when two men rushed into the room, pulling Nathan and Johnny apart.

One of them shoved Nathan up against the wall, while the other slugged him in the face.

"Stop," she cried. "Stop."

But they weren't stopping; they were going after Nathan, and he was no match for two of them. Blood was

coming out of his nose, and he grunted as one of the men slammed him in the gut.

Johnny got to his feet, blood dripping down his face as well, murderous intent in his eyes.

"Make them stop, Johnny," she begged.

"Why would I do that?" he yelled.

"Because this isn't about him; it's about our daughter." She stepped in front of him, putting herself between him and Nathan. "We need to find Hayley, and we're wasting time."

"He went after me," Johnny argued, his gaze raging. "No one goes after me."

"He thought you had Hayley. But you don't. Someone else does. Please! Nathan can help us."

She could see the battle going on in Johnny's gaze, but finally, he put up a hand.

"Stop," he said sharply.

Nathan slid down the wall as the two men backed off. She didn't know how badly he was hurt, and she wanted to run to him, but she didn't want to infuriate Johnny any further.

Nathan struggled to get up, but his right eye was swelling, and blood was still coming out of his nose.

"You always needed others to do your dirty work, Johnny," Nathan said, obviously not worried about infuriating Johnny. "Now, you stoop to kidnapping kids."

It was her turn to talk Nathan down. "Stop it, Nathan. Johnny doesn't have Hayley."

Nathan gave her a look of utter disbelief. "He's lying. He always lied to you, and you always believed him. You're

doing it again."

"He's not lying—not this time."

"He's playing you."

"I never played her," Johnny interrupted.

"You dragged her down in the mud with you," Nathan returned.

"And you couldn't stand that she picked me and not you."

"This isn't getting us anywhere," she said, cutting into their argument. "We need to bring a little girl home. Can we just focus on that?" She only gave them a second to think about it, and then she plowed ahead, turning to Johnny. "Calvin Baker made a ransom demand from Hayley's father yesterday. They met at the silos. I shot him in the shoulder. Someone else made the kill shot from a sniper position. They had to be a really good shot. They shut Calvin up before he could be interrogated. You say he's not working for you. But you can find out who he was working for, can't you? Because whoever that is has our daughter."

"I could ask some questions."

"Then do it. I don't believe this is just about me anymore," she added. "This is about revenge, and I think it's on both of us."

Johnny's hard gaze met hers. "Stay here." He took his gun off the desk and waved his men out of the room, shutting the door behind him.

After Johnny left, she ran to Nathan's side, wishing she could throw her arms around him. "I'm so sorry. We need to get you to a hospital."

"Forget about me. I'm fine."

"You're not fine."

"Doesn't matter. Do you really believe him, Bree?"

She looked into his eyes, needing him to see past his anger for Johnny. "I do. He didn't know anything until yesterday when he was questioned by the FBI. But before he comes back, I need to get my hands free. Can you help me?"

"Of course." Nathan got to his feet and ransacked the desk, pulling out a pair of scissors and cutting through the tie binding her wrists.

She shook out her hands in relief.

Nathan met her gaze. "Johnny's men kidnapped you. They tied you up and brought you here, and you want to trust him?"

"I don't have a choice. We need to fight fire with fire, and Johnny can find out who Baker was working for."

"You're making a deal with the devil."

"I know. If Johnny helps me find Hayley, he might try to take her."

"He *will* take her—it's not a question of *might*."

"Then we'll fight to get her free of him, but at least she'll be alive, and that's what's most important right now." She paused. "Do you know where we are?"

"Auto shop on Hudson," he said tersely. "I guess this is one of his businesses now."

"How did you find me?"

"Sierra told me where she thought you would be."

"She helped you? That's shocking."

"And maybe also a little too easy. Perhaps she thought Johnny would kill us, and she could get rid of us both at once." He pulled out her phone and handed it to her. "I found this in the parking lot."

"I wanted you to know I hadn't run out on you. I knew you'd come looking for me."

"I should have gone into the salon with you."

"Let's not look back." She put her phone in her pocket and glanced toward the closed door. "Where do you think Johnny went? Why did he just disappear like that?"

"Beats me," he said, wiping the blood off his face with the back of his sleeve.

"We need to get you out of here," she said decisively. "Johnny might go after you again."

"Or I'll go after him," he said darkly.

Her phone buzzed, drawing her attention away from him.

A text message.

Her heart stopped as she opened the message and saw a photo of a little girl tied to a chair, tape over her mouth, terror in her eyes, and the word *daughter* scrawled across it. "Oh, God." She felt sick to her stomach.

Nathan took the phone out of her hand and enlarged the picture while she fought to keep the bile from rising in her throat.

A few deep breaths put her back into control. "Any clue to where she is?" she asked.

"I think she's at Howard School."

"Is that place still around?"

"Yes. Like so many other abandoned buildings in that neighborhood."

Howard had once been an elementary school, about a mile from their high school. It had been condemned a long time ago after toxic spills from a nearby factory had infused the soil.

"Every few years, the city tries to sell it to someone," Nathan added. "But its location in a run-down industrial area and a low-income neighborhood has made developers uneasy that the area can ever be revitalized." He paused. "It's another place from our past."

She met his gaze. "We all used to go there in high school. We got into a lot of trouble there."

"It's also where Johnny beat the crap out of me."

"No," she breathed.

"Yes. He did a lot of beatings there—like the one Stix went to prison for."

"The kid from Northwestern."

"The one you gave Johnny an alibi for."

"The night of the fashion show," she murmured. "Oh, my God—the newspaper photo was from that show. I didn't put it together. I should have figured that out sooner."

"This is about that night," Nathan agreed.

"Revenge," she breathed. "Against both Johnny and me."

"Which means that it's either Stix or the kid from Northwestern behind this."

He'd no sooner finished speaking when another text came in. They read it together: *Come alone. If you're not here in fifteen minutes, she's dead.*

"Let's go," Nathan said.

As they ran toward the door, gun shots echoed from the shop below, followed by shouts and more firepower.

"What the hell is that?" she asked, as Nathan managed to break open the door.

"No idea," he yelled. "But there's a fire escape off the storage room. It's how I got up here."

She ran down the hall, staying close to Nathan. More shots were fired. It sounded like they were coming from an automatic weapon.

Nathan grabbed her hand and pulled her into a small room, then pushed her toward the window. She climbed over the sill and made her way down the fire escape as fast as possible.

When they reached the ground, they took off running, dashing between buildings and down alleys to where Nathan had hidden his truck. It sounded like a war back at the auto shop, and she didn't know what to think about that. But thankfully, they were out. Now they just had to save Hayley.

Nathan gunned the engine, as they took off. She looked in the side view mirror for any sign of a tail, but there wasn't one.

"If Johnny doesn't survive whatever is going on back there, he won't be able to help us," she said.

"Maybe that's the point."

Her phone buzzed again, and she saw another text coming in. This time it was a video message. Hayley was facing the camera and no longer tied to the chair. She looked right into the camera and said, "Mommy, please come and get me. I'm waiting. Hurry."

It was the first time she'd ever heard her daughter's voice and tears streamed out of her eyes. She played the message again, her heart twisting in agony. "I know she's not talking to me; she's talking to Lindsay, to her mother, but it still hurts."

Nathan put his hand on her leg. "Hang in there, Bree. We're going to get her."

"I know I'm going to see Hayley; I just don't know if I'm going to be able to rescue her," she said, overwhelming fear running through her. "I'm afraid whoever has her is going to kill us all."

"We won't let him. As I recall, there are at least three entrances to the school and a lot of broken windows. There will be multiple ways to get in and out."

"I'm sure there will be multiple guards watching those doors and windows, too. It's not going to be easy."

"We've never had easy. We've always beaten the odds."

She met his gaze. "You're right. We've been through a lot together."

"And we'll do this together, too."

"I have to go in alone, Nathan."

"I understand that. But I will not be far behind. You saw what happened to Mark yesterday when he went by himself. He'd be dead if it wasn't for you."

"I've been thinking about that." She opened a new text on her phone and typed in a lengthy message.

"Who are you writing?"

"Agent Tracy Cox, my Chicago nemesis, but also a good agent. I want you to send this as soon as I get out of the car. I want the kidnapper to think he's getting his way at

first, so you have to keep out of sight. I'm sure he knows by now that you're working with me."

"I can stay hidden."

"I'll probably have a ten-minute head start before the agents show up. Hopefully, I won't need them. But if I do, I have to trust they'll come in the right way."

He pulled the truck around a corner and turned off the engine. The school was still out of sight, but she knew exactly where it was. These were the streets of her youth: the dark, barren, depressing, run-down neighborhood which she'd somehow managed to survive once. She had to make it twice.

She looked over at Nathan. "This is it."

"Be careful, Bree. I don't want to lose you."

"I don't want to lose you, either." She gently touched the side of his bruised face. "Don't be a crazy-ass hero."

"Don't worry about me. Go get your daughter."

She leaned over and gave him a kiss, then got out of the truck and ran down the street.

Nathan watched Bree leave with tremendous misgivings, but he reminded himself that she was trained for situations like these. She'd just never had her daughter's life at stake before. But she would keep it together. She was smart, tough, and determined.

And he would be right behind her.

He sent her text to the FBI and then got out of the truck. He went in the opposite direction from where Bree had

gone. Fortunately, there weren't many people out. A lot of the buildings in this area had been destroyed by a fire several years ago, and others were either out of business or closed on the weekend.

Howard School was three blocks away and located next to the river. It should have been a picturesque location, but it wasn't, and on this gray, gloomy day, he felt nothing but foreboding.

The school had been one of their favorite places to get into trouble or shelter them from the snow or get drunk on a hot summer night. The police and the city would periodically try to lock the building down, keep people out, but it never lasted long.

The truth was that no one cared about this part of the city; they never had. Maybe one day the whole area would be redeveloped, but that was a long way away. For now, the abandoned buildings, many filled with dangerous asbestos and inhabited by rats, would continue to be a blight on the city.

It wasn't a coincidence that Hayley was here. The school was where Johnny had conducted business. It could be Stix behind the plan, or the kid Johnny had almost killed for stealing his drug business. It could even be Sierra. She'd told him earlier that she'd saved him by calling in the fire department. She'd known where Johnny was then.

Maybe Sierra was behind the whole thing, he suddenly wondered. What if she'd found out Bree had had a kid with Johnny? What if she'd wanted to torture her former rival? What if she'd wanted to get rid of the one person who could take Johnny away from her—his daughter Hayley?

The way the kidnapper had played on Bree's emotions seemed almost feminine in nature, not that he wanted to discredit women, but another woman might certainly know that Bree's most vulnerable point would be the loss of her child. And Sierra had known Bree when she was in her teens. She'd probably known about the shelter. She'd definitely known about the fashion show, because she'd been jealous of Bree's photo in the paper.

But would Sierra really go against the man she'd loved for years? The man who had probably financed her salon and was letting her live the life she always wanted?

Frustrated, he decided to put the guessing aside. He was probably going to find out soon enough. What he needed to worry about was how to enter the school without being seen and how he was going to save Bree and Hayley.

As he neared the building, he kept a wary eye on the windows and doors facing him.

All was quiet. He couldn't see anyone moving behind the broken windows.

The building backed right up to the water, just a narrow cement path between the structure and a low retaining wall.

He hid behind the adjacent building, waiting and watching for a long minute. There were no guards outside, but who knew how many people were waiting inside?

Time to find out.

He didn't head to one of the doors, instead aiming for a window on the ground floor. There were plenty of those around, and he didn't think they could guard all of them. Hopefully, he was picking the right one.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

BREE WALKED past the large sign that said No Entry and warned of legal prosecution for trespassers, a sign she'd ignored many times before.

The lock and chain on the front door of the school had been sawed off. It didn't look to be a particularly old lock, maybe that had been recent, but when she entered the building, a nasty stench made her gag. Rats scurried away as she stepped over broken bottles, discarded needles, and other garbage.

She moved into the hallway and looked both ways. There were three classrooms on the left plus the principal's office and three classrooms on the right. In front of her was the multi-purpose auditorium. There were stairs at both ends of the hallway, leading up to the second floor, where six more classrooms could be found as well as restrooms.

She'd been in every single one of those rooms at one time or another. She'd even climbed out onto the flat-top roof that overlooked the river. She could do this. She could find her daughter.

Pausing, she listened for some sign of life.

Why was it so quiet?

She could hear her heart pounding and felt like a sitting duck. A shooter could come out of any of the classrooms or the offices or the auditorium, and she would have no escape.

But she didn't think she was going to die that fast.

The game was coming to a climax, and she could do nothing but play along.

The sound of crying made her pulse race. It sounded like it was coming from the auditorium.

She ran forward, pushing through the large door at the back of the room. The rows of seats had long since been taken away, and huge chunks of the ceiling now covered the floor. There was more garbage in this room, and it was cold and dark with barely any light coming from the boarded-up windows.

Squinting in the darkness, she stepped over more trash, making her way to the stage. The curtain was drawn.

That seemed a portent of the show to come.

Licking her lips, fear ravaging her insides, she heard a child's sobbing get louder. The thought of Hayley being kept in this hellhole turned some of her fear into anger.

She walked faster.

She went up the stairs on the right.

The curtain suddenly opened.

A bright light hit the stage and there was Hayley sitting in the middle of the floor, arms around her knees, rocking back and forth, crying her little heart out.

She ran toward her, dropping to her knees, knowing that they were both spotlighted for whoever was watching, but

she didn't care.

"It's going to be okay, Hayley." She wrapped her arms around the little girl—*around her daughter*. She could hardly believe she was holding her. "I'm here. I've got you."

"I want my mommy," Hayley said, looking into her eyes.

The simple phrase broke her heart. "I'm going to take you to her."

"She's not dead? They said she was dead. And my daddy, too."

"Your family is fine," she reassured her, mentally taking note that Hayley had used the word *they*. "Who brought you here?"

"A tall man and a short man," she said with another sob. "They smell bad."

"Do you know where they went?" She looked around, but with the light on, she could barely see anything.

The light suddenly went off. She blinked in the darkness, and jumped to her feet, pulling Hayley up with her, putting her body in front of her daughter's as a man appeared in front of her. He was definitely the tall man, well over six foot seven, and when he came out of the shadows, he had a gun trained on her.

Her heart leapt again as all the clues fell into place. "Stix," she murmured. "Stan Tix."

"I'm glad to see you haven't forgotten me, Bree Larson—or I guess it's Adams now. You left this shit-filled city and made a new life for yourself. Some of us didn't get to do that."

"You did all this for revenge against me and Johnny?"

"Surprised? Did you really think I'd ever forget the two people who ruined my life? I was on my way to a pro basketball career. I was going to be rich, famous—I was going to have everything. But I lost it all, because of Johnny, and because of you."

"You did it to yourself. I didn't do anything."

"You lied to the cops to protect Johnny. You backed up his story. You told them Johnny couldn't possibly have assaulted that kid, that he was a good guy."

"I didn't say any of that. I just said he was at the fashion show. He was in the audience. I didn't know anything."

"He wasn't in the audience. He was here, beating up a college kid for trying to take over his drug turf. I arrived just in time to save that kid from dying, and I ended up with blood on my hands. But it was the knife in the back that took me down, the one placed there by Johnny, and left there by you."

"That kid said two guys beat him up. You were one of them. He identified you. There was DNA evidence."

"I didn't do the beating. The second man was Baker—Johnny's right-hand man. And the kid saw me when I was trying to help him. But he had serious head injuries. He couldn't remember when I'd entered the room."

Was that true?

Frowning, she thought about the other part of his statement. "You said Baker was there, too."

"He was."

"But he has been working with you. He's part of this kidnapping. He made the ransom call. Why wouldn't you hate him, too?" she asked in confusion.

"I did hate him. So, I used him. Now he's dead."

"You were at the silos. You shot him."

"I was done with him. And I didn't need him talking to you."

"You could have taken me out at the silos."

"That wouldn't have been nearly as much fun."

As he shifted his weight, the light glinted off the big ring on his hand—the World Series Cubs ring.

"You took Hayley out of the auditorium," she said. "How did you get her to go with you?"

"She wanted to come with me. I had her bunny," he replied.

She put her hand on Hayley's arm, feeling the little girl's body shaking as she clung to Bree's waist. "I can't believe you kidnapped an innocent child to get back at Johnny and me. She's not part of this. You want me; I'm here. Let Hayley walk out."

"Oh, I don't think she's going anywhere, not until we have a happy family reunion."

"Johnny isn't coming."

"I think he is."

"Look, I don't know anything about that night, Stix. I didn't set you up. I didn't know what happened."

"Pretty girls never know anything about what their bad boyfriends are doing," he said, a bitter note in his voice. "Well, my pretty girl left me. She had a baby with someone else. She got married and forgot all about me."

"I'm sorry. But I still don't understand why you went to such elaborate lengths to mess with me. Why did you send me all over the city? You sent that girl—Emma—to talk to

me on the train. And now I guess the photo at the shelter makes sense, because that was the night all this happened. But it's so complicated. How long have you been planning your revenge?"

"Since the day I went to prison."

She shook her head, seeing the crazy anger in his eyes. He was obsessed, fanatical; he would not be talked out of anything, but she still felt like she had to try. "Is Emma all right?"

"Who the hell is Emma?"

"The little girl on the train. Now you're confused?" *Was he completely out of his mind?* "Why focus on me? Johnny was the one who really hurt you."

"I know exactly what's happening. And don't worry, Johnny is part of this. He should be here any second. My men will make sure of that. You see, I've put together my own army. I found a lot of good soldiers in prison. They taught me how to fight someone like Johnny, and how to win."

He'd no sooner finished speaking when the doors to the auditorium opened, and Johnny was shoved toward the stage by another man with a gun. Johnny looked worse than he had after his fight with Nathan. His clothes were ripped, and he was barely able to walk.

As he got closer, she saw that his leg was bleeding, and someone had tied a rag around it. He'd been shot. The warfare at the automotive shop must have come from Stix and his associates.

Hayley cried louder as the men drew closer.

Johnny gave her what felt like a reassuring look, but she wasn't comforted. He could barely walk. *What the hell kind of help was he going to be?* And he appeared to be alone.

Obviously, Stix had taken out Johnny's men.

Unless one or two of them had survived and would come after their boss?

She hoped that was a possibility.

Even without them, Nathan was around somewhere, and FBI agents were on their way. She just had to keep everyone alive in the meantime.

The only good thing about this nightmare was that Stix wanted to savor his moment of revenge, of triumph. He didn't want them to die too fast. He wanted them to understand that he was in charge now, that they would die at his hands.

"Watch the front," Stix told his associate. "Where's Rico?"

"Out back," the man said, letting go of Johnny as he left.

She was happy to see him go; it definitely improved her odds, but Stix still had the only gun, and with Hayley hanging on to her for dear life, she couldn't take him down with any sudden moves.

"How did you know about my baby?" she asked, hoping Hayley wasn't paying attention to the conversation, but she seemed too frightened to be taking much in.

"A friend clued me in," Stix said.

"A friend? Does he have a name?" she asked sharply.

"I know who he is. You don't need to know," Stix replied. His gaze hardened on Johnny. "You got nothing to say, Johnny boy? Look who's in charge now?"

Johnny spit on the floor in response.

Anger stiffened Stix's spine, and he seemed to get even taller. "I'll do the talking then. You sent me to prison for what you did. You took away my life, the family I was supposed to have, and now you're going to lose yours."

"Bree is not my family," Johnny said harshly. "I don't give a damn about her anymore."

She believed Johnny, but Stix didn't.

"You don't love Sierra," Stix said. "You're just using her, the way you use everyone. Bree is the only one you cared about, and even if you hate her for what she did to you, you still want her." He paused, giving Bree an evil smile. "I actually admire the guts it took for you to walk away."

"Then let me go. Let Hayley go."

"Unfortunately, there's always collateral damage." He turned back to Johnny. "I know what you care about, and that's blood—family. Well, your blood is right here on this stage. And I'll be doing her a favor by not letting her grow up with you."

Bree sucked in a breath at Stix's twisted words.

Johnny didn't rise to Stix's bait. He just stared back at his one-time friend with burning hatred in his eyes.

No one was backing down. But she needed to find a way to defuse the situation.

"Do whatever you want to me and Johnny," she said, bringing Stix's attention back to her. "Hayley is not part of this. She wasn't even born when you went to prison."

"I don't think so." Stix raised his gun and pointed it at her. "In fact, I think she goes first, and you two will watch."

"You don't want to do that," she argued. "You just told me you were innocent of your crime, and that you tried to save the kid Johnny almost killed. You don't want to hurt this child."

"I've changed. Prison will do that."

He had changed and the gentle giant she had once known was nowhere to be found. He was going to kill them all. She had no doubt about it.

Johnny must have made the same assumption, because he suddenly moved, throwing his body in front of hers as Stix fired his weapon. The bullet ripped through Johnny's chest.

Hayley screamed.

She ducked down, wrapping Hayley up in her arms, praying the next bullet would hit her and not her child.

But before Stix could fire again, a crashing noise above the stage distracted him. He looked up, and then a body came down from the rafters, knocking Stix off his feet.

Nathan!

The gun flew out of Stix's hand, sliding across the stage as Nathan attacked him.

She pushed Hayley to the side and grabbed Stix's gun off the floor.

She was just in time as the man who'd brought Johnny in earlier came rushing toward the stage. She fired, hitting him square in the chest. He fell to the floor. She turned her gun toward Stix, but he and Nathan were so entangled, she couldn't risk hurting Nathan.

Hayley was screaming, and her maternal instincts were firing on all cylinders. She needed to get her daughter off

the stage and safely away.

"Give me the gun. Get her out of here," Johnny told her, his face a picture of contorted agony as he sat up, blood coming from his chest and his leg.

She had no time to dither, tossing the gun to Johnny, then grabbing Hayley and running toward the stairs.

As another blast rocked the auditorium, she prayed that Johnny had not shot Nathan.

Not knowing how many men they might have to get through to get out of the school, she decided to go up to the roof. Hopefully, they could find a place to hide until more help arrived.

When they got on the roof, the dark day gave them some shadows, but they still needed to find cover. The roof was patchy in places, and she had to be careful where they stepped, so they didn't fall through.

Large heating ducts rose up like stalwarts along one side of the roof, but they were too thin to hide behind. Then she spied a big heating unit about four feet wide by six feet long and it was next to a raised portion of the roof. They might be out of sight there. She moved quickly across the roof. "Climb in, Hayley," she said, pushing the little girl behind the unit.

"Don't go," Hayley cried, clinging to her hand. "I'm scared."

"I'm not going anywhere," she said, sliding in next to her. As Hayley's fingers tightened around hers, she felt a crazy sense of familiarity. She'd never held her baby's hand until now, but it felt so absolutely right, and the connection between them was powerfully strong.

She would save her daughter, or she would die trying.

Nathan had taken out two of Stix's men on his way into the school, but he'd had the element of surprise. Now he was going toe-to-toe with a man who had six inches and forty pounds on him. Not only that, Stix was fighting like a yard dog who'd been chained up too long. There was a starving hunger in him, a powerful need for the revenge he'd been seeking for more than a decade.

Thankfully, Johnny had shot another one of Stix's men, who had come into the room after Bree and Hayley left. He just needed to take Stix down, give Bree time to escape.

His fist connected with Stix's jaw, and as Stix's eyes bugged out, he thought he might have gotten the advantage.

But then Stix seemed to gather superhuman strength from somewhere, throwing his entire body weight at him.

He felt the edge of the stage underneath his foot and then he went flying. He landed hard on his back, his head bouncing off the floor, something sharp cutting his back. He saw stars and felt a rocketing wave of pain rip through him as a curtain of darkness began to descend.

He couldn't let that curtain hit the ground. He couldn't lose consciousness. Bree needed him.

He fought through the haze threatening to take him under and somehow found a way to get back on his feet. But Stix was gone. Two of his associates were dead on the floor, and Johnny was barely moving.

He struggled to get himself up the stairs to the stage. Johnny was barely breathing, gasping in the last few seconds of his life. There was too much damage, too much blood.

"Roof," Johnny bit out, clutching his bloody chest, as he looked at him. "Save Bree," he bit out. "And my daughter." He struggled for breath. "Tell Bree...I finally did one good thing. Hope it's enough." Johnny's eyes closed as he uttered his last breath.

Nathan didn't have time to think about what Johnny's death meant. All he could focus on was getting to Bree. He grabbed the gun that had just fallen from Johnny's hand and ran toward the stairs, hoping Stix had gone in the opposite direction.

"The tall man is back," Hayley whispered, her eyes widening again.

Bree's gut tightened as Stix came out on the roof, and a terrible fear for Nathan washed through her. *If Stix was up here, then Nathan...*

But she couldn't think about that now. She couldn't let Stix get to Hayley. And it wouldn't take long for him to find them. She was going to have to find a way to turn the tables.

"Stay here," she whispered.

"Don't leave me," Hayley pleaded.

"I'll be back soon. You have to be very, very quiet. Okay?"

Hayley's bottom lip trembled, and her eyes filled with tears. "I want to go home."

"It's almost over. I won't let anything happen to you. Just don't move."

Hayley nodded her head.

She crept out from behind the heater. She moved away from Hayley as quietly as she could, hoping that if Stix heard her, he'd see only her and not Hayley.

Stix was definitely enraged, pacing along the river-side of the roof, probably looking for a way down. Maybe he didn't know they'd come up here. Or maybe he just hadn't seen the heating unit yet.

He was such a big man. She didn't know if she could physically take him down, but she had to try. Right now, he hadn't seen her. She could catch him off guard.

As he moved closer to the edge, she saw her opportunity. If she could grab onto the heating duct at the same time she kicked her feet out, she might be able to knock him off without taking herself over the side at the same time.

She'd only have one chance. If it didn't work, she'd be dead. And Hayley would die, too.

That wasn't going to happen.

Commit, she told herself.

She could do this. She could do this for her daughter and for Nathan and even for Johnny, who had somehow, incredibly, taken a bullet for her.

Taking a deep breath, she gathered herself together and then ran full speed ahead. Two feet before she got to Stix,

she grabbed the pole and then swung her body into midair, her feet hitting him dead in the chest as he turned around.

The force knocked him backward.

He tried to grab on to her legs.

His hand caught her foot for a brief second.

She kicked him away, holding onto the duct with all her might, and hoping it wouldn't break.

Stix waved his arms in the air, flailing, searching for something to save him.

But there was nothing for him to grab on to.

He let out a roar of anger and fear, shock widening his eyes, as he fell backward over the side of the building.

Heart pounding, she let go of the duct and walked over to the edge, seeing Stix's body floating face-down in the dark river.

The door to the roof opened behind her, and she whirled around, her hands automatically fisting as she prepared to do battle again.

But it was Nathan who stepped on to the roof, a gun in his hand.

She'd never been so happy to see him in her life.

He ran forward and swept her up into his arms, hugging her tight. But he didn't hang on long. "Stix," he bit out. "Where?"

"Down there," she said, tipping her head.

He looked over the side and then back at her. "How did you manage that?"

"You wouldn't believe it if I told you."

"You are one serious badass, Bree."

"Just a mother fighting for her kid." She paused. "Johnny?"

He shook his head.

She nodded, not really sure how she felt about Johnny's death.

"Everyone else is down or took off," he added. "I think we're okay."

"Good." As she finished speaking, she saw vehicles heading toward the school. Help had arrived. "Do you still have my phone?"

"Right here," he said, handing it to her.

She punched in Tracy's number. "I've got Hayley. She's safe. We're on the roof with Nathan. I don't know who else is still alive downstairs, but be careful coming in."

She ended the call as Tracy said they'd be right there. Then she ran across the roof and squatted down next to the heating unit. She held out her hand. "It's over, baby. The bad men are gone."

Hayley crawled out and wrapped her arms around Bree's neck. "I'm going to see my mommy now?" she asked.

"Really, really soon." She hugged the little girl as tightly as she could, closing her eyes, memorizing the moment, because she knew it would probably be the last time she ever held her daughter.

A few minutes later, the roof was swarming with police and FBI. She set Hayley on her feet and then stood up, but Hayley still held on to her arm, as if she couldn't trust whatever was coming next.

Tracy came over to her, and Bree couldn't really imagine what she was going to say—probably that she was done

being an agent. But the words that came out of Tracy's mouth shocked her.

"Nice work, Agent Adams."

Bree met her gaze, knowing that while Tracy might be a territorial hard-ass, she'd also wanted to save Hayley. "Thanks."

Tracy gave Hayley a smile. "I'm Agent Cox. I'm going to take you to your parents."

"No. She's going to take me," Hayley said, clinging to Bree's arm. "She promised."

"I did promise."

"Okay," Tracy said. "That's fine. Her parents are at the hospital. There's an ambulance downstairs. They can check Hayley out on the way."

"I know it's against protocol for me to go with her—"

"But you should go with her," Tracy said, meeting her gaze.

"Thank you."

"You did it all yourself. I think we both knew you would."

As Tracy stepped away to speak to ASAIC Hobbs, Bree looked at Nathan. "I need to stay with Hayley."

"Of course. I'll meet you at the hospital."

"You should get checked out, too. You don't look so good."

He smiled through his bloody bruises. "Really? Because I never felt better in my life."

She had so many things she wanted to say to him, but first she had to return her daughter to the family who loved her.

CHAPTER TWENTY

ON THE WAY to the hospital, the female paramedic checked Hayley out with a careful, reassuring smile, as Bree held Hayley's hand. It didn't appear that Hayley had been physically injured during her time in captivity. She had some bruises, but she told Bree that the tall man had taken her to a house, and a woman had brought her food and given her a book to read.

Hayley didn't know what the woman's name was. She described her as having dark hair and eyes but couldn't provide any more detail. She said the woman had told her that she'd be okay if she did what she was told. She also said no one had hit her or hurt her in any way, for which Bree was immensely grateful.

The emotional trauma of the kidnapping and the captivity would be very difficult for Hayley to deal with, but at least she wouldn't have to suffer through memories of physical or sexual abuse.

Apparently, Stix had been willing to kill Hayley, but only because she was Johnny's blood and her daughter, the two

people he'd blamed for the destruction of his life, not because he just wanted to hurt a kid.

She still had so many questions, but for now the only thing that mattered was that Hayley was safe.

When they arrived at the hospital, they were escorted up to the fifth floor, bypassing the ER since Hayley was not in physical peril. What she needed most was to see her parents, and they were waiting in Mark's hospital room.

It wasn't until they entered the room, and Hayley saw her mother sitting on the bed next to her father, that she let go of Bree's hand and ran into her mother's arms.

Lindsay and Hayley cried together at their reunion, while tears dripped down Mark's face as he leaned over to put his hand on his daughter's head.

She'd seen reunions like this before, parents overjoyed at the return of their beloved child, but this one hit home. *This was her child, her daughter.* She wanted to be part of the circle, but she couldn't be.

An arm came around her shoulder, and she looked up into Nathan's warm, compassionate gaze. He was probably the only one who knew exactly how she was feeling.

"She's going to be okay," she told him. "Stix didn't hurt her."

"I'm glad." He paused. "Are you really not going to tell her you're her mother?"

"How can I? She thought she lost her family, and now she has them back. Look how happy she is—how happy they are."

"She has a right to know who her mother is."

"When she's ready to know, that's when they'll tell her."

"You're letting them call the shots?"

"She's their daughter." As she said the words, she realized how true they were. "I gave birth to her, but they've raised her and loved her for the past ten years. Who's to say they don't have more right to her than I do?"

"You sound like a mother, Bree."

"I want to make the choice that's right for her and not the choice that's right for me."

"Maybe one day it could be right for both of you."

"One day," she echoed, turning her gaze back to the Jansens.

Lindsay helped Hayley onto the bed, so she could hug her father. Then she turned and looked at Bree, enormous gratitude in her eyes, as she mouthed the words, "Thank you."

She nodded, her eyes blurring with tears, watching as Lindsay wrapped her arms around both her daughter and her husband. She knew she should step outside, but it was so difficult to leave knowing that she might never see Hayley again.

Finally, she forced herself to move. They stepped into the hallway, and she shut the door to Mark's room, wanting to give the family a few minutes of privacy.

The corridor was already filling with police and agents, and the media would be swarming in front of the hospital. Thankfully, this story had a happy ending.

Tracy moved over to join them. "We have a lot of dead bodies and a lot of questions," she said. "We're going to need you both to come into the office."

"Nathan needs to see a doctor," she said quickly.

"I'm fine, Bree," he said.

"You're not fine. You could have a broken rib or a concussion."

"I've arranged for Mr. Bishop to be seen in the ER," Tracy replied, motioning a nurse forward. "Nurse Collins will escort you down there. When you're done, an agent will bring you to the office."

"I really don't need a doctor," Nathan complained.

She gave him a smile. "Just get yourself checked out."

"All right. But I am fine."

"I hope so."

As Nathan left, Tracy gave her an assessing look. "Is something going on with you two? I thought you were just childhood friends."

"It goes deeper than that," she admitted. "Nathan and I have been through a lot together, not just this week, but at other times in our lives."

"He knew your deep, dark secret."

"One of a very small number of people. He's the one who helped me get out of Chicago."

"He seems like a good man."

"The best. I wouldn't have made it through this without him."

"Maybe you'll want to transfer to Chicago."

"I'm sure your team would love that."

Tracy smiled. "I must admit I didn't want you here."

"Really. I'm surprised to hear you say that," she said dryly.

"I admit that I can get a little territorial. And we have a past. When you showed up, I knew what would happen. You

would become the center of everything, and that's exactly the way it went down."

"That wasn't what I was expecting. I really thought I would just be consulting on a case."

"I never thought that. You're too independent, too damned smart, and too good at your job to just sit on the sidelines."

"Wait—you're complimenting me?"

Tracy shrugged. "I'm just stating the facts. I don't like the drama that follows you around. And I still think you act on emotion far too often, but you're also very intuitive and good at reading situations."

"Thank you. You're a good agent, too. We might approach things differently, but we usually end up at the same place. I wish you didn't see us as competitors."

"I'm starting to realize that's a weakness of mine."

She was surprised at Tracy's words. "We can both be good agents."

"Yes. I suppose we can."

"That is if I keep my job after all this."

"I suspect you'll find a way," she said with a knowing gleam in her eyes. "So, tell me what went down at the school. Who was behind all of this?"

"Stan Tix."

"The deceased individual we found in the river?"

"Yes. We called him Stix because he was so tall. He was a red-hot basketball player in college and was going to go pro, but instead he went to prison for a violent assault that he claims my ex-boyfriend Johnny committed. Stix also

blamed me for his prison sentence, because I was Johnny's alibi."

"Did you lie for your boyfriend?"

"I didn't think I did. I was modeling in a fashion show that night. I saw Johnny before I went backstage and then after the show, about two hours later. I told the police I was sure he'd been at the show the whole night. But according to Stix, Johnny and Calvin Baker were at Howard School beating up a rival drug dealer while I was walking the runway. Stix said he tried to stop it, and that's why his DNA and fingerprints were found at the scene. He went to prison for ten years. During that time, he plotted ways to get back at us."

"But why was he working with Baker, if Baker was part of it?"

"He said he was using him. And when he was done, he shot him."

"That's cold."

"He was clearly out of his mind with plans of revenge." She paused. "I still don't know how Stix found out about the baby I gave up for adoption, or how he knew so much about my past. He said something about someone telling him, but he didn't give me a name." She thought about that for a second. "Maybe it was Charles Benedict."

"You said last night you had concerns about the detective, but that's still a big leap."

"Maybe not. Benedict worked for Johnny's father when I got pregnant. Maybe he figured out that I left Johnny because of that. I need to talk to him."

"I'm sure you'll get that chance. Did Hayley say anything to you on your way over here?"

"She told me that there was a woman taking care of her at a house. They didn't take her to Howard School until earlier today. Thankfully, she wasn't hurt."

"She's lucky. She seems quite attached to you. Did you tell her who you really are?"

"No, and I'm not going to. The Jansens are her parents, and I'm going to let them decide if and when they want to share that information."

"That decision must be killing you."

"It's rough, but I always wanted her to be safe and happy, and now she truly can be. There's no threat left to her. The Jansens are great parents. They love Hayley, and she loves them." She gave a helpless shrug. "That's why I gave her up—so she could have that kind of family. I'm not going to take it away now." She cleared her throat. "Anyway, we can go over all this."

"Oh, we definitely will," Tracy promised.

"I did want to ask you if you've heard what's going on in New York. Dan told me earlier that the real White Rose Kidnapper struck again."

"Yes. But we actually got good news from your team an hour ago. They caught the kidnapper and saved the child."

"Oh, my God, that's amazing. How did they do it so fast?"

"The kidnapper was in a rush this time, angry that someone was impersonating him here in Chicago. He made mistakes he hadn't made before, and your team was able to track him down."

She could hardly believe the man they'd been tracking for three months had been found so quickly. "Who is he?"

"He's a forty-two-year-old delivery driver for a flower shop in Williamsburg, New York. His mother left him with his abusive father when he was thirteen. But she took his eleven-year-old sister with her. Apparently, he hated his mother for leaving him behind and hated his sister for having the life he wanted. Those emotions formed the foundation of his desire to target girls of that age. He wanted to be famous. He wanted people to know him, to be afraid of him. He quite liked the name the media had given him, and he didn't like news of a copycat."

"So, this case actually helped solve the other one. I'm glad some good came out of it."

"We should get down to the office."

She had a feeling she was headed for a very long night. But it didn't matter. She'd tell them whatever they wanted to know. There were no more secrets to keep.

Nathan opened his apartment door for Bree a little after nine p.m. After four hours of questioning, both individually and together, they'd finally been allowed to leave.

They'd taken a cab to his apartment after leaving the FBI office. His truck was still at the hospital, but he'd get that tomorrow. Right now, he just wanted to hold Bree, and as soon as he closed the apartment door, that's exactly what he did.

She wrapped her arms around his waist and rested her head on his shoulder. Her silky hair brushed his chin, and he held her tight, grateful that Hayley was safe and that they were both still alive. The day could have ended so much differently.

"It feels like a decade has passed since we had breakfast here together," she told him, lifting her head.

He smiled. "I think we still have some Chinese food from last night, if you're hungry."

"Tracy got me a salad earlier. But if you're hungry—"

"No, the agent interviewing me also got me some food."

"I'm glad. That was a hellishly long session."

"There was a lot to explain. Speaking of explaining...I heard some of what Stix was saying to you on the stage, but not everything. I know he was out for revenge, but there's a part of this whole thing that just doesn't really make sense."

"Which part?"

Seeing the new tension in her expression, he was sorry he'd brought it up. "Never mind. It doesn't matter."

"You're talking about the way Stix orchestrated my trip through time—Emma coming up to me on the train, the flyer for the shelter, the photo for the fashion show. Although, the photo makes more sense now, because that was the night Stix was charged for attempted murder, and I gave Johnny an alibi."

"But all of that—the threatening calls from the kidnapper with the altered voice—was that Stix? Or was it Calvin?" Nathan asked.

"I don't know."

"And why all the attention on you? Why wasn't Stix gaslighting Johnny?"

"I wish I could have asked him all that. I still don't know who told him I had a kid. He mentioned some mysterious friend. And how did he find Hayley? I'm hoping we'll get more information as we investigate his life since he got out of prison. There's a woman somewhere who took care of Hayley. Maybe she'll know something."

"I hope so, but it's over, and that's what is important. Stix was obviously sick in the head—kidnapping a little girl, hiding her away, pretending to impersonate some other serial kidnapper, staging that whole scene at the school. You can't make logic out of crazy."

"No, but I wish I could." She moved her hands from around his back and cupped his face. "Your beautiful face is so bruised. It almost hurts me to look at you. I know you're in pain."

"Hey, the other guys I fought are dead, so I'm doing okay. I'm just sorry Stix ever got up to the roof. The man was strong. He threw me over the stage. Want to tell me how you pushed him over the edge?"

"I waited until he was standing right by one of those tall heating ducts. I ran forward, grabbed the duct, kicked up my legs in my best martial arts move and connected with his chest. I knew I needed to hang on to something, or I'd go into the river with him. He tried to grab my foot, but I kicked him again, and down he went, flailing his arms like a desperate bird."

He shook his head in amazement. "And to think I ever worried that you couldn't take care of yourself."

"You did take care of me today, Nathan. You came after me when Johnny's men grabbed me and took me to the shop. You jumped down from the beam over the stage like some superhero and tackled a man with a gun, giving me a chance to escape."

"Johnny put himself in front of a bullet for you," he couldn't help saying, even though the last thing he'd ever imagined himself doing was praising Johnny.

"I was shocked he did that. I guess his instinct to protect his daughter was stronger than his instinct to protect himself."

"Or it was his instinct to protect you."

She shrugged. "We'll never know."

"I heard his last words, Bree."

Her eyes widened. "What did he say?"

"He said to tell you that he finally did one good thing. He hoped it was enough."

Moisture filled her eyes, and he didn't know how he felt about her sadness for a man who had been his rival, his enemy—a man who had almost killed him once. But he couldn't look away. He couldn't ignore her feelings, whatever they were.

She blinked back the tears. "I'm not crying because I'm sad that he's dead."

"You're not? It kind of looks like you are."

"I'm sad because I wish he could have found that goodness in himself a long time ago. What a wasted life."

"You always saw the good in him."

"No, I didn't; I just wanted to see it. It was never really there. It was only in my head."

"Well, today it was there."

"I'm grateful he saved me, and he saved Hayley. But I'm not going to mourn him. He lived a life in a violent world, and he contributed to that violence. He hurt a lot of people, including you, most of all you," she said, running her hand down his cheek. "I have put you through so much, Nathan. I don't know why you're still with me."

He smiled as he rested his hands on her waist and drew her close. "You know why. I love you, Bree. I've been in love with you since I was thirteen years old. I think it happened the first time I saw you. You've always been the one for me, even when you weren't. I know it wasn't the same for you. I know you've loved other people."

"I'm sure you have, too, Nathan."

"I've cared about the women I've been with, but honestly Bree when you showed back up in my life, you made a mockery of all those feelings. I was just kidding myself thinking I felt anything close to what I felt for you with any of the women in my life."

"What about Adrienne?"

"I talked to her while you were in the salon. I told her it was over."

"Really?"

"She said she was surprised. But I'm not sure that's true. Even before you came back, Adrienne and I weren't quite in sync. We didn't have enough ease with each other to share our secrets."

"Or hatred of Brussels sprouts."

"You're going to make me eat some, aren't you?"

"I am," she said with a laugh. "But not tonight."

"Thank God—a reprieve." He leaned over and kissed her, because it had just been too long since he'd tasted her lips. He felt an overwhelming rush of desire, of love, of thankfulness that she was alive and safe and with him.

And then her phone buzzed.

As he let her go, he said, "I'm beginning to hate that thing."

She checked her phone. "It's from my friend, Parisa. Nothing important. She just wanted to let me know she's around to help if I need her."

"She's a little late."

"I could have asked sooner, but I had you."

"You're always going to have me."

A shadow crossed her face, and she pulled away, walking over to the windows. As he moved to join her, she turned around.

"Nathan, I love you, too."

"Why am I hearing a *but*?"

"This city..." She let the words hang. "Chicago is your home. It's where your family is. But I don't know if it's where I want to be. The past is no longer haunting me. Johnny is dead. Stix is dead. Hopefully, there isn't anyone else here who hates me."

"So you could come back. It seemed like the Chicago agents were treating you with more respect tonight."

"I did make my peace with Tracy. But there's something else."

He read the truth in her eyes. "Hayley."

She nodded. "I don't know if I could live here and not want to see her all the time. I just think it would be too

hard."

"Maybe you could see her—be a part of her life. Mark and Lindsay are reasonable people. And after you saved their daughter, I think they feel damned grateful to you."

"That's probably all true. But I need to let them tell Hayley when it's right for her and for their family. That might not be for a long while."

He felt a heaviness settling over his heart, the same despair he'd felt when she'd gotten on the bus eleven years ago, and he'd wondered if he'd ever see her again. For days afterward, he'd been mired in pain—a pain that had gone far deeper than his physical wounds. Was he really going to let her walk away again?

"I can leave Chicago, Bree."

"But you love it here."

"I love you more. I can be a contractor anywhere. I do have to finish the house I'm working on, but after that, I can free myself up." As he spoke, he was actually starting to like the idea. "It's not like I've never thought of leaving before."

"There's still Josie and Grace. Your family is here."

"They have Kyle. And he might actually appreciate not having Josie's big brother looking over his shoulder."

"He might need you looking over his shoulder."

"I can still do that. And I can still see my sister and my niece. There are plenty of flights to Chicago from all over the world. I've never lived in New York. It might be fun."

"I can't believe you'd move for me," she said in wonder. "I feel selfish."

"No. You're not being selfish; you're being honest. I think it would be difficult for you to be here with Hayley nearby, at least for the foreseeable future. I still hope that will change, because I think you'd both be better off if you were in each other's lives. But everything is fresh and raw and needs time to settle out."

"I can work out of other cities besides New York," she said. "I went there because I had a mentor there, but he died last summer, and while I love my team, I could do something else somewhere else. Maybe we start over someplace new."

"I like the sound of that. We could always go west, find a house by the beach."

"With a view of a beautiful harbor and lots of sailboats," she said.

"When we dreamed that as kids, I always saw you in the picture."

"I saw you, too. I actually saw you on a surfboard."

He grinned. "I have never been on a surfboard."

"You'd look so good on one. I can see you now in a pair of sexy board shorts." She took her hands in his, her expression turning serious. "I do love you, Nathan. I loved you when I was a scared girl and you were my sweet, protective friend. I loved you when I was a reckless, rebellious teenager making stupid decisions and not sure how to handle the weird feelings I sometimes got when I was around you."

"You did not."

"I did. I just didn't realize it. And then I stupidly chose to get involved with a mobster." She gave him a helpless

smile. "But I loved you when you helped me get away, when you kept my secret, when you supported my choice." She took a breath, gazing deep into his eyes. "Most importantly, I love you now. I love who I am with you. I love how we are together. It feels so honest. I feel so connected to you. I can't imagine even going back to New York for one day without you."

His heart swelled as he read the absolute truth in her eyes. "I feel the same way. We know each other's hearts. So, let's find a way to be together."

"Okay, let's do it."

"*It* as in..."

She laughed. "Yes, but maybe not tonight. You should sleep. You're so bruised; you must be in pain."

"The only thing I feel right now is happy. I will sleep later—after I show you how much I love you."

"You already did that a thousand times over today. So, let me show you." She gave him a tender kiss and led him into the bedroom.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

HAPPINESS WAS PRETTY SIMPLE, Bree thought, as she and Nathan ate breakfast late Monday morning. They'd had a wonderful Sunday—making love, sleeping, talking, and watching a stupidly funny movie at one point, because they just needed to laugh. They didn't talk about anything that had happened, giving themselves a twenty-four-hour hiatus on all dark and serious subjects. But that hiatus was coming to an end.

The call from Nathan's doorman confirmed that Agent Tracy Cox was on her way up.

Bree got to her feet, taking their empty plates to the sink.

"Does it feel like bad news if she's coming here to talk to you?" Nathan asked.

"It doesn't feel like good news. But I guess we'll find out."

Nathan moved down the hall to open the door.

"Sorry to bother you," Tracy said. "But I wanted to touch base before you go back to New York. Or are you going

back to New York?" she asked, her speculative gaze encompassing both of them.

Bree smiled at Nathan, then looked back at Tracy. "My long-term plans are up in the air, but I will be heading back to New York in a few days. I just need to catch my breath."

"That's completely understandable."

"So, what have you learned?" she asked.

"We found the woman who was taking care of Hayley. It was Stanley Tix's older sister, Carla. She said her brother rented her a house in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin for two weeks and told her he needed her to take care of a little girl who was in trouble. He claimed that Johnny was going to kill the child if Stan didn't hide her away, and that Johnny had already killed the girl's parents. Carla didn't have internet or cable at the house, so she claims she was unaware that the girl she was taking care of had been kidnapped."

"And local newspapers in Wisconsin might not have covered the kidnapping," Bree said. "He was smart to take her out of Illinois."

"Carla is still facing serious charges, but on first glance, it doesn't appear she did anything except take care of Hayley."

"I'm glad there was someone there to do that. What about the girl on the train? Emma and her sister, Tasha? Any word on who they were tied to?"

"Yes. Tasha is an actress. She and her sister, Emma, were standing in line at an open-call audition when a man approached them. He gave them \$5000 cash to stay in the shelter for two nights and then hang in a car with him one

day. She said they were outside the FBI office and they watched you walk to the train. Emma and her sister followed, Emma talked to you, then went to the café where she met up with Tasha. They left the flyer at the café and the photo in the shelter."

"Such an elaborate scheme," she murmured.

"Very complicated," Tracy agreed. "Not something most people would think of."

"I didn't know Stix was that clever," Nathan put in.

"The girls must have been able to give a description of their contact," Bree suggested.

"Yes, and we have a sketch of him." Tracy reached into her bag and pulled out a piece of paper. "Do you recognize him? He's apparently on the shorter side—five-five, Tasha thought. He's probably late twenties, brown hair, beard, bad skin."

Bree stared at the photo, but the face didn't seem at all familiar. "I don't know this guy."

She glanced at Nathan.

He shook his head. "I don't, either."

"That's too bad," Tracy said. "We don't have anything else to go on. He paid the girls in cash. He didn't tell them his name. They said they were in a gray car, but they didn't know the make or the license plate. The man didn't speak much beyond giving them instructions of what to do."

"I'm sure he was a minor level player," Bree commented, handing Tracy the sketch.

"That would be my guess," Tracy agreed. "We'll pass this on to organized crime. As they go through the members

associated with Johnny and/or Stanley Tix, they may be able to identify him."

"I'd sure like to tie him up as a loose end. Stix did tell me that someone fed him the information about Hayley's birth and adoption, and I still don't know who that is."

"Neither do we, but I can tell you this—someone provided Stix with a great deal of information about you, not just about Hayley's birth. We found pages from your FBI file at the house in Wisconsin."

Her jaw dropped in shock. "What?"

"All the details from the investigations you've been conducting since you got to New York, reports and reviews dating back to your training at Quantico. We also found personal handwritten notes that refer to the adoption agency used by the Jansens and the name of a woman—Diane Miller. I'm assuming that's the same Diane you told us about, the one who had set you up in Detroit"

"Her last name was Brady when I knew her."

"They both could be aliases."

"What does this mean?" Nathan interrupted. "Are you saying that Stix had help from someone in the FBI? Who else could get an FBI file?"

"It sure looks that way," Tracy said. "And there's something else. Detective Charles Benedict was found dead of an overdose in his home last night."

Bree had almost thought she'd lost the ability to be shocked, but the hits just kept on coming. "Suicide?"

"It looks that way. He left a note saying he was sorry he'd crossed a line he shouldn't have crossed. We're not

sure what it means yet, but it appears you were right about him being involved in some way."

"That's all the note said? Nothing more specific?" she asked.

"Unfortunately not. The police are investigating as well. We'll also look into any connections Benedict might have had with anyone in the bureau, in case he was the one who provided that FBI file to Mr. Tix." Tracy took a breath. "On a positive note, Hayley is safe. Johnny and a half-dozen men who worked for his criminal enterprise are dead. Stix and his associates are also dead. So, the streets are going to be safer for a lot of people."

"What about Sierra?" Nathan asked.

"She's not talking," Tracy replied. "But it doesn't appear she knows much of anything. I think that's it." She paused. "If we need more information from either of you, I'm sure someone will be in touch."

"Someone?" Bree asked curiously. "Not you?"

"I'm going to be on vacation the next week or so."

"Really? Where are you going?"

Tracy flushed. "I hear there's a lovely beach in Ecuador."

She smiled. "You're going to see Diego."

"If he's in the area, I might look him up."

"Tell him I said hello."

"I don't know if it's a good idea," Tracy said, uncertainty in her gaze. "I haven't seen him in years."

And suddenly Bree wondered if this was really why Tracy had made the trip over to Nathan's apartment to brief them.

"I hadn't seen Nathan in eleven years. Sometimes time doesn't matter."

"We'll see. I'm not quite the romantic you are."

"Bree is not romantic," Nathan said with a laugh. "I am the romantic one."

"Hey," she said, giving him a playful punch on the arm. "How can you say that?"

"Because it's true. You might be one badass, superwoman, FBI agent, but sentimental romantic stuff—that is not your thing. But I don't care, because I just need you, not the romance."

"Well, maybe I'll surprise you," she told him, knowing once again he was right about her.

Tracy smiled as she got to her feet. "I'm glad you two found each other again. And I'm glad you and I got to work together again, Bree. Good luck with whatever comes next."

"You, too," she said.

"I'll let myself out," Tracy added, nodding to Nathan.

As the door shut behind Tracy, Nathan said, "What do you think about all that? Was Detective Benedict Stix's connection? Or is there someone else we need to worry about?"

"I'm not sure. I'm unsettled by the fact that my FBI file was in the house in Wisconsin, but with Stix and Benedict both dead, I think we're okay. Stix was really the only one with motive. He could have paid someone to give him that file. Perhaps Detective Benedict used his agency connections to get it. The FBI and the police will probably dig up more information over the next few months."

"Months? I'd like the answers now."

"And here I thought I was the impatient one." She moved closer to him, wrapping her arms around his neck. "I think we're good, Nathan."

"We're very good," he said, giving her a kiss. "I just wish we could start the rest of our lives right now. But you have to go back to New York."

"And you need to finish your house. We'll be responsible people and take care of our obligations, and then we'll be free to do whatever we want to do."

"As long as we do it together, I'm happy." He gave her a wicked smile. "I am, however, feeling a little weak. I don't know if I'm completely healed from my injuries. I think I should go back to bed, and you should go with me."

"That sounds like a plan."

OceanofPDF.com

EPILOGUE

SIX WEEKS later

Bree landed at Chicago O'Hare a little before four and grabbed a cab to get into town. She had a six-hour layover in Chicago, which gave her just enough time to attend one very special birthday party before she and Nathan got another plane to Los Angeles. The next chapter in their lives was about to begin. She could hardly wait.

The last month and a half had been incredibly busy. She'd had to finish up the current work on her plate, which had been made easier by the arrest of the White Rose Kidnapper, thereby closing the biggest case she'd been working on. That man would be going to jail for the rest of his life.

In addition, she'd kept in touch with the Chicago team, who had wrapped up Hayley's kidnapping case. It appeared that Detective Benedict had been working with Stix, as the police had found evidence of several calls and a money transfer between them. She still didn't know how Benedict had gotten her FBI file, or figured out that Hayley was her child, but she was satisfied that the key players were dead.

Her last lingering concern had been that Johnny's family would try to lay claim to Hayley, but apparently Johnny had not had time to tell anyone in his family that Hayley was his daughter, and the FBI and police had kept that information out of the press, maintaining that Hayley's copycat kidnapping had been used to lure Bree to Chicago where Stix could get revenge on her and Johnny, the two people he believed had destroyed his life.

The only other person in Johnny's circle who knew differently was Sierra, but she'd kept her mouth shut, preferring to enjoy the money and the deed to her salon that Johnny had left her in his will.

Feeling confident that Hayley was out of danger, she'd moved forward with her own plans, calling contacts and scouring available jobs with the FBI office in Los Angeles, finally landing one in White-Collar Crime. Going after individuals and companies involved in financial and corporate fraud would be a nice change from the sadness that had often come with the CARD team. While she was very proud of the work she had done, she was ready to live a life that was not quite so dark, but she could still put criminals out of business.

She tapped her fingers impatiently on her thighs as the taxi took her to Lincoln Park. She thought about that morning almost seven weeks ago when she'd come to Chicago to find Hayley.

She'd found her daughter, her love, her life...and to think how afraid she'd been to return. Sometimes confronting the past was a good thing.

Finally, the cab pulled up in front of Hayley's house. There were no news vans out front, just two large bouquets of balloons on either side of the walkway. And coming down the street was Nathan. He must have been waiting for her.

She jumped out of the cab and threw herself into his arms.

They'd talked every day of the last six weeks, sometimes more than once, and they'd done a bunch of video chats, but now she was holding him, kissing him, sharing the love and the passion that had only grown deeper with absence. It was difficult to tear herself away, but she managed to do so with a breathless laugh.

"We better keep this PG-rated," she said. "We're on the sidewalk."

"I don't care," he said with a grin. "I've missed you, Bree."

"I've missed you, too." She kissed him again. "I'm so excited to start our life together. No regrets about leaving Chicago?"

"Not even a small one. I'm ready to go. Are you?"

"As soon as we do this," she said, feeling nervous for another reason.

She hadn't seen or spoken to Hayley or the Jansens since she'd dropped Hayley off at the hospital after the confrontation with Stix, but a week earlier, she'd received an invitation to Hayley's birthday party. It had obviously been written by Hayley, but there had been a small handwritten note attached from Lindsay, saying she hoped she could make it.

She knew from Nathan that Mark and Lindsay had not told Hayley that she was adopted yet. They felt it was too soon after the kidnapping, and they were following Hayley's therapist's advice to let things be for a while. They were, however, very much open to sharing Hayley's life with Bree and welcoming her into the house as a friend, if that worked for her.

"Am I doing the right thing?" she asked Nathan.

"If it's what you want, then you're doing the right thing."

She frowned. "That's not exactly the reassurance I was looking for."

"I think it would be great for Hayley to have you in her life, in whatever capacity you and her parents are willing to accept. I just don't know what it's going to do to you to be with her and not be able to tell her you're her birth mother. I don't want to see you sad or hurting. If this is going to be too difficult, we'll just drop that present on the porch," he said, motioning to the brightly-wrapped gift in her hand. "And head to the airport."

"It is going to be hard, but I want to do it. And you know what makes it a little easier?"

"What's that?"

"It's not Hayley's real birthday. That won't be for five days."

"That's right. The birth certificate was altered. Someone is going to have to fix that some time."

"Some time, but not now. Not while Hayley is still fragile."

"She's doing good. I've seen her once or twice. She's bouncing back. It will take time, but I think she'll be able to

put all this behind her."

"I'm sure she's confused about what it was all about. Stix talked about her being my daughter when we were on the stage, but she was crying so loudly, I didn't know if she heard or not. I hoped she hadn't."

"She doesn't appear to have said anything about that."

"That's good."

He took her hand. "Let's go."

The front door was open, so they walked inside. The living room hallway, living room, and dining room were decorated with streamers and filled with kids and adults. A buffet had been spread out on the dining room table. A huge vanilla-iced birthday cake decorated with pink and purple bunnies sat on a side table. It was sure to be a hit with all the kids.

She searched the crowd for Hayley and felt a rush of love and happiness when her little girl came running down the hall. Hayley wore a pretty blue dress, her long brown hair flowing out behind her, her brown eyes glittering with happiness.

"You came," Hayley said with delight, as she held out her arms.

Bree swept her into a hug, so happy at Hayley's reaction. There was no shyness, no restraint, no lingering fear or sadness. When she let her go, she said, "Happy Birthday."

"I'm so glad you're here," Hayley said, hanging on to Bree's hand. "I want you to meet my parents and my friends and see my room."

"I want to do all of that," she said with a laugh.

"Come upstairs first," Hayley said.

She glanced back at Nathan. He gave her a smile and a nod of encouragement. "Go. I'll be right here. And take your time."

She would definitely take all the time that she was given, and she would cherish every second.

"That goofy smile on your face must mean that Bree is somewhere nearby," Josie said, giving Nathan a nudge in the ribs with her elbow.

"She went upstairs with Hayley to see her room."

"Hayley is thrilled that Bree said she'd come to her party. She's been talking on and on about Bree to Grace. She's almost as taken with Bree as you are."

He grinned. "Bree is very loveable."

"Oh, I know. I always liked her. I just didn't always like the way she treated you."

"All that is in the past, Josie."

"I still don't know everything that happened."

"And you don't need to know," he said quickly. While he felt slightly guilty that he hadn't told Josie that Bree was Hayley's mother, he had to respect Bree's decision to keep the secret until the Jansens decided the truth should come out. "All that's important is what's coming next. I hope you and Grace and Kyle will consider doing Christmas in California this year. We'd like to host."

"Let's see...sunny, seventy-degree days in Santa Monica, or wind chill of minus eight in Chicago? It's a tough call.

Yes, of course, we'll be there. I'm going to book tickets next week. And Kyle is going to make sure he gets the time off. After everything that happened with Hayley, I think he has started to realize the importance of spending time with your family when you can."

"I'm glad."

"And I'm glad you're with Bree. She's the love of your life. She always has been."

"Yes, she has," he admitted.

"While I'll miss you, I think starting over in California is going to be good for you. And you won't have to worry about snow; you can build houses all year round."

"I'm looking forward to the change. But I'm going to miss you and Grace—and Kyle," he added belatedly.

She laughed at that. "I know you and Kyle don't see eye-to-eye, but I love you both."

"I'm still going to keep my eye on you," he promised.

"I have no doubt." Her gaze turned serious. "But to be honest, Nathan, I have let you consider me your responsibility for far too long. I needed you when I was a kid. You got me through life. You saved me more than once. But I'm okay now. I probably should have said that a long time ago. I'm doing good, and I'm not in danger of going backward. I've got my life together. I'm not interested in drugs or alcohol or any of the vices I got swept up into. You don't have to worry about me anymore. Just be happy. It's your turn." She gave him a hug and blinked away some tears. "This sucks. I really hate good-byes."

"It's not good-bye. We're going to see each other at Christmas."

"I know. It won't be same, but it will be fine. And maybe one day you can give Grace a cousin."

"You're getting a little ahead of yourself."

"As if you haven't thought about having a little girl who looks just like Bree," she teased. "But a son would be good, too. I know Bree has a career, but maybe one day."

"Definitely one day," he promised.

Bree smiled as she sat on the end of Hayley's bed and watched her daughter name off every one of the stuffed animals in her collection.

She'd never been able to hang on to her toys as a child. And she'd stopped naming anything, because as soon as she did, it was almost guaranteed to disappear. But Hayley didn't live with that uncertainty. And even though she'd been through a horrible ordeal, she seemed to now trust again in the safety of her life.

She was so glad to see that. She hated to think that her child would be forever scarred by someone wanting revenge on her and Johnny.

"Mommy got me a new bunny," Hayley said, taking a very white, very fluffy bunny from the center of her bed. "I left the other one at the house by the lake. But I like this one better."

"I love all your animals and your room. It's so pretty. I wish I would have had a room like this when I was growing up."

"Sometimes I get scared in the dark," Hayley said suddenly, her gaze turning serious. "Sometimes, Mommy sleeps with me. I think she gets scared, too."

"I understand. But you don't have to be afraid anymore. You're safe now."

"I wish you could stay here. Mommy says you don't live in Chicago."

"No, I don't," she said, a lump growing in her throat. "But I'll come and visit you whenever I can. And you can write me if you want."

"Will you write me back? I like to get email. I like to get real letters, too. Which do you like?"

"I like them both. And I will definitely write you back. I will always be available if you need me, Hayley. You can write me or call me. I'll make sure you always have my phone number."

"Mommy says you're like my guardian angel."

"I like the sound of that," she said with a smile. "Too bad I don't have any wings."

Hayley giggled. "Then you could fly."

"That would be fun." She looked up as Lindsay came into the room with a tentative expression on her face.

"I hope I'm not interrupting," Lindsay said. "It's time to open your presents, Hayley."

"Yay!" Hayley clapped her hands with delight.

"Why don't you go downstairs and help Grandma put them in a pile for you?" Lindsay suggested. "Bree and I will be right down."

"Okay."

As Hayley ran from the room, Bree got to her feet. "I appreciate you inviting me."

"Hayley really wanted you to come. She's been talking about you nonstop since you left." She paused. "I wanted you to come, too. I never had a chance to really say thank you."

"You wrote me a nice note."

"It didn't begin to express what I was feeling. You saved Hayley's life. Nathan told me what you did—how you shielded her body with your own. You risked your life. So did Nathan. And Mark and I are forever grateful."

"I'm just sorry Hayley was ever in danger and that it was because of me."

"It was because of a crazy person. You told me not to blame myself for Hayley's abduction. I have to return the favor. It's not your fault what happened. And having learned a bit about Hayley's biological father, I can understand why you felt the need to give up your child and disappear. I worry a little still that someone in his family might try to claim her, but as the weeks pass, I feel a bit more secure that that won't happen."

"I don't think you have to worry about it. The Hawkes are busy fighting over who is going to take over for Johnny. Their world is far from here. And Hayley isn't a part of it."

"I'm glad about that."

"Johnny did take a bullet for Hayley," Bree couldn't help pointing out. "I won't try to tell you he was a good person, because he obviously was not, but when I knew him as a young man, he wasn't nearly as evil or as cold as he grew up to be. In the end, he died for his child, and that's

something. I hope that when Hayley is older, when she wants or needs more information, she can take that one piece of him and hold it close." She took a breath. "I never knew who my father was. I'd like to think he would have taken a bullet for me, but probably not."

"You had a very rough life, didn't you? Nathan has told us a little about your past. I didn't realize he'd had such difficult life, either."

"Well, all that seems like a long time ago now."

"You're an amazing person, Bree. I feel a little guilty that Hayley doesn't know who you really are to her, but I can tell you that she already loves you."

"I love her, too. She said that I could be her guardian angel, and I think I would like that."

"Really?" Lindsay asked uncertainly. "You're still okay with us waiting to tell her the truth?"

"I trust you and Mark. You have been magnificent parents to my daughter. I want Hayley to know when you want her to know, when it's the right time." She fought her way through a sudden rush of tears, wanting to say what she needed to say. "I wanted Hayley to have a great mother, someone she could always count on, and you are that person, Lindsay. I didn't have a mom like you when I was growing up, and it's a gift, a very special gift."

Lindsay dabbed at her eyes. "That's a very sweet thing to say."

"It's the truth."

"Mark and I have been talking to my parents about moving out of Chicago. We're thinking about going to Austin. My aunt lives there, and Mark has job

opportunities. We wouldn't mind putting some distance between ourselves and everything that happened here."

"That makes sense."

"But we would definitely still keep in touch with you."

"I hope so. I told Hayley I would always be available if she needs me."

"I'm sure she appreciated that," Lindsay said. "So, you and Nathan are going to be Californians..."

"Yes. We always dreamed about the beach when we were kids. We decided it was time to make the dream happen."

"Nathan said he always loved you, but it was never right...until now."

"He's a good man. And I am very lucky to have found him again."

"Well, we better go downstairs and watch Hayley open her presents."

"That sounds good to me." She followed Lindsay downstairs. Hayley was sitting in a big chair with the birthday party guests packed into the living room, the kids sitting on the floor, the parents perched on every available piece of furniture.

Nathan was standing in the entryway. He put his arm around her as Lindsay moved into the room to sit next to Hayley.

"How did it go?" he asked quietly.

She gazed into his eyes. "Really, really well. This party, this loving crowd, this beautiful family—it's the kind of life we always dreamed about, Nathan, and my daughter is living it. That's something great."

"Yes, it is."

"I'm so glad I came." She leaned her head against his chest, feeling more happiness than she'd ever imagined possible.

The next day, Bree woke up in Manhattan Beach. After a long flight the night before, they'd landed just before midnight and had taken a cab to the small house they'd rented for a month while they looked around for a more permanent location. Too exhausted to explore, they'd tumbled into bed and into sleep.

But now the sun was shining through the curtains and she was eager to take a better look around her new home. Nathan was already out of bed, so he'd obviously gotten a head start on her.

She washed up, threw on leggings, a workout top, and a pair of flip-flops and headed down the hall.

She could see Nathan standing outside on the deck. She grabbed a cup of coffee on her way out to join him. Setting her mug on the wide rail, she gave him a happy smile. "We finally have our view."

"Yes, we do. What do you think?"

"It's perfect."

They were standing on the second floor of their rental house, and the deck overlooked the strand, a wide pavement for biking, jogging and strolling that ran for several miles, alongside the beaches of Manhattan, Hermosa, and Redondo. It was a great place for people

watching. And on the other side of the strand was a wide swath of sand leading out to the Pacific Ocean.

"It's just like your poster," Nathan said. "The one you put up in your room so many years ago. Endless blue sky, the Pacific ocean, and even one sailboat."

"I can't believe how lucky we are to be here."

"I don't think luck had much to do with it. We both worked hard to get here."

"And we're here. We're holding the dream in our hands."

"Well, not quite," he said, taking her hands in his. "Now, we are."

She gazed into his beautiful brown eyes and felt an enormous wave of love. "Have I told you lately that I love you?"

"I think it's been at least a few hours."

"Well, I do."

"I love you, too." He gave her a tender kiss. "We could go back to bed."

"That sounds tempting, but I was thinking we should explore. It's such a beautiful day. Let's take a walk, find a market, pick up some food. I'm going to cook for you tonight."

"Hold on—you're going to cook?"

"Yes, and you know what's on the menu?" she said with a playful smile.

He groaned. "No way. Not our first night in California."

"Californians love Brussels sprouts. And you are going to love mine. You'll try one, right?"

"Have I ever been able to deny you anything?"

"Actually, I think you have said no a few times."

He laughed. "Let's not talk about that. Shall we go? I am kind of hungry now, and before we think about dinner, I'd like to grab some breakfast. It looks like there's a beachside café down there." He pointed to where a group of people were waiting outside, menus in hand.

"Let's do it."

Nathan grabbed their house keys and they walked downstairs and around to the strand. There were a ton of people out, which probably wasn't surprising on a Saturday morning. What was surprising was that it was almost Thanksgiving and it was already seventy degrees.

"I think I'm going to like this weather," Nathan said, putting his arm around her shoulders.

"It's so warm. I can't believe it. I'm surprised you didn't go for a run this morning."

"I might go later. It will certainly be different being able to run outside during the winter."

"I don't think they have winter here." She paused as they neared the restaurant. "It looks crowded."

"I'll go inside and put our name in and grab some menus."

"Sounds good," she said, not wanting to fight through the line.

Nathan came back a moment later and handed her a menu. "Twenty minutes for a table, they said."

"That's fine. Let's sit over there." She started to move across the pavement when a man on a skateboard came around the corner, almost knocking her down.

Nathan quickly pulled her back against him.

The man gave her a quick look, and then continued on his way.

Her heart was suddenly beating fast, and it had nothing to do with almost being knocked over.

"Are you okay?" Nathan asked with concern.

"That—that was Wyatt," she said.

"Who's Wyatt?"

"One of my friends from Quantico."

Nathan gave her a doubtful look. "The scruffy guy on the board with a thick beard and the baseball cap is a federal agent?"

"One who often works undercover." She looked down the path, but Wyatt had disappeared.

Had it been him?

It had certainly looked like him. But why wouldn't he have said hello, instead of the quick stare, and the even faster takeoff?

"Maybe I'm wrong. I'm probably wrong," she said.

"You want to go after him?"

"No. I want to have breakfast with you. I want to focus on us. If it was Wyatt, and he needs to talk to me, he'll get in touch. Until then, I'm not going to worry about it."

They crossed over to a low cement wall and sat down. After a brief perusal of the menus, they set them to the side, put their arms around each other and took in the beautiful view.

"I'm going to make you happy, Bree," Nathan promised, turning his head to look at her. "No more loneliness for you. I'm going to stick so close, you'll get sick of me."

"I don't think that's possible. I'm going to make you happy, too. And I was thinking maybe one day..." She was afraid to finish the thought.

"What?" he asked curiously.

"Nothing. It's too soon."

"What's too soon? You know you can't keep secrets from me. Tell me what you want."

"I want us to have a family. I'd like to have a child with you, Nathan."

"I'd like that, too."

"I'm not ready quite yet," she added. "There's a scared, cynical part of me that's a little afraid to trust in all this perfection. I'm afraid to jinx it by planning for the future. That's usually when things go wrong."

"Nothing will go wrong," he promised. "Look around you—we've got nothing but blue skies."

"Storms always come."

"If they come, we'll just ride them out. We'll hold each other and let the thunder roll over us."

She smiled into his eyes, knowing she could trust this man to stick with her no matter what came their way, and she would stick with him. "Yes, we will," she said, and then she leaned in and gave him a kiss. "I think I've changed my mind about breakfast."

He laughed. "Me, too. Race you back?"

"You're on."

#

OceanofPDF.com

DESPERATE PLAY

OceanofPDF.com

DESPERATE PLAY - BOOK BLURB

Special Agent Wyatt Tanner has always worked undercover. He thrives in the dark of the night. He survives by turning himself into someone else. But living so long in the shadows can make a man forget who he really is. When people start dying, when he finds blood on his own hands, he questions the choices he has made, the people he is with.

Can he find his way back to the light? Can he trust the beautiful woman who needs his help? Or does she also have a secret life?

He'll have to make one desperate play to find out...

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER ONE

AS THE SUN rose over Manhattan Beach, Wyatt Tanner adjusted the baseball hat on his head and changed positions on the very uncomfortable bench upon which he'd spent the past few hours. It was a little before seven, and he was happy to see the city waking up. He was itchy to get the day going.

He pulled a granola bar out of his weathered, green seabag and downed it in two bites, then tossed the wrapper into the nearby overflowing trash can. The food did little to ease the gnawing hunger in his gut. He'd always been a big breakfast person, and right now visions of eggs, bacon, hash browns, and pancakes with powdered sugar and hot maple syrup floated through his head.

Later, he told himself, not sure that was a promise he would keep. But he'd told so many lies in his life, what was one more?

He ran a hand through his dirty, brown hair and wondered how the hell he'd gotten here. It was a thought that had been running through his head far too frequently the past several months. Of course, he knew how he'd

gotten here, but sometimes the twists and turns his life had taken seemed surreal, even to him.

But he couldn't get lost in the past.

An old minivan pulled into the parking lot behind him. Three young males tumbled out of the van along with a few empty beer cans. He hoped those were from the night before.

The men pulled on wetsuits, grabbed their surfboards and headed across the sand. They were young, ripped, full of life, and cocky as hell.

He could almost remember that feeling...

Not that he was old, but this morning he was feeling every day of his thirty-two years.

As the wind picked up, he zipped up his weathered bomber jacket, and was happy he wasn't out on the ocean today. It was early December, for God's sake. This might be Southern California, and while the temp was supposed to get up into the low seventies today, it was only in the fifties now, and the sea was ice-cold. But he could understand the lure of the waves, the adrenaline rush that came from battling Mother Nature. Since he'd come to California, he'd been out on those waves more than once, impatiently waiting for the ride of his life. Usually, the ocean did not disappoint.

He sat up straighter as a black Escalade pulled into the lot a few spots away from the mini-van. The driver, a male in his mid-forties, wearing a conservative gray suit, got out from behind the wheel and moved around the front of the car to open the back door.

An older man stepped onto the pavement, his hair white, his skin tan, and his body lean in his black wetsuit. The man had probably fifty years on the three teenagers who had hit the beach before him, but there was excitement in his expression as his gaze moved toward the large waves crushing the beach. It wasn't a day for amateurs, but clearly this man did not fall into that category.

The driver handed the man his surfboard and then said, "You need anything else for now, Mr. Tremaine?"

"No, thanks, Robert. Go have your coffee. I won't be more than a half hour. Busy day today."

"Enjoy yourself," Robert replied, before heading down the strand toward a beachside café a quarter of a mile away.

The older man ran a reverent hand down his board and smiled to himself. He was clearly looking forward to riding the waves. But as he picked up the board, a dark SUV came speeding into the lot, stopping directly behind the Escalade, rather than pulling into an adjacent parking spot.

Wyatt's gut clenched. Trouble was coming.

The two men who exited the vehicle looked more like thugs than surfers, wearing jeans and dark jackets, baseball caps on their heads, dark sunglasses covering their eyes. As they moved toward the Escalade, the taller man pulled out a gun.

He jumped to his feet.

The older man suddenly realized the danger he was in as the shorter man ripped the surfboard away from him, tossing it onto the ground while his friend shoved the older

gentleman up against the side of the car, pressing the gun into his side.

Wyatt wasn't about to let the man be robbed, kidnapped or carjacked. No one was paying any attention to him. He was just another homeless person on the beach.

He took a wide circle around the van, so he could creep up behind the shorter man. He grabbed him by both shoulders and bounced his head off the side of the car. The man groaned and slumped to the ground.

The taller man heard the commotion, turned toward him, gun in hand.

He rushed forward, slamming into the arm that held the gun, the weapon falling to the ground. He kicked it away as the other man threw a fist at his face.

He winced, dodging a second too late to avoid contact.

Then he reared back and landed a blow of his own. The man stumbled backward, hitting the side of the car, before racing back toward his vehicle. His fellow assailant also stumbled toward the car. They took off with a squeal of tires.

Wyatt looked down at the older man who was leaning against the side of the car, looking shocked and scared, his face as white as his hair.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

The man struggled to get out the words. "You saved my life. Those men came out of nowhere."

"Right place at the right time," he said with a shrug. "What happened to your driver?"

"Robert went to get coffee. I need to call 911. My phone. *Damn.* I don't have it with me. Do you have one?"

"Nope. I'm traveling light these days. Just me and my duffel." He tipped his head toward the bench where his duffel seemed to be drawing the interest of a homeless person, who had wandered down the beach. He jogged over and grabbed it, urging the other man to keep moving.

The older man came up next to him. "I want to thank you," he said, sincerity in his bright-blue eyes.

"Not necessary."

The man's gaze fell to the military insignia on his seabag. "You're a Marine?"

"Was," he said.

"So was I—about forty years ago." The man extended his hand. "I'm Hamilton Tremaine."

"Nice to meet you," he said, not really surprised by the firm handshake.

"And you are..."

"Wyatt Tanner."

"Do you live around here?"

"Some days," he said vaguely.

The man's gaze sharpened. "You're homeless?"

"Let's just say I'm between jobs and apartments."

"Come back to the car with me. I may have left my phone at home, but I have my wallet."

He quickly put up a hand. "No. I appreciate the offer, but I don't take charity, Mr. Tremaine."

"Call it a thank-you gift."

"I'm glad you're okay. That's all the thanks I need, especially knowing you're a fellow Marine."

"I need to give you more than my thanks. My driver usually acts as my bodyguard. But I've never had any

trouble down here in the early mornings. I always send him off for coffee while I surf. I should have been more careful." His gaze darkened. "I've become predictable. If you hadn't been here...well, I don't know what would have happened."

"You should be careful, especially if you're the kind of man who needs a bodyguard."

"You haven't heard of me?" Hamilton asked, giving him a thoughtful look.

"Sorry. I've been out of touch the last few years."

"Where did you serve?"

"Afghanistan. I was in Intelligence—MCIA," he said, referring to the Marine Corps Intelligence Activity division.

"Why did you leave?"

He let out a heavy sigh. "I was injured in an ambush. Explosion took away my hearing for a while. It eventually came back but not in time to pass the physical."

"And you haven't been able to find a job since you got home?"

"It's been a rough couple of months, but I'll figure it out."

"Sure. Do you have family?"

"No, it's just me. But I'm fine with that."

"Well, I'm not fine with it. Let me help you, Mr. Tanner."

"That's very generous of you, but I can take care of myself." He grabbed his bag. "I'm going to head out."

"No. I'm not letting you leave," Hamilton said forcefully. "And I have more to offer you than charity; I run a very successful company. I'm sure we can find a job for an ex-Marine. In fact, I could use someone like you on my security team. My long-time security director just decided

to retire and move to Florida with his wife, and I've been on the look-out for a replacement."

"Seriously? I am willing to work. But not if it's a job you're just making up for charity."

"It's definitely not that. You're a soldier. You know how to fight. And I know I can trust a fellow Marine to have my back."

"Always," he said. "But I don't want to take advantage. I'm sure you have other people in your company who can do the job."

"Sometimes it's good to have an outsider's objective opinion." He paused. "You risked your life to save mine. Not many men are willing to do that. Putting you to work is the least I can do. Why don't we walk down to the café, and I'll get my—" Hamilton stopped abruptly as his driver came running down the path.

"Is this man bothering you?" the driver asked aggressively, giving him a hard look.

"He's not bothering me. He just saved my life. I was assaulted by two men, one of whom put a gun in my side, but this man ran them off. Wyatt Tanner, meet my driver, Robert Burton."

He inclined his head as Robert turned pale.

Robert gave his employer a searching look. "Are you hurt? Were you robbed?"

"No. Like I said, Mr. Tanner ran them off. I was just coming to get you. We need to call 911."

"I'm on it," Robert replied, taking out his phone.

Hamilton put his surfboard in the back of the vehicle and then grabbed Wyatt's bag from his hands and tossed it

in the backseat. "I still have my seabag in a closet at home. My wife used to threaten to throw it away every other year, but I just couldn't let her do it." He paused. "I was in Vietnam. Drafted. Wasn't my idea to serve, but I'm a better man for it. What about you?"

"I enlisted at nineteen. And I'm a better man for it, too."

A gleam of understanding entered Hamilton's eyes. "Glad to hear you say that."

Two police cars pulled into the lot a moment later. After hearing Hamilton's name, the officers became much more interested in what had happened.

They each gave their statements. Unfortunately, neither he nor Hamilton Tremaine had seen the license plate number on the car, and their descriptions of the attackers could probably match hundreds of men in the Los Angeles area.

Wyatt kept his answers as short as possible, and when the police asked for an address where they could reach him, he gave the name of a motel a few blocks away. It didn't really matter. The officers were far more interested in talking to Hamilton. One seemed particularly star struck and mentioned several times how excited he was about Hamilton's private aerospace company Nova Star.

Tremaine had pulled himself together since the attack, speaking forcefully and articulately now that the shock of what had almost happened wore off. He admitted that the attack had felt targeted and personal, and Wyatt certainly didn't disagree. But he doubted the police would come even close to finding Hamilton's attackers.

As the officers left, Hamilton insisted Wyatt get into the Escalade.

He attempted one last protest. "I appreciate the offer of a possible job, but I'd like to get cleaned up, so I don't scare your human resource people. Perhaps I could come down to your office later today."

"Do you have somewhere to go and do that?" Hamilton asked.

"There's a shelter a few blocks away."

Hamilton shook his head. "No way. We'll go to my house."

"Mr. Tremaine—can I speak to you for a moment?" Robert interrupted.

"I know what you're going to say," Hamilton replied, giving Robert a hard look. "But this man saved my life."

"You don't know anything about him," Robert said in a hushed voice that Wyatt could clearly hear.

"I know he's a Marine. That's good enough for me."

"But you can't just take him to your house."

"He's right," Wyatt said quickly. "I'll go to the shelter—"

"You'll go to a hotel," Hamilton said. "We'll check you in, drop you off, and cover any food you need. When you're ready, we'll set you up with an interview. And I'm not taking no for an answer. So, get in the car."

"All right. But the hotel doesn't have to be fancy."

Hamilton smiled. "Trust me. It will be just what you need."

Fifteen minutes later, Wyatt realized that *just what he needed* was a one-bedroom suite in a five-star hotel on Santa Monica Beach with a complimentary fruit basket that was apparently the precursor to a deluxe breakfast that would be on its way up shortly.

After checking out the view from his ocean-facing balcony, Wyatt went back into the living room and unzipped a pocket inside his seabag. He took out a small phone and punched in a short text.

I'm almost in.

The text that came back was filled with swear words, followed by...

You broke my nose.

He felt only marginally guilty. *You've needed a nose job for a while.*

I told you to watch the face. Where are you?

The Beaumont. Going to get cleaned up before my job interview with the very grateful Hamilton Tremaine.

Next time I get to be the bum to the rescue.

He didn't reply, just put the phone away and headed for the shower. Then he was going to have a really big breakfast.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWO

FOUR WEEKS LATER...

Avery Caldwell was not a fan of funhouses or roller coasters, so she would have preferred catching up with her old friend Noelle Price at a wine bar or a nice restaurant instead of the chaotic and crowded amusement park on the Santa Monica Pier. But Noelle had insisted they do something different. She wanted to release some stress and had said there was no better place than a roller coaster to scream your guts out.

Hearing the screams on the nearby Twirling Tornado ride, Avery thought a lot of people were letting out their stress. She could understand it. It was Friday night, and she'd had a long week, too, but spinning herself upside down was not going to ease her tension. A hot bath, a glass of pinot, maybe a good book was what she needed.

Frowning, she realized she was sounding boring even to herself. Maybe Noelle was right, and she did need to change things up.

"Cotton candy," Noelle said with a squeal. "We have to get some." She grabbed Avery's hand, much the same way she'd done when they were ten years old and spending every minute together.

"It's just straight up sugar," she protested.

"Exactly. Do you want one?" Noelle asked, as they stopped in front of the stand. She let go of Avery's hand to reach into her handbag. "I'm paying."

"I'm good. Thanks."

As Noelle ordered her cotton candy, Avery couldn't help thinking how different they still were. Sometimes, it amazed her that they'd ever become friends, but the bond between them had formed when they were eight years old, and while it had sometimes bent and strained over the years, it was still there.

They'd been through a lot together over the years. Noelle had been there for her when her dad had left her mom to become a celebrity writer and motivational speaker. And she'd been there for Noelle when her dad and grandmother had died in a car crash.

They'd also been each other's wing-woman through middle school and high school and a bit into college, but that's when their differences had started to divide them. Noelle's partying had gone extreme, and Avery had been more interested in becoming an astrophysicist than hitting up the latest fraternity party.

They'd lost touch sometime their senior year and while she'd gone on to grad school, Noelle had left LA to travel and take whatever job served her wanderlust and party nature. They hadn't spoken for six or seven years. But

they'd reconnected two months earlier when Noelle had reached out on social media and asked her to get a drink.

When they'd met up, it felt like no time had passed at all. Although, she had been a little disappointed when Noelle asked for her help in getting a job, thinking that perhaps that was the only reason she'd sought her out.

While she'd been a bit reluctant to recommend Noelle for a job at her employer, Nova Star Technologies, because Noelle could be kind of flaky, she hadn't been able to say no.

Thankfully, Noelle had gotten the job and been a great employee so far.

"This is amazing," Noelle said, returning with her cotton candy, her blue eyes lighting up as she bit into the sugary web of delight. "Do you want some?"

She started to say no, but then she saw the look of resignation in Noelle's eyes and realized she was becoming quite the wet blanket. "Sure." She took a handful and popped it into her mouth.

"It's good, right?" Noelle prodded.

She laughed. "Yes, and I feel like I'm eight years old again."

"Not a bad age. It's when we met."

"I was just thinking that."

"I quickly became your bad influence."

"And I was your good influence." She met her friend's gaze with a smile.

Noelle nodded. "The first time you spoke to me was at summer camp. You gave me a hat, because my white skin was starting to freckle and burn."

"With your red hair and pale skin, I didn't know how you'd come to camp without a hat and a gallon of sunscreen."

Noelle laughed. "Later you learned I never planned ahead and forgetting a hat was probably the least of my vices."

"That's true," she said dryly. "And you learned I always planned ahead. My mother taught me to be practical."

"And she hung on to you as tightly as she could."

"She felt like she needed to hold my feet to the ground, especially since my father was always floating around like some shiny balloon about to leave one party and go to the next."

"Your father did love to chase shiny objects. Speaking of which, is he really going to marry Whitney Tremaine?"

"It looks that way," she said with a sigh. "It's ridiculous. She's twenty years younger than him."

"Men don't seem to have a problem with that age difference, especially when they're in their fifties."

"I've tried to tell both of them to go slow, but neither one is hearing me. Whitney is caught up in my dad's magnetic charm, and my father has always loved an adoring and beautiful fan."

"Maybe they'll be happy," Noelle suggested.

"I doubt it. My dad has no more substance than your cotton candy. He has built his entire life on a charade, pretending to be wise and well-traveled and self-aware, and Whitney has bought into it."

"Well, you can't do anything about it. They're both grown-ups."

"You're right. I can't change anything, so I'm trying to stay out of it. I just respect the Tremaines so much, especially Hamilton. He gave me a great job, all the freedom I could ever want to build out an incredible educational program at Nova Star, and I don't want my father to ruin my relationship with the Tremaines, which he could easily do."

"The Tremaines seem to like him."

"Hamilton was leery at first, but Whitney has been so unhappy since her mom died last year, he likes that my father puts a smile on her face."

"Well, maybe your dad will do better with Whitney than he did with your mom."

"Maybe." An odd feeling ran through her as Noelle glanced at her watch again.

Noelle was up to something. She suddenly felt like they were sixteen again, and Noelle had asked her to go to a movie. But she hadn't really wanted her company; she'd just needed a cover for meeting up with a boyfriend her mother didn't like. "What's going on?"

"Nothing."

"I've seen this act before. You invited me here for a reason, and it wasn't just to catch up."

Noelle stared back at her, an odd glint in her eyes. "You probably know me better than anyone else, Avery."

"I used to. But we haven't been close the last couple of years."

"I'm sorry about that," Noelle said.

"Me, too. I don't really know what happened."

"I think we started judging each other."

She couldn't deny that. "We did do that."

"But we're hanging out now. We can't change the past, but we can do better in the future. I am really grateful that you got me the job at Nova Star, Avery. I know you weren't sure if I'd screw up, and I can't blame you for thinking that, because I have messed up a lot in my life, and you have often had to clean up the mess. But I am trying to change things. I'm not the person I used to be."

She was a little shocked at Noelle's surprisingly serious tone. "From what I've heard, you're doing great at work."

"I'm glad to know that." Noelle checked her watch again. "Not that it's too difficult to screw up copying, printing and filing."

"You have to start somewhere."

"I know. I actually really like Nova Star. It's inspiring to be around people who dream big, who talk about things I can't even imagine. Do you really think Hamilton Tremaine will make it to Mars one day?"

"Who knows? It makes for good press. But Nova Star is about more than a billionaire trying to get to Mars. There is important work being done on satellites and protection for those satellites."

"But none of that is as exciting as Hamilton Tremaine strapping himself into a rocket."

She smiled. "True. Hamilton is a man with a huge vision."

"And a huge bank account."

"He worked his way to money, though. His parents weren't wealthy. He made it all himself. I admire that."

"I do, too. It makes me feel like if he can do it, we can, too. Not that you care about money—unless it's about funding some new science project," Noelle teased.

"Money is very important to science," she agreed. "But I've never wanted to live a big life—not like my dad. He loves money and fame."

"You definitely took after your mom and not your dad," Noelle agreed, sneaking another glance at her watch.

"Okay, you have to tell me why you keep looking at the time," she said.

"No reason. Just habit, I guess. Do you like my new watch? I got it the other day. It does all kinds of things—even measures my heart rate."

"I've thought about getting one of those."

"You should. It has a bunch of cool apps on it."

"Noelle, stop."

"What?"

"Are you sure you're not meeting someone else here—maybe a man?" she suggested.

"I'm dating Carter Hayes, you know that."

"I also know that Carter is a lawyer, and he's stable, and steady, and that doesn't always suit you particularly well."

"He anchors me. Like you've always done. I know I need that. I can't keep chasing bad boys, can I?"

"Isn't there something in between bad boy and boring?"

A shadow passed through Noelle's eyes. "I don't know. I make a lot of mistakes when it comes to men. You know that better than anyone. But the only excitement I'm looking for tonight is in the funhouse. Let's do that next."

She groaned. "You know I hate funhouses, Noelle."

"You're not ten years old anymore. You won't get lost again," Noelle said, reminding her of an experience she'd had a very long time ago.

"I just don't like the experience. It's creepy, and all those weird mirrors, slanted floors and odd-shaped doorways make me uncomfortable."

Noelle laughed. "That's the point. It's good for you to get out of your comfort zone, Avery. Your head is always in the stars, but you never take your feet off the ground."

"I know you think I'm boring—"

"Not boring, just a little too cautious, careful, wary... Sometimes I think you're afraid to live. You don't want to be like your dad, so you shy away from having adventures. You dream big but it's only about space, not about somewhere you can actually go."

"Hey, if Hamilton has his way, we'll all be taking trips to space."

"Somehow, I don't think you'd be the first to sign up."

"If anything could tempt me to take a risk, it would probably be the chance to explore the universe."

"Well, until then, think about exploring a bit more here on Earth, maybe some hot guy's hard body."

She groaned. "Haven't seen too many of those lately."

"Then find one."

She frowned. "It's not that easy."

"It's easier than you make it."

"Am I really that bad?"

"You're not bad; you're just always in control, and sometimes I think you miss out on stuff. Do you ever just

throw caution to the wind? Have sex because it's fun and not because it has to lead to a relationship?"

"Sex is emotional for me," she said, thinking it had been awhile since she'd gotten physically involved with anyone. "Sometimes I wish it wasn't."

Noelle smiled. "It really doesn't have to be, but I get it. You and I are different. And I don't know why I'm trying to turn you into me, because I should be the one turning into you."

She grinned back at her friend. "I have a feeling we're both going to stay exactly the same."

"Not me. I am making some changes. But first, I'm going to have a little fun."

"Well, I'm up for fun but not the funhouse."

"Come on. It will take five minutes."

"Sorry, not happening."

"If you really don't want to go, I'll go by myself." Noelle handed her the last of the cotton candy. "You can finish this. I'll be back soon."

"Really? It's that important to you?" she asked in surprise.

"I won't be long."

"And there's nothing else going on?" She couldn't shake the feeling that something was off. Not that it was that unusual for Noelle to go off on her own when Avery didn't want to do something.

"Don't worry," Noelle said. "Look, I know I haven't always been the best person, Avery. I've made some bad decisions in my life, but like I said, I'm trying to do better now. Can you trust me on that?"

"What are you talking about? You're so serious all of a sudden."

"Well, I need to shake that off right away," Noelle said lightly. "I'll see you soon."

"I'll be here."

As Noelle left, she walked over to a nearby bench and sat down, finishing off the cotton candy and tossing the empty roller into the garbage can. Then she checked her phone for texts and emails.

As the director of the educational program at Nova Star, she worked with schools, science programs and community organizations. Hamilton Tremaine was determined to bring the universe to the common man, and he'd placed a great deal of emphasis on science, creating an auditorium for shows and talks, tours for kids, and special educational opportunities for teachers, and she got to run it all. She liked it much better than teaching at the university, which was what she'd been doing before Hamilton Tremaine had approached her about a job.

As she read through the email subject headings, she decided to put her phone away. She didn't really want to work tonight. She hoped Noelle would be back soon. She wanted to get some food. She needed something more substantial than cotton candy.

She spent the next few minutes people-watching. The pier was crowded, everyone enjoying the balmy evening. She'd grown up in Southern California, so she was used to seventy-degree weather, even in early December, and most of the time she appreciated it. But once in a while, she wondered what it would be like to have a white Christmas.

That wouldn't happen this year. There was way too much going on at Nova Star to get away for the holidays.

Maybe she'd take a trip in January. New York might be fun. Perhaps Noelle would want to go with her.

Frowning, she found herself checking her own watch. It didn't have all the bells and whistles that Noelle's watch had, but it did tell the time, and at least fifteen minutes had passed since Noelle had gone into the funhouse.

What was taking her so long? There wasn't a line, so she should have gotten right in.

As another few minutes passed, uneasiness ran through her.

She tapped her fingers on the bench, crossed and uncrossed her legs, waited another five minutes and then got to her feet when she saw two teenage girls come out of the funhouse, who had clearly gone in after Noelle.

She walked over to the entrance. Debating her options for another minute, she bought a ticket and entered the attraction. The slanted floors, dark light, labyrinth of doors and rooms that often lead nowhere, the spooky noises, heavy breathing, and occasionally shrill screams made her increasingly uneasy. Her skin prickled with discomfort, goose bumps running up and down her arms, along with a cold chill.

She never should have come in here. Noelle was probably out by now, wondering where she was.

Making another turn, she faced her distorted self in the mirror, but there was someone behind her—a shadow, a man.

She whirled around, catching a glimpse of his profile as he moved into another room. She'd seen him before...at Nova Star. Brown hair, brown eyes, really attractive...he worked in security. Noelle had said he was hot, and she had agreed.

Was he meeting Noelle here?

It had seemed weird from the beginning that Noelle had wanted to hit up the amusement park, and she'd known that Avery would never go into the funhouse. So why had she insisted on going inside?

Well, she was here now. And she couldn't go back, so she had to go forward.

Unfortunately, her imagination was spiraling in the inky darkness.

She forced herself to keep moving, turning another corner. A female scream stopped her in her tracks. It had sounded loud and close.

Her heart pounded against her chest and her lungs constricted so tightly, she could barely breathe.

She had to get out of here!

Panic flooded through her.

She bumped into a wall and banged her arm hard, then dodged under a beam that appeared to be falling. She found herself surrounded by more mirrors. She ran through thick curtains and saw a door that said *Employees Only*. She tried the knob, hoping it was a back way out, but the door was locked. She had to turn around.

She heard moaning off to her right, down another shadowy hallway.

There were footsteps to her left, behind her, in front of her, and spooky canned laughter coming out of a speaker.

It was a cacophony of terrifying sounds. She tried to talk herself through the moment.

She was fine. Everything was good.

As the noises died down, a word wafted through the sudden stillness.

"Help!"

Was it just another fake, terrifying plea? The word echoed through her head, the voice sounding familiar.

Was that Noelle?

She moved down the hall and darker into the shadows. The moaning grew louder. She pulled back the heavy, thick curtain in front of her and gasped in shock.

Lying on the ground was Noelle, her hands pressing against her bloody chest, her blue eyes wide open, her lips parted as she squeezed out a word. "Avery."

"Oh, my God, Noelle." She ran to her friend's side, dropping to her knees. There was so much blood seeping from Noelle's chest, through Noelle's fingers, she didn't know what to do. "What happened?"

"Trusted the wrong person," Noelle gasped.

"This is a gag," she said in disbelief. "This is a crazy funhouse gag." She put hands over Noelle's, pressing down on the gushing wound.

"Wish...it...was... Left something... apartment...you'll recognize it from when we were young. So innocent then. Get it."

"Get what?" she asked in confusion. "What are you talking about? Who did this to you?"

"Knew it was wrong...thought I could make it right... sorry." Noelle's eyes met hers. "Love you..."

"Don't," she said forcefully. "Don't give up on me, Noelle."

Noelle struggled to take in one last breath and then her eyes closed.

"No!" she screamed. "No!"

She pressed harder on Noelle's chest, knowing even as she did so that Noelle was no longer breathing.

"Help! Help! Help!" she yelled, calling out the word over and over again, until finally pounding footsteps came up behind her.

A man and then an older female came into the hall, flooding the room with light, and then there was more screaming.

Other people came into the corridor. She didn't know if they were staff or tourists. She couldn't look away from Noelle's face. She couldn't take her hands away from Noelle's hands. *This wasn't happening. Noelle wasn't dead. It couldn't be true.*

A team of paramedics eventually pulled her away from Noelle's lifeless body. They performed CPR, then tried to shock her heart back into beating, but nothing worked.

She saw the paramedics shake their heads at each other. Tears streamed out of her eyes.

A police officer said something about needing to talk to her, but she could barely hear him.

Noelle was dead.

Someone had killed her.

Wyatt was stopped at the exit by a uniformed police officer who wasn't letting anyone out of the funhouse until they'd been questioned.

Having just seen Noelle Price's bloody body and Avery Caldwell's horrified face, he felt a wave of anger and frustration. But he couldn't show his emotions, not now.

He was herded into a back room with a dozen other guests. He answered the expected questions, expressed great concern, and offered himself up for whatever else they might need. He acted like someone who had nothing to hide and since there were a lot of people being detained at the same time, the officers were not that interested in him. They jotted down the name he gave them, as well as a phone number and address, none of which were accurate.

Then he was allowed to leave.

Outside the funhouse, the police had set up a perimeter with yellow tape, and there were probably fifty or so people who had been drawn to that part of the pier to see what was happening.

He moved outside the tape and under the shadows of the nearby snack shack.

Several minutes later, he watched Noelle's body get placed in the ambulance. He saw the police bring out Avery and escort her to a waiting police car.

She flung a look over her shoulder, and he instinctively ducked. But there was no way she could see him now. He was behind the crowd, out of the lights.

What he wasn't so sure about was whether she'd seen him in the funhouse. He'd been shocked to see her standing in front of one of the warped mirrors and he'd dodged out of sight as quickly as possible.

Not that she would necessarily recognize him.

While he had seen her every single day of the past four weeks on the security cameras at Nova Star, he'd never actually met her.

He'd told himself that was a good thing, because he'd found his gaze settling on her far too often.

There was something about her always hopeful expression that tugged on him. He couldn't remember when he'd last felt hopeful, when he'd last put his gaze on the stars and dreamed about something impossible...but Avery did that every day in the shows she had created.

She made people look up and wonder what might be... She was a dreamer and a scientist, and—he really needed to stop thinking about her in any terms besides the immediate situation.

Pulling out his phone, he punched in a number. "Noelle Price is dead. Avery Caldwell found her body. We need to talk."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THREE

AFTER ALMOST AN HOUR of questioning at the police station, Avery was told to wait in the lobby, that someone would take her home.

As she sat down in a hard chair, she glanced down at her still blood-stained hands. She'd tried to wash away Noelle's blood, but she could still see traces of it on her hands. She had a feeling no matter how many times she tried to wash it away, it would still feel like it was there.

She twisted her fingers together, forcing her gaze upward, wishing this was just a terrible nightmare and that she would soon wake up.

But that wasn't happening.

And other people who loved Noelle were now experiencing the same horror, shock and sadness.

Noelle's mom had been notified and so had Noelle's boyfriend, Carter Hayes. The detective she'd spoken to had informed her of those facts as he asked her to tell him about the people who were on Noelle's contact list. She'd actually been surprised to see less than a dozen numbers. She would have expected Noelle to have hundreds of

friends in her contacts; she was a very friendly person. But the few people's names she recognized were Noelle's coworkers.

The detective had also showed her that the only texts on the phone in the past week were between her and Noelle, talking about getting together and going to the amusement park.

Where were the other texts? Why wasn't there communication between Carter and Noelle on the phone?

She'd expressed surprise when the detective had asked her if she found it unusual for Noelle not to have texted her mom or her boyfriend in the last several weeks. He'd suggested that perhaps Noelle had changed phones or had a second one.

She hadn't been able to come up with a good answer to either of those questions. She didn't know why Noelle would have had more than one phone, but it was definitely possible, and it seemed like the only explanation for why there were no other texts on the phone, because Noelle had always been an avid texter.

Tapping her foot on the ground, she was about to get up and tell the officer at the desk that she would grab her own ride home, when the station door opened, and her father walked in.

Brett Caldwell was fifty-five years old, but he looked at least ten years younger. She'd gotten her dark hair from him, but she'd missed out on the charming, quirky smile and long, lean limbs that took him up over six foot two. She was barely five four, and as usual, her father's towering presence made her instinctively wary—not because he

would ever physically hurt her. No, her father had only hurt her with absence and disinterest, which made her wonder why on earth he'd shown up.

But despite all the hurt and anger between them, when he opened his arms and gave her a sympathetic, worried smile, she went willingly into his embrace. For the first time in her life, her dad had actually come when she needed him.

"I can't believe you're here," she said, as they broke apart. "How did you know?"

"It's all over the news."

"I was on the news?" she asked in dismay.

"Not you—Noelle. But when the reporter said Noelle was with a female friend, and you weren't answering your phone, I had a feeling it was you. I called around, and here I am. I'm sorry about Noelle. I know how close you were."

"I can't believe she's dead. One minute we were eating cotton candy, and the next minute she was bleeding. There was so much blood, Dad. I've never seen anything like that."

He frowned. "Let's get you out of here."

"That would be good. I just want to go home."

"I think you should come to my place. Whitney said you're welcome to spend the night."

"I really just want to go to my apartment." She could not top off this day having to make small talk with Whitney Tremaine, a woman who was her boss's daughter, her father's girlfriend, and was only five years her senior. It was too much.

The door behind her dad opened, bringing in cold air, and one frantic mother.

"Avery," Vicky Caldwell said with relief.

Unlike her dad, her mom looked every day of her fifty-five years, her brown hair laced with gray, especially at the roots, and there were heavy lines around her mouth and eyes. But then, life had not been as kind to her mom as it had been to her father.

"Are you all right?" her mother asked.

"I'm okay," she said, accepting another tight hug, this one feeling far more normal and familiar.

After her parents had divorced, she and her mom had become a very tight unit.

"Noelle?" her mom asked, searching her gaze. "Is she really dead?"

She gave a tight nod. "Someone stabbed her."

"I don't understand how this happened."

"I don't, either."

"Did you see who killed Noelle?" her father asked.

"No. It happened in the funhouse on the Santa Monica Pier. It was dark and creepy inside. I wasn't going to go in at all. But Noelle was taking forever to come out, and I just got a weird feeling. She'd been acting a little strange, so I got worried."

"How was she acting?" her dad asked.

"I don't know if I can even say," she replied with a helpless shrug. "She was checking her watch, like she was waiting for something or someone. But when I called her on it, she brushed me off. She told me I could trust her. She said she'd turned over a new leaf and was trying to be a

better person." She paused. "I don't remember exactly what she said. Maybe I'm misremembering." As the adrenaline surge began to wear off, she felt overwhelmingly tired. "I want to go home."

"You're coming home with me," her mom said firmly.

"Or with me," her father put in. "The offer still stands, Avery. I know I haven't always been there for you, but I'd like to make up for that now."

"Make up for it?" her mom cut in, a scornful look on her face. "You're going to make up for splitting our family apart, for depriving Avery of a father, for choosing fame and fortune over us? You think a guest room is going to do that, Brett?"

"This is between me and Avery, Vicky. You've always tried to poison her against me."

"I didn't have to do a thing. She made her own decisions based on what she experienced."

She put up a hand as she could see the old anger simmering between them. "I can't handle this right now. Please, stop, both of you." When they fell silent, she made her decision, which was, of course, the only one she could make. "Mom, I would love to stay with you tonight."

Her mother looked mollified by her answer.

She turned to her father. "I appreciate you coming down here. Thank you. But I'll be more comfortable at Mom's. I can sleep in my old room."

"Whatever you want, Avery," he said with disappointment. "I'm only a phone call away."

"I appreciate that."

"Come on, let's get you home." Her mom put an arm around her shoulders and led her out of the police station.

She knew her mother was brimming with questions, but thankfully she didn't ask any on the way to her house, which was about fifteen minutes away.

While she'd moved out of her childhood home when she went to college and had never ever really been back for more than the occasional night at a time, when she walked into the house, she felt safe for the first time in hours.

She flopped onto the living room couch, too exhausted to even try to make it upstairs to her room.

"Can I get you something to eat or drink?" Her mother perched on the edge of the armchair across from her.

"The thought of food..." She shuddered.

"Do you want to talk about what happened?"

"Not really."

She didn't think that would satisfy her always curious mother, and she was right.

"I didn't know you and Noelle had reconnected," her mom said. "I thought you lost touch awhile ago."

"She looked me up a few months ago. She needed a job, and I gave her a referral for a position at Nova Star."

"What?" her mother asked in surprise. "You never told me this."

"I didn't think you'd like it. You haven't been a fan of Noelle's for a long time."

"Because she was always getting you into trouble. But you could have told me. I hate to think you are keeping things from me, Avery."

"It really wasn't deliberate. You've been busy, and so have I. Where's Don tonight?"

"He's in San Diego, taking care of some family business with his sister. He'll be back tomorrow. We're leaving for Hawaii on Sunday."

"That's right."

"I don't know if I should go now."

"Of course you should go. You've been looking forward to the trip for weeks, and so has Don." Her mom had been seeing a very nice man for the last four months, and Avery had high hopes for their relationship. It was long past time for her mother to be happy.

"I know, but after what happened tonight..."

"That should not change your plans."

"I want to support you, Avery."

"You always have, Mom," she said with heartfelt sincerity. "But you can't do anything." She gave a helpless shrug. "I can't do anything. Noelle is dead, and nothing is going to change that."

"What did the police say?"

"They were more interested in asking me questions than giving me answers. They're going to do a thorough investigation, dig into every aspect of Noelle's life."

"Her mother will be heartbroken."

"I know," she said heavily. "And Noelle has been dating someone, too. I'm sure he'll be shocked and saddened. I just don't know why this happened."

"Was it random?"

"The police don't know if she just ran into some crazy person in the funhouse, or if there was more to it."

"Surely someone saw this person."

"I think there must have been cameras somewhere, but it was one dark maze inside the attraction. There were lots of people moving around in the shadows. And there were screams every other minute, coming over the speakers. I think I heard Noelle scream, but I'm not even sure. If I hadn't found her on the ground, I might have just kept going and tried to find my way out."

Her mother's lips drew into a tight line. "I kind of wish you had done that."

There was a part of her that wished that, too. But would the heartbreak be any less if she'd been outside when the cops were called, when the paramedics rolled up in the ambulance, when Noelle's body was taken away? She doubted it. And at least Noelle hadn't been alone when she died. Maybe that meant something.

"I'm surprised you called your father," her mother continued.

"I didn't. He saw the news and had this feeling I was the friend with Noelle, and I guess he must have called the police and they told him I was there."

"When I think of all the times I wanted him to be there for you, and he wasn't..."

"I know. I suspect he was only there tonight because he's been trying to get closer to me in recent months, ever since I inadvertently introduced him to the new love of his life."

Her mother blew out a breath of disillusionment. "I almost feel sorry for her. And I have to admit that I sometimes wonder if your father didn't look you up just to

get closer to the Tremaines. Brett could always sniff out money and opportunity better than anyone else."

"He is successful now in his own right. It's not like he doesn't have money and he's just a gold-digger."

"Oh, sure. He's a celebrity author and a motivational speaker. But there's your father's money and then there's Tremaine money. We both know there's a huge difference."

"Believe me, the last thing I wanted was for Dad to get involved with the Tremaines, but you know how he is. He came to take me to lunch one day and suddenly he was up in the executive suite. He can be charming."

"Don't I know it." Her mother paused, giving her a concerned look. "You're very pale. Let me get you some juice or some tea."

"Tea would be nice. Something soothing."

"I have chamomile."

"That sounds good." As she said the words, she could almost hear Noelle's voice in her head, saying, *Chamomile tea? What are you—an old lady?* "Noelle would be laughing at me right now."

Her mother raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

"Because she thought tea was an old lady's drink. She always wanted coffee, as strong and as caffeinated as she could get it. Not that she needed more energy. She woke up bouncing off the walls." Her lips suddenly trembled as emotion welled up in her. "I can't believe she's dead, Mom."

Her mother immediately came to sit next to her, putting her arms around her. "I'm so sorry, Avery. I know how much you loved her."

"Even when we weren't talking, I always knew she was out there somewhere, that we'd one day be friends again."

"It's good you got back together before all this happened."

"But it wasn't enough. We were just getting to know each other again."

"It's never enough time, honey."

She drew in a shaky breath. "Noelle's mom lives in Florida now. I wonder if she'll want to bury Noelle there. But Noelle didn't like Florida. She said the mosquitos were bad. On the other hand, she'd probably want to be by her mom. Although, she does have a boyfriend. Maybe she would want to be with him. I need to talk to both of them. I need to help."

"Stop," her mom said firmly. "Breathe. You can talk to everyone tomorrow. I doubt anyone will be making decisions before then."

"I shouldn't have let her go into the funhouse alone."

"This isn't your fault, Avery."

"It feels like it." She paused, not wanting to talk anymore. "Thanks for being here, Mom, but I'm going to lie down."

"Are you sure you want to be alone?"

"Yes." She pulled out of her mother's embrace and slowly got to her feet, which seemed to take a lot more effort than it normally did.

"We'll talk about everything tomorrow, Avery. If you need help planning some kind of memorial for Noelle, you know you can count on me."

"You're leaving for Hawaii on Sunday."

"I'll change my plans."

"I don't want you to do that."

"I'm not going to leave you like this."

"There's nothing you can do to make this easier; I'm just going to have to breathe through it. A wise woman told me that once after my father left."

Her mother gave her an emotional smile. "Sometimes that is all you can do."

"But I might need to do more than breathe."

Her mom's gaze narrowed. "Like what?"

"Like try to find out who killed Noelle."

"The police will do that. You need to stay out of this, Avery. Because whoever did kill Noelle is still out there somewhere, and you don't want to be the person who knows too much. In fact, I wonder if the police shouldn't have someone watching you."

"I'm not in danger. I don't think whoever killed Noelle even saw me in the funhouse."

"But you don't know for sure."

She thought about that—the terrifying chills suddenly coming back, but she didn't want to alarm her mother. "I don't think I'm in danger. And I'm not sure Noelle's death was random. She was acting cagey. Something was off."

"Something you don't need to know anything more about. Why don't you come to Hawaii with me and Don?"

"Don would love that," she said dryly.

"He'd understand. We can get you your own room."

"I'm going to be fine. Just keep your plans."

"Only if you promise to stay out of Noelle's business."

"I wouldn't know where to start digging even if I wanted to," she said, offering her very concerned mother an answer that would pacify her. "I really don't want you to worry."

"That's my job, Avery."

"Not anymore. I'm an adult. I'll get through this."

"I know you will, but I still want you to be safe."

"Me, too." As she said good night to her mother and walked down the hall to her room, she wondered if what she'd told her mother was true—that she didn't know where to start digging into Noelle's life. Noelle had said something about her apartment right before she took her last breath.

Was there a clue there?

If there was, the police would probably find it, wouldn't they?

That question ran around and around in Avery's head as she tossed and turned all night, haunted by Noelle's face, her eyes, her last gasping breaths.

If only she'd found her a minute sooner. If only she hadn't let Noelle go into the funhouse alone. If only she'd made Noelle tell her more about what was going on in her life.

So many *if-only's* made sleep impossible.

It also didn't help that she was in her childhood bedroom. It was in this room where she and Noelle had had slumber parties, painted their nails, texted boys, gossiped

about their friends, and told each other secrets in the dark of the night.

But there was no one talking now.

Noelle's voice had been silenced.

It still seemed impossible to believe that someone had murdered her in the funhouse.

Was it random?

The police had questioned her regarding the relationship between Carter and Noelle, asking her if he was the kind of man who might hurt his girlfriend. She hadn't been able to answer the question.

Noelle had told her with her dying breath that she had trusted the wrong person, but who was that? *Was it Carter or someone else? And what was at Noelle's apartment that she wanted Avery to get?*

Throwing off the covers, she opened her eyes, relieved to see the dawn light peeking through the blinds.

Thank God it was morning. She'd never been so happy to see the sun come up. She took a quick shower, wishing she didn't have to put on the same clothes, but she no longer kept anything to wear at her mom's house. Then she went into the kitchen to find a pot of coffee ready for her as well as a note from her mom.

Early pre-Hawaii hair appointment. Eggs and bacon are in the oven. Eat something!

She smiled at her mom's thoughtfulness. She might be thirty years old, but when she was in her mom's house, her mother still continued to take care of her.

She poured herself a mug of coffee, retrieved the breakfast plate from the oven, and found herself

surprisingly hungry.

Over breakfast, she pulled out her phone and forced herself to check the news. It wasn't easy to read about Noelle's death, especially since it was told in a dispassionate way, mentioning only Noelle's name, her age, her city of residence, and her employer. There was no description of the vibrant, beautiful, outgoing person, who should have had a much longer life.

To think of everything that Noelle would never have—a wedding, a husband, a child, grandchildren—it broke her heart and her eyes swelled with tears.

She put the phone down, sadness being replaced with anger. Whoever had killed Noelle needed to be brought to justice. She'd asked the police to keep her in the loop, but she wasn't sure they would. She wasn't even sure they had taken her off the person-of-interest list.

She couldn't blame them. She'd gone to the pier with Noelle, she'd conveniently stayed outside the funhouse during the murder, but then, somehow, she'd been the one to find her. It had sounded a bit odd even to her ears.

Picking up her phone again, she made the call she was dreading the most. She called Noelle's mom, Kari Price. She'd had Noelle's mom's phone number in her phone since she was sixteen years old. Both their moms had wanted their girls to have their phone numbers, just in case.

The phone rang several times before Kari's voicemail picked up the call. She sounded perky and happy. This had definitely been recorded before she'd received the worst news of her life.

"It's me, Avery," she said, her hand tightening around her phone. "I'm so, so sorry. I think you know how much I loved Noelle. I want to help you with whatever you need. Please call me back when you get a chance." She let out a breath as she ended the message. In some ways, she was relieved she hadn't connected with Noelle's mom. Her feelings were still so raw.

Getting up, she rinsed off her plate and put it in the dishwasher. As she debated her next move, she realized she didn't have her car. She'd gotten a ride to the pier, thinking that with Noelle there would be wine involved at some point. She didn't want to hang around here all day, so after leaving a short note for her mom, she called a rideshare company, then went out front to wait.

A few minutes later, she was on her way home. But halfway there, the restlessness running around inside her made her ask the driver to change her destination.

She needed to go to Noelle's apartment. It was the last thing Noelle had asked her to do. Avery needed to figure out why.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FOUR

NOELLE LIVED in the Ocean Breeze Courtyard Apartments in Venice Beach. As Avery got out of the car, she couldn't help thinking that the building, while modest, was nicer than some of the places Noelle had lived in. After her father and grandmother had died, money had been scarce, and Noelle's mom had never been one to stay at the same job very long. In fact, Kari Price was probably even flakier than Noelle. But Kari had always been nice to her, and she couldn't imagine what she was going through now. Hopefully, they would have a chance to speak soon.

She walked across the street, feeling more than a little trepidation at entering Noelle's apartment. She told herself there was nothing to fear, but with so many unanswered questions, everything seemed suspicious and worrisome. She walked through the front gate into a courtyard. Twelve apartments, six on each level, surrounded the courtyard in a rectangular shape. At the back was a small pool and barbecue area.

The building and courtyard were empty and quiet at nine o'clock on a Saturday morning, and as she walked up

to Noelle's second floor apartment in the back corner, she wondered if the other tenants knew what had happened to her. Probably—since there was yellow caution tape across Noelle's front door, a stark reminder of the previous evening's events. The police must have searched the apartment last night for leads into her death.

She stared at the tape for a long moment, knowing she would probably be breaking the law if she went inside. On the other hand, this seemed like the perfect opportunity to see if she could make sense of Noelle's last words.

The door had a coded lock on it, and if the police hadn't changed it, she should be able to get in. She used the four-digit code that Noelle had used for everything—6257. It was the address of her childhood home, the one that Avery had spent so much time in as a young girl.

Sure enough, the lock clicked, and she turned the knob, stepping into the apartment.

Her heart was beating a million miles a minute. She knew Noelle wasn't there, but she didn't know if the danger or trouble she was in was.

She stood just inside the door for a good minute, listening acutely for any unexpected sound. Everything was still. The room had obviously been searched, however. The pillow cushions had been pulled off the couch. The kitchen drawers and cupboards were open. It was a huge cluttered mess.

She made her way into the bedroom, finding more sad chaos. The bed was unmade and covered with clothes, probably tossed out of the upended dresser drawers. If Noelle had left something here, it was gone.

She felt overwhelmed at the idea of digging through everything to find some clue when she didn't even know what she was looking for.

And then she saw Noelle's jewelry box sitting open on the floor just inside the walk-in closet. She knelt down next to it. There wasn't much of value inside, rings, bracelets, necklaces...

Noelle had never had enough money to buy real jewelry, but there was the locket from her grandmother that she'd gotten on her sixteenth birthday and the charm bracelet Avery had given Noelle when they were ten. She'd bought one for herself at the time, too, and they'd collected fun charms over the next year. She couldn't believe Noelle had kept it all these years.

Impulsively, she grabbed both items and slipped them into her coat pocket, then she rifled through the rest of the jewelry box, finding a man's watch, that she thought might have belonged to Noelle's father, but she wasn't sure.

Standing up, she looked around the rest of the closet, wondering where Noelle would have hidden something—if she'd had something to hide. She probably would have been creative in some way. Put it where no one would expect. But where would that be?

She moved farther into the closet checking the pockets in the coats that were still on their hangers but found only a few quarters. Shoe boxes were strewn about the closet. Obviously, the police had already gone through them.

A couple of books on the floor caught her eye, and she smiled when she realized one of them was hers. She'd published a small book about space travel for kids the past

year, and Noelle had bought it in the gift shop at Nova Star and made her autograph it.

She picked it up and read the inscription that Noelle had actually dictated for her: *To the smartest, most beautiful, and skinniest best friend. Love, Avery.* She closed the book and pressed it against her heart, feeling a wave of pain.

And then she heard a noise...

Her eyes flew open. Her heart sped up. *Someone else was in the apartment.*

She started toward the door, not sure if she should barricade herself in the closet or try to get by whoever was in the apartment.

Maybe it was just the police.

It wasn't!

A man came out of the bathroom dressed in dark clothes with a ski mask over his head and face, a long, black gun in his hand. She shrieked in alarm and instinctively backed up. He raised his arm, the gun pointed at her face.

"Please, don't," she begged, knowing it probably wouldn't make a difference.

But he hesitated.

She didn't know why; she was just grateful.

"Just go. I don't know who you are or why you're here," she said.

"Shut up." His voice was hard, angry, and the hand holding the gun tightened.

She drew in a quick breath, still trying to figure out an escape.

Then another man came barreling into the room, tackling the gunman to the ground. He wrestled the gun

out of the guy's hand and the weapon went flying across the room.

Terrified and paralyzed, she stared in shock as the two men went after each other. It was then she realized that the man fighting her attacker was the same man from the funhouse, the one who also worked in security at Nova Star.

What the hell was he doing here?

What did it matter?

She needed to get out of the apartment while she had the chance, but the men were between her and the door.

As she hesitated, she saw the Nova Star security guy get off three quick brutal punches that sent the masked man flying against the wall.

The man quickly recovered, regaining momentum as he dodged the next blow, grabbed the security guy around the waist and knocking him off his feet.

But the security guy quickly regained his footing, bouncing back with another blow. And then in one swift motion, he ripped off the man's mask.

She saw a dark beard and tattooed Roman numerals on the man's neck, as he picked up a drawer and hurled it at the security guy. The drawer hit her rescuer in the head, and he went down hard. As he struggled to get back up, the formerly masked man took off, and then her rescuer growled out "Stay here," and ran after him.

She let out a breath of relief. But staying in the apartment didn't seem like a good idea. Still clutching the book in her hand, she left the bedroom.

The living room was empty. The front door was open. She saw a woman across the courtyard staring at her, and she was talking on her phone, probably calling the police.

She should stay and wait for them to arrive, tell them what happened, but the yellow tape on the front door made her realize that she'd tampered with a crime scene, and no one was going to be happy about that.

As she stepped into the exterior hallway, her rescuer came jogging back to her, a grim, angry expression on his face. She backed up a step.

"Come on," he said. "You need to get out of here."

"I'm not going anywhere with you."

"Look, I work in security for Nova Star. You can trust me."

"Can I?" she countered. "I saw you at the funhouse last night—right before Noelle was killed."

Dark shadows filled his brown eyes. "I didn't kill Noelle."

"I don't know if I can believe you."

"You were the one kneeling over her. Maybe you killed her. Maybe you came to her apartment to find something you didn't want anyone else to know about."

She gasped at the suggestion. "Noelle was one of my best friends."

"Good. Then you'll want to stay alive long enough to find out what happened to her. Move, Avery. There will be more coming."

"You know my name?" she asked in surprise.

"It's my job to know who you are."

She didn't want to go with him, but she also didn't want to stay here and wait for whoever else might show up, so

she followed him out of the building. "I think the neighbor called the police," she said as they hit the sidewalk. "We should wait for them."

"It's too dangerous to stay here. You can talk to the police later. Where's your car?"

"I don't have one."

"Then you'll come with me."

"Why would I trust you?"

"I just saved your life."

"Did you? Why were you there?"

"We're not having this conversation here." He opened the door to a nearby silver SUV. "Get in."

As a car came speeding down the street, all thought of resisting him fled. She didn't know who he was, but he had saved her from a gunman, so she jumped into the vehicle.

He slid behind the wheel as the other car passed by without incident.

Then he started the car and peeled down the street in the opposite direction.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Somewhere that isn't here."

It wasn't much of an answer, but, somehow, she'd made the impulsive decision to trust him.

And then Noelle's last words came back to haunt her...*I trusted the wrong person.*

She hoped she hadn't done the same.

Wyatt drove quickly away from Noelle's apartment building, pissed off at what had just gone down. But right now, his only focus was on getting Avery to safety. She was damn lucky he'd gotten there when he did, or she might be in the same condition as Noelle. He knew she didn't trust him, but that didn't matter. She was shaken up, but she was alive.

She was wearing the same clothes she'd been in last night: skinny dark jeans, a cream-colored knit top, and a short black leather coat. Her brown hair fell loose around her shoulders, her face was pale, and her brown eyes appeared shocked and weary, but she was still a very attractive woman. Normally, there was a warm, inviting, exciting air about her. He'd been drawn to her every time he'd seen her on the security monitor.

He'd told himself he needed to get closer to her because she was tight with Hamilton Tremaine, but he'd never had the chance...until now.

This wasn't the opportunity he'd expected, but he'd take it.

Avery and Hamilton shared a love of the stars, and Hamilton spoke of her with great reverence and fondness. Avery had gotten even deeper into the family when her father Brett Caldwell had become romantically involved with Whitney Tremaine, the youngest of Hamilton's three offspring.

She'd been on his radar to check out, but she'd moved higher up the list when he'd seen her at the pier on Friday night. Avery had been the one to get Noelle her job at the company. While he'd never seen them spend much time

together at work, clearly, they'd gotten together after business hours.

But Noelle was dead, stabbed with deliberate violence, and Avery had watched her friend bleed out. Now, she was running for her life. He couldn't imagine what she was thinking—probably wondering what kind of hell she'd walked into.

He wished he could tell her it was going to be okay, but he had no idea if that was true. He needed to find out what she knew and then figure out how much danger she was in. It was bad enough she'd been in the funhouse last night, but this morning she'd seen a man's face—the same man who might have killed Noelle. That could be a big problem.

As he glanced at her, he noticed the book clenched in her hand. She'd brought it from Noelle's apartment. Maybe it was a clue. "Why are you holding that book?"

At first, she gave him a blank look and then she glanced down at the book in her hands. "Oh, it's mine." She held it up, so he could see the cover and her name. "I wrote this about space for kids, and we sell it in the Nova Star gift shop. Noelle bought it and had me sign it for her. I saw it on the floor of her room, and I just grabbed it. Then the man came out of the bathroom with a gun." She paused. "I don't know why I didn't leave it there. Noelle bought it as a joke. She dictated what she wanted me to write when I autographed it."

"What did you write?"

She opened the book and read the inscription: "*To the smartest, most beautiful, and skinniest best friend. Love Avery.*" She gave him a sad look. "Noelle was one of a kind.

She was the brightest star, the life of the party, the girl who did things no one else dared to do. She could be crazy and funny and generous..."

As her voice trailed away, he wondered what she was leaving out. "And..." he prodded.

"She could be flaky at times. She was almost always late. She sometimes ditched me for a better offer, but I couldn't really blame her, because I was usually nowhere near as much fun as she was." She let out a sigh. "But I shouldn't say any of that, because she's dead."

"Say whatever you want. Dying doesn't turn anyone into a saint."

"She didn't deserve to die. It still feels unreal, like it's a horrific nightmare. I want to wake up, but I can't."

He nodded, knowing there was nothing he could say to make her feel better. She was going to have to live through the grief.

As he reached the Pacific Coast Highway, he sped up, not stopping until he saw a small parking lot near a public beach. He pulled off the road and into an open spot.

"Why are you stopping here?" Avery asked, shooting him a wary look.

"Seems as good a place as any. We need to talk. Let's take a walk on the beach. I could use some fresh air. I'm betting you could, too."

He could see she was torn between going with him or staying in the car. Probably in her mind, neither option was a good one. But, finally, she nodded and got out, leaving the book on the seat as she did so.

He wondered if there was more to that book than she'd said; it was interesting that she'd taken it from Noelle's apartment, especially since he didn't know why she'd gone there in the first place.

They walked across the sand to the edge of the water and just stood there for a moment.

It was a cool, sunny December morning, with only a few people on the beach: a couple walking their dog, a family with a couple of kids digging sandcastles, and a lone woman sitting on a towel, reading a book.

"Why does everything look normal when it's not?" Avery questioned.

He doubted she really wanted an answer, so he didn't give her one. He was just happy that her breath had slowed down. He needed her thinking clearly.

"What's your name?" she asked abruptly, turning to look at him.

"Wyatt Tanner."

She waited a moment, then said, "You already know my name."

"I do. You're Avery Caldwell, an astrophysicist, and an employee of Nova Star. You created and currently manage the educational outreach program at the company. And I know that because I work in security, as I mentioned before. I've gone over the personnel files for everyone at the company."

"That's a lot of people."

"Well, I'm not the only one on the team," he said, meeting her brown-eyed gaze, and thinking irrelevantly that she was even prettier in person. Clearing his throat, he

added, "I hope my position at Nova Star makes you feel more comfortable."

"Why would it?"

"It's my job to protect the employees of Nova Star, and Noelle was one of them. I didn't hurt her, Avery."

"But I saw you in the funhouse, and even though I was freaked out, I recognized you."

"Why were you freaked out? You saw me before you found Noelle."

She frowned. "Yes, but I hate funhouses. I got lost in one when I was a little kid."

"Then why did you go in last night?"

"Because Noelle never came out. I was watching the door, and I kept seeing people come out who had gone in after her. I got worried."

"You didn't think she was just having fun?"

"I had a bad feeling. She was acting weird."

"How so?"

"She was checking her watch a lot, like she was waiting for something or was going to meet someone."

"But she was with you. Why would she be meeting someone else?"

"Obviously, I don't know the answer to that question. When I thought I saw you in the mirror, I wondered if she was meeting you." She paused, a question in her eyes. "Was it you? Were you supposed to meet Noelle in the funhouse?"

"No."

"It seems like the oddest coincidence that you were there."

"I was supposed to meet a friend at the pier. She was late, so I thought I'd check out the funhouse while I was waiting."

"When did you know that Noelle got stabbed?"

"I was almost at the exit when I heard screams. One of the employees told us to wait, that something had happened."

"Us?"

"There were about a dozen of us."

"Did you see Noelle?"

"No. They put us in a back room."

"Why?"

"To question us on what we'd seen. Unfortunately, I hadn't seen anything." He paused. "I understand you found her."

"Yes, and it was awful. She was covered in blood. I wanted to save her, but I could see that she was slipping away."

"Slipping away?" he echoed, his gut tightening. "She was alive when you found her? Did she say anything?"

Avery hesitated, the suspicion back in her eyes. "It feels like you're asking all the questions and I'm giving all the answers."

"I investigate crimes. Asking questions is what I do."

"But the crime didn't happen at work. Why did you come to Noelle's apartment this morning?"

He hesitated and wondered why. He lied every single day of his life. It was second nature. And it rarely bothered him. He could pass lie detector tests. He could face down a team of interrogators without giving anything up, but there

was something about Avery's haunted expression that made him wish he could tell her something that would help her make sense of things. But that was impossible. More information would only put her in more danger.

"Well?" Avery demanded. "Are you going to answer me?"

"Hamilton called me last night after he heard the news. He asked me to make sure that Noelle's death wasn't tied to her job at Nova Star."

"Why would it be?"

"I don't know, but he asked me to see what I could find out."

"At her apartment?"

"Yes. Now, do you want to tell me why you went there?"

"I'm not really sure. Noelle muttered a few cryptic words before she died. She said she'd trusted the wrong person and she said something about me going to her apartment, but she didn't say why. I thought about it all night and decided I should go there and see if anything stood out to me. Unfortunately, when I got there, the place was a mess. I don't know if the police turned things upside down or if someone else did. I walked into the closet and then that man came out of the bathroom with a gun. I froze. And then you came in."

"Did he say anything to you? Did you recognize him when I got the mask off?"

"No. I'm absolutely certain I never saw him before. What about you?"

"Same."

"He was looking for something in Noelle's apartment. Do you think he found it?"

"My guess is you interrupted his search."

"I wish I knew what he was after, why Noelle implied I should go there." Her gaze turned toward the ocean. "Noelle often trusted the wrong people. She liked men who were exciting and daring and sometimes walked a fine line between right and wrong. And it wasn't just the men in her life who led her down the wrong path; it was also her female friends. That's why we stopped hanging out together. I felt like she changed into someone else." Avery looked back at him. "Sorry, I'm rambling."

"You're entitled. You've suffered a huge personal loss." He paused. "Although, it sounds like there was a break in your friendship."

"We barely spoke over the last six, seven years. It wasn't until she looked me up two months ago and asked me to help her get a job that we became friends again. And, before you say it, yes, I did think she was probably using me, but she was still my friend and I had the ability to help her, so I did." Avery took a breath and let it out, folding her arms in front of her. "What's going to happen now? Noelle's neighbor called the police. She saw us. I'm thinking we should go down to the station and talk to the detectives I spoke to last night and tell them what happened."

"We could do that," he said slowly. "But we broke into a crime scene."

"I knew the code," she protested.

"But you crossed the police tape."

She frowned. "How did you get in?"

"You didn't lock the door behind you."

"What about the other guy? He was there before me. How did he know the code?"

"No idea." He paused, as he considered his options. He didn't want to go to the police, but he could see she was already working up a lot of steam for that course of action.

"Why don't you want me to go to the police?" she asked, giving him a suspicious look.

"I'm trying to protect you." That wasn't even close to the truth, but hopefully she'd buy it.

"Or protect yourself."

So much for her buying it.

"This isn't about me. If I'm reluctant for you to go to the police, it's because Hamilton asked me to look into this. He's concerned about Noelle's death. If it's tied in any way to Nova Star, it will bring negative press and intense scrutiny to the company, and with the satellite defense launch scheduled for Tuesday, that's the last thing he wants."

She paled. "I don't care about any of that. I love Nova Star, and I am a big fan of Hamilton's, but I want justice for Noelle. If every employee at the company has to be questioned, then that's what has to happen."

He liked that she wasn't intimidated by Hamilton. "I want justice for her, too. Why don't we work together on that?"

"If you want to work together, then come with me to the police station."

"Is this a test?"

"It's a suggestion."

He'd have to make a quick call, but he could probably make it work. "All right."

She looked surprised. "Really? Why the change of heart?"

"No change of heart. You're clearly determined to speak to the police, so I'll go with you. Before we do that, tell me about Noelle's boyfriend."

"Carter? I don't know a lot about him. We had dinner together once. He seems nice enough. He's a lawyer and works in patents at Nova Star. Noelle told me he was steady, and she liked that about him. He kept her feet on the ground the way I used to." She sniffed as emotion came back into her eyes. "Maybe it was good Noelle had a chance to really fly, knowing now how little time she had." She cleared her throat. "Anyway, I don't know much about Carter except that he works a lot."

"You haven't spoken to him since last night?"

"No. I know the police were going to call him. I did try to reach Noelle's mother, but she didn't answer. I left her a message."

"Is Noelle's family local?"

"Not anymore. Her father is deceased. Her mom moved to Florida seven or eight years ago. I don't think there's anyone left here in Los Angeles. They didn't have the biggest family to start with. Noelle and I had that in common. Although my father didn't die, he did leave, so by the time Noelle and I were in high school, we were both basically fatherless."

"I've seen your father in your office. He must have come back at some point."

"Yes, but he was gone for a long time before that. And even when he was around, he wasn't really around. Although, he did come to the police station last night; I guess he's trying to show that he's changed."

"Your father came to the station?" he echoed, making a mental note of that fact.

"Yes, and then my mom showed up, and suddenly I felt like I was thirteen again, watching them fight over who was going to take me home from soccer practice. Only it wasn't soccer, and I wasn't a kid, and Noelle had just died." She drew in a shaky breath. "Oh, God...I don't know how to deal with all this emotion. I'm angry and sad, scared and confused. It's too much."

"It won't get easier for a while."

She stared back at him. "You know I actually appreciate you saying that instead of trying to tell me I'll feel better soon."

He shrugged. "I know what it's like to lose a friend. It's very difficult, especially when the circumstances are sudden and violent."

"I never could have prepared myself for what happened last night."

"No."

"All right. So, I guess we should go to the police station. And then hopefully I can go home, change my clothes and catch my breath."

"I'll take you there."

"Thanks."

As they walked back to the car, he hoped he was making the right decision. He didn't particularly want to talk to the

police again. He needed to make a play...something that would continue to allow him to build trust with Avery but not get him in deeper with the cops, who would only make his assignment more difficult.

After opening the car door for Avery, he walked slowly around the back of the vehicle, pulling out his phone and texting a quick message to his team leader. He needed the FBI to pull some strings, and they had to do it fast.

As he slid behind the wheel, he got a text that they were on it.

Relieved, he started the car and pulled back onto the highway.

"You haven't been at Nova Star that long, have you?" Avery asked.

"About a month."

"And before that? Where did you work?"

"I was in the Marines—intelligence."

"That's where you saw friends die."

"Unfortunately."

A gleam entered her eyes. "Hamilton was a Marine. I'm sure that made you a good candidate for the job. Always faithful, right?"

"Semper fi," he murmured, thinking that faithfulness did not describe him at all. He came and left in the dark of the night. He lived his life in the shadows, under different names, different disguises. He was a chauffeur one day, a trucker the next—a gambler, a hustler, an importer, an exporter. He'd lost track of all the different roles he'd been required to play.

Sometimes, he thought he was losing track of himself.

But now wasn't the time to think about that.

He had a job to do, and it wasn't security for Nova Star. It was high-stakes industrial espionage by a possible foreign power into the aerospace industry, and Noelle's death had just raised the stakes. He needed more access, more information, and as he glanced over at Avery, he realized she might be valuable on a lot of levels. If anyone could get him deeper into the inner circle of Nova Star, it was her.

But that meant he would have to play her...and for the first time in a long time, he felt a reluctance to do that.

He would have to get over it.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FIVE

WYATT TOOK his time getting them to the police station, wanting to give his contact a chance to get there ahead of him and smooth the way. Fortunately, there was a fair amount of Saturday morning beach traffic, so he didn't have to try that hard to go slow.

When they arrived at the station, almost forty-five minutes had passed since his text. Hopefully that was enough time.

As Avery got out of the car, she looked grimly determined but not very happy.

"Still want to do this?" he asked.

"I feel like I should."

He had a feeling this was a woman who always did what she thought she *should* do. "Then let's do it."

When they checked in at the counter in the lobby, he made sure to give his name as well as Avery's. A moment later, a uniformed officer came into the room. The man asked Avery to wait and then escorted him down a hall and into a conference room.

When he stepped inside the room, he was surprised to see a friendly and familiar face. The beautiful brunette with the sharp, always insightful, green eyes, was one of his closest friends, not just at the bureau but in life. He'd met Bree Adams at Quantico, and through the years, they'd saved each other's life more than once.

"Bree, what are you doing here?" He looked around, making note of the fact that they were not in an interrogation room. "Where's Flynn?"

"Don't worry. We're cool," Bree said, reading his expression. "As far as the police know, I'm meeting with you to find out what happened at Ms. Price's apartment this morning. Flynn contacted Special Agent Joanna Davis, who gave me a brief read-in on your situation. She's meeting with the homicide detectives now to inform them we'll be handling the investigation going forward."

"Good." He was pleased that Flynn had brought Joanna in. She could be the public face of the investigation. Since Joanna had already spoken to Hamilton months ago, it would make sense for her to be involved again. "It's the right move. Nova Star is aware that the bureau is concerned about a spy in their ranks. With Noelle Price's murder, the company won't be surprised that they're back on the hot seat, but as long as they don't know I'm working from the inside, we're good."

"Joanna said you're on a specialized task force run by Flynn MacKenzie. That shocked me. You and Flynn were intense rivals at Quantico."

He saw the speculation in her eyes and shrugged. "Things change. I liked the job he was offering, so I took it."

"How's the investigation going?"

"Not as quickly as I would like. We haven't had a lot to go on until now. Noelle's murder has definitely raised the stakes."

Bree nodded. "I've been wondering ever since I saw you at the beach before Thanksgiving if I would run into you again, or if you would try to contact me, but it's been very quiet the last month."

"I was about to go under with Nova Star when I saw you there, and you weren't alone."

"No. I was with Nathan, and I figured you were undercover. You look better than you did then. You got rid of the beard."

"I had to clean up my act for my job in security. I'm a suit and tie guy now, at least during the week. What about you? You're working for Joanna?"

"Yes. After everything that went down in Chicago, I needed a change, and I've always wanted to live at the beach. I'm not sure I love the work yet; it's been more administrative than I like, but on the other hand, it's a nice break from the emotionally intense drama of working with missing children."

"I know you had a rough time in Chicago. I'm glad things worked out." He paused. "Or did they? The kid...*your* kid..." He let his words slip away. He might be friends with Bree, but he didn't know how much she wanted him to know.

"She doesn't know anything yet," Bree said quickly. "Someday, but not now. It's easier being here in California. I keep in touch, but I'm not right there wondering what

she's doing every second. Plus, I'm with Nathan, and I get to run by the sea every morning. It's not bad."

He smiled, noting the genuine happiness in her eyes. "It sounds good, and Joanna is lucky to have you."

"I'm not sure she feels that way. She didn't recruit me, and she still remembers me as being on the Quantico team that screwed up and got Jamie Rowland killed. Not that she says that out loud, but I feel her judgment."

"That had nothing to do with you."

"I know. Hopefully, she'll eventually get past all that old history, and realize I'm a seasoned agent now. Anyway, what can you tell me about this morning?" Bree asked. "You went to the homicide victim's apartment?"

"Yes, and I ran in to her best friend there—Avery Caldwell. I also ran into a masked gunman. Fortunately, I got a look at his face. Unfortunately, he got away."

"What can you tell me about him?"

"Caucasian male, mid-thirties, beard, brown hair and eyes, scar over the right eyebrow and the Roman numerals MMX—2010 tattooed on his neck—could be a gang initiation date."

"Why was Ms. Caldwell at the apartment? Does she know something about the murder?"

"No, but she's trying to figure out who killed her friend."

"You need to get her out of this, Wyatt."

"Too late for that. I'm concerned that not only was she at Noelle's side when she died, she also got a look at the guy in the apartment this morning. She could be in danger. I'm going to stay close. I have this feeling she's the key to something—I just don't know what. She's also tight with the

Tremaines, and while I've developed a relationship with Hamilton, I've had little access to his sons, his daughter, or their spouses. Since Avery's father is living with Whitney Tremaine, Avery is in the immediate family circle. She might be able to help me."

"Or she could turn them against you."

"It's a risk, but I'm not worried about that right now."

"What does Hamilton Tremaine think about Ms. Price's murder?"

"He'd like to believe her death has nothing to do with his company. In fact, he'd like me to prove that. I've managed to become a valuable confidant. We share Marine stories."

Bree smiled. "Are you making those up?"

"I actually used one Jamie and Damon told me about from their Army days."

"Always thinking on your feet."

"It's what keeps me alive."

"I heard about the sting you set up to get into Nova Star. Jim Abrams is pissed you broke his nose."

He gave a faint smile. "Not intentional. I thought he was better at ducking."

She smiled back at him. "I'm glad we're going to work together, even if it's from afar. One of these days, I want you to meet Nathan. He's very important to me."

"I'd like to meet him sometime."

"Before you go..." She jotted a number on the back of her card. "I know you're working through Flynn, but in case you ever need anything unofficially...I just got this number."

"Thanks." As he put her card into his wallet, the conference room door opened.

Joanna Davis walked into the room. Dressed in a slim black skirt and black blazer over a silky blouse, her short, straight blonde hair framing her face, she looked both sophisticated and professional. Joanna was in her early forties, a divorcee who had been at the bureau for fifteen years.

He respected Joanna, but she was one of only a handful of people who could make him uncomfortable. She was too flirtatious and a bit of a man-eater, both on the job and in her personal life, and he preferred to spend as little time as possible with her.

Fortunately, he worked for Flynn, not for Joanna, so while she might be Flynn's boss, they had little contact with each other, and that's the way he preferred it.

"Wyatt, you look good," she said, her gaze raking his body. "I've been wondering when we'd run into each other. I didn't think it would be here."

"What happened with Detective Larimer?"

"He's standing down. We're in charge now. I'll inform Mr. Tremaine of that fact as well."

"That will simplify matters."

"Well, I live to simplify things for you," she drawled, sarcasm in her tone. "I understand Mr. Tremaine is giving you more responsibility and access. Is that true?"

"It is. He has even asked me to keep an eye on his sons' activities."

"So, while he tells the FBI there's nothing to see where his sons are concerned, you're hearing a different song?"

"Yes. Hamilton is an idealist, a dreamer, but he's also a smart man. While he doesn't want to believe anyone close

to him would sell him out, he's not stupid. He may not want to work with the bureau, but he's determined to find out if someone in his company is a mole."

"Good."

"I need to go. I don't want to leave Avery alone in the lobby too long. She might try to talk to the cops and confuse things. Thanks again for the help here."

"Once this is over, we'll catch up," Joanna said. "I'd like to hear about what else you've been doing the past several years."

"Sounds good," he said, seeing a teasing light lurking in Bree's eyes. Bree and his other friends had been well aware of Joanna's interest in him at Quantico.

After leaving the conference room, he found Avery pacing around the lobby, a worried look on her face.

"Did you tell them what happened?" she asked immediately.

"Yes. We can go." He put his hand against the small of her back and pushed her gently toward the door.

"What do you mean?" she asked in surprise. "I don't need to answer any questions?"

"Nope. We're good."

"They don't want to talk to me?"

"I told them everything we knew."

"And that's it?"

"That's it."

She gave him a suspicious look as they left the station, but she kept walking until they got to his car. Then she stopped.

"Okay, seriously, what's going on, Wyatt? Why did they want to speak to you alone? Why wasn't I questioned? I'm Noelle's friend."

"And I run security for Nova Star, where Noelle was employed. I knew the information they needed to proceed, and I gave it to them."

"And they didn't care that neither one of us was supposed to be in the apartment?"

"I wouldn't say they didn't care, but we're not under suspicion." He opened the door for her, and she reluctantly got in.

He walked around the car and slid behind the wheel. "I'll take you home now."

"I still don't get it," she said a few moments later. "Something is off." She shot him a suspicious look. "I think you're lying to me, Wyatt."

"What do you think I'm lying about? If the police wanted to talk to you, don't you think they would have called you in? I wasn't stopping anyone from doing that. You were sitting in the lobby."

"You also weren't gone that long."

"There wasn't a lot to say. I know you're on edge—"

"On edge does not begin to describe how I feel. You may be looking into this on behalf of Nova Star, but Noelle was my friend. She meant something to me. This isn't just a case to me. She was an important person in my life."

"I understand, which is why I told the police what we both knew so you wouldn't have to go through it again."

"And Detective Larimer was really okay with that?"

"It wasn't his choice. There was a special agent from the FBI there."

"Wait a second—the FBI was there? Why?"

"They didn't say; they just informed me that they're taking over the case."

"But that doesn't make sense."

He shrugged. "Like I said, they didn't feel it necessary to explain their actions to me. But the good news is that we have more people looking for answers and for justice for Noelle."

"Well, that's true. I'm sure the FBI will have more resources than the local police."

"Exactly. Now, you can go home and catch your breath, the way you wanted to."

"I would like to do that," she admitted. "I need a minute or two to regroup. And then I have to start making calls."

"Do you want to give me your address?" He actually already knew where she lived, but realized he was about to give that away.

She started. "Oh, sorry. Yes. You're actually going in the right direction. I live in Hermosa Beach. 312 Taylor Avenue. It's right off the 405." She paused. "What do you think will happen next, Wyatt? Will the FBI be able to find the man in Noelle's apartment based on his tattoo? You did tell them about the tattoo, didn't you?"

"Yes, and it will hopefully give them a good lead."

"Do you think that man is the same person who killed Noelle?"

"It's possible."

She let out a breath. "I was thinking that, too. The FBI has to find him."

"If anyone can, they can."

Several minutes later, he pulled up in front of a three-story apartment building, grabbing a parking spot not too far from the front door. He scanned the area for anything out of the ordinary, but all looked peaceful and quiet. It was possible the man from Noelle's apartment did not know who Avery was, but he didn't want to underestimate anyone.

"I'll walk you up," he said, as he turned off the engine.

"That's not necessary."

He ignored her comment, meeting her on the sidewalk. "After what happened at Noelle's, I'm not letting you go in alone. You're very important to my boss."

"Why do you say that?" she asked curiously.

"He speaks very highly of you, Avery. He loves your passion for space. He says you're one of the few people who really understands his vision. He also told me how you have helped him bring Nova Star to the masses with your educational outreach programs. He's quite impressed with you."

Wyatt had to admit he was fairly impressed with the beautiful astrophysicist as well, which seemed crazy, because geeky science girls were not usually his type. *But there was something about Avery...* He refused to let himself finish that thought. Avery was part of his job. He couldn't forget that.

"Well, I'm impressed with Hamilton, too," Avery said, as they entered her building and headed up the stairs. "He has

never met a barrier he didn't want to break down, or a challenge he couldn't overcome, and I like that kind of bulldog tenacity. I also respect his brilliance and his big dreams. He's the kind of person who changes the world. It's inspiring to be around him."

"How did you come to take the job with him?"

"Hamilton came to a lecture I gave at UCLA three years ago. He waited around afterward to speak to me and insisted I have coffee with him. He wanted to tell me about his company and how he needed someone like me to share his passionate love of space with the outside world. I was intrigued. He basically offered me a blank check to do whatever I wanted to do. I couldn't turn that down, so, I said yes. I've never regretted it." She paused in front of her door. "This is me."

"Let me go in first," he said, as she unlocked the door.

She waved him inside, and he made a quick scan of the small living room and adjacent kitchen area and then headed down the short hall to check out the bedroom and bath. Avery dogged his every step, staying close behind him as he opened the last remaining closet door.

Then she let out a heavy breath. "No one has been in here."

"It doesn't look like it. Everything is very neat."

"I don't like clutter. When I get stressed, I clean."

"You must have cleaned this morning."

"Actually, I didn't stay here last night. I went to my mom's house. But the last few weeks have been tense. With the upcoming satellite defense launch, there have been a

lot more requests for educational information, which get siphoned through my department."

He nodded, following her back into the living room.

While everything was very organized, the apartment was still warm and interesting and smart, he thought with a smile, noting the shelves laden with hardcover science books, the photographs of space on the walls, the colorful blanket tossed over the back of the couch, and the extremely old telescope by the window.

"Do you take this up on the roof?" he asked.

"Occasionally, but I don't use that one very often. I got it when I was twelve. I have access to much better telescopes at work. Have you ever been out to Nova Star's test facility in the desert?"

"Not yet."

"The rooftop there affords some of the best viewing I've ever experienced. Are you interested in the stars?"

"Not really. When I look up for too long, I tend to trip over reality."

"That can happen. I've been accused of having my head in the clouds, but space also gives me perspective. When I get too caught up in my day, I look up, and I realize how very, very small my life and my problems are. Although, today, they seem rather huge. Do you want something to drink?"

"I'd love some water," he said, happy that she wasn't eager to kick him out. He wasn't ready to walk away yet—for multiple reasons, some that went beyond Noelle's murder.

Avery took out two glasses, popped in some ice, and then filled them with water from a filtered spout on the outside of her refrigerator.

He took a seat at her small kitchen table, noting the organized pile of bills next to her checkbook. "I bet you actually balance this thing," he said, as she handed him a glass.

She made a face at him. "I used to. I've gotten busy, and so much is direct deposit and online bill pay now but keeping track of my finances was a lesson my mother taught me early on. Money was tight when I was growing up. Before my father became a celebrity writer, he was fairly unsuccessful, and we were living off my mom's teacher's salary. My mother always had to make sure that we had our bills covered while my dad chased his big dreams."

He heard the note of bitterness in her voice. "It seems like your father succeeded in achieving some of those dreams. From what I understand, he's quite famous now."

"Yes, because he created a male self-help bestseller called *Meat, Sex, Sports—A Man's Guide to Happiness*."

"That's all it takes, huh?"

"Men are apparently fairly simple creatures," she said dryly.

"And that book sold well?"

"Over five million copies. It also spawned a series of webinars and motivational talks, first for men, then spreading into the general public how to find happiness, peace, and success. My father has since written three other books on variations of that theme." She took a sip of her

water. "I'm happy that he found the success he wanted; I'm just not that impressed with his work. I'm an academic. I like substance, and my dad is all style and talk and not a lot else. He changes with the wind. You never really know who you're going to get when he shows up." She sighed. "I don't know why we're talking about him."

"How do you feel about your father's relationship with Whitney?"

"I hate it, but I can't do anything about it."

"Did you introduce them?"

"Yes, of course. He came to have lunch with me, and the next thing I know, we're up in the executive suite. Now he has become entrenched with the Tremaines. He bought a big house in Calabasas, and Whitney moved in with him. I'm really afraid he's going to mess things up for me. I know that sounds selfish, but I like my job, and I care a lot about the Tremaines. As Hamilton told you, he and I are kindred spirits when it comes to our interest in space."

"What do you think about the upcoming launch on Tuesday? Is the satellite ready to defend itself? Or is Hamilton rushing under the pressure of his rivals?"

"I honestly don't know. He could be pushing too hard. But that's understandable since there are several companies hot on our heels. Do you have any idea how much activity on Earth is controlled and aided by satellites?"

"I've been getting a crash course on that subject the past month," he said. "Hamilton likes to talk."

"That he does—to anyone who will listen. Space is the new frontier; it's the next battleground, Wyatt. Being able

to defend our satellites is going to be hugely important. And being able to take down other weaponized satellites, missiles, rockets, etc., without creating space debris will also be a significant advancement." She smiled. "But the general public is not as interested in the satellite as they are in the idea of Hamilton getting in the *Star Gazer* rocket ship one day and making a trip to Mars with some of his best friends. That's the story that captures the imagination."

"He tells me that could happen within the next five years. Do you agree?"

"We're getting closer to the possibility of interplanetary travel. But five years is overly optimistic. I'd say fifteen is a better guess, but who knows?"

"Would you go to Mars?" he asked curiously.

"Get in a rocket and soar into the universe? I wish I could say yes," she said with a yearning sigh. "I would love to be part of that, but I don't have the guts."

"Not even to see what you've spent your whole life learning about?"

"Big old coward," she admitted. "I wish I wasn't. I wish I was brave."

"You were brave this morning."

"No, that's not true. I froze. I didn't even try to help you when you were fighting with that man. I could have gone for the gun. I just stood there—paralyzed. I was lucky he didn't go after me when he hit you with that drawer."

"I should have seen that coming," he said with a frown. "But don't sell yourself short. You stood up to danger, and you've held it together since then."

"Barely, but I probably shouldn't admit that. I have a feeling an adrenaline crash is coming my way soon. You might want to get ready for that."

He smiled at her endearing self-deprecation. "I will buckle up."

"I just want answers, Wyatt. I want to know why Noelle is dead. I want to make sure someone pays for killing her. And while I understand why Hamilton wants to protect the company, Nova Star's work is not more important than Noelle's life. I hope you're really trying to get to the truth and not cover it up."

"That is what I'm trying to do," he reassured her.

She didn't look entirely convinced. "But your loyalty is to Hamilton."

"Not at the expense of someone's life." He paused, thinking that he needed to give her a bit more information in order to get her to trust him. "I'll let you in on a little secret; Hamilton doesn't just want to protect his company, he's also worried about his son, Jonathan."

"Jonathan?" she echoed. "What does he have to do with any of this?"

"Jonathan had a drink with Noelle three nights ago at Steamers, a bar in the Pelican Point Hotel in Palos Verdes."

"What?" she asked in surprise. "How do you know that?"

"I saw them."

"You saw them together—just by chance?"

He ignored that question, going for one of his own. "Do you think Noelle and Jonathan could have been having an affair?"

"Jonathan is married, and Noelle has a boyfriend. I didn't think they even knew each other. Are you sure it was her?"

"I am sure. It doesn't seem like they would have business to discuss since they don't work together."

"No, they don't." She gave him an unhappy look. "What happened after this drink? Did they stay at the hotel?"

"They left in separate cars."

"And you saw that, too? Were you following Noelle? Or Jonathan?"

"That's not a question I can answer."

"Why not?"

"Because it involves other issues at Nova Star I'm not cleared to speak about."

"If those issues have to do with Noelle's death—"

"I don't know that they do," he said quickly.

"But they might." She pressed her fingers to her temples. "I'm getting a headache."

"I realize this is tough, Avery. You don't know me, and I'm asking you a lot of questions, but I am trying to help. Did Noelle ever say anything about Jonathan to you?"

She lifted her gaze to his. "She said he was attractive and funny. She admired him from afar. But that's true of a lot of the women at Nova Star. Jonathan is personable and friendly. Everyone likes him."

"Okay. But somehow Noelle, who was a Level 1 admin got close enough to the owner's son to have a drink with him. How do you think that happened?"

"I don't know, but Noelle's job or educational level has never deterred her from getting a date. She has always

been very attractive to men. Trust me, I went to enough bars with her to know that when she was in the room, it was like there was a spotlight on her. Men were drawn to her, and she didn't even have to say a word. She just had this gleam in her eyes, this secret smile, that everyone wanted to explore."

There wasn't any jealousy in Avery's tone, but he couldn't help wondering what it would have felt like for Avery to have a friend who was always in the sun, while she was in the shadows. *Although, maybe Avery had preferred that.* Despite her proficiency at her job and her ability to speak to hundreds of people in a group, there was an innate sense of shyness about her, as if stepping into the light was no more in her comfort zone than going to Mars.

"I'm sure Jonathan just ran into her somewhere at the company," Avery continued. "Maybe she told him she needed career advice or something. Or maybe he hit on her. I don't know."

"Would she go out with a married man?"

Avery hesitated. "She wasn't a slut, Wyatt, but she did like men, and she didn't consider sex to be that big of a deal."

"I'm going to take that as a yes."

She let out a heavy sigh. "Even if they were having an affair, what does that mean?" She paused. "Are you suggesting that Jonathan Tremaine could have something to do with this?"

"I don't know. I'm looking for a motive. This wasn't random. Someone wanted to kill Noelle."

"If she was having an affair, Jonathan could have been afraid she'd tell his wife," Avery said slowly.

"That's one scenario," he said, happy to let her throw out her theories first.

"Or her boyfriend could have found out she was cheating on him. But Carter doesn't seem the angry type, and the person who killed Noelle..." She shook her head, biting down on her lip whatever she was remembering. "It was violent, Wyatt. It was personal. It felt like Noelle had betrayed someone." She took a breath. "But if she and Jonathan weren't personally involved, then their meeting had to have been about something else. You were following Jonathan for a reason that you don't care to explain, so Noelle's death might not have anything to do with an affair." She rolled her head around her shoulders. "I feel like we're going in circles. Nothing makes sense."

"Not yet. But one thing is clear to me, and it should be clear to you. You're in the middle of a very dangerous situation. You can identify the man in the apartment this morning. You were with Noelle last night. You heard her dying words." He paused, seeing her face pale. "I know you're a smart woman. You understand what I'm saying."

"Yes, I do."

Avery's phone buzzed, and she jumped. As she looked at the number, the lines of tension around her eyes deepened. "It's Noelle's mom. I have to take this."

He nodded. "Of course. But I'm not leaving you alone in this apartment, so I'll be here."

Avery didn't reply as she took the phone with her into the bedroom. "I'm so sorry, Mrs. Price," she said, and then

she closed the door.

Wyatt let out a breath, hoping he'd played his cards correctly. He usually didn't share information, but Avery was sharp, and she was in danger, and his gut told him that the only way to gain her trust was to bring her into the problem—at least part of the problem.

Feeling restless, he got up and paced around the living room. The book Avery had taken out of Noelle's apartment was on the coffee table. He picked it up, wondering if it was a clue. He read the inscription again, remembering what Avery had said earlier—that Noelle had dictated the words to her.

He'd never spoken to Noelle, but Avery's deep affection for the woman had brought her alive in a way he had never expected. Even though his heart had iced over years ago, he felt a pang of sadness that such a bright woman was gone. He would find out who had killed her. He didn't know if Avery would like the answer or if Noelle's activities might hurt the people who loved her, but at least they'd get to the truth.

Flipping through the pages of the book, he wondered if by some small chance Noelle had jotted something down inside the book, but it was pristine. Nothing appeared altered in any way.

Taking a seat on the couch, he read through the introduction and then into the first few chapters. The book was for kids, but Avery had not dumbed anything down. Her passion for science and space rang through on every page, and he could only imagine how many children would

be inspired to go into astrophysics or become astronauts after reading her story.

A few minutes later, he heard the shower go on. Avery must have finished her call. Maybe when she was done freshening up, he could encourage her to pack a bag and find another place to stay.

She'd probably fight him on that. She might think she was a coward, but when he looked at her, he saw a strong, capable, beautiful woman with a really big heart.

He would have liked to have met her away from the job. But that would have never happened. He was almost always on assignment, living a life that was not his own. That's why he rarely had relationships with women. He had nights, sometimes the occasional weekend. But no one ever really knew the real him, and he never really knew them. It had worked well for the most part. *But every now and then...*

He shrugged off that wayward thought and tried not to think about Avery's beautiful curves under a spray of hot water.

Thankfully, his phone rang, and he was relieved by the distraction. When he saw Hamilton Tremaine's private number flash across his screen, he got his head back in the game.

"Tanner," he said briskly.

"How is Avery?" Hamilton asked, genuine concern in his voice. "I was just informed by Special Agent Davis at the FBI that she was attacked this morning at Ms. Price's apartment. Why didn't you call me, Wyatt?"

"I haven't had a second. Avery is fine. Unfortunately, the person involved got away. What else did Agent Davis have to say?"

"That the FBI is taking over the case because of Ms. Price's employment at my company and the other incidents we've previously discussed. I don't see how this woman could have been involved in any kind of sabotage or theft. From what I understand, her job was barely more than an administrative clerk. She didn't have access to anything, and she only worked for us for a few months. In fact, I suspect, based on the resume I read, that she was only hired because of Avery's influence. Unless...there's something I don't know?"

"I'm just beginning to dig into Ms. Price's life. She did have a boyfriend at the company—Carter Hayes."

"Yes. Mr. Hayes is a junior attorney in the patent department. Have you spoken to him?"

"Not yet. I'm most concerned about Avery right now. She can identify the man who almost shot her this morning, and I'm worried about her safety."

"So am I," Hamilton said with alarm. "You need to stay with her. I don't want anything to happen to Avery. She's very important to me. She's not just an employee; she's practically family."

"I understand. And I intend to keep a close eye on her."

"Good. Keep me updated. I want to know anything and everything as soon as you know it. I don't like what's going on. This break-in following the murder...disturbs me. Especially since you told me last night that Jonathan had a drink with Ms. Price several days ago. The FBI are going to

jump on that like bees to honey, the same way they did with the death of that Chinese woman."

"Did you ask him about his meeting with Ms. Price?"

"I haven't been able to reach him. I've left several messages with his wife. But I'll see him at dinner tomorrow night."

"I know you've been reluctant to have me speak to Jonathan, but I think it's important."

"Not before I do," Hamilton said firmly. "Once I hear what he has to say, we'll discuss it."

Hamilton was still protecting his son.

"But I know Jonathan," Hamilton continued. "He didn't kill that woman, whatever else he might have been doing with her. Someone is either continuing to frame him or he was just in the wrong place, wrong time. You need to find the real killer. Get the job done. I'm counting on you."

"I will do my best," he promised.

As he was about to put down his phone, a text appeared from Flynn MacKenzie. They rarely communicated, but apparently this was important.

There were only three words. *Fire Courtyard Apartments.*

A chill ran down his spine. He immediately got on the internet for more details, quickly coming across a breaking news story about a four-alarm fire at an apartment complex in Venice Beach. The entire building was engulfed in flames. Residents said it started quickly, some sort of explosion in a corner apartment.

His gut twisted. He knew exactly which apartment that was. Whatever hadn't been found this morning was forever

gone.

Avery came out of the bedroom a moment later, wearing tan jeans frayed at the hem, a pair of flats and a soft green sweater that hugged her breasts. Her long brown hair was still damp and curling at the ends, her gold-flecked brown eyes bright and beguiling, her face showing a lot more color than she'd had before. But that wasn't going to last long.

"I've been thinking," she said. "I know you're worried about me, but I'll be fine here. I'll keep the doors locked." She stopped abruptly as he got to his feet.

"No," he said flatly.

"Look, I appreciate your concern, Wyatt, but I'm not involved in anything remotely classified at Nova Star. I don't know secrets. I run shows for kids and teachers and tourists."

"You're not staying here, Avery." He turned his phone around, so she could see the screen. "Look."

"What?" she asked, taking his phone. "Is that a fire burning? Is it close by?"

"It's in Venice Beach—an apartment building."

"Oh, my God! Is that Noelle's building?"

He met her suddenly terrified gaze. "Yes. Pack a bag, Avery. And do it fast."

"Why? This doesn't have anything to do with me. Maybe it's all over now. Noelle is dead, and her apartment is destroyed. There's nothing left to find."

"Except you were there. You had a book in your hands. And they don't know that it was just your own book autographed to your friend."

She stared back at him, her gaze sharpening as she took in his words. "It's possible they think I have whatever they were looking for?"

"And that's why we're getting you out of here. Pack for several days and bring that book."

"Why?"

"I don't know, but just bring it."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SIX

"WHERE ARE WE GOING?" Avery asked twenty minutes later, as Wyatt drove away from her apartment building. She'd thrown a pile of clothes into a suitcase, without putting much thought into what she was bringing, grabbed what little cash she had stashed in her place for when the cleaners came, and then jumped into Wyatt's car.

The fire at Noelle's apartment building had definitely brought home to her the fact that this was not over and that she might really be in danger.

For a brief moment in the shower, she'd tried to talk herself out of that idea, rationalizing that whoever was interested in Noelle's place was not interested in her. But with Noelle's apartment gutted by fire and Wyatt's reminder that she had been seen there, it made sense to get away. Although she didn't think her book was important in any way, she'd put it in her bag at his request. Maybe they'd go through it together later.

"Wyatt?" she pressed, realizing he hadn't answered her.

There was a hard set to his jaw, a simmering tension in his movements, and that didn't make her feel better at all.

Wyatt had jumped in front of a gun for her. He was an ex-soldier. He was clearly someone who ran into dicey situations when everyone else was running out, so if he said they needed to run, she had to trust his instincts.

"Sorry. Thinking," he said in clipped tones, shooting her a quick look, his dark eyes filled with shadows. "What about your mother's house?"

"No. My mom will have a million questions. Plus, she's leaving for Hawaii tomorrow, and I don't want her to change her plans."

"What about your dad then?"

"And bring danger to him? Or to any of my friends? I need to stay somewhere that isn't attached to me, where no one would expect me to be. Why don't you just drop me at the nearest hotel?"

"I'm not dropping you anywhere."

"We can't stay together," she protested.

"Why not?"

"Because...we can't," she said, floundering for a good reason that wouldn't make her sound like an idiot.

"We'll get separate but connecting rooms. However, I'd like to stop at my apartment and pick up a few things before we do that."

"I'm very capable of taking care of myself, Wyatt," she said, trying to infuse as much confidence into those words as she could. But the truth was she didn't feel at all optimistic that she could take care of herself, not after what had happened to Noelle and what happened to her at Noelle's apartment.

"In ordinary situations, I'm sure you are," Wyatt returned. "But this is not ordinary, Avery. If what I've told you isn't enough for you to realize the need to be careful—"

"I recognize the need. I'm not stupid."

"I know you're not stupid; I just don't think you've ever had to deal with the kind of danger that you might be in."

He was right about that. "Fine. We'll stay at the same hotel, but I can't just hide out there. I have to go on living. I told Noelle's mom that I would meet her at the mortuary at four o'clock today to discuss plans. I'm not going to let her deal with that alone."

"I'll go with you."

"To the mortuary? To discuss funeral plans? To listen to Noelle's mother sob with grief?" she asked with surprise.

"If that's what you're doing, that's what I'm doing."

"Why do you care what happens to me? You don't know me. We're not friends. I'm not your problem. Why go out of your way to make sure I'm safe?"

"I told you before; it's my job to look out for Nova Star employees, and that includes you. Especially you, actually. I spoke to Hamilton while you were in the shower. He's concerned about you, and he asked me to stay close. He's the boss."

"I doubt he made a point of that."

"He said you're practically family. Why don't you call him and ask him if you can trust me?" Wyatt suggested.

Her gaze narrowed on his confident expression. "You know he'll say yes."

"I do. But I want you to feel as comfortable as you can with me."

She debated for a moment and then pulled out her phone and called Hamilton. She rarely used the personal number he'd given her, but these circumstances were extraordinary. And as much as Wyatt seemed trustworthy, there were bits and pieces of his story that bothered her, like the fact that he'd been at the funhouse the night before, that he'd seen Noelle with Jonathan Tremaine but couldn't explain how that came to be.

Hamilton answered a moment later. "Avery—are you all right?"

She heard real concern in his voice, and it touched her deeply. In truth, Hamilton sometimes felt more like a father to her than her own dad. "I'm hanging in there."

"I am so sorry about your friend. Your father told me how close you were—ever since you were children."

Emotion knotted her throat at his caring words. "Noelle and I were best friends for a long time. I really hope they catch the person who killed her."

"You need to leave that to the police," he said. "Wyatt told me what happened this morning. Why were you at your friend's apartment?"

So, Wyatt had talked to Hamilton. At least, he hadn't lied about that. "I just needed to go there," she said vaguely, not wanting to get into any more details.

"I'm worried about you, Avery. Wyatt says the intruder got a look at your face."

"Well, Wyatt was certainly chatty," she said. "While the situation isn't ideal, I'm being careful; I don't want you to worry."

"It's too late for that. I didn't know your friend, but she was an employee, and the manner of her death disturbs me. The fact that you could be in danger makes the situation even worse. I want Wyatt to protect you until we can hire additional security."

"I don't think that's necessary."

"I do. Now, will I see you tomorrow at your father's birthday dinner? With everything that's going on, I'm sure it's the last thing you want to do, but I know Whitney has gone to a lot of trouble, and I'm quite certain your father would appreciate you being there."

She'd completely forgotten about the birthday party. "I haven't given it any thought."

"Completely understandable. But please make it happen. I'd like to talk to you in person, Avery. I know you're going through a difficult time, but there are also some things I need to know about your friend. With the launch coming up on Tuesday, I have to know if there is any break in my security."

"I understand. I'll see you tomorrow then, but I have one request. Please don't say anything to my dad about what happened at Noelle's apartment this morning. It will only upset him."

"He's your father; he has a right to know."

"But there's nothing he can do about it. I'd really appreciate it if you wouldn't say anything."

There was a hesitation on the other end of the line, but finally Hamilton said, "All right. I will respect your wishes."

"Thank you."

"Take care."

"I will."

"Well?" Wyatt asked, as she disconnected the call.

"You weren't lying. Hamilton asked you to look out for me."

"And...you'll let me be your shadow for a while longer?"

"Yes." She turned her head to meet his gaze. "But I'm pretty sure you're going to be bored out of your mind."

For the first time since she'd met him, a smile curved his lips.

"Bored, huh? So far hanging out with you has been anything but boring."

"But this isn't my normal life. That is usually quite uneventful."

"Well, hopefully we can get you back to that."

"Hopefully," she echoed, although a tiny part of her wondered if that was really what she wanted.

Not that she needed to live in a world where her friends were dying, but Noelle had just ranted to her the night before about being too complacent, unwilling to take risks, always playing it safe.

Well, she wasn't doing any of that anymore. She was not playing it safe and she was taking a risk by trusting Wyatt, because as much as Hamilton seemed to like him, he'd only known Wyatt for a month. Maybe she needed to find out more about Hamilton's favorite new security guy.

Despite her interest in getting to know what Wyatt Tanner was all about, his studio apartment gave her few clues. It

was very small, utilitarian, no real signs of any kind of personality. He had a couch and a chair in front of a large TV and a queen-sized bed in a sleeping alcove, but there were no pictures or photos anywhere in the apartment.

"It doesn't feel like you've lived here long," she said, as he threw some clothes into what appeared to be an old Marine duffel bag.

"Why do you say that?"

"There's nothing here that feels personal. Where are your photos?"

"On my phone."

Somehow, she doubted that. "Really?"

He shrugged. "I don't take a lot of photos. I keep memories here," he said, tapping the side of his head. "And I don't need my space to be personal. It's just a place to crash."

"Exactly. It's not a place to live. And I can't help but feel that your salary at Nova Star would allow you to live a richer life."

"I'm not into material things. I've spent a lot of my life moving around. It's easier to leave when you don't have to pack and unpack."

She stared back at him, studying his expression. Wyatt certainly didn't give much away, his gaze unreadable, his thoughts masked, and his emotions hidden away. He was over six-feet tall, with a powerful stance, a commanding presence. He was definitely the kind of man anyone would follow—the kind of man a woman would look at twice, or three times...

She drew in a quick breath at that distracting thought, trying not to notice his full, sexy lips, the strong jaw, the thick wavy brown hair that fell over his forehead.

"What?" he asked, his brows furrowing at her continued stare. "Something in my teeth?"

"No," she said. "Sorry for staring. I was just...thinking." She licked her lips. "So, you said it's easier to leave if you don't unpack. Does that mean you're not planning to stay here or at Nova Star?"

"I have no plans to leave, but life can be temporary. This weekend is proof of that. I've seen a lot of people plan for a future that never came. It seems pointless."

"That's cynical and depressing."

"Or realistic and pragmatic," he returned, as he moved toward his closet.

She couldn't help but notice that he didn't have much more in there than a few suit jackets, dress shirts and slacks. He grabbed several of those items and put them in a green duffel bag that looked like it had seen better days.

"Is that from the service?" she asked.

"It is."

"Why did you leave the Marines?"

"You're very curious," he said, zipping his bag.

"I'm a scientist. I question things. And you didn't give me an answer."

"I lost my hearing in a bomb blast. It came back about two weeks after they booted me out of the Corps."

"I'm sorry you were injured. Do you miss being a soldier?"

"I still fight, just on a different battlefield."

There was a steel gleam in his eyes, cockiness in his tone, and a core of strength that she found very, very appealing. She had no real reason to trust him, but she did. She hoped she wouldn't regret that.

"We should get going," he said. "I want to get us checked in somewhere before we go to the mortuary. We can talk later."

She nodded, but she wasn't sure if they would talk later, at least not about personal matters, and maybe it was better that way. She needed to think of Wyatt like a bodyguard, keep a good solid emotional wall between them.

After leaving his apartment, Wyatt drove them to a hotel in Marina Del Rey. It was big, impersonal, with lots of people around, and she suspected his choice was deliberate. After Wyatt checked them in, they took the elevator to the seventh floor. They had two connecting rooms and the first thing Wyatt did was open the door between the rooms and do a thorough check of both.

"What are you looking for?" she asked as he opened up her closet and the dresser drawers.

"Just looking."

"No one knows we're here or that we'd be assigned these rooms."

"No, but I'd like to know if anyone comes in when we're not here." He pulled a piece of paper off a notepad by the phone, slipping it between two drawers. If anyone opened the drawer, the paper would fall.

"Very clever. I'm starting to feel like I'm in a spy movie," she said.

"But this isn't a movie, Avery, and you can't forget that," he said somberly, drawing her gaze to his.

"I know that, believe me."

He nodded. "Okay." He set up a few other simple traps in their rooms, and then they went back downstairs and headed to the mortuary.

The Sweet Peace Mortuary was housed in a two-story building about three blocks from a very large cemetery. Avery's nerves tightened as she entered the building. It was the first time she'd ever been in a funeral home and she didn't care for it. It was quiet and dark and had an odd smell, probably a mix of formaldehyde and something else. She did not want to think about what went on in the back rooms, so she tried to focus on the woman standing behind a tall counter.

The receptionist, who appeared to be in her sixties or seventies, gave her a sympathetic smile and asked if they were all present.

"We're waiting on one more," she said.

"Let me know when you're all here, and Director Stanyan will see you in his office," the receptionist replied. "Please have a seat."

"Thanks."

As she moved away from the counter and took a seat on one of the lobby sofas, she saw brochures on the coffee table in front of her for caskets, as well as pamphlets about burial rights and cremations. The people used as models

for the promotional materials were all older, white-haired, having lived long and full lives, and a wave of anger ran through her.

"It isn't fair," she said to Wyatt, who had taken a seat next to her, picking up one of the brochures and waving it at him. "It's too soon for Noelle to be gone. She doesn't belong here. Can this be real? Can my best friend, a woman who is only thirty years old, be dead? This is a place for really old people."

Wyatt's brown eyes filled with compassion. "I wish it wasn't real, Avery."

"Me, too." She put down the brochure and hugged her arms around her waist, feeling ice-cold, but she doubted any amount of heat would make her feel warm again.

"Tell me how you met," Wyatt said.

"What?" she asked blankly.

"How you and Noelle first met."

"I—I don't know if I can talk about it."

"You can." He gave her an encouraging smile.

She thought for a moment. "It was at summer camp. We were eight years old and in the same cabin. We were going to the lake, and I saw that she had left without sunscreen or a hat, so I grabbed both items and told her she couldn't be out all day in the sun without them. She looked at me like I was crazy. But that was me. I was the worrier, the girl who looked before she leapt. Noelle just dove in, headfirst, unafraid, ready for any adventure." She paused. "I guess I should be glad she had so many adventures. She lived life. It was just too short." She drew in a breath, trying to rein in her emotions, not wanting to break down in front of

Wyatt. Plus, Noelle's mom would be here soon, and she had a feeling Kari Price was going to be a mess. "I need to keep it together, especially with Noelle's mom coming."

"What's her mother like?"

"Kari is a lot like Noelle—red hair, blue eyes, big personality. She can also be emotional and kind of flaky and sometimes a little too caught up in herself. At least, that's the way I remember her. I haven't seen her since college graduation." She twisted her hands together in her lap. "Kari was a young mom. She had Noelle when she was eighteen. Noelle's dad was eight years older, and he was a good influence on Kari, according to Noelle, but he died when Noelle was eleven. After that Kari went off the rails. She was depressed. She drank too much. She brought home different men, some who weren't so great. She was always late picking us up when it was her turn to drive us somewhere. It used to make my mom crazy. Eventually, she stopped letting Kari do any of the pick-ups or drop-offs. She just didn't trust her."

"That must have been rough on Noelle."

"It was hard at times, but on the flip side, Noelle had no restrictions whatsoever. Kari looked at Noelle like she was a friend, not a daughter, so Noelle had no curfew, no mom worrying about where she was or asking too many questions. Noelle got into a lot of trouble in high school."

"Did she take you down with her?"

"No. I tended to bail when things got dicey. She usually had other friends who were willing to keep up with her."

"It sounds like you were complete opposites."

"We were. But despite how different we were, we really had a bond. We told each other everything when we were kids. We were like sisters." She paused. "When Noelle came back into my life this year, I was wary, but I was also happy, because I'd really missed her. I don't think I've ever been as honest with anyone as I was with her. She knew all my bad stuff, all my quirks, and I knew all of hers—or I used to. Now, it feels like I didn't know anything about her. I want to find out what happened, Wyatt. I want to get justice for her. But I'm also a little afraid of what we're going to learn."

Wyatt gave her an understanding nod. "I get that. The truth is we never really know anyone, even when we think we do. Everyone has a secret, something no one else knows."

"I don't think that's true."

"Isn't it?" he challenged.

"Well, I know you have secrets, and you're very private, but I feel like my life is pretty open."

"But you're not involved with anyone. You live alone. Who's to know if you eat a pint of mocha almond fudge out of the carton after midnight?"

"It would not be mocha almond fudge, probably strawberry swirl or cookie dough," she said, knowing Wyatt was trying to lighten the mood. "But I wouldn't worry about hiding that from someone. I'm not single because I have an ice cream addiction; I just haven't met the right person."

"Maybe you're too busy looking up at the stars," he suggested.

She rolled her eyes at that comment. "Have you been talking to my mother? That's her favorite thing to say. I've

been building a career. There's nothing wrong with that."

"No, there's not."

"What about you? Are you single because you have some secret fetish?"

"No, I'm single because I'm a terrible boyfriend."

"Did someone tell you that?"

"More than one someone. I'm not good at relationships."

"Maybe because you look at everything as being temporary. No woman wants to think she's just good for the next few minutes or days or weeks."

"Unfortunately, my past career didn't allow me much time to build anything longer than that."

"You're not a Marine now. You can put down roots. You can hang a picture—if you want to."

"I knew you were judging my apartment décor," he said with a gleam in his eyes.

"Décor? You had nothing in your apartment, Wyatt. Certainly nothing that would count as décor."

"Well, I might consider hanging a picture, once this is all over."

"Maybe something from the Nova Star gift shop—with the stars, the moon, Mars—they sell some amazing and wonderful photos."

He gave her a smile that sent a little shiver down her spine, and some of the cold in her heart seeped away.

But as their gaze clung for seconds too long, she felt uneasy, wondering what she was doing. *How could she even be thinking of Wyatt as a man when she was sitting in a mortuary about to figure out funeral arrangements for her best friend?*

Although, she could almost hear Noelle saying, *I get it—he's hot—and you're still alive. Don't waste your life.*

But was that Noelle? Or was it her own voice?

The door opened, and she stood up as Kari Price walked in. Her hair was a darker red than she remembered, and Kari was very thin, wearing a loose sweater over black leggings. Dark glasses covered her eyes, but as she stepped forward, she removed them, revealing red-rimmed eyes. She held out her arms, and Avery ran into her embrace as they exchanged a long, sad hug.

"I'm sorry," she said, gazing into Kari's eyes.

"Our girl is gone. I can hardly believe it. All the way here, I kept telling myself it was a dream."

"I know the feeling." She felt tears well up within her, but she needed to keep them at bay.

"Are you Noelle's boyfriend?" Kari asked Wyatt, who had gotten to his feet.

"No," he said quickly. "I'm Wyatt Tanner. I worked with your daughter."

"He's trying to help me find out what happened to Noelle," Avery added.

"Thank God someone is looking for my daughter's killer. The police just told me the FBI has taken over the case but no one from the bureau is calling me back," Kari said, anger in her eyes. "Shouldn't someone have some answers for me by now?"

"I'm sure they'll be in touch," she replied. "But let's worry about that later. Are you ready to discuss arrangements?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure what to do. I don't have any idea if Noelle would want to be buried or cremated, and where she would want any of that to take place. I'm hoping you might know, Avery."

She shook her head. "We didn't talk about any of that."

"Of course not. Why would you? My baby shouldn't be dead," Kari said, sobs taking over the last part of her sentence.

Avery put her arm around Kari's shoulders as the director, a serious-looking man in his mid to late fifties came out of a back room and suggested they move into his office.

"I'm going to wait for you here," Wyatt said quickly, a pained expression on his face.

She nodded, thinking it would be better to do this with Kari on her own. But it wasn't going to be easy, and there was a part of her that wished she could stay in the reception area, too.

But she needed to be there for Noelle's mom. Noelle had always hated when her mom was unhappy. She'd often felt personally responsible for it, as if it was up to her to make up for her dad dying. If Noelle was looking down on them now, at least she'd know that Avery was taking care of her mother. It was the last thing she could do for her friend.

CHAPTER SEVEN

WYATT WAS happy to wait in the reception area while Avery and Kari discussed funeral arrangements. Just being close to their raw emotion had made him feel uneasy. It had also made him realize how little emotion he'd let into his life the past few years.

Everything was about work, and in order to do his job well, he couldn't let emotion into it. Most of the time he had no problem staying on track, but talking to Avery about her friendship with Noelle, her childhood, her life, had reminded him that once upon a time he'd had friendships too, real friendships. He'd also had a family and a home.

Frowning at the direction of his thoughts, he pulled out his phone and checked the time. He could hardly believe it was almost five. The day had passed in a blur, and it wasn't over yet.

He felt a restless urge to connect with someone, but it couldn't be someone from his distant past. He walked outside, drawing in several deep gulps of fresh air before punching in the number Bree had given him.

"Just wanted to check in," he said. "I saw the news about the fire in Venice Beach. Are you at work? Can you talk?"

"I am in the office. Hold on one second," she said.

He perched on the edge of a brick planter outside the mortuary and watched the traffic for a few moments until Bree came back on the line.

"Sorry about that," she said.

"No problem. I probably shouldn't be calling you, but I thought you might have more up-to-date information than Flynn."

"It's fine. I just got off the phone with the fire investigator. The blaze was set in Noelle Price's apartment. Witnesses at the scene mentioned an earlier fight involving you, Ms. Caldwell, and the man with the tattoo on his neck."

"No one else was seen at the apartment after we left?"

"Not that anyone remembers, but it was a chaotic scene. The fire spread quickly. People were focused on getting out of the building with a few personal items and their lives. The only thing we know for sure is that whatever was in that apartment is gone. The fire investigation is just beginning. I'm sure we'll know more in a few days."

"I'm not sure we have a few days. With the satellite launch coming up on Tuesday, Noelle's murder, and now the fire, everything is ratcheting up."

"Which should make Nova Star more interested in cooperating with us, but Joanna said while your boss expressed concern about Ms. Price's death, he didn't believe it was connected to the company. He said his

security is also looking into the matter, which I guess is you and your team at Nova Star."

"Yes. But Hamilton is not quite as confident as he would have you believe. He is determined to protect his family, and he thinks Jonathan is being set up for a fall."

"Then he needs to help us prove that."

"Well, he's got me to do that. Are you spending the whole weekend at work?"

"Maybe. Nathan went back to Chicago for a few days, so I figured I might as well keep busy. By the way, Vincent Rowland showed up in the office a few minutes ago and whisked Joanna off for a drink."

He was surprised. Vincent Rowland was retired FBI and the father of a former friend. "What is he doing in LA?"

"He's here for his daughter Cassie's engagement party."

"That's good. I'm glad the Rowlands have a happy event to celebrate. That memorial a few months back was kind of rough."

"I really wanted to be there for that."

"Work comes first."

"Yes. But I'm not sure Vincent would agree with you. He was very short with me. I think he's still angry that I wasn't there."

"You had a good reason. You were looking for a missing child. Vincent understood that. He's just a reserved man. I wouldn't take it personally."

"I just wish sometimes I could talk to him about Jamie. I cared so much for his son, but sometimes I think he blames me for Jamie's death. He once told me that Jamie's

penchant for falling in love distracted him from what should have been his true priority."

"Jamie's death was an unfortunate accident. Everyone agrees on that."

"I know," she said with a sigh. "Sorry to bring all that up. I just got rattled when I saw Vincent. Anyway, let's get back to you. What's going on? Where are you now?"

"I'm at the mortuary with Avery Caldwell. She and Noelle Price's mother are making funeral arrangements."

"That's depressing."

"Very. Have you been able to ID the man at Noelle's apartment this morning?"

"Not yet, but we're working on it."

"All right. I've moved Avery to a safer location just in case anyone is interested in going after her. I'm going to stay close to her this weekend, which will actually work in my favor. There's a dinner party tomorrow night for her father's birthday, and the entire Tremaine family will be there. I'm going to get myself on the guest list."

"That should be an interesting party. I saw Ms. Caldwell's photograph. She's very pretty."

"Which has nothing to do with anything," he said bluntly, hearing the teasing note in her voice.

"I know you're always professional on the job."

"Exactly."

"And she's definitely not your type."

"I don't have a type."

"Well, you don't usually date rocket scientists, do you?"

"Maybe I would if they looked like Avery."

"So, you are intrigued," she said knowingly.

"I'm not blind, but I'm not going to do anything about it. She's terrified and grief-stricken, and I would never take advantage of that. Plus, she has no idea who I really am."

"Do you ever get tired of the undercover life, Wyatt?"

He would have normally answered that question very easily, very quickly. Going undercover was what he did best. But today, all he could see were a hundred shades of gray. "I am a little tired," he admitted. "But I'll be fine."

"Sometimes changing your job isn't a bad thing. I did it."

"I change my job all the time—every assignment."

"I mean change your real job."

"I don't think I could go back into an office at this point." He paused as a car turned in to the lot and a man got out. "I have to go. Looks like Noelle Price's boyfriend just showed up."

He stood up, slipping his phone into his pocket as Carter Hayes hurried across the lot, wearing jeans and a button-down shirt instead of the suit he usually wore to work.

In his early thirties, Carter had sandy-brown hair, fair skin, and a boyish look that was strained and frazzled today.

"Mr. Hayes," he said, stepping in front of him.

Carter gave him a surprised and blank look. That was understandable. While he had seen Carter numerous times on the security cameras at Nova Star and had also begun to look into his life since Noelle had shown up at a restaurant with Jonathan Tremaine, Carter had no idea who he was.

"Yes?" Carter said. "Who are you?"

"Wyatt Tanner. I'm in security at Nova Star."

"Oh. You're here with Avery?"

"Yes. She's inside with Noelle's mother. I'm very sorry for your loss. Avery told me that you've been seeing Noelle for several months."

"I have," Carter admitted. "And I can't believe any of this. It's a nightmare. I spoke to Noelle just a few hours before she went to the pier with Avery and then she's killed, stabbed by some crazy person? How does that happen?"

"I don't know," he said somberly, seeing what appeared to be genuine horror in Carter's face.

"Do the police have any idea who killed her?"

"Not that they've told me."

"They won't tell me anything. I think they consider me a suspect. I spent half the night at the police station answering questions and an hour ago, I got a call from some FBI agent who wants to talk to me next, but I have no answers. All I know is that Noelle went to meet Avery and ended up dead."

He nodded. "That's rough."

Carter hesitated, giving him an odd look. "Is there any chance you can turn down the heat on me? You said you're in security, right?"

"Yes, but there's nothing I can do to stop the FBI from investigating, and I'm sure you want to find who killed Noelle."

"Of course. But it wasn't me. And I'm up for a promotion at Nova Star. I've been working really hard for it. If the Tremaines get wind that I'm a suspect...well, I don't want to be fired. I've been at the company for three years. I'm a loyal employee."

"I doubt anyone is looking to fire you," he said, although it seemed like Carter's concerns at the moment were very self-centered for a man who had just lost his girlfriend.

Carter shifted back and forth, digging his hands in his pockets. "I'm sorry. I'm wound up. Too much coffee, not enough sleep."

"I can understand that."

"I don't want to be here, but when Noelle's mother called me, I couldn't say no. Is she inside?"

"She's with Avery. They're meeting with the director now."

Carter hesitated. "What's her mother like?"

"You haven't met her?"

"No. I've just heard Noelle argue with her on the phone. Her mom has been having money problems, and she has been asking Noelle for help. But Noelle hasn't been on the job long, and she doesn't have extra cash." Carter paused. "I'm a little afraid Noelle's mom is going to hit me up for money, and that's why she wants me here."

Now Carter was worried about money as well as his job? Noelle was getting pushed further and further down his list of concerns.

"You think she'd do that now?" he asked.

"Maybe. Noelle says her mom is terrible with money, that she always has to bail her out. On the other hand, I know how much Noelle loved her mother. I feel like she'd want me to help her."

Carter's words echoed what Avery had said earlier. Maybe he needed to look more closely at Kari Price. *If Kari*

had had money problems, had Noelle done something to get the cash her mother needed?

He stepped back and opened the door for Carter. "After you." For a split second, he thought Carter might bolt, but the man drew in a breath and stepped inside the lobby.

Wyatt had no sooner followed him inside when Avery joined them.

Relief flashed through her brown eyes as she saw Carter.

"Carter." She gave him an emotional hug. "Kari said you were coming down."

"Sorry I'm late. It's been...a lot." Carter ran a hand through his tousled hair.

"I know. I feel the same way."

"Where's her mom?"

"Kari is still meeting with the director. If you want to join her, I'm sure she'd be okay with that."

Carter swallowed hard. "Maybe I should just wait."

"All right. She's almost done."

Carter nodded. "Is, uh, is Noelle's body...is it back there?"

"No," Avery said quickly. "Her body hasn't been released by the medical examiner yet, but Kari doesn't know how long she can stay in town, so she wanted to start making arrangements."

"Is she taking Noelle back to Florida?"

"I think she wants to talk to you about it."

Carter appeared panicked by Avery's words. "Me? I don't know what to do. I mean, I loved Noelle. I did. But we haven't been together that long."

"It's okay, Carter," Avery said, putting a hand on his arm. "I know how shocked and upset you are, because I feel the same way."

"I am shocked," Carter echoed. "I don't know how we got here."

"I don't, either."

"The police said you found Noelle, but why weren't you with her? Why was she alone?" Carter asked.

"She wanted to go into the funhouse, and I didn't, so she went without me. When she was taking too long, I decided to look for her. I'm so sorry, Carter," she said, her eyes filling with tears.

"You're not to blame, Avery. I know you cared a lot for Noelle. She was happy the two of you were friends again."

"I was happy, too." Avery took a breath. "So, getting back to what needs to be done now...Kari is very concerned about the financial burden of a funeral. I don't think she has much money."

"From what Noelle said, she doesn't," Carter said, his lips drawing into a tight line. "She was always calling, asking Noelle to send her some cash. She was sending her a check almost every other week, but it never seemed to be enough."

"I didn't realize things were that bad," Avery murmured.

"Look, I can contribute something toward this funeral," Carter said. "But I don't want to talk to her mother. I have to go. If you need help, call me." He pulled out his wallet and handed Avery a business card.

"Please, don't go, Carter," Avery said. "I know Kari would like to see you."

"She doesn't know me; I don't know her. I've just said hello over the phone. It's better this way." Carter whirled around and dashed out the door, leaving Avery with a stunned look on her face.

"Well, I didn't expect that," she said, turning back to him. "What did I say?"

"Nothing. Carter was amped up before he walked in here. He said the police gave him a grilling last night. He's worried he's going to be accused of Noelle's murder."

Avery stared back at him. "Really? He's worried about that? I know boyfriends and husbands are often people of interest, but that can usually be cleared up pretty quickly."

"Maybe Carter is overreacting to whatever the police asked him."

"He has to be. I don't believe Carter had anything to do with Noelle's death." She paused, frowning. "Do you?"

"I wouldn't think so, but I've learned never to count anyone out. So, what's going on back there? Is Kari planning a funeral?"

"No. I don't really know what she's going to do. She kept bursting into tears every few minutes, especially when she heard what things might cost. The director asked me to let him speak to her alone, and I was fine with that."

As she finished speaking, Kari returned to the lobby, her cheeks wet with tears, her eyes bloodshot. "I'm sorry, Avery."

"What?" she asked. "What's wrong now?"

"I don't have the money to do any of this. I thought maybe I could swing it, but the truth is I can't. I don't have the funds to bury my own daughter or to give her a

memorial. I'm a horrible mother." She collapsed into Avery's arms, sobbing her heart out.

He knew Kari's grief was real and raw, but he also thought some of the drama was part of her play to get Avery to step up to the financial plate.

Avery gave him a helpless look and then helped Kari over to the couch. "It's going to be fine. I'll help. Carter said he would contribute, too."

"He was here? Where did he go?"

"He just left. He's very upset."

"But I wanted to speak to him. Why didn't he wait?"

"I don't know. He's exhausted and sad and angry—like we all are. I think we should take a minute or a day and just let things ride. We don't have to decide anything right now."

Kari looked a bit more encouraged. "That's true. We can take a little time. She just died last night."

"Exactly. We can talk later or tomorrow," Avery said. "How did you get here? Did you drive? Do you need a ride somewhere?"

"No, my friend Connie is picking me up. I just called her. She's only a few minutes away. I'm staying with her for a few days."

"I'm glad you won't be alone. I'll wait with you until she comes."

"No. I'm okay," Kari said, wiping her eyes. "You go ahead, Avery. This is a dreary place to wait in."

"We can go outside."

"I'll be all right. I'm sorry about my meltdown. I'm just so overwhelmed."

"Completely understandable. We'll talk later."

"I'll call you." Kari turned her gaze toward him. "It's Wyatt, right?"

He nodded. "Yes."

"Please help Avery find out who killed my daughter. She was my only child, my baby, and she deserves justice."

"Believe me, I'm going to do everything I can."

"Are you sure you don't want me to stay?" Avery asked.

"No, thank you. You were always a good girl, Avery, such a positive influence on Noelle. When you were around, I trusted she'd be okay, she wouldn't go too crazy. When you stopped being friends, I was very sad. I'm glad you got back together before...before all this. I know how much you meant to her."

"She meant a lot to me, too. I'm never going to forget her."

"I know you won't."

Avery gave Kari another hug and then got to her feet. He opened the door for her and followed her outside. Afternoon shadows were falling, and the temperature had dropped ten degrees, but the crisp air felt great after the stifling atmosphere in the mortuary, and he could see Avery drawing in deep, calming breaths as they walked to the car.

As they got into the vehicle, he said, "You handled both Kari and Carter quite well."

"I have to admit they surprised me in different ways. Carter bailed out on everything. Kari apparently can't afford even the cheapest funeral. Which leaves me."

"It sure looks that way."

"I didn't realize Kari's problems were so bad or that Noelle was supporting her. She never said anything about that, although she might have thought I'd say something judgmental. I always liked Kari, but I did have a front row seat to a lot of her screw-ups." She paused. "I guess I now know why Noelle was so desperate to get a corporate job instead of pursuing her acting ambitions, the way she had before. It makes sense."

"Does it also make sense that she picked a lawyer to date, someone who could probably take care of her, if she needed it?"

"Maybe. He wasn't her usual type, but people change. But if she did think she could count on him, she was probably wrong. Today, he seemed like the least likely person anyone should count on. I don't care if he thinks he's on the hot seat with the police. His girlfriend is dead. He should have manned up and helped out."

He liked Avery's passionate, angry response to Carter. "I thought the exact same thing."

She met his gaze. "Right? Who acts like that?"

"Something in his behavior was off," he agreed, wondering if it was just grief and shock or something more sinister. Avery let out a heavy sigh, drawing his attention back to her. "What are you thinking now?"

"I feel guilty for saying it."

"You need to stop feeling guilty. It's a waste of emotion. You can't change the past. You have to move forward. Focus on finding Noelle's killer, getting to the truth, instead of blaming yourself for what happened to her."

"I wasn't actually feeling guilty about that."

"Oh, then what?" he asked with surprise.

"I'm hungry. I'd like to get something to eat."

The conflict in her eyes curved his mouth into a smile.
"It's not wrong to be hungry. It's almost dinner time."

"I know, but it feels like getting something to eat means I'm just going on with my life, like nothing ever happened."

"Which is what you have to do. But it will never ever be like nothing happened. Noelle was important to you. You're going to miss her. You're going to carry her with you through your life. It won't be enough, but it will be something. And what choice do you have?"

"None. But I do like the idea of carrying her with me through my life. Thanks for those words of wisdom."

"I have my moments," he said lightly. "Now, let's get something to eat. What do you like?"

"Pretty much everything. You choose. I don't think I can make any more decisions today."

He heard the weary note in her voice and wanted to make that decision for her. In fact, he wanted to make a lot of things easier for her.

A voice inside his head reminded him that making things easier for Avery was not his job; he was just supposed to keep her safe. *Maybe he could do both...*

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER EIGHT

HE TOOK Avery to a Mexican restaurant he'd found a few weeks ago. It was a hole-in-the-wall café, a dozen blocks off the beach, tucked between a dry cleaner and a thrift shop. There were only eight tables in the small space, but the delicious food was cooked by Carlos Ortiz, an amazing chef in his early fifties. Carlos's wife, Magdalena, ran the front of the house, his son, Felipe, was his sous chef, and his three daughters, who looked so much alike Wyatt could never remember their names, provided excellent service.

He'd eaten there a dozen times already, which went against his usual practice of never being too predictable or settling into too much of a routine. But the food was that good.

"*Hola*, Wyatt," Magdalena said with a cheerful smile.

"*Hola*." He pointed at an empty table at the back of the room, away from the windows and the front door. "That one okay?"

"All yours," she said. "Katerina will be right with you."

"They know your name?" Avery asked as they settled in at the table.

"I guess I have become a regular."

"Then you must know what's good."

"Everything. I like the burritos. They are huge, though."

"Good, because I'm starving." She set the paper menu down. "And I'm thinking a margarita would taste really good."

"Did I hear someone say margaritas?" Katerina asked, giving them a smile as she dropped off two glasses of water. "How are you, Wyatt?"

"I'm hungry," he said with a smile. "And we're ready to order."

"That was fast. What can I get you?"

"I'm going to have the loaded chicken burrito."

"And I will have the same," Avery said. "As well as a margarita."

"You're not going to let her drink alone, are you?" Katerina asked him.

"Sure. I'll take a margarita."

"Great." Katerina picked up their menus and headed toward the kitchen.

"It smells good in here," Avery commented as she glanced around the room. "How did you find this place?"

"I stumbled in one day, and I was amazed. I've had good Mexican food in California, but this is at the top of the list."

"So, this is your home away from home?"

"I suppose, but..." He paused, thinking this restaurant was really nothing like any home he'd actually lived in.

"But," she pressed.

"I did not grow up in a house like this, so it does not remind me of home."

"Where did you grow up?" she asked curiously. "We've been talking so much about me and my family and my relationship with Noelle, I know very little about you, except that you were a Marine."

"There's no big story," he murmured, wishing he hadn't opened that door.

"Come on, give me a few details." She rested her forearms on the table, leaning forward with curiosity in her sparkling, gold-flecked brown eyes. She was looking for a distraction, and he was it.

"What do you want to know?" he asked warily.

"Are your parents alive? Where do they live? Where did you grow up? Are you from California or somewhere else?"

He inwardly flinched at the barrage of questions, knowing he should have expected them at some point, because clearly Avery had a mind that was wired to want to know everything. He decided to stick as close to the truth as possible, while, of course, leaving out big chunks of the story.

"My parents are alive. I grew up in New York. I have an older brother. What else?"

"What else?" she echoed. "That's barely more than I'd see on your driver's license."

He waved his hand around the warm, happy, colorful restaurant. "See all this? Well, the house I grew up in was nothing like this. It was professionally decorated, filled with expensive, luxury furniture, paintings, and art, but there was no personality."

"Interesting. Much like your current apartment, which is not professionally decorated but still has no personality,"

she said with a bit of sarcasm.

He grinned. "Maybe that's why I'm comfortable there; it feels familiar in an opposite sort of way."

"Why was your parents' home so sterile? What are they like? What's your relationship with them?"

He waited to answer until Katerina had dropped off their margaritas. Then he said, "My parents entertained a lot, for both my father's work, and also because they had a country club lifestyle. Our home wasn't supposed to reflect a normal, messy family life, it was a stage for events. As for my relationship with them—it was good enough for a long time, and then it was really bad."

"Well, that's about as cryptic an answer as anyone could give," she said, sipping her drink. "Talking to you is like playing twenty questions. Why so reserved, Wyatt?"

"I'm a private person."

"Well, you're not making a public speech; you're just talking to me. And I've been pretty honest with you."

"That was your choice."

"What made things go from good enough to really bad?" she pressed.

Now they were getting into territory he never talked about. On the other hand, what he had to say would probably not affect his cover in any way, so what did it matter?

It mattered, because then she'd know more about him than most people did. That could make him vulnerable. And he never put himself in that position.

"You're having quite a long argument with yourself," Avery said, a perceptive gleam in her eyes. "Are we back to

everyone has a secret, especially you?"

"We are back to that." He sipped his drink and then said, "I thought my parents were average, a little snobby, a little highhanded, maybe, but I grew up with money. It was all I knew. We had a nice house in a neighborhood where everyone had a beautiful home. My dad played golf. My mom played tennis. They had parties every weekend, and they were very popular. My father could charm anyone."

"Sounds like my dad," she muttered. "Go on."

He ran his finger around the base of his margarita glass as he neared the edge of a personal cliff. *What the hell—he might as well jump.* It was too late to backtrack now.

"My father had a big secret. He was a financial wizard, someone everyone trusted, but they shouldn't have. He moved money around, played games, borrowed from Peter to pay Paul. He was always looking to score, get a huge payout, and he often got it—until he didn't. Then his house of cards started to fall apart. He not only lost a lot of money, everyone came after him, the SEC, the banks, it was a colossal mess. The worst thing was that by the time that happened, my brother was already working for him, and he went down, too. My family lost everything. My mom was ostracized from her friends. My brother had to defend himself in court for so long that his wife left him, taking their baby with her."

"I'm so sorry," she said with concern in her eye. "And you? How did you fare?"

"I was the youngest. I was the least involved in anything, so I walked away from it all. I took myself out of the

spotlight, away from the press, the accusations, the trials. I distanced myself from everything and everyone."

She stared back at him. "That sounds lonely, Wyatt."

He shrugged. "It wasn't like the kids I grew up with wanted to be friends anymore. A few did, but their parents immediately squashed that. It didn't matter. It was time to move on. The life I had led was gone. I had to accept it."

"So, you joined the Marines."

"I knew I had to change my life," he said, playing with the truth.

"What happened to your mom and dad and your brother?"

"My father went to jail. My mom divorced my father and moved in with her sister but recently remarried. My brother served some time but got out last year. He changed his name and started over. He has some contact with his daughter, but he missed out on some very formative years. I don't think he will ever live the life he imagined or planned for."

"That's terrible. And that's why you said earlier that you'd seen people plan for futures they never got. I thought you were talking about friends who lost their lives, but you were talking about your family."

"I was talking about both," he admitted.

"I'm sorry you had to go through all that. It must have been incredibly painful, especially you seemed to end up on the outside of the circle."

"The circle broke. We were like a chain of beads that fell off a string and scattered to different corners."

"And you don't talk to anyone anymore?"

"I don't. We all had to find a way to make our lives work, and we couldn't do that together."

"I don't see why you couldn't, but I suspect there is more you haven't told me."

"I've told you enough. Anyway, my life is what it is. I don't look back. I don't worry about tomorrow. I just live."

She nodded, then let out a sigh. "I get it, but I am the complete opposite. I look back, I look ahead, and I look sideways. I don't know how to stop planning and trying to control things I can't control."

"That must be exhausting."

"So tiring," she agreed. "I wish I didn't worry everything to death. I know it doesn't affect anything, but I just don't know how to stop. However, if I've learned anything over the past two days, it's that any belief I have that I'm in control is just an illusion."

He was impressed by her self-deprecating honesty. He didn't know if Avery was always so forthcoming or if the stress of Noelle's death had put her over the edge, but he had to admit he liked talking to her. She was a good listener, and she didn't judge. It had felt surprisingly good to tell her about his parents, and that wasn't a subject he shared with just anyone. But instinctively he knew he could trust her with the information.

"Thank you for telling me about your family, Wyatt," she added. "I'm beginning to understand why you have so many walls up. I also have a feeling that if I looked you up on the internet, I wouldn't find anything about you. You said your brother changed his name and started over. Did you do the same?"

Avery's brain certainly worked at an incredible speed. She put facts together and read between lines more quickly than most anyone he'd met. He decided to give her a truthful answer. "Yes, I did."

She raised a brow. "Wow. I wasn't sure you'd admit to that. Are you going to tell me your real name?"

"No."

"Okay then." She sat back in her seat. "I guess I pushed one button too many."

"The person I was doesn't exist anymore." He hoped she had enough on her plate right now to prevent her from looking for more information. Although, if she did, she wouldn't find anything. He'd buried his past more deeply than she could ever dig up, even if she did put parts of his story together. But considering how many other issues were occupying her brain right now, he didn't think it would be a problem. By the time she got back to thinking about who he was, he'd probably be gone.

He took a long drink, that sobering thought annoying him more than it should have.

"I can relate to part of your story," Avery continued. "My dad didn't go to jail, but I think he's a bit of a con artist. He wouldn't admit to that, but his moral code is built on shifting sand. He makes people believe he holds the secret to the perfect life, and they pay him large sums of money to hear him spout quotes made famous by other people. I guess none of it is technically illegal, but it always feels a little wrong to me." She cleared her throat. "My dad thinks my mother poisoned me against him, but she didn't. I was there. I lived with him until I was fourteen. I saw who he

was then, and I see who he is now. He's charming and funny, and he's someone who can become whoever you want him to be, but only for a little while. If you look at him too hard or stay too long, you realize he has no more substance than a puff of smoke. I just wish..." Her voice fell away.

"Wish what?" he asked curiously.

"That I didn't love him so much," she confessed. "Even with all the disappointments, I still remember the good times. My dad was fun. When I would hang out with him, it was like being with the most entertaining person you could meet. We would do crazy things. We once hopped a fence and went swimming at a pool in a gated community after midnight, because it was hot, and our air conditioning wasn't working. Being with him was an adventure."

He could hear the love and the conflict in her voice. "But you felt that you were betraying your mom when you liked being with him."

"Especially in the year right before they divorced and immediately afterward. Of course, as the years passed, and my dad let me down numerous times, those adventures became a distant memory."

"But you're not distant anymore."

"I know. And it feels weird that he's back in my life again."

"How does your mother feel about it?"

"She hates it. But, fortunately, she has someone new in her life, too. Don is a great guy. He's taking her to Hawaii tomorrow, which I am really grateful about now that there is so much going on."

He was glad her mother was leaving, too. Anyone connected to Avery could be used as a bargaining chip, and while her dad had security because of his celebrity and his relationship with the Tremaines, he doubted her mother had any protection.

"Oh, wow," Avery said, as Katerina set down their burritos. "You weren't kidding. These are huge. But I think I'm up to the challenge."

He smiled. "Me, too."

She picked up her fork, then hesitated. "There's something I should have said earlier, Wyatt."

"What's that?"

"Thank you. You saved my life this morning. You've been by my side every second since then, even when that meant sitting through a sob fest at a mortuary. I know you'll say it's part of your job, but I think you're going above and beyond."

"You're welcome. Now eat."

"You don't have to say that twice."

Avery dug into the delicious flavors of her spicy burrito stuffed with chicken, rice, beans, onions, salsa, and topped with guacamole and sour cream. Wyatt was right; it was probably the best burrito she'd ever had. And Wyatt was surprisingly easy to have dinner with.

He'd started out the day as a mysterious and somewhat alarming stranger. But now he felt more like a friend. She was happy he'd opened up about his family. His dad and her

dad shared some bad traits in common, and for some reason that made her feel closer to Wyatt. She'd read between the lines of his story and had seen the loneliness and disappointment in his eyes as he talked about the decimation of his family. She'd felt similar emotions, even though their situations had been different.

She'd also isolated herself a bit, diving into her studies with perhaps more intensity than she might have if she hadn't been so shattered by her parents' divorce. Wyatt had done the same and taken it to another level by changing his name.

As she ate, she teased him with suggestions of what his name might really be, enjoying a conversation that for a brief moment in time felt almost normal.

Wyatt, of course, did not confess to his true identity, although he'd told her she was getting closer when she'd suggested his real name was George. She doubted that was true, seeing the gleam in his brown eyes, but it amused her to think of him as a *George*.

The staid, formal, somewhat old-fashioned name didn't suit him at all. He really felt more like a Wyatt—a man of action, intensity, purpose, and fearless courage. She felt safe with him.

But there were other feelings, too, and those she should probably set aside for another day—a day far away from now.

As she managed to get down the last bite of her burrito, her phone rang. "It's my mom," she said. "I need to take this."

"Go ahead. I'm going to pay the bill, give you some privacy. Don't go outside without me."

She frowned at the warning reminder but was glad when he moved over to the counter to speak to Magdalena.

"Hi, Mom. How are you?"

"I'm fine. It's you I'm worried about. I just saw some disturbing news on the TV. There was a fire in Venice Beach at Noelle's apartment."

"Yes, I heard about that, too."

"What happened? Why would someone burn down Noelle's apartment? What was she involved in?"

"I really don't know, Mom."

"This is getting worse and worse. I just told Don I think I should skip the trip."

"You are absolutely not going to do that."

"I'm worried about you, Avery."

"You don't need to be. I'm okay."

"You'd say that even if you weren't."

"But I am all right," she reiterated. She really needed her mother to go to Hawaii, so she didn't have to worry about her.

"Are you at home? Maybe I should come by and we can talk. Or you can come here?"

"I'm actually out with someone."

"You're out? With who?"

"A friend from work," she said vaguely. "I'm not alone. And I really want you to go on your trip and have a good time. There's nothing for you to do here."

"What about the funeral arrangements?"

"I spent some time at the mortuary with Kari today. Nothing is going to happen immediately. In the end, we'll probably just have a very small service or some kind of memorial celebration."

"How is Kari holding up?"

"Not very well. She spent a lot of time crying today. She also said that she doesn't have enough money to pay for anything."

"Of course she doesn't," her mother said, an edge to her voice. "Kari never saved a dime and lived beyond her means. Now she wants you to pay, doesn't she?"

"I said I'd contribute; so did Noelle's boyfriend."

"Well, you know I'll help. I didn't like Kari, but I liked Noelle very much. She was like a second daughter to me."

"I know she felt that way about you, too. Anyway, you and Don have fun, take pictures."

"If anything happens, Avery, promise you'll call me. I don't care how small or unimportant you think it is."

"Don't worry," she said, deliberately avoiding that promise. "It's all going to be fine."

"I really hope so."

"Everything all right?" Wyatt asked, as he returned to the table.

She slipped her phone into her bag. "My mom heard about the fire, but I convinced her to go to Hawaii tomorrow anyway."

"Good. Then neither of you will have to worry about the other."

"Exactly." She got to her feet. "Shall we go?"

As they walked outside, she couldn't help noticing the change in Wyatt's demeanor. He'd gone from relaxed and easy to hypervigilant, keeping his hand on her arm, his gaze darting in every direction, sweeping the street for any sign of danger.

After they got in the car and Wyatt pulled out of the parking spot, she asked, "How long are we going to do this?"

"It's a short drive to the hotel."

"I don't mean that. I mean *this*—you and me, hiding out. I have a dinner tomorrow. I have to go to work on Monday. I have a life."

"And I want you to keep living that life, which means you're going to have to bear with me a little longer."

"I just don't know what's going to change that will suddenly make my life safer."

"The FBI could find the person who was at Noelle's apartment this morning. That would be a start. The investigation into the fire could also provide clues."

"Do you really think so?" she asked doubtfully.

"I don't know, but something will break. It always does."

"You've been involved in situations like this before?"

"Not exactly like this, but I've worked in security and intelligence long enough to know that the clues will come as long as we keep looking."

"Okay, but we're not exactly doing anything proactive at the moment."

"We took a short break. We'll get back to it."

"Do you have a specific plan in mind?" she asked, not seeing any possible way for them to figure out what

happened to Noelle. "We're not the police or the FBI. What can we do on our own?"

"We can focus on the personal. You knew Noelle better than anyone."

"But she didn't tell me anything."

"Maybe you just don't remember. It could have been something that sounded like nothing at the time, but in retrospect..."

"I've already been racking my brain wondering if I missed some clue, but I don't think so. Since Noelle started working at Nova Star, we saw each other fairly often. We had lunch at least twice a week. We went out a few times on the weekends, saw a couple of movies, went to brunch with some old high school friends..." She shrugged. "Nothing stands out."

"These old high school friends—who were they?"

"Jenny Fordham and Lindsay Swanson. Lindsay is getting married, so we went out to toast her engagement."

"Do they work in the aerospace industry?"

She almost laughed at that question. "No. Jenny is an assistant manager at a clothing boutique and Lindsay is a dental hygienist. We went to the Montage Hotel, gossiped about old times, and had a few glasses of champagne. That was it. Nothing mysterious about it."

"What about Carter?"

"What about him?" she countered. "You met him today. What did you think?"

"That he was self-absorbed, more concerned about his reputation and the police's interest in him, than his girlfriend's death."

"I felt the same way, but he did seem genuinely upset. Maybe he's just processing everything. I hate to judge him on a day like today. I'm probably not acting exactly right, either." She tapped her fingers on her legs, feeling restless and impatient. "I want to do more than wait around for something else to happen. I know I should be feeling calmer after my margarita, but I'm amped up. I don't know what to do with all the emotion."

"We could go for a run."

"After that really excellent but huge burrito? No thanks. But I have to say going back to the hotel and staring at the walls doesn't sound appealing, either."

"I have an idea," he said slowly.

"Oh, yeah?" she asked, a fluttery feeling in her stomach. "What's that?"

"It's better if I show you."

Her nerves tightened, and her lips went dry.

If Wyatt made a move on her, she'd say no. He was very attractive. He stirred her senses, but that was just because her senses were already stirred up. And she didn't do hook-ups. That was Noelle. That wasn't her. She was careful, cautious, boring.

So, she'd definitely say no—wouldn't she?

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER NINE

"YOU WANT ME TO SCREAM?" Avery asked doubtfully, as Wyatt parked the car at a vista point overlooking a beach, just north of Malibu. "Here?"

"Not exactly here. Come on." He got out of the car, pulled out his phone and turned on the flashlight to show a dirt path going down the bluff to the sand. Then he extended his hand.

"This seems like a bad idea," she said, but still she slipped her hand into his.

"Well, you can tell me later if it was."

He led her down the path, helping her over some boulders as they reached the bottom. The tide was out, and they had at least fifty yards of sandy beach. With the bright moon overhead and thousands of stars in the night sky providing just enough light, Wyatt put his phone in his pocket.

"It's cold," she said, as the wind whipped her hair. "But I like it." She also liked the fact that he was still holding her hand, even though she knew she should let go.

"Me, too," he said, squeezing her fingers. "Perfect weather for screaming. There's no one around for miles—no houses, no people, no one to judge you."

"Except for you. I can't believe you have ever come out here and just screamed into the wind. That does not sound like a Wyatt Tanner move. You're very calm, cool and collected. You let frustration go, because tomorrow is another day, right?"

"That is my usual mantra. But screaming into the wind worked really well for someone else I know, someone who was bottling things up, afraid to show how scared and unhappy and sad she was, because she was terrified of giving up control, letting loose of her emotions."

"Who was that?" she asked, curious to hear the answer.

"My sister-in-law. When my brother went to jail, she had a three-month-old baby at home. She was trying to hold everything together, but their assets were frozen, her friends were deserting her, her parents were embarrassed, my parents had their own problems, and she was trying to be a good soldier. But inside she was raging. One day, I put her in the car, and we drove to the beach—not this one, but another one. And I told her to scream. She was reluctant at first, but after the first half-hearted effort, she got into it."

"Did you scream with her? Because you must have shared some of her feelings of frustration and anger. Your dad ripped your family apart."

"I was angry, and on that day, at that beach, I let out the loudest yell of my life. It was the first time in my life I just let it rip. I felt better. So did my sister-in-law. I think you will, too."

She frowned. "I'm just not a screamer."

"Never? Not even..."

At his laugh, her cheeks warmed with embarrassment. "I wasn't talking about that."

"I know. You're easy to tease. You have a sweet quality about you."

She wasn't thrilled with that adjective. "Sweet doesn't sound awesome. In fact, it sounds close to boring. Noelle told me many, many times how boring I was."

"I don't think you're boring at all. I also don't think you see yourself the way others see you."

"I see myself just fine, thank you. And Noelle wasn't the only one to suggest I could lead a more exciting life."

"Excitement is a relative thing. You have a passion for what you do."

"I do," she agreed, waving her free hand toward the night sky. "Look at all those stars. There's so much out there we know nothing about. How can anyone not be fascinated by the universe?"

He smiled. "I don't know. You're certainly making me more interested."

As his fingers tightened around hers, and the moonlight played across the strong planes of his face, she had a feeling he was far more interested in her than the stars, and she sucked in a quick breath of nerves and anticipation. She didn't know exactly what he saw when he looked at her, but she knew what she saw when she looked at him: a man of power, drive, strength, courage, compassion, and remarkable kindness. He was rough around the edges, guarded and cryptic at times, but there

was something about him that encouraged her trust. Maybe it was the personal story he'd shared over dinner, the fact that he'd opened himself up, revealed a side of himself that she doubted he showed many people. Maybe that's why she couldn't let go of his hand. Or maybe it was the incredible physical pull she felt toward him.

As his gaze clung to hers, the air seemed to sizzle between them. "I don't know what you want from me," she said finally. Even though what she should have said was that she didn't know what she wanted from herself.

"I want you to let go of the emotions that are making your head spin. I want you to be whoever you want to be—the woman who holds it all in, who hangs onto control with utter desperation, or the woman who lets it all go. There's no judgement here."

"Are you sure no one can hear us? Because I really don't want the cops to come running."

"There's no one around for miles. And this doesn't have to be about yelling. Just talk it out. Say what you're feeling."

"I'm numb."

"You *were* numb. You're not anymore."

That was true. "I'm angry."

"Louder," he encouraged.

"I'm angry," she yelled, feeling a bit ridiculous and yet liking the sound of her voice on the wind. The waves crashed on to the beach in front of her, almost in answer to her statement, as if the ocean was in turmoil, too.

"Why are you angry?" Wyatt challenged.

"Because it's not fair. Noelle was too young to die."

"Say it again," he ordered.

"She was too young to die. It's not fair," she said more loudly.

"And what's happening to you—is that fair?" he asked. "Should you have to hide out? Should you be afraid to go home? Should you be planning the funeral of your best friend? Is that fair?"

"No, it's not fair." She let go of his hand and turned toward the sea, screaming into the wind, into the onrushing waves. "It's not fair! It's not fair! It's not fair!"

The words ripped through her again and again, louder and louder, and then she felt the last bit of her control snap like a branch in a storm.

The tears she'd been holding back streamed down her face. Sobs erupted from deep in her chest. She could barely breathe. A moment of panic hit her. This was why she didn't like losing control, because now she was floundering, breathing too fast, not able to rein anything in. She was drowning in a sea of feelings, and she didn't know how she could get through it.

But then Wyatt turned her around and pulled her against his chest. He wrapped his strong arms around her, tucking her head under his chin, and she held on to him like he was a lifeboat in a stormy sea.

He wasn't going to let her drown, and as his strength surrounded her with warmth and courage, she started to feel the ground beneath her feet again. The fear receded.

Her sobs slowed down, as did her tears. She was able to breathe again.

"You did good," Wyatt whispered in her ear.

She lifted her head, wiping the tears from her face as she stepped away from him. "I feel like a fool."

"A less stressed fool?" he asked with a hopeful smile.

She couldn't help but smile back. "Maybe the screaming did help. I bet you weren't expecting the waterworks show, though. That took me by surprise. I'm not really a crier."

"I know. You hold everything in."

"I had to after my dad left. My mom was so sad. My tears only made things worse, so I stopped crying."

He nodded in understanding. "When my father's crimes became publicly known, my mother was also a basket case. She wasn't just worried about my dad, but also about my brother."

"And you had to be the strong one."

"I did. But my relationship with my mother didn't get better because of that."

"Really? I would have thought she would have leaned on you, that you would have been the good, shining light in her life."

"She didn't think I helped enough. She thought I could have been more outspoken, more loyal, especially with the press. She basically wanted me to help her hide the crimes, but there was no way to do that."

"It wasn't your job to make their mistakes seem better."

"She didn't see it that way. We weren't that close before it all went down, and we became strangers afterwards. She was much tighter with my brother."

"Do you see her at all anymore?"

"No."

"Not ever?"

"Not in a long time. And it's fine. You don't need to suggest I look her up," he warned.

"I wasn't going to," she said. "I wouldn't want someone to tell me what to do about my family, either."

"Exactly. We're two of a kind."

"I don't know if I'd go that far but, thank you. Not just for making me let go, but for sharing something so personal with me. I'm not sure why you did."

"I'm not sure, either," he admitted. "I don't usually share, but there's something about you, Avery."

"There's something about you, too, Wyatt. I don't know how we went so fast from not trusting each other to telling our secrets. I've gone out with men for months who know less about me than you do right now. I don't understand it. It doesn't make sense, but we're connected."

"Not everything makes sense."

"I prefer it when it does."

He gave her a small smile. "I know you do. But there's no set time period to connect with someone. And not all moves are thought out in advance, Avery. Sometimes you've just got to go with the current."

He moved closer, his hands settling on her waist, and the heat of his gaze triggered a new set of emotions that had nothing to do with sadness and anger and everything to do with desire and recklessness.

"What is your next move?" she asked, feeling like that current might turn into a riptide.

"I know what I want it to be."

"So do I." Throwing her innate sense of caution into the same wind that had heard her screams and released her

anger, she put her arms around Wyatt's neck, pressed her body back against his and touched her lips to his mouth.

She'd never felt so hungry for a man, and kissing Wyatt touched off an explosion of heat and desire, of real, honest, soul-stirring passion. There was no holding back, no tentative exploration. It was everything all at once. She wasn't on the sidelines. She wasn't hiding in dark corner while everyone else had fun. She was in the arms of an attractive and sexy man, whose hard body was sending tingles of desire to every part of her body.

Wyatt ran his hands up under her jacket, and she could feel the heat through her light-weight sweater, sending all sorts of ideas through her head of the two of them tearing off each other's clothes, lying down in the soft sand, and making love in the moonlight, under the stars...

But Wyatt was pulling away. His ragged breath curled up in a cloud of heat that she wanted to throw herself back into.

As she took a step forward, Wyatt grabbed both of her arms.

"Hang on," he said tightly. "We need to stop."

"Do we?" she asked. "Aren't you the one who said I should live in the moment?"

"Yes," he conceded. "But not...not tonight. You've had a long day."

"You're really saying no?" she asked in surprise. "Okay. I guess I misread—"

"You didn't misread anything," he said quickly, his fingers biting into her arms. "What happened just now—that was crazy good."

"It was, wasn't it? So why..."

"Because you're running on emotion. And I cannot take advantage of that."

"You're not taking advantage, Wyatt. I know what I want. And I want you."

"A man you met earlier today? A man you're not sure you can trust?"

She didn't appreciate the reminders. They were making her think again, when all she wanted to do was feel.

"I want you, too, Avery, but not like this. I want you to choose, not just fall into something... You'd regret it. And I don't want you to have any regrets."

"You don't have to protect me from myself. I'm a grown woman. If I get hurt or have regrets, that's on me."

"Okay. Then maybe I'm protecting myself."

She didn't know quite how to take that. *Was he implying she could hurt him? She could break his heart?* That seemed unlikely.

"It's been a rough day," he continued. "Let's go back to the hotel."

"To our separate but connected rooms?"

His jaw tightened. "It could be a long night."

"I don't know what to make of you, Wyatt."

"I know. There have been some mixed signals tonight. I'm not happy about that. Chalk it up to your extreme attractiveness."

"You do realize this might have been your only chance, and you just said no."

"God, I hope not," he said with so much sincerity, she couldn't help but smile, the tension breaking inside of her.

"I guess we'll see."

"Let's walk back to the car."

As she followed him up the path, she decided to torment him just a little more. "You know when we were talking about secrets? There is one secret I haven't shared with you yet."

"What's that?" he asked warily.

"I don't like pajamas, so I don't always wear them."

He groaned. "You're going to kill me, aren't you?"

She shrugged. "Just saying..."

Was he a complete and utter fool?

That question plagued Wyatt all the way back to the hotel in Marina Del Rey.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd said no to a beautiful and willing woman who'd stated quite bluntly that she wanted him. In fact, he didn't think that had ever happened before.

But something about Avery's sweet sexiness had sent off warning bells in his head. She might think he'd opened up to her with the story of his family, but he was still holding back a lot—a hell of a lot. He was living a lie, and she didn't deserve anything but the truth.

He needed to remember that in the upcoming days—make that hours, since he'd now have to spend the night wondering if she was really sleeping in the nude or had just said that to pay him back for calling a halt to things.

As they neared the hotel, he forced his brain back on the job at hand, which was keeping Avery safe, not taking her to bed. Fortunately, they were able to park and make their way up to their rooms without incident.

He checked the small traps he'd set up around the room and everything was exactly as he'd left it. He was very happy about that.

"Everything okay?" Avery asked, as she tucked strands of her wind-blown dark hair behind her ears. Her dark eyes stood out against her pale skin, and there was noticeable red around her eyes and nose from her breakdown at the beach. Her haunted beauty made him glad he'd ended things before they'd really started. She had enough emotion to deal with. While some sweet release could go a long way in situations like these, there was always a morning after.

"It's all good," he said briskly. "But I would like to leave the door open. I promise not to peek."

She gave him a tired smile, and he had a feeling the adrenaline was wearing off.

"Get some sleep, Avery."

"I think I will sleep. I'm suddenly exhausted."

He nodded and moved toward the door to his room.

"Wait, Wyatt."

He looked back at her. "Yes?"

"I'm glad you took me to the beach. You were right. I needed to scream, to let out my emotions. I'd been holding everything in since Noelle died. I'm just sorry I cried all over you."

"Don't worry about it. Now you know what to do when you feel like you're about to snap."

"Yes. But there's one more thing." She paused, giving him a serious look. "Kissing you was separate from that. I feel like you should know that. Anyway, goodnight."

"Good-night."

Walking into his room took a lot of willpower. He'd crossed a line that he shouldn't have crossed. He couldn't let it happen again. Not until this job was over.

Hell, who was he kidding?

Once this job was over, he'd disappear like he always did. He'd move on to the next assignment.

Avery didn't need another man in her life who would turn into a ghost.

So, he needed to keep her close—*but not that close.*

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TEN

AVERY THOUGHT she might have fallen asleep before her head hit the pillow, and when she woke up, the sun was streaming through the sheer drapes. She got up, smiling to herself as she pulled her T-shirt down over her PJ bottoms and walked to the window. She hadn't actually lied to Wyatt about sleeping in the nude, but last night she'd felt cold, and had wanted the extra warmth when she'd gotten into bed. But hopefully, she'd given him something to think about.

It was a sunny day, not a cloud in the sky, the ocean sparkling in the distance several blocks away. The beautiful view made her feel a little sad that Noelle wasn't alive to see it. She'd always loved the beach, whether it was in the hot summer or the windy spring or the cold winter.

She wondered how many days it would take before she would wake up and Noelle would not be the first thing on her mind—probably too many to count.

Looking at the ocean also reminded her of the night before, letting out her grief, lowering her guard, and experiencing one of the most amazing kisses of her life. She

put her fingers to her lips, remembering how it had felt to have Wyatt's hot mouth on hers.

Noelle would have been proud.

"I got out of my comfort zone," she whispered, thinking of the last conversation she'd had with her friend. "I just wish I could tell you about it."

Even as she said the words, she realized last night wouldn't have happened if Noelle hadn't died. She might have never said two words to Wyatt, even if she had seen him at Nova Star. They worked in very separate departments, and she didn't spend much time trying to create a social life for herself. It was just easier...and safer...to bury herself in work.

Her phone buzzed on the nightstand, bringing her back to reality. She hurried across the room to answer it. It was Noelle's mother.

"Good morning, Kari," she said, frowning as she heard what sounded like a public announcement in the background. "Where are you?"

"I'm at the airport, Avery."

"What do you mean? You're leaving?" she asked in surprise. "We haven't made any decisions."

"I'm sorry, but I have to go home. If I don't go to work tomorrow, I'll lose my job."

"But what about Noelle? What about the arrangements? There is so much to do."

"You know what Noelle would want better than me. I'll send you money as soon as I get my paycheck. Carter said he would help out, too. She finally met a good, solid man. I wish they could have had more time together."

"Are you coming back?"

"No. I don't think so. I can't afford it, Avery."

"Well, do you want the memorial to be in Florida? Do you want Noelle to be buried there?"

"Noelle didn't like Florida. I think she'd want to be here—near her friends, the places she loved most. And she wasn't a fan of formal funerals. Maybe something simple..." Kari's voice broke. "I know you must think I'm a terrible person to dump all this on you. And you're not wrong. Your mother will probably say, what did you expect—I've always been a flake. But I just don't have the money to stay here, and I feel so ashamed and embarrassed that I can't bury my own daughter."

"You don't have to be ashamed. I will take care of everything. And when I have time to figure out the details, I'll make sure to let you know what I have in mind. Hopefully you can be a part of something."

"Don't wait on me, Avery. Do what's best for Noelle. You were like sisters. I trust you, and I know she did, too. Good-bye."

"Good-bye." She barely got the word out before Kari hung up.

"Avery? What's going on?"

Wyatt's concerned voice drew her head around. "That was Kari. She's leaving town. She says she can't do it. I'm in charge."

Anger flashed through his eyes. "That's ridiculous."

"She doesn't have any money. She's embarrassed."

"She's Noelle's mother. She could at least stay and help you."

"Hopefully, Carter will help." She ran a hand through her tangled hair, noting that Wyatt looked good, having already taken a shower, his dark hair damp, his face cleanly shaven, a hint of cologne wafting around him. He wore dark jeans and a long-sleeved gray sweater that clung to his broad shoulders. She really wished they were having this conversation after she'd had a chance to clean up, too.

"Well, you have time to figure all this out," he said.

"I don't know how much time. I should at least organize something at work this week to honor her."

"That would be nice. It doesn't have to be too complicated. You can save that for the bigger service."

"If there is one. Kari just reminded me that Noelle hated funerals." She let out a sigh. "There's so much to think about."

"I'm here if you need to bounce off ideas."

"Right now, I just need a shower."

"Good idea. I thought I'd go downstairs and grab us some coffees from the café down the street. How does that sound?"

"Like heaven. If you run into some bagels and cream cheese, that would be good, too."

"You got it." He smiled, his gaze running down her body with an appreciative gleam. "By the way, I like the PJs, although I would have liked your usual sleeping attire better."

She flushed. "I was cold last night."

"And you wanted to torture me."

"That, too."

He cleared his throat. "Right. Okay. I'll be back shortly. Keep the door locked. Don't open it for anyone."

His words reminded her of why they were in the hotel. "I won't. You be safe, too," she added on a more serious note. "I wasn't the only one who saw that man's face yesterday."

Wyatt headed downstairs and got into his car, wishing he could have kept Avery warm last night. But deep down, sleepless night aside, he knew he'd made the right decision. He had gotten too personally involved with her last night, and he needed to get things back on track.

He was going to pick up coffee and bagels but first he had a quick stop to make. While he was in deep cover, he kept contact with his colleagues to a minimum, but with everything that was happening, he needed a check-in.

He took a circuitous route to his destination, making sure no one was on his tail before he parked near a secondhand bookstore.

He waited another moment in his car and then headed down the block. Next to the store was a door leading up to an apartment. He pressed three numbers on the intercom and saw a small security camera click over his face before he was buzzed inside.

Jogging up the stairs, he opened what appeared to be an electrical box but was in fact a retinal scanner. Once he was cleared to enter, the door clicked open.

The two-bedroom apartment had been turned into a command post six weeks ago when Flynn had formed the

task force to look into foreign espionage in the aerospace industry, specifically at Nova Star.

A bank of computers sat on a long table, with two guys tapping away on their keyboards. Mark and Connor were young agents, barely out of Quantico, but they were equipped with the latest cyber hacking skills. He'd been siphoning out footage from Nova Star's security cameras for the past month, and they were in charge of pointing out any anomalies or people to look into.

With his input, they'd also compiled reams of data on the Tremaines and other personnel at Nova Star who had access to secure data. Unfortunately, none of that data had given them a clear lead on who had leaked information to the Chinese.

At the kitchen table sat Flynn MacKenzie, the leader of their team. Flynn had blondish hair, a scruffy beard, and compelling blue eyes. He also had a British accent that seemed to drive women crazy and was one of his best skills for getting what he wanted.

He almost hadn't taken the job Flynn had offered him because they'd gone through Quantico together as rivals in every way. He'd thought at the time that Flynn had played fast and loose with some of the rules of their training missions just to get a win. In fact, at one point he'd wondered if Flynn's antics hadn't been part of why his good friend Jamie had died during a training incident. Not that he had any proof, and certainly Flynn had seemed to be just as upset about Jamie's death as anyone, but something had clearly gone wrong, and no one had ever been able to figure out what that was.

That incident aside, Flynn had proven himself to be a good agent in the intervening years. He pushed the boundaries, and he'd managed to use his skill at politics to build connections in the bureau that had put him into the position of running his own task force at a very young age.

Wyatt could hardly blame him for climbing the bureaucratic ladder faster than him, since he hadn't tried to climb it at all. He just wanted to do a job that made a difference. As long as Flynn had the same goal he did, he was on board.

"What do you have for me?" Wyatt asked.

"We found the man you ran into at Noelle Price's apartment yesterday." Flynn held out a photo. "Unfortunately, we can't question him."

He sat down across from Flynn and took the picture from his hand. The man who had pulled a gun on Avery was on the ground, dead from a single bullet to the head—execution style. "He pissed off his boss. Do we have an ID?"

"Anton Bogdan. Thirty-two years old. Came to the US from the Ukraine fifteen years ago with his family. Father and uncle are roofers. He works part-time for them and lives in El Segundo. He has a record of assault, theft, DUI, etc. but no major felonies. He runs with a Russian gang, led by this guy, Stash Ivanov." Flynn pulled out another photo, this one of a square, stocky man, dressed in an ill-fitting suit. "Stash runs a private investment firm. He moves money around for rich people."

He nodded, knowing that whatever break that they got in whatever case they were working almost always led back to whoever was moving the money around. "What do these

guys have to do with Noelle Price?" He set the photos down on the table. "Any evidence either one was at the Santa Monica Pier Friday night?"

"No. We haven't found them on any security footage, but we're still going through the video obtained from cameras on the pier and adjacent streets. Medical examiner didn't find any DNA on her body, so nothing to go on there. But if the Russians are involved...it's doubtful they're working with China. So, Ms. Price's murder could be unrelated to the death of Jia Lin."

"Or both China and Russia are in play. Someone wants to steal or sabotage Nova Star's new satellite defense system technology."

"Joanna is working Nova Star from an official bureau position, but we need you to put more pressure on Jonathan Tremaine. With the launch Tuesday, we're running out of time."

"I know. I'm going to do that tonight. I'm going to make sure I'm at Brett Caldwell's birthday party. All the Tremaines will be there. I'll pull Jonathan aside and show him the photos I have of him and Noelle together. I'll tell him his father asked me to follow him after what happened with Jia Lin in San Francisco. Hopefully, if he thinks my intent is to protect him from being fingered in Noelle's death, he'll be more forthcoming. At any rate, I will handle the Tremaines, but what I need your help on is Noelle's boyfriend, Carter Hayes. I only had time to run a cursory check on him before Noelle was killed, since she'd only been on my radar for a few days."

"We're already on it."

The apartment buzzer went off, and he glanced at the security monitors in the room, one showing the front door, the other positioned behind the building. He was surprised to see Bree's pretty face at the front door. "What's Bree doing here?"

"She's joining the team."

"Since when?"

"Since I decided we need more help, and Joanna is wasting Bree's talents, having her run data checks like she's fresh out of Quantico. She's better than that, but Joanna doesn't like having competition."

"Whereas you don't see anyone as competition."

Flynn raised a questioning brow. "You have a problem, Tanner? I thought you and Bree were tight."

"We are tight, and I don't have a problem. I just didn't think she was a big fan of yours."

"We both want to get the job done." Flynn buzzed Bree in. "I heard she's living with some dude now."

"Yes, and she's happy. Don't screw with that."

"Wouldn't go down that road again," Flynn said. "She already shot me down once."

A moment later, Bree walked in the door, her smile brightening when she saw Wyatt. "I didn't expect to see you here, Wyatt."

"Likewise. You're joining the team?"

"Didn't want you to have all the fun."

"Bree is going to the media event at Nova Star tomorrow. She'll interview whichever Tremaines make themselves available to the press," Flynn said. "The

reporter who was going to do the interview got reassigned. Her editor owed me a favor."

He was constantly amazed at how many cards Flynn seemed able to call in when he needed them. "Sounds good."

"Joanna had me dive into Noelle's financials," Bree said. "There was a cash deposit of \$5000 made last Thursday."

"The night after she met with Jonathan and the day before she was killed," he muttered. "It's not a lot of money, though."

"But a significant anomaly in her bank account which ran close to zero quite often."

"She was allegedly supporting her mother."

"She did send Kari Price money on a regular basis. But we didn't see any other unrecognizable deposits besides that one."

"Okay. Thanks." He stood up. "I need to get back to Avery before she gets suspicious. I'll be in touch."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER ELEVEN

AVERY FELT like a new person after her shower and much more prepared to take on the day. After changing clothes, she repacked her suitcase just in case they had to make another quick exit, and checked her watch a few times, wondering why it would take Wyatt an hour to pick up coffee and bagels.

Wandering over to the window, she looked out at the water again, hoping it would calm her, but a feeling of uneasiness ran down her spine, making her nerves tingle uncomfortably. In the brief time she'd known Wyatt, she'd come to count on him. It was crazy how fast she'd gone from not trusting him to literally putting her life in his hands. She'd told him last night that there was an incredible pull between them, an unexpected and inexplicable connection, and it was just as strong now as it had been yesterday.

As the minutes passed, she grew more worried, not just for herself, but also for him. While Wyatt acted as if all the danger was about her, that wasn't true. He'd been at Noelle's apartment. Heck, he'd been in the funhouse, too, a

fact which still didn't quite make sense to her. He'd told her he was there to meet a friend, but that was before they'd gotten to know each other, before he'd told her that Noelle had met Jonathan earlier that week and that Wyatt had been following at least one of them. Maybe he'd been following Noelle on Friday night. In fact, that seemed to be the best explanation. He'd clearly lied to her about his presence on the pier, although that was before they'd gotten to know each other. He had also stated quite clearly that he was taking orders from Hamilton Tremaine, and there were some things he couldn't disclose; perhaps that was one of them.

But they were too deep in this to have secrets between them.

She'd ask him to explain when he got back. Trust had to work both ways.

Her phone buzzed, and she walked over to pick it up from the nightstand. The call was from Kimberly Walton, head of media relations at Nova Star. They worked closely together when it came to public events, and the upcoming week was going to be full of those events. In all the craziness surrounding Noelle's death, she'd almost forgotten just how much needed to be done tomorrow.

"Hi, Kim," she said.

"Avery, I'm so very sorry," Kim said. "I've been thinking about you since I heard the terrible news about Noelle. I kept picking up the phone to call you yesterday, but I just didn't know what to say. This is such a horrible situation."

"It really is," she said, sitting down on the edge of the bed.

"Noelle was a great girl. We had drinks together on Thursday. I was thinking then that we could be really good friends."

"I didn't know you had drinks," she said, thinking Noelle had been out every night last week with various people. "Or that you even knew each other," she added.

"Noelle was assigned to our department for a few days last month. We bonded over press releases and brochures. She was really helpful. I had her running all over the building, trying to get statements from our key leaders. You know how difficult it is to get Kyle and Jonathan Tremaine to stand still long enough to give us more than a soundbite."

"Was Noelle able to get anything from either of them?" Maybe this explained why Noelle had met with Jonathan a few days ago. It might have been completely innocent. She could have tracked him down, trying to get a quote from him.

"She did, thank goodness, so we're all set. But here I am talking about work when poor Noelle..."

Her hand tightened on the phone. "I know. It's surreal."

"Are you going to take some time off, Avery? It would be completely understandable. I just need to know what should be taken off your plate, so nothing falls through the cracks."

"Right." She hadn't given one thought to her job the last twenty-four hours, which was odd, since most days her life was consumed with work.

"You were going to edit the show for the press tomorrow morning. You said you wanted to combine two of your

videos to make it more pertinent to the launch, so that they would have more educational information to base their upcoming articles on."

"I did most of that on Friday. I just have to finish the last piece. I'll do that today. I was planning to come in anyway."

"Are you sure? Maybe we don't need it."

"No, it's important. I'll take care of it, Kim."

"Is there anything I can do for you? A lot of people are asking where they can send flowers or donations, or if there will be a service. I'm not sure what to tell them."

"I'm not sure, either," she murmured, feeling the weight of the world on her shoulders.

"How's Carter doing?"

"Do you know Carter, too?"

"Not really, just what Noelle told me about him."

"What did she tell you about him?"

"Well, not a lot. I commented that he's kind of quiet, and she said I'd probably be surprised at how ambitious he is. She said he wasn't going to be a junior lawyer for long. I got the feeling she liked his drive. I don't know him well enough to reach out, but I hope he's okay."

"He's hanging in there." She paused, as she heard the door open behind her. Her tension eased when she saw Wyatt. "I need to go. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Thanks, Avery. Call if I can help in any way."

"I will." She put down the phone and got to her feet as Wyatt deposited two coffees on the table as well as a large brown paper bag. "You were gone a long time."

"I stood in line at the first place and then their coffee machine broke right when I was about to order. So, I had to

go somewhere else. Good news, though—the second place had more food items. I got bagels and cream cheese as well as some breakfast sandwiches and fruit.

She sat down at the table and unwrapped a croissant filled with scrambled eggs, ham and cheese. "This looks good. I'll start here."

He took the seat across from her. "Who was on the phone?"

"Kim Walton. She's director of media relations. She reminded me that I need to finish a few things before tomorrow's press tour, which includes a show that I'm putting together."

"Can't someone else take care of that?"

"It's my job, and it's almost done. I just need to add one piece. I have to go by the office at some point today."

He nodded agreeably. "We can make that happen. I actually want to check in at the office, too. We were already amping up our security for this week, but we need to double it now."

"That seems like a good idea." She took another bite of her croissant. As she swallowed, she added, "Kim told me that Noelle has been helping out in her department, that she'd tasked Noelle with the job of getting quotes from all the top people at the company to be used in this week's press materials." As Wyatt's gaze met hers, she continued. "I think that's why Noelle met with Jonathan last week. I don't think they were having an affair. It was business."

Wyatt's gaze gave little away. She couldn't tell if he was convinced or thought she was crazy.

"What do you think?" she asked when he remained silent.

"It's something to consider. Maybe you can ask Jonathan and Kyle about it tonight."

"That's true. They'll both be at my father's party."

"I'd like to be there, too."

She wiped her mouth with her napkin. "I don't know if that's a good idea."

"Where you go, I go—remember?"

"I'll be safe at my father's house in Calabasas. He lives in a gated community. It's very safe."

"I'd still like to go. Hamilton asked me to stay close to you, and I'd like to meet your father."

"And I would like you *not* to meet my father."

"Why? Do you think I'm going to embarrass you?"

"I think my father will ask questions about why you're with me, who you are, what you are to me. I don't need that right now, Wyatt."

"Just tell him I'm your bodyguard. He'll appreciate that someone is watching out for you."

She let out a sigh. "Is it really that important?"

"It is, Avery."

She sensed there was more behind his desire to come to dinner than to just watch out for her. "It's not just me you want to get close to, is it?"

"I wouldn't mind having a conversation with Jonathan. Even if Noelle's conversation with Jonathan was completely innocent, it could factor into the FBI investigation. They'll be going through her life—every detail, every phone call, everyone she spoke to. Jonathan needs to know that his

meeting with her could come up and put both him and Nova Star in an awkward situation."

"That's true. You're very persuasive, Wyatt."

"Does that mean you're taking me to dinner?"

"Yes."

"Good. Now that we have that out of the way, I want to ask you for another favor."

"What's that?" she asked warily.

"I want you to call Carter Hayes and set up a meeting. Tell him you need to talk about funeral arrangements. See if we can meet him at his place. If Noelle spent time there, maybe whatever she was trying to protect is there."

Her pulse quickened. "You're right. She just said apartment. She didn't say *her* apartment. I just assumed it was hers that she was referring to. Carter might be in danger, too."

"It's possible."

"I'll call him. I just hope he'll agree to see us. Yesterday, he couldn't get away from us fast enough."

While Avery spoke to Carter on the phone, Wyatt considered telling her that the man who had pulled a gun on her yesterday was dead, but then he'd have to explain where he got the information, which would lead him down a path he didn't want to go. She couldn't do anything with the information; so, for the moment, he would keep it to himself.

Listening to Avery's side of the conversation, it was apparent that Noelle's boyfriend was not too thrilled with the idea of getting together with them, but when she told him that he might be in danger, he agreed to hear her out.

Wyatt didn't know what he thought about Carter Hayes, but he definitely needed more information. Hopefully, Flynn would come up with something on his background as well.

"Carter said to come by in a half hour," Avery said. "I think he's afraid I'm going to hit him up for money, but I told him quite frankly we needed a conversation about much more than that. However, I don't know what we're going to learn from him."

"We'll find out."

She sat back in her chair. "Wyatt, we need to talk about a few things."

His senses went on high alert at those words. There was a very serious expression in her brown eyes now, and he could almost feel the fire at his feet. "What do you want to discuss?"

"The funhouse on Friday night. You told me yesterday that it was a coincidence you were there, that you went to meet a friend. That wasn't true, was it?"

"No," he admitted, happy that her first question was one he might be able to get past with a little truth-telling and an apology.

"Why did you lie to me?"

"Because I didn't trust you then. You were the person kneeling next to Noelle when her body was found."

Her eyes widened. "You thought I had killed her?"

"I wasn't sure what to think, especially when I found you at her apartment."

"So, why were you there?"

"I was following Noelle."

"Because she'd met with Jonathan?"

"Yes."

She frowned, her smart brain computing what he'd told her, and obviously things weren't adding up. "What aren't you telling me?"

That was a loaded question. There was so much he wasn't telling her he didn't know where to start. But he could see the glint of determination in her eyes. She was much more clear-headed today, and she wanted some answers. He would have to give her something.

"Nova Star has a security leak, Avery. Hamilton has tasked me with finding the mole. Noelle's unusual meeting with Jonathan sparked my interest."

"You think Noelle was leaking information?" she asked slowly. "But how is that possible? She didn't have access to anything. She didn't work in engineering or any of the labs."

"She might have been working with someone else. She could have been the middleman."

"Someone like Jonathan Tremaine?"

"Or someone else. That's why I followed her to the pier. I saw Noelle go into the funhouse alone, while you waited outside. It seemed to be taking a long time, and I could see you were getting nervous, too. After you entered, I went in, too. I saw you in the mirror, but I did not see Noelle. I was

almost out when I heard screams and I was held by the exit. You know the rest."

Her face paled, his words obviously taking her back to that horrible night. "When you saw me in the funhouse, did you think I might be the leak?"

"I actually didn't think that until I saw you at her apartment the next day."

"Really?" she asked, shocked etched across her face. "That's what you thought?"

"It didn't make sense to me that her friend would go into her apartment so early the next morning and break through the police tape in order to do so."

"When did you decide I wasn't the leak?" She paused, her gaze narrowing. "Or maybe you haven't decided that?"

"I knew you were not the mole as soon as we started talking. Your grief for your friend was completely genuine. It was obvious you weren't involved in her death. Everything since then has been about keeping you safe and trying to figure out who did kill Noelle."

Avery got up and paced restlessly around the room. "I don't want to believe Noelle was passing classified information to someone. Do you have anything to go on besides this meeting with Jonathan?"

"Yes. Noelle had a cash deposit of \$5000 put into her bank account the day before she was killed. It broke the pattern of her usual banking behavior, and there was no indication of where or who the money came from."

"How do you know that?"

"The FBI told me that when I met with them at the police station yesterday."

"What? Why didn't you tell me that then?"

"There was a lot going on. And I didn't think you were in the frame of mind to hear it."

She ran a hand through her hair. "This just gets worse and worse. Why did the FBI give you that information?"

"Because of my position in security at Nova Star. They've been in touch with Hamilton, too. They know that I am working on the inside while they do their thing. Obviously, Noelle's death raised the stakes. And with the upcoming launch on Tuesday, we need answers fast."

"Maybe Hamilton should scrub the launch."

"I've suggested that more than once. He doesn't want to do that. He doesn't want to lose his advantage."

"But people are dying..." She sat back down at the table. "I knew something was off with Noelle. She was rambling on about trying to be a better person. That doesn't sound like someone who is stealing secrets."

"It's possible she had a change of heart about whatever she was doing and was looking for a way out. Someone killed Noelle for a reason, Avery. Based on what we know so far, that someone also thought she left something behind at her apartment. It's possible she reneged on a deal she'd made and paid for it with her life. But we're not going to know which side Noelle was on until we find out who killed her."

"I just don't know why she would do it."

"Her mom was broke. She was supporting her, right? Money and desperation are good motivators."

"But she could have just asked me for money, for help. I'm not rich, but I make a good living. I could have given

her \$5000. That doesn't seem like enough money to lose your life over."

"I'm sure there was more promised."

"Do you think Jonathan could be the mole—the person passing information through Noelle to a third party? Does Hamilton believe his oldest son, his heir to his fortune, to his company, would be selling him and the company out?"

"He doesn't want to believe that. He thinks Jonathan is being framed."

"For Noelle's murder?"

"Among other things."

"What other things?"

"I can't tell you."

"You've told me this much, Wyatt. Tell me the rest."

"Knowing more is only going to put you in more danger."

She did not like his answer, an angry light entering her eyes. "I'm already in danger. I'm hiding out in a hotel room with you. I have a right to know what else is going on. And if you don't tell me, I'm not taking you to dinner tonight. I'm not giving you access to Jonathan or Kyle or anyone else you want to talk to."

Despite his dislike of her words, he actually admired the ruthless note in her voice. Apparently, sweet Avery also had a stubborn side.

He would tell her just enough to get her back on his side.

"Fine. I can say this much. A Chinese female aerospace engineer by the name of Jia Lin was killed three months ago in San Francisco. She worked for a state-funded aerospace company in Beijing that's in competition with

Nova Star. She met with Jonathan for dinner the night before she lost her life in a single-vehicle accident. In her possession were classified specs for Nova Star's *Star Gazer Rocket II*."

"What? She met with Jonathan, too?"

"Yes."

"But that rocket won't go into production for another year. How are there even specs?"

"Apparently, they are preliminary but still highly proprietary."

"What did Jonathan say? I assume someone talked to him about it."

"Both the police and the FBI spoke to him. This happened before I came on board. Hamilton told me that Jonathan took the meeting because Jia Lin is a top-level engineer, and she was looking for a job. While he doesn't ordinarily talk to recruits, he was going to be in San Francisco for other meetings, so he agreed to see her. He denies handing her any information or having anything to do with her death."

"I assume there was no real evidence tying Jonathan to the accident, or he would have been arrested."

"That's correct. But the FBI were concerned that Nova Star's security had been breached by a Chinese national. They wanted Hamilton's cooperation, but when it became clear the bureau was a little too interested in making Jonathan a scapegoat, Hamilton shut them down and told them his security team would take care of it. He hired me shortly thereafter because I have more experience in

gathering foreign intelligence than his previous director of security, who had also decided to take an early retirement."

"Hamilton is very loyal to family, and I can understand why he would have trouble seeing any kind of motivation on Jonathan's part to sabotage the company he will one day inherit. Plus, Hamilton and Jonathan are very close. Frankly, if you'd told me that Kyle was the suspect, I'd have more doubt in my mind."

"Why is that?"

"Because Kyle and Hamilton often butt heads over the direction of the company, the priorities, the focus. Kyle is less interested in sending his father and friends to Mars and more interested in how space technology can benefit people on Earth. He fought Hamilton to get the funds to develop this satellite defense system. That's really his baby." She paused. "Which, now that I've said all that, reminds me that Kyle wouldn't sabotage the company, either, not when he's about to get everything that he has wanted for a very long time."

"Perhaps someone doesn't want Kyle to get everything."

She met his gaze. "If you're talking about sibling rivalry, I think you're going down the wrong road. Jonathan and Kyle are opposites in personality, but I've always felt there was a strong bond between them."

"What about Whitney? She doesn't seem to have much to do with the company. Is that by choice?"

"Definitely. She has no interest in science or the universe. She's into clothes and art and decorating. Although, apparently, she's now very much into bettering her spiritual mindset and becoming at peace with her soul."

He raised a brow at her words. "You sound like you read that on a brochure."

"I did. My father gives a class on that; it's in his course description. Shortly after he met Whitney, she took his seminar, and she said it changed her life. She now does yoga and drinks a lot of green juice and treats my father like he's a god. It works great. She adores him, and he needs someone to adore him."

"Interesting. Now I'm really looking forward to tonight, although, I hope we don't have green juice for dinner."

"You never know. You haven't met Whitney?"

"No, not yet. Hamilton said he used to worry about her until she met your father. At first, he was uncomfortable with the age gap, but he soon realized that Whitney was very happy, and she deserved that. I guess she wasn't always a happy person."

"I think she has struggled with depression, especially after her mother died last year. She had much more in common with her mom than she does with her father and her brothers." She paused. "I know I should probably try harder to like her, but despite her sudden interest in peace and love, she has a high-handed, snobbish attitude that I don't really care for."

"And it's weird for your dad to sleep with someone who is only a few years older than you."

She grimaced at his words. "Please, don't talk about that."

"Sorry. So, can I go to dinner now?"

She nodded. "I wish you would have told me some of this earlier."

"A lot has happened really fast, Avery."

"Well, that's true." She glanced at her watch. "And the world isn't done spinning yet. Time to meet Carter. I'm almost afraid to find out what he has to say." She stood up, then gave him a worried look. "Wait a second."

"What?" he asked, as he got to his feet.

"Is it possible that Carter is the one who made Noelle the middleman?"

"The thought has crossed my mind."

"You haven't done any research on him?"

"Very minimal. As I said, Noelle just appeared on the radar a few days ago. We need to be careful what we say to Carter, Avery. You can't discuss what I just told you." He hoped he hadn't made a mistake in telling her so much right before they met with Carter.

"I understand. You can trust me, Wyatt. I won't blow this. I want to know what happened to Noelle. And if Carter got her into trouble, if he's the reason she's dead, then he's going to pay."

"I agree. But until we know that for sure, we need to treat him like he's a devoted, loving, and grieving boyfriend."

"I can do that. Thanks for being honest with me, Wyatt. We'll get further if we work together."

He nodded, knowing he wasn't even close to being honest with her. But he couldn't think about that now. The stakes were bigger than one person, and he couldn't forget that.

CHAPTER TWELVE

WYATT HAD CERTAINLY GIVEN her a lot to think about, and his revelations occupied her thoughts as they drove across town to meet with Carter.

The idea that Noelle could have been a spy was just mind-boggling. She didn't even think Noelle had been particularly good at keeping secrets. When she heard something interesting, she had to talk about it. She lived for gossip and drama. How could she possibly have kept something so big, so important, from everyone in her life?

And if she had been involved in the leaking of proprietary material, then she'd betrayed not only Nova Star but her—her best friend, the woman who had put her own job and reputation on the line to get Noelle into the company.

Had she been completely blind when it came to Noelle?

She'd always known Noelle could be flaky, that she was often late, that she didn't always work that hard, and that she'd choose fun over responsibility just about any day of the week. But breaking the law, conspiring with a foreign government—that seemed too ridiculous to be true.

On the other hand, Noelle had been acting strangely. She had needed money to support her mom, and there had been cash in her account that hadn't come from her paycheck. The facts were adding up in a very bad way, and she desperately wanted to prove the facts wrong. She wanted there to be another reason for everything, a reason that would show that Noelle was a good person and not a criminal, not a traitor.

"You okay?" Wyatt asked, giving her a concerned look.

"I don't think I'm going to be okay for a long time. I'm just thinking about everything you told me, trying to figure out if any of it makes sense. It doesn't. The Noelle I knew wouldn't, *couldn't*, have done what you're suggesting."

"Well, maybe she didn't."

"You're just saying that to make me feel better. You don't believe it."

"I actually haven't made a decision about Noelle. And you shouldn't, either. We need more information. Hopefully Carter can give us something else to go on."

"Hopefully," she echoed, but she wasn't feeling overly optimistic.

Carter hadn't even been helpful when it came to talking about funeral arrangements; she doubted he was going to tell them anything that would help them find Noelle's killer. But she was eager to hear what he had to say. He'd been the person closest to Noelle. If anyone could shed light on her life outside of work the past few months, it would be him.

Fifteen minutes later, they pulled up in front of a series of townhouses in Hermosa Beach, a city just a few miles

south of Venice Beach where Noelle had lived. When Carter opened the door to let them in, he didn't look any better than he had the day before. In fact, he looked worse. He wore black track pants and a gray T-shirt and had two-day's growth of beard on his jaw. His face was pale, and his eyes were a little too bright, as if he'd had a lot of caffeine.

"Hi, Carter." She felt like she should give him a hug, but he wasn't the kind of person who looked like he wanted that kind of connection. "Thanks for meeting with us. You remember Wyatt."

Carter nodded, as he waved them into his home. "I can't believe Noelle's mother just left town the way she did. How could she just abandon her daughter, after everything Noelle did to try to help her get back on her feet?"

"It shocked me, too," she said, following Carter into the living room.

His townhome felt new, with sleek hardwood floors in the entry and a plush rug under the couch and chairs in the living room. The kitchen boasted cherry cabinets and black appliances and the adjacent dining room offered a glass table and a view of the palm trees lining the nearby beach. There was also a balcony with a grouping of cozy chairs and a barbecue. That felt more like Noelle.

She looked around for more signs of her friend and found a few: the bright yellow coffee mug on the counter, the now wilting flowers in a vase by the couch, the fashion magazines on the coffee table. Noelle might not have put her stamp on the masculine brown leather couch and matching recliner, the golf photos on the walls, or the law books in the bookcase, but she'd definitely left pieces of

herself in Carter's home. Those pieces seemed jarring, though, as if they didn't really belong, as if Noelle had not really belonged here.

Carter was certainly different from the long-haired, hard-drinking, musicians Noelle had often dated. Frowning, Avery couldn't help wondering what she was missing, why Noelle and Carter's relationship just felt so...*off*.

She wandered over to the vase filled with flowers, emotion putting a knot in her throat as her gaze came to rest on the sunflower.

"This was her favorite flower," she said, fingering the petals. "Noelle liked to lift her face to the sun, feel the heat on her skin. She felt like the sunflower did the same thing. It opened itself up to the light."

Silence followed her words. When she looked up, both men were staring at her with varying expressions of alarm and concern. She dropped her hand. "Could I have some coffee?"

"Uh, sure," Carter said, relieved by the unemotional question. "I actually just made another pot. Wyatt?"

"I'm good," Wyatt said. "Can I use your bathroom?"

"Yeah, down the hall on the left," Carter replied, as he moved into the kitchen.

As Wyatt left the room, she suddenly realized the bathroom was just an excuse. He wanted to take a look around Carter's apartment. And she could help by providing a distraction.

She moved into the kitchen and slid onto a stool in front of the island. Carter set a mug of coffee in front of her.

"You want anything in it?" he asked. "Although, I think I'm out of cream."

"Black is good. How are you doing today, Carter?"

He leaned against the opposite counter, crossing his arms. "Not so great. I'm sorry I ran out on you yesterday. When I was in the mortuary, I couldn't breathe."

"It was difficult for me, too."

He gave her a sad smile. "But you did it anyway. Noelle always told me that you were the strong one. You were her anchor. Like the weight on the end of a balloon string. You stopped her from flying away."

His words hit her hard, because she could hear Noelle's voice saying those same exact things. Her eyes watered, but she blinked back tears. There was no more time for crying. "I used to think that we stopped being friends because I held her back, because she wanted to soar, and she couldn't do that with me."

"She told me she was a wild child. Frankly, I didn't know why she went out with me in the first place. I knew I wasn't her usual type, but she was so attractive, so bright and appealing. When she was in the room, I couldn't look away. Somehow, I found the courage to ask her out. And she said yes. I have to say I was stunned. I didn't think we'd make it past the first date, but we did. We had more in common than we thought."

"What did you have in common?" she couldn't help asking, then saw him flinch. "I'm just trying to understand. I'm sorry if that was insensitive."

"No, I get it. Most people wouldn't see us together. But when we were alone, we were in sync. Noelle loved her job.

She said it was the first time she'd ever felt like she was really contributing to the greater good. And I felt the same way. We talked about work all the time. She supported my ambitions. In fact, she gave me the courage to ask for a promotion, more responsibility, greater access to the key players in the company. Without her, I probably wouldn't have gone for it."

"That's great. Did you get it?"

"I'm supposed to find out tomorrow. I don't know what's going to happen now. The FBI stopped by this morning. They had a lot of questions for me. They think I had something to do with her death, but I didn't. I loved Noelle. She loved me."

"Did the FBI tell you that her apartment was burned down yesterday?"

He nodded. "I couldn't believe it."

"Did they also tell you that someone was looking for something in Noelle's apartment before that happened?"

"They mentioned that. They asked me a lot of questions about her life—who she spent time with, who she talked to on the phone, whether she kept anything here. They wanted to search the place, but I had to draw the line somewhere. I'm all for cooperating, but I'm a lawyer; I know when someone is putting a case together, and I'm a target." He stopped talking. "Where's Wyatt?"

"He's just using the restroom."

"Is he? Or is he looking around?"

As Carter straightened, ready to investigate, Wyatt came around the corner.

"You know, I think I'll have that coffee after all," Wyatt said. Taking in the tension in the room, he added, "What did I miss?"

"Carter said the FBI came by this morning," she replied. "He's afraid they are going to try to pin Noelle's death on him."

"And I am innocent," Carter proclaimed. "I would never kill anyone and certainly not the woman I loved."

"They're just going down the checklist of usual suspects," Wyatt said. "If they had any real evidence, you'd have been arrested."

"What is your involvement in all this?" Carter asked, giving Wyatt a suspicious look. "Isn't your job just to sit behind a monitor and check for intruders at Nova Star?"

"It's a bit more complicated than that," Wyatt said, not taking offense at Carter's rude comment.

"Wyatt is trying to help me figure out who killed Noelle," she interrupted. "He's also protecting Nova Star and its employees, one of whom is you. He suggested we come over here today so that we could alert you to the fact that you might be in danger because Noelle spent time here, and whoever was looking for something at her apartment might come here next. So, you might not want to attack him for doing his job and being concerned about you."

Carter frowned. "Sorry. I'm not myself today. I appreciate your concern. I can't imagine what Noelle could have left behind that someone would be looking for. I thought the attack was random. Now it sounds like something else was going on."

"Did you notice Noelle talking to anyone new, being on her phone a lot, acting out of the ordinary?" Wyatt asked.

"No. But the last week or so, I was working late, because the upcoming launch had tripled our workload, and I wanted to show I was ready to take on a bigger role. Noelle and I were missing each other a lot. But she was fine with it. She told me she wanted to spend more time with you, Avery, so she was going to ask you to go to the pier with her Friday night. I told her to have fun." His voice broke. "That's the last thing I said to her."

She bit down on her lip as emotions threatened to swamp her once again. "She was having fun. She had cotton candy, and she looked like a little kid, eating that pink, sugary confection."

"I can't imagine why she would have wanted to eat that," Carter said, wrinkling his nose in distaste.

No, he couldn't have imagined it, she thought. No matter what Carter had said about him and Noelle being in sync and having a lot in common, she still wondered if Carter had really known Noelle at all.

But maybe that wasn't his fault. Maybe Noelle hadn't let him see the real her. Perhaps she'd had other reasons for spending time with Carter.

Shaking her head, she realized she was going down a path she didn't want to go, but she couldn't turn around just yet. "You said Noelle really liked her job and that she also wanted to move up. Do you know if she was talking to anyone about a transfer?"

"She spent a lot of time with Kim in media relations. I know she was doing some work for her, but she never said

what it was. Press stuff, I guess. She'd have been good at that. She was great with people. Her phone was always going off with texts and calls."

"Really? Because I saw her phone at the police station, and she didn't have any texts on there, none with you, and only a couple with me, setting up our plan for Friday night. Did she have another phone, Carter?"

"I—I don't know. I don't think so. It had that yellow polka-dot case."

"That's right, it did," she said, realizing the phone she'd seen at the station had been in a simple black case, but she'd seen the other phone numerous times before. "She must have had two phones. Maybe whoever searched her apartment was looking for her other phone."

"Can we look around for it here?" Wyatt asked.

"No," Carter said sharply, shaking his head. "I don't know what's going on, but I know you two have more information than I do, and I don't like it. I will look for the phone, and if I find it, I'll turn it over to the FBI."

"What are you afraid of?" Wyatt challenged.

"Nothing. But this is my apartment. Noelle was my girlfriend, and this is my call. You both need to go."

"Hang on," she said, sliding off the stool. "We're on the same side, Carter."

"It doesn't feel that way."

"Well, it's the truth. And we still need to talk about a memorial for Noelle. Her friends at work are going to want to say good-bye, to celebrate her life, and you need to be a part of that."

"I told you I'd give you some money. How much do you want?"

"I don't want money; I want your input. You just said you loved Noelle. Don't you want to give her an appropriate send-off?"

"An appropriate send-off?" he asked in bewilderment. "I don't even know what that is. She's gone, Avery. She's not coming back. There's no chance to say good-bye. It's done. Do whatever you want. And if you need money, I'll chip in. But I can't plan anything. I can't."

She heard desperation in his voice and saw anger and sadness in his eyes, but there was some other emotion at play, and she didn't know what it was.

"I'll show you out," Carter added, waving them toward the door.

"Carter—"

"I'm sorry, Avery. I know I'm being an ass, but I can't do this right now. I will look through Noelle's things. I'll tell you if I find anything."

"Okay, thanks." As they stepped outside, he slammed the door behind them. "That was weird," she said, looking at Wyatt. "Did you find anything on your way to the bathroom?"

"I didn't see a phone with a yellow polka-dot case, not that I was looking for that, but I think it would have stood out. When I left you and Carter, he was being cooperative. That changed fast."

"It did," she said, as she got into the car. "As soon as Carter started talking about the FBI grilling him and wanting to search his apartment, he suddenly realized

you'd been gone awhile, and it freaked him out. He's hiding something and acting crazy. One minute I think he's grief-stricken and the next minute I feel like he's just angry and pissed off that Noelle's death has inconvenienced his life. He says he loves her, but he wants nothing to do with her memorial. Before all this I thought he was stable and a little boring. I was wrong."

"From what I've heard you say about Noelle, it doesn't seem like they go together."

"She said he reminded her of me and that she needed someone to hold her feet to the ground. If she loved me for that, maybe she would love him for that, too."

"Was that really why she loved you? Because I think there was a lot more to your friendship than that. You weren't just her anchor—you were her friend. You believed in her. You cared about her. You wanted the best for her. You even went out of your way to get her a job after she'd cut all ties to you for years. Those kinds of friends don't come around very often, and I think Noelle knew that."

"Thanks," she said, feeling a little teary at his words. "For saying all that. I'd like to believe our friendship was real, but there's a part of me now that isn't sure Noelle didn't use me to get into Nova Star. Maybe I helped start this whole security breach. Anyway...Noelle had things at Carter's place. Anyone who was in contact with her probably would have known about their relationship. If whoever killed her is still looking for something she had, then why haven't they gone to Carter's home? Or do you think they just haven't gotten there yet? I don't know if he understood that he could be in real danger."

"If Carter is involved, then he would not have any reason to run, Avery. And if he doesn't understand what danger he might be in, then he's not as smart as I think he is."

"I can't imagine Carter stabbing Noelle. That doesn't feel right."

"He didn't have to do it himself to be involved. It's also possible that he and Noelle were working together, and he had no idea she was going to be taken out. I think part of his anger was covering up fear."

"It could just be fear that he won't get his promotion," she said bitterly. "Who would be worried about that at a time like this?"

"His fear went deeper than that."

"Maybe. I keep hoping I'll get answers, and all I get are more questions."

"The answers are coming." He started the engine. "Let's go to work. I want to check Noelle's desk, and you said you had something to do, right?"

"Yes, I do. And I'm sure that the police or the FBI already looked in Noelle's desk."

"I'm sure, too," he agreed. "But we're going to be there anyway, so why not check it out?"

She let out a sigh, not sure how it was going to feel to see Noelle's empty chair and know she would never sit in it again. "I hope I can do this."

"You can," Wyatt said, drawing her gaze to his. "You're stronger than you think."

"I guess we're going to find out."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

WHEN THEY ENTERED the lobby of Nova Star on Sunday afternoon, Jed Collins, an older security guard with dark-gray hair and bright-blue eyes, gave them a welcoming smile from behind the front counter. Wyatt liked Jed. He was in his late sixties, but he was an ex-cop, who had a good eye for detail. They didn't work together often, since Wyatt spent most of his time on the fifth floor in the security center, and Jed was usually at one of the entrances.

"Ms. Caldwell, I'm very sorry for your loss," Jed said. "I know you and Ms. Price were friends. It's horrific what happened to her."

"Thank you, Jed. I appreciate that," Avery said, accepting Jed's warm hand clasp.

"I don't know if her family needs any help with expenses, but if they do, please let me know."

"I will do that. We're still trying to figure things out."

"It's shocking. Ms. Price was such a happy, outgoing person. She always stopped and said hello. Of course, most of the time, it was because she was looking for her badge in

that big, messy bag of hers," he added with a sad smile. "But still, she was a sweetheart. She even brought me sunflowers to give my wife when she had her foot surgery."

"I didn't know that," Avery said.

"She said she loved working here, never felt more at home, like we were all family. I can't believe someone killed her. Do they know who did it?"

"Not yet," she said tightly.

"We should get going," he put in, sensing that Avery wasn't quite ready to hear a lot of condolences from well-meaning employees. "Everything quiet around here, Jed? The police or FBI been around?"

"Yesterday there was a lot of action. Haven't seen anyone today. Engineering is busy with the launch coming up, but the rest of the building is empty. I hope you two don't have to work too long today."

"Not too long," Avery said, handing over her bag as Jed waved her through the security X-ray scanner.

There were three scanners in the lobby as well as scanners at two other entrances to the large building. The engineering building and science labs were in an adjacent wing that had a separate entrance and additional security procedures for employees or guests to enter. But none of that security would make a difference if there was a mole inside the building.

Wyatt placed his phone and wallet in a small container and made his way through the scanner. Then they headed across the slick marble floors, past the display of model rockets that soared two stories high, the gift shop that was

now closed, and the press room that would be filled with reporters starting tomorrow.

The entrance to the two-story auditorium where Avery ran her shows was located past the bank of elevators at the end of the first-floor hallway.

"Should we check Noelle's desk first?" he asked, as he punched the elevator button.

"Seems like the best place to start," she said, a heavy note in her voice.

"I can do it myself."

"No, you were right earlier. I need to see her desk today, when there aren't dozens of other people around, watching my reaction." She squared her shoulders and stepped into the elevator as if she were going off to do battle.

He knew what she was feeling. He'd lost more than a few friends to violence in his life, and the first few days and weeks were always rough.

"After we check Noelle's desk, I need to go to my office and then the auditorium," Avery added. "And I don't need you looking over my shoulder for all that."

"That's fine. I have some work to do, too."

"Really?" she asked with surprise. "I thought you'd put up a fight."

"You'll be safe in your office and in the auditorium."

They got off the elevator on the third floor where the business, legal, and accounting departments were located. Noelle had been assigned as an admin for all three departments and had sat with a dozen other admins in a room filled with large cubicles and the latest equipment with seated, standing, and treadmill desks as well as

oversized monitors, printers, and small filing cabinets for storing duplicate copies of information stored on the company's web server.

A bank of windows threw some nice light over the area, and as they walked toward Noelle's desk, which was in the middle of the room, he made a mental note of the names listed on gold placards on the cubicle walls next to Noelle's desk. Kathryn Sams and Jaycee Lawrence were apparently Noelle's closest cubicle buddies, and it definitely might be worth having a conversation with both of them.

Avery stepped into Noelle's cubicle, her expression tense and wary, as if she was afraid of what they would find, although he didn't believe they'd find much. He knew the FBI had already swept her desk and cubicle, but he wanted to see it for himself, as did Avery.

There was a yellow polka-dot mug on the desk that immediately captured his attention. Apparently, Noelle really liked yellow. But the top of the desk was clear of any other items. He opened the drawers and found nothing more than blank notepads and pens.

"Avery?"

A woman's voice brought both their heads up.

"Kathryn," Avery said in surprise.

"I can't believe Noelle is dead," Kathryn said, shaking her head in disbelief

As the two women hugged for a long minute, he made note of the fact that the short brunette was the woman who sat next to Noelle. If anyone might have overheard something or been privy to Noelle's confidence, it might have been her. Although, he would have thought that

Noelle would have shared more with Avery, given their long history. If she hadn't, it had to be because she didn't want Avery to know what she was up to.

"I keep hoping it's a dream," Kathryn added, her gaze moving toward Noelle's desk. "It's so neat," she added, a note of surprise in her voice. "Did you clean out her desk?"

"Not me," Avery replied. "The police and FBI were here yesterday."

"Oh, of course, that makes sense."

Wyatt couldn't help noting how Kathryn's gaze darted around Noelle's cubicle, as if she were looking for something. Finally, her gaze came to rest on him, and she started. "Sorry, I don't think we've met."

"Wyatt Tanner. I work upstairs in security."

"Yes, that's right. I've seen you around."

He wondered if that were true, since he didn't really wander around much, especially not on this floor.

"Are there any leads on who killed Noelle?" Kathryn asked him.

"No. Do you have any thoughts on the matter?"

"Me? No!" she said somewhat emphatically. "I don't know anything."

Wyatt noticed Avery's gaze sharpen at Kathryn's denial.

"Noelle didn't mention she was in any kind of trouble?" Avery asked.

"Was she in trouble?" Kathryn countered.

Avery shrugged. "I don't know. It certainly feels that way now."

"But you were with her Friday night. If she did have a problem, she would have told you. She always said you

were good friends." Kathryn licked her lips. "There was one odd thing."

"What's that?" he asked sharply, drawing her gaze back to his.

"Her boyfriend, Carter. He came by Noelle's desk Friday night, and he was going through her drawers. He seemed angry about something. I asked him if he needed help, and he said Noelle had called him and told him she'd left her phone here, and he was looking for it. I helped him search for it, but we didn't find it. He seemed really annoyed." She paused, licking her lips. "He's—he's not a suspect, is he? I heard something rumored to that effect."

"Everyone is a suspect," he replied. "Did you notice Noelle having a problem with anyone else? Did she go out with other people in the company besides Carter?"

"I don't think so. I mean, she was really pretty, and very popular, and there were always a lot of men coming around to say hello or ask for her help. But she seemed most interested in Carter, especially after she was assigned to the patent office for a few days. I remember when she came back, she said that she found the legal stuff really interesting, that it was amazing all the things the company was inventing. Not that she knew what any of them were. We used to laugh about how we rarely knew what we were writing letters or memos about," she said with a teary smile. "Noelle said she was really over her head when she helped out in Kyle Tremaine's office one day. She said the man was clearly brilliant, but she could barely understand a word he said."

As Kathryn rambled on, he thought about how much access Noelle had had to other departments, something he hadn't really considered before. He also hadn't known that she'd spent time in Kyle's office, which might have given her even greater access to proprietary information. But what was also interesting was Carter's search of Noelle's desk on Friday night.

Had Carter been looking for Noelle's second phone that he'd denied having any knowledge of? And why hadn't he mentioned that Noelle had left her phone at work and asked him to look for it? They'd specifically spoken about the phone. It was hardly something he would have forgotten.

Finally, Kathryn came to a stop. "Sorry, I'm chattering on. I'm a little rattled after what happened to Noelle. I heard she was stabbed. It sounds awful. And you found her, Avery? Was she alive? Did she say anything to you?"

"No, she didn't," Avery lied. "And she had her phone when she was with me. In fact, she texted me when she was running a few minutes late."

"Maybe she found it then. Anyway, I just stopped in to grab my work computer." She paused. "Oh, is there going to be a service, Avery? I'd like to go, and I'm happy to help with any plans. Just let me know."

"I'll keep you in the loop," Avery said, as Kathryn moved into her own cubicle.

They walked back to the elevators in silence, not saying a word until they stepped inside and the doors shut.

"Oh, my God," Avery said, her eyes lit up with excitement. "Carter was looking through Noelle's desk on

Friday night. He lied to us about Noelle's phone. Maybe he is involved in her death."

"He's involved in something, but I don't know what."

"I'd like to go back and confront him."

"I want to gather more information before we do that, and you have work to do."

"That's true. I know I need to concentrate on that, but it won't be easy."

As the elevator doors opened on the second floor, he put a hand on her arm, staying close as they walked down the hall to her office.

Avery opened the door to her office and waved him inside. It wasn't a large room, but it was filled to the brim. Bookshelves lined two walls and were crammed with books, flyers, brochures, DVDs about space, and boxes of Nova Star swag: tote bags and key chains, journals and educational booklets for teachers and students. Clearly, Avery had had a hand in designing and providing information for everything.

She walked around her desk and opened her computer. While it was booting up, she looked back at him. "You can go now. I need about a half hour here, and then I have to take my computer down to the auditorium and run through the show. That could take another half hour. What are you going to do?"

"Check through the security camera footage and see what else Carter was up to on Friday night besides going through Noelle's desk. Lock this door after I leave and call me if anyone comes knocking. When you're ready to go to the auditorium, let me know, and I'll walk you there."

"Wyatt, you can't babysit me every second. Tomorrow I'm going to be back here doing my job and the day after that."

"I'm only interested in today. Call me when you're done."

"All right."

He walked outside and waited for her to lock the door, then headed upstairs to his office.

Security ran lean on the weekends, and instead of the usual dozen or so men and women who worked in security operations during the week, there were six people in today: three sitting in front of a bank of security cameras, two working on their computers, and the last person sitting at a desk very near to his own. That person was Lance Hughes, a forty-six-year-old, ex-Navy communications tech who monitored their server for any unauthorized access to their computer system.

Hamilton liked hiring ex-military. He said he knew he could count on soldiers to not only protect but also to fight. And he was probably right about that. But what he most valued in the security personnel working under his direction was intuition, attention to detail, and an instinct for anomalies. Lance had all those traits and had become one of the people he relied most upon.

It also helped that Lance wasn't competitive. He hadn't cared that Wyatt had come in over personnel who had been there years before him. Some of his coworkers had definitely not liked his sudden appearance a month ago, or

his close relationship with Hamilton, who had stated on more than one occasion that Wyatt was his guy.

Lance gave him a nod, as he looked up from his computer. "I didn't know you were coming in today."

"How's it going around here?" Lance was one of the few people who knew that there had been a security breach several months earlier. He didn't know that Jonathan Tremaine might have been involved, but he'd been put on high alert weeks ago to watch for anything unusual.

"It's quiet for now." Lance folded his arms across his chest as he leaned back in his swivel chair.

"What do you know about the homicide involving Noelle Price?"

"Not much. I've spoken to the police and the FBI. They're digging into the case."

"I noticed you came in with Avery Caldwell. How's she doing?"

"Not very well. Hamilton has asked me to keep an eye on her. She went to Noelle's apartment yesterday morning and ran into a man with a gun. Luckily, she was unharmed, but there's concern she might be in danger."

"And this has to do with Nova Star?"

"Don't know yet. But I'm going to find out." He moved over to his desk and sat down in front of his computer. Within minutes, he'd pulled up the security camera footage from Friday afternoon. He flipped back and forth between cameras as he tried to zero in on the path to Noelle's desk.

When he got a clear shot of her desk, he backed up the footage until Noelle was on the frame. The time on the camera read five twenty. She pulled a phone out of her bag,

and his pulse quickened as he saw the black case. She texted someone. He tried to zoom in, but the message was too grainy to read.

Five minutes later, she got up and tossed her phone into her bag and then said good-bye to Kathryn and walked out of her cubicle.

He watched her empty desk for another ten minutes, speeding up the footage until he saw Carter come into the frame. He pulled open Noelle's drawers with force and anger, not seeming to care who might be watching him. Kathryn got up and said something to him and then came around to help him in his search.

As Carter slammed a final drawer shut, he said something to Kathryn, and as she replied, she put her hand on his arm.

His gut tightened. Kathryn was more than a little friendly with Carter. The way she touched him, the way she leaned in, suggested they had an intimate relationship.

What the hell was going on?

A moment later, Carter left. Kathryn glanced around Noelle's cubicle for another minute and then went back to her own desk.

He forwarded through the footage again and saw Kathryn leaving ten minutes later. He kept the footage going until the room grew dark and then picked up again the next morning. But it was Saturday, and no one was working. The next person who appeared on the camera was Detective Larimer. An hour later, Joanna Davis and several FBI techs appeared.

His phone vibrated, and he saw a text from Avery. She was ready to head to the auditorium. He pushed back his chair and stood up.

"Are you leaving already?" Lance asked, giving him a curious look.

"Yeah, I need to take Avery to the auditorium."

"Take her?"

"Like I said, Hamilton wants me to keep her close."

"Rough job," Lance said with a knowing gleam in his eyes. "She's very attractive. Almost makes me wish I'd taken more science classes in school."

He smiled. "I know what you mean."

"Hey, before you go. I don't know if this is anything, but someone tried to use Kyle Tremaine's access code to get into his email file. The user was outside the company and after three unsuccessful tries, they gave up."

"And the ISP?"

"That's the interesting thing—the ISP address led me to Brett Caldwell's house."

"Avery's dad?"

"And Whitney Tremaine's boyfriend. Now, it's possible that Kyle was at the house and just forgot his new password. We've been requiring updates every week since the security breach."

"Thanks for letting me know."

As he left the security center, his mind spun with the latest leads. Kathryn and Carter were connected. Maybe Kyle and Brett were connected, too. He didn't know where the clues would take him, but at least they had more to follow than they'd had an hour ago.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ON HIS WAY TO pick up Avery and escort her to the auditorium, he stopped by Noelle's desk again.

Kathryn was gone. He wondered why she'd really come into the office. *Had she wanted to take another look at Noelle's space? Or had she simply come in to get her computer as she had said?* He would have to catch up with her later.

He hurried up to Avery's office and knocked, saying his name as he did so. She flipped the locks and stepped out with her computer in hand. "That took you awhile."

"Sorry, I went back by Noelle's desk," he said, as they walked to the elevator.

"Why?"

"I'll tell you when we get in the auditorium," he replied, as they passed by another employee heading out of an office and into a nearby restroom.

Avery gave him a frustrated look but didn't ask any more questions until they entered the auditorium. She flipped on the lights and they walked down the aisle toward the

center stage, a thousand seats rising up two stories around them.

"Okay, talk, Wyatt," she said, putting her computer on the podium. "We're all alone here."

"I reviewed the security footage from Friday night. Carter arrived at Noelle's desk about ten minutes after she left, just as Kathryn said. He went through the drawers and seemed angry and irritated."

"He was looking for her phone."

"Here's the thing—before Noelle left, I could see her texting on a phone, and the phone appeared to be in a black case. She put that phone in her bag."

"That's the one she had at the pier."

"I'm guessing the person she texted was you."

"She said she was running late," Avery confirmed. "So, we still don't know where her other phone is."

"There was no sign of it on the footage I watched. There was one other interesting note. When Carter was about to leave, he and Kathryn had an intense moment together. She put her hand on his arm and looked into his eyes, like she knew him as more than a friend."

"Carter and Kathryn?" she asked in surprise. "He was cheating on Noelle?"

"I don't know if he was cheating. He could have had a relationship with Kathryn before Noelle got hired at Nova Star. But Kathryn definitely didn't share that piece of information with us. She acted like she barely knew Carter, like she was almost afraid of him."

"She did point a finger at him, almost as if she wanted to make him a target. Was that to throw attention off herself?"

Or maybe she wanted to get back at Carter for something—like choosing Noelle instead of her? We need to talk to her again."

"She's gone. That's why I went by Noelle's desk before I came to get you."

"We'll go to her house then."

"We need to do some digging first. We don't want to alert Kathryn to anything until we know more. This is too important to rush, Avery. We say the wrong thing to the wrong person, and all the rats will run for cover."

She blew out a breath. "You're right. I just want some answers."

"Well, there's someone else we need answers from," he said, knowing she wasn't going to like what was coming next.

"Who?"

"Your father."

"What?" she asked in confusion. "What does my father have to do with any of this?"

"One of my security team discovered an attempt to log in to Kyle Tremaine's email account from your father's house."

"Well, my dad lives with Whitney, and Kyle does visit. So, maybe it was Whitney, or Kyle was there and just forgot his password. Your team has us changing passwords every other second these days. My father wouldn't try to get into Kyle's account. He can barely get into his own account."

"It's probably nothing, but I'd like to ask Kyle about it tonight at dinner."

"This party is looking to be more fun by the minute," she said dryly. "Is that it?"

"Yes."

"Good. I need to focus and get this work done."

"While you do that, I'm going to call the FBI and see what they know."

"Really?" she asked in surprise. "Do you think they'll tell you anything?"

"Probably not much, but it's worth a shot."

"I thought Hamilton wanted to keep the bureau at a distance."

"He also wants to know what's going on. I know how to play it." As he left the auditorium, he didn't dial Joanna; he contacted Bree. Now that she was part of their group, he preferred talking to her over anyone else.

Avery's mind spun with Wyatt's recent revelations, but as she opened her computer, she forced herself to concentrate on the task at hand. She had already sent the video file to the computer on stage, but she wanted to double-check that everything was working correctly and ready for the media at nine o'clock in the morning.

It actually felt good to think about work, because considering whether Carter had cheated on Noelle and whether or not her father had tried to log in to Kyle's email account was making her sick to her stomach. She wanted new leads, but each one that came seemed worse than the last.

Wyatt returned to the auditorium a few minutes later and seeing him stride toward the stage with confidence and strength made her feel better. She was fast becoming addicted to his handsome face, strong presence, and the sharp intelligence in his eyes. When he was with her, she felt like they might just get to the bottom of everything. She also felt like he was the only person who really understood what she was going through, but that was because she'd shown him her grief, her fear, her vulnerability. She'd let loose of her emotions in front of him and cried all over him, and he hadn't judged her; he'd held her.

Her body tingled as he drew closer, as his gaze met hers. It was scary how attracted she was to him. He'd only been gone a few minutes, but she'd actually missed him, and she felt an absurdly giddy feeling that he was back. Clearly, she was getting too involved. But she couldn't back away. There was too much at stake.

"What did the FBI say?" she asked, as he stepped onto the stage.

"Very little. I told them they should look more closely into Carter and Kathryn. They assured me they were on it."

"Do you think that's true?"

"Yes. They won't ignore solid leads, but they're frustrated with Hamilton's reluctance to give them unfettered access, so they weren't particularly interested in sharing information with me."

"Did you say anything about my father?"

"No."

She felt an unexpected wave of relief. It wasn't her job to protect her dad, but she was happy her father's name had not come up.

"Like you said, it could have been Whitney or Kyle," Wyatt added. "I can ask them tonight."

"I'd wait until after cocktails. Both Kyle and Whitney enjoy their wine."

"What about your father? Is he a drinker?"

"Not at all. He's cleansed his body of toxins the past few years."

Wyatt smiled. "I'm really looking forward to meeting him. He sounds very interesting."

"Then he'll like you, because he finds himself very interesting."

"Are you almost done?"

"I actually want to run through the show. It only takes fifteen minutes. What do you think? Feel like being my test audience?"

"Sure, why not? I've actually never seen any of your shows."

"What?" she asked in surprise. "It's supposed to be part of your orientation. Everyone sees the welcome to Nova Star video."

"Hamilton fast-tracked me through orientation."

"Then this will be good. You'll be a completely objective audience, like the reporters coming tomorrow. Take a seat in the first row. I'm going to turn off the lights and soon you will be taking an incredible journey through the universe."

He smiled. "This better live up to the hype."

"Space always lives up to the hype. I know you don't like to look up, but today you will, and I'll be surprised if you aren't amazed."

"So says the space geek," he teased.

She grinned back at him. "This is my world, Wyatt."

"I can't wait to see it."

Something passed between them that had nothing to do with Noelle or Carter. It was a personal, intimate moment that only they were sharing. Her lips tingled as she remembered the kiss they'd shared the night before and wondered if it would happen again

Wyatt cleared his throat, his gaze filling with shadows. "I better take my seat."

"Yes," she said, letting out her breath as she turned to her computer and got the show ready to go.

Wyatt kicked back in the leather recliner in the first row, grateful when Avery turned off the lights. It gave him a chance to regroup. For a moment there, he'd been tempted to kiss her again, and he'd promised himself that wouldn't happen—*shouldn't* happen. But that had been close, too close.

Thankfully, his racing heart began to calm in the cool darkness, only a small light coming from the podium where Avery stood in the shadows.

A moment later, she walked down the steps and took a seat in the chair next to him.

Then she pressed the switch in her hand, and the massive ceiling turned into the night sky. A trillion stars appeared, pulsating music playing in the background, building an expectation for what was to come.

And then a voice came through the speakers, and his nerves tightened. It was Avery's voice—hushed, breathy, excited. He glanced over at her, seeing her smile at him in the shadows and light from the night sky.

"Look up," she said.

He didn't want to look up; he wanted to keep looking at her.

But as her voice rang out again, stirring his senses, his gaze moved to the sky overhead.

"The universe is an endless, infinite space of immense distance and time. Where does it begin? Where does it end? What lies beyond what we've discovered so far? And who will lead the way to interplanetary travel? Who will be the first to defend space and protect it for all mankind?"

Her questions were followed by a kaleidoscope of colors. Stars, and planets spun around above him, carrying him away in a manner he had not expected.

He'd been working at Nova Star for a month and hadn't really paid much attention to the space stuff. But now he was looking up in a way he hadn't before—at least not in a very long time.

The sky above was filled with possibilities, with hope, optimism, wonder at the unexplainable, inexplicable universe...and the men and women who wanted to understand it, wanted to explore it, wanted to explain it...

He'd never been that interested in the universe, but he had wanted to change the world. He'd wanted to leave his mark on Earth. He'd wanted to take down the dark and bring out the light, although he'd never put it in those terms.

He'd been working undercover for the bureau for almost six years. He'd played so many different parts. He'd caught bad guys, protected innocent people, saved a few lives.

But was it worth it? Could he live forever in the shadows, never being who he really was, never letting anyone really know him?

He'd thought he could. But lately, he'd been feeling restless, yearning for something he couldn't quite define, wanting what he couldn't have...

His gaze moved to the woman next to him. He couldn't really see her in the darkness, but he was acutely aware of her presence, of the faint hint of lavender that must come from her shampoo or her body lotion. And thinking about her body only made the ache in his gut worse. Her kiss had taken him on an adventure, too. That brief taste had whetted his appetite for more, and he'd spent half the night telling himself to let it go, think of her as a job, but none of those reminders had worked. As soon as he'd seen her again, he'd wanted her back in his arms.

She was such an intriguing blend of smart, sexy and sweet. She didn't just fill him with desire, she also filled him with affection. And she'd slid in past his defenses before he'd even realized she was there. He still couldn't believe he'd told her about his family. That story had

brought them closer. He just wished he could tell her everything.

But that couldn't happen. He needed to rein in the reckless feelings.

Looking back up at the sky, he told himself he was just tired. He never took vacations between jobs, and he probably should. It had been a long time since he'd been able to let down his guard and just be himself—whoever that was. He was starting to forget, which was another disturbing feeling. Agents older than him had warned him about the dangers of staying out in the cold too long. But he'd always believed he could handle it, because he didn't want what other people wanted. His happy family illusions had shattered years ago. He didn't believe in love or happily ever after. He didn't think being a husband, a father, was in the cards. He didn't know if he had it in him to open himself up to all the possible pain again.

But being with Avery...made him think about what he was missing in his life, made him want more than he had. *Were the possibilities for his life as endless and as dream-worthy as the sky above him?*

As Avery's captivating voice fell away on a lingering, magical-feeling kind of whisper, he thought maybe, just maybe, they were.

He drew in several deep breaths, needing to get back to reality fast.

He was only with Avery because she needed protection and because she might be able to help him with his assignment. He really couldn't forget that.

But as she turned on the lights and gazed at him with eager, expectant, and very beautiful brown eyes—that resolve went right out the window.

"Well, what did you think?" she asked impatiently.

He raised his recliner to an upright position. "That was amazing. You took me right out of this world."

Her happy smile almost undid him.

"I'm so glad," she said, delight in her gaze. "That show was designed for people who have had no interest in space until now. It's supposed to whet their appetite to want more."

"It definitely did that," he muttered. "You have a very mesmerizing voice. Your passion for space is...palpable. I almost felt like I was spinning through the heavens."

"That's what I wanted you to feel. I remember the first time I saw a show like this. It was at the Griffith Park Observatory, and I went with my dad. Selfish quirks aside, he's the person who taught me how to dream. I think I was about nine at the time, and I was mesmerized by all the planets beyond this one. After that, I wanted to learn everything I could about space. Birthdays and holidays, I asked for books and more trips to the observatory. My mom used to say, 'Brett, look what you started—our daughter is obsessed.'"

He smiled. "Your obsession looks good on you."

She grinned back at him. "You're nice to say that. Not all guys have felt the same."

"No?"

"No," she said with a shake of her head. "I was late to my boyfriend's birthday my senior year in high school

because I was waiting for a comet to shoot through the sky. He got mad and ended up hooking up with Lorraine Hobbs. And that was the end of that. He couldn't believe I'd blown him off. But it was a comet, Wyatt. Do you know how rare it is to see something like that?"

"I'll take your word for it."

"I would have made it up to him if he hadn't cheated on me so quickly."

"He wasn't worth your time."

"He wasn't. And I knew that even then, but you know how high school is. No one wants to be alone, even geeky science nerds."

"You had to be the most beautiful nerd at that school."

She flushed at his words. "That's a charming thing to say but not true. I was very awkward back then. I still am, if you want to know the truth. When I study data, I wear really ugly glasses with thick black frames."

"Sounds sexy," he said, not knowing why the thought of Avery in a pair of glasses got his motor running, but it had certainly done that.

"It's not, trust me. I'm a very single woman."

"Is that the way you like it?" he asked curiously.

She licked her lips as she pondered his question. "I'm not unhappy on my own. My obsession does take a lot of time, and I love to work. But sometimes it's a little lonely. It would be nice to share my life with someone—the right someone. He hasn't come along yet."

"Maybe he's waiting for you to come back to Earth," he teased.

She made a face at him. "That could be a long wait."

He laughed. "You know, I've worked here for a while, but I don't really think I thought about what's being done here."

"Our mission is about more than just sending ordinary people into space. The satellites bring back important data as well as power the internet, GPS, so many things from ordinary life that people don't even realize. And, of course, they can also be used for spying, for war, for destruction. I worry sometimes that the beautiful universe will become a war zone. It's already happening with space debris from previous tests gone awry. Where will all the junk go?"

"I don't know, but I do know that almost every amazing technological advance can also be used in the worst possible way."

"Yes. That's why we have to fight to protect the technology we're developing."

"And that's why Hamilton hired me. I appreciate you reminding me of what's at stake from a science perspective."

"I'm glad it helped. So, now you know what I dreamed about as a little girl. What about you? What did you want to be when you grew up? A soldier? A security guy?"

"None of those jobs were even on my radar when I was a kid."

"Then what?"

"Well, let's see. I thought I could be a professional baseball player for a while, until I realized I wasn't that good."

"When did that happen?"

"When I got to college and realized that everyone there had been the best player on their team. There was nothing that special about me. I certainly wasn't the fastest or the biggest."

"Did you play in college?"

"First two years. I hurt my arm, and during the time it took to rehab, I discovered there was another life off the baseball field, and unlike you, I did not find that life in the library or the classroom. I had way too much fun."

She smiled. "I bet you did. What was your major?"

"Economics. At the time, I thought I'd probably go into the family financial business. I had no idea what was to come. I was probably lucky to be born nine years after my brother. He was already entrenched when everything went bad."

"Nine years is a big gap."

"I was an *accident*. My parents had only wanted one kid, but they apparently went to Hawaii and had too many vodka tonics, and voila—I was on deck."

She laughed. "Well, at least you were conceived in fun."

"They were happy then," he admitted, barely remembering those days now. "At least, I thought they were. I second guess everything now."

"It's weird how similar our dads are. Even though my father has never broken the law, he does kind of sell snake oil. And it sounds like your father did the same." The smile on her face dimmed. "What you said earlier about a possible email hack coming from my dad's house—I don't think he would do that. He sells dreams, and maybe he gets paid for his bullshit, but he's not a criminal. And he barely

knows how to send an attachment to an email; I can't see him trying to hack into Kyle's account. I also doubt he'd understand anything Kyle was talking about. I've had Kyle talk to science groups before, and even physicists were lost when he went off on one of his tangents."

"Now you sound like my mother defending my father for his sins," he said.

She frowned. "Do I? It's not like I don't see his flaws. But..."

"But you don't want him to be guilty of anything more."

"He can't be guilty of anything more, because if he was involved in this, then that would mean that he had something to do with Noelle's death and that man pulling a gun on me, and that could not be true," she said with pain in her voice.

"We don't know that it is true. We're still fact-finding."

She frowned. "I want to find the facts more quickly."

"It actually hasn't been that long. Things are moving fast."

"I guess. I'm usually better at being patient."

"Well, usually your life isn't on the line. I get that, Avery."

"I know you do." She paused. "Your life has been on the line before, hasn't it?"

"Many times."

"How did you get from college fun to the Marines?"

"It was the fastest way to change my life after everything that happened with my dad," he said, hating that he had to keep playing with the truth and also annoyed

that by telling her some of the truth about his life, he'd opened himself up to this line of questioning.

"And you couldn't just move to another city? You had to go risk your life?"

"I had to do something worthwhile, something to balance things out." He was talking about why he'd gone into the FBI, but in this instance, the reason worked for both his real life and his cover.

"Pay for your father's sins?" she questioned.

"Not exactly. But it turned out to be a good move."

"And now you're in security."

"Not quite the clear-cut route that you took toward a career, but I'm happy with where I am."

"I'm happy with where you are, too." She took a breath. "I'm kind of getting used to having you around, Wyatt."

"I'm not a pain in the ass, huh?"

"Well, I wouldn't go that far."

"Fair enough," he said with a grin.

"I do appreciate everything you've done to keep me safe."

"That's my job," he said, reminding himself not to forget that.

"And you do it well. I have no idea what's going to happen next, and that's scary for me. I like to know what's around the corner before I make the turn but being with you makes the unexpected easier to handle."

"Well...good," he said somewhat tersely, her faith in him starting to make him feel like the worst kind of person.

"Wait. What did I say? You're suddenly annoyed." Her brows drew together in a frown.

"I'm not annoyed. You feel safe with me. That's great. That's what you're supposed to feel."

"It's *not* the only thing I feel, Wyatt. You know that." Her gaze connected with his. "There's an electricity between us. I can feel the pull right now. I think you can, too. But we said we shouldn't do anything about it, right?"

It was the hesitancy in her question that made him lean across the armrest and answer her with the kiss he'd been thinking about since the last one they'd shared. He gripped her arms and covered her mouth with his, savoring the sweet heat of her lips, the passion that was so uniquely Avery, a mix of innocence and desire that was as out of this world as she was.

She'd stoked the fire between them with her show, with her hushed voice spinning tales of dreams and impossibilities.

She was absolutely an impossibility for him, but he wanted her anyway. He wanted what little he could get. Actually, he wanted as much as he could get, so he deepened the kiss, sliding his tongue into her mouth, savoring the soft moan that escaped her lips.

It just wasn't enough.

He wanted more.

So much more.

Too much more.

He broke the kiss, then framed her face with his hands as he gazed into her brown eyes that were lit with desire. "Beautiful," he whispered.

She put her hands on his face and smiled. "So handsome. Even with this scar," she added, tracing the thin

line that ran across his jaw. "How did you get this?"

"I don't remember."

They stared at each other for a long minute, and he had the crazy feeling he could look at her for the rest of his life and never want to look away.

Her gaze grew serious. "What are we doing, Wyatt?" she murmured.

It was a good question.

And he had no *good* answer.

He wasn't supposed to be messing around with Avery. He was on a job. Hell, he was lying to her, and when she realized that, she'd be hurt and angry.

But they wouldn't have time to fight about it, because he'd be moving on to the next job, and she'd find out that he was just another man who had let her down.

He really didn't want to be that man.

Avery was too sweet, too open, too honest. He couldn't be the one to hurt her. He had to put on the brakes.

"Wyatt?" she pressed. "There's an awful lot going on in your eyes."

"Well, there's a lot going on in both our lives right now. And this should probably not be part of that." He let go of her and stood up, breaking the connection between them. "We should get back to business."

"Yes, I guess we should," she said, getting to her feet, a troubled look in her gaze.

"If you're done here, why don't we go back to the hotel?"

"That's a good idea. I want to change clothes before the party."

"Is this dinner formal?"

"Not formal, but I'm going to put on a dress. Men will be in slacks, nice shirts, but no coats or ties required."

He was relieved to hear that. "I can do that."

She nodded and then let out a sigh.

"What was that for?" he asked.

"I just have a feeling you're going to look really good, Wyatt, and I'm going to want to kiss you again—business or no business."

He smiled at her candor. "You're going to look good, too, Avery. We're screwed."

"So, I'm not in this alone."

"You're not, but..." He forced himself to say the words. "This isn't a good time for our own personal trip to another galaxy. It's not that I don't want to, because I do. Believe me, I do."

She smiled back at him. "You talk like that, and you're going to make it harder for this space geek to resist you. But you're right. There's a better time."

He grinned. "I'll keep that in mind...when we find our better time."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

SHE WAS RIGHT. Wyatt looked deliciously sexy after he'd showered and put on gray slacks and a light-blue dress shirt. His hair was thick and wavy, his cheeks freshly shaven, and he smelled like musk and man, and it was all Avery could do not to throw herself into his arms and find that *better time* right now.

Despite the immediate guilty feeling that followed, a part of her wondered why they should wait?

Life was ridiculously short. Noelle had been eating cotton candy one minute and dying of a stab wound the next.

Maybe she should start living like there might not be a tomorrow, especially in view of how much danger she was currently in.

But there was no time to act on her reckless thoughts. They would be late for dinner and this dinner was turning out to be about more than her dad's fifty-sixth birthday. Still, she couldn't help smiling under Wyatt's appreciative gaze. "What?" she asked, sensing he wanted to say something, or maybe she just wanted him to say it.

"You look beautiful, Avery."

She smoothed down the sides of her short, clingy black dress, glad she'd put on high heels and had a chance to pull herself together. Wyatt had seen her at her worst so far. This might not be her best, but it was quite an improvement. She'd left her hair down, put on some makeup, even spritzed herself with some perfume, and Wyatt's words made her feel even better about herself. "Thanks. You clean up well, too."

His eyes sparkled with warm humor. "Glad you think so."

She really did, and a gnawing hunger in her gut had nothing to do with the fact that she hadn't eaten in hours. It was all about this man who had appeared out of nowhere and had somehow become her constant companion. But they were in dangerous territory, alone in this hotel room, and she couldn't handle any more danger, no matter how sexy it might be.

"We should go," she said. "Whitney hates when people are late. Not that she's ever on time."

"One-way street, huh?"

"That's Whitney." She put a silky wrap around her shoulders that would do little to keep her warm, but the only jacket she had in her suitcase had Noelle's blood on it, and that wasn't going to work.

Within minutes, they were in the car and on their way to her father's house in Calabasas, an upscale suburb north of Los Angeles, on the other side of the Malibu Canyon. He'd purchased the house a few months ago when he and Whitney had moved in together, choosing the location because all the Tremaines had homes in the area and the

hillside community offered views of the mountains and the beach.

Opting to avoid the freeways, Wyatt took the northern beach route, heading up the Pacific Coast Highway, turning off just past Malibu to drive through the Santa Monica Mountains to Calabasas.

"I am not looking forward to this," she muttered as Wyatt weaved his way through the unusually heavy traffic. Apparently, a lot of beachgoers had decided to take this route as well.

"I can understand that."

"On my best day, a dinner like this would not be high on my list of things to do, and this is nowhere near to my best day. But it is my dad's birthday, so I really can't skip it."

"It might be a good distraction."

"I doubt that, although it will give you an opportunity to get up close and personal with the Tremaines."

"I'm looking forward to that. I've had brief conversations with Jonathan and Kyle, but I've never spoken to Whitney. I did see her at Hamilton's house once, but she didn't come in to say hello."

"You were at Hamilton's house?" she asked with surprise. "He doesn't invite many employees to his home. It took me a year to get an invite. You seem awfully close to Hamilton for someone who has only worked at the company for a month. Did you bond over Marine stories?"

"We did, but our connection actually started when I saved Hamilton from being robbed and carjacked."

"What? When did that happen?"

"Right before I was hired. It was at the beach. Hamilton likes to surf in the mornings. I happened to be walking by when two thugs attacked him."

"His driver wasn't around?"

"He'd gone to get coffee. Anyway, Hamilton was grateful. We got to talking, and eventually he offered me a job. He's a good man—much more down-to-earth than I would have expected from a billionaire."

"Hamilton is very generous, and he talks to everyone. He's not class-conscious."

"That was one of the first things I noticed about him."

"Whitney, on the other hand, is very class-conscious. When you were describing your mother to me earlier, she reminded me of Whitney. My father's girlfriend is very into her women's groups and her charities. She dresses extremely well, always has her makeup on, her hair done, and she spends a lot of time working out."

"You don't like her," he said, shooting her a look. "Just because of her relationship with your dad?"

"Well, I don't love that, but even before they got involved, I wasn't a fan, and Whitney has never cared for me. She doesn't like Hamilton's friendship with me, or that we share a common love of astronomy. It seems to make her jealous in some way. But since she started seeing my father, she pretends to like me. It's not genuine, but that's fine. We do not have to be friends."

"Does your father want you to be friends?" Wyatt asked, as he turned off the highway and headed into the hills where there was a lot less traffic.

"Yes. He keeps telling me that Whitney has changed since she took his class on living your best life. She's now in tune with her emotions and is seeking peace instead of material goods and personal recognition. I don't believe that for one second. But I want my father to be happy. And I know how much Hamilton cares about Whitney's happiness, so I try to be friendly."

"It's a tangled web."

She blew out a breath, twisting her fingers together. "Yes. And if there's some kind of conspiracy going on at Nova Star that involves one of the Tremaines, I think things are going to get more complicated."

"You mentioned that you and your father reconnected several months ago?" Wyatt asked.

She frowned, having a feeling she knew where he was going. "Yes."

Wyatt glanced over at her. "Don't want to talk about it?"

He'd obviously heard the restraint in her voice. "I know what you're going to suggest—that my father reaching out to me to put him right into the Tremaine inner circle."

"Well, it did, didn't it?"

"Yes, but that was all by chance."

"Was it?" Wyatt countered. "You're a scientist, Avery. Is that what the data tells you?"

"Don't play the science card. We're talking about my father." She settled back in her seat as Wyatt concentrated on the traffic. She didn't want to consider the fact that her dad could be involved in anything, because that seemed completely unbelievable. "My dad wouldn't have access to

proprietary material. It's not like Whitney works at the company. She's rarely even at Nova Star."

"You're probably right."

She wondered if he really believed that. Despite the fact that they'd gotten closer, there was a part of Wyatt that she couldn't quite read. Even when he seemed to be in a sharing mood, he still held back. She was quite certain that there were things he knew that she didn't. But she believed he wanted to find Noelle's killer. And at the moment, that was the most important thing.

Twenty minutes later, Wyatt stopped at the guard house for the gated community her father lived in. She leaned over and gave her name to the female guard, Jessica, who she'd seen several times before. "Hi," she said. "Family dinner."

"I heard," Jessica replied. "Have fun."

The guard gate went up, and they drove into the complex and up several hilly streets before reaching her dad's home. They snagged a spot in the driveway and then made their way to the front door.

"This is nice," Wyatt said, his gaze scanning the house and surrounding area. While there were nearby neighbors, tall trees and shrubs prevented them from being seen. "It's not quite as large as Hamilton's home, but it's very luxurious."

"My father likes luxury. And even when he didn't have as much money as he does now, he wanted to appear successful. We always rented nice homes and my dad wore expensive suits, even when he was just job hunting. He said success breeds success, and I can't say he's wrong. He

turned a book without a particularly original idea into a huge motivational enterprise. People actually use him to improve their lives." She shook her head in bemusement, still not clear on how her dad had made that happen.

"People will believe anything if you hit them at their weak spot. We're all just looking for the secret to life, right?"

She gave him a thoughtful look. "Are you looking for a secret?"

"No, not me. I've already found it," he said lightly.

"You have? Please share."

"The secret is there is no secret. You live your life as best you can, enjoy what makes you happy, and that's it."

"Sounds very simple."

"Isn't it?"

"Peace and happiness seem much more complex to me. But I tend to make things more difficult than they are. At least, that's what Noelle used to say." She drew in a breath. "She keeps coming into my head."

"That's normal. She's on your mind. You don't want to let her go."

"I know I have to let her go. Maybe it will be easier once we know what really happened to her."

"I hope so," Wyatt said somberly, as he reached for the bell. "Ready?"

"Or not—here we come," she murmured.

Brett Caldwell looked exactly like the cover of his book jacket, Wyatt thought. He was tall and attractive, with dark-brown hair and eyes, and a charming, boyish smile that inspired trust. But Wyatt knew too much about him to be sucked in.

Brett gave Avery a smile and a hug. "I'm so glad you came, Avery. I know this is a terrible time for you and the last thing you want to do is come to a party."

"Well, I wouldn't miss your birthday, Dad."

"I appreciate that. I've been worried about you. I've sent you several texts. When you didn't answer, I even called your mother to see if you were all right and caught her on the beach in Maui. I guess if you weren't all right, she wouldn't have gone on her trip."

"I'm doing okay, hanging in there as best I can. Sorry about the messages. I just haven't felt like talking to anyone."

"I understand. Your mother said that Kari can't pay for Noelle's funeral. If you need financial help, I'm happy to contribute."

"I'll figure it out." She stepped back from her dad. "This is Wyatt Tanner. I hope you don't mind an extra guest for dinner."

Brett's gaze swung to his, becoming suddenly sharper and more assessing. "Of course not. Nice to meet you, Mr. Tanner."

"Happy birthday, Mr. Caldwell."

"Are you and Avery—"

"We're friends," Avery said quickly, before he could offer an explanation for his presence. "Wyatt works in security at

Nova Star. He's been very supportive since Noelle was killed. And he's staying on top of the investigation."

"Good," Brett said with a nod. "We need some answers. Noelle was a sweetheart. What happened to her is tragic."

"I completely agree," he said.

"Avery," a woman said, appearing behind Brett.

"Hi, Whitney," Avery said, giving the other woman an impersonal hug and an air kiss. "It's good to see you."

Whitney sidled up closer to Brett, as if needing to remind Avery that she and her father were together. They did make a striking couple. Whitney had straight blonde hair and deep blue eyes with an hourglass figure that probably had had some help from a plastic surgeon at some point.

"I've been thinking about you a lot since Friday night," Whitney said. "If there's anything I can do, I hope you'll let me know."

"Thanks. I appreciate that," Avery said politely.

"Mr. Tanner," Whitney said, turning to him with a speculative gleam in her eyes. "I saw you at my father's house a couple of weeks ago. I didn't want to interrupt your meeting. It appears that you're his new favorite friend at the company."

She didn't make that sound like a compliment. "I like and respect your father a great deal. And it's nice to finally meet you. I've heard a lot about you."

"I sincerely doubt my father has told you a lot about me," she said, an edge to her voice. "But come in, come in. We are having drinks out on the terrace. My father is already here with Larry Bickmore and his wife, Karen, and

Tawny Spellman and her very boring husband, Walter. Oh, and another old friend of Dad's is here, whose name I forget."

"Are your brothers coming?" Avery asked.

"They're supposed to be. Jonathan is coming solo. He and Stephanie are having a few problems, not that they've publicly stated that, but she seems to come down with a headache or some other germ every time we get together," Whitney said. "Kyle and Liz will be here, as far as I know."

"Any friends of yours, Dad?" Avery asked Brett, as Whitney moved ahead to speak to one of the caterers.

"It's a Nova Star and Tremaine night tonight," he said with a smile. "Family time."

Wyatt had a feeling that Avery was biting back a reply that had something to do with the fact that the Tremaines weren't his family, but she remained silent.

As they walked through the house, he made note of the expensive furniture, paintings, and carefully designed décor, all in keeping with what Avery had told him earlier about her dad's taste for the finer things in life. But it was the spectacular floor-to-ceiling windows and the deck off the living room that really impressed. Not only did Brett's home offer a stunning view of the hills they'd just driven through, but also the Pacific Ocean in the distance.

They followed Brett out to the terrace where a bartender was serving drinks, and a server was offering appetizers to the group of men and women.

He had previously met both Larry Bickmore, senior counsel, and Tawny Spellman, senior vice-president of manufacturing and production, but neither meeting had

gone beyond perfunctory conversation and brief security updates. While he knew little about them personally, professionally they were well-respected by their employees and colleagues. They were both also very close to Hamilton.

Larry's spouse Karen wore a very low cut, clingy dress, showing off her breasts. She already seemed to be well into cocktail hour. Tawny's husband Walter was a balding, older man, who looked like he'd rather be anywhere else.

While Avery said hello to Tawny and Walter, he snagged a crab puff off a silver tray, he had to admit this undercover gig was certainly better than most of his jobs. Usually, he was inserted into some drug dealing cartel. But his good feeling vanished when he saw the man standing closest to Hamilton Tremaine.

It was Vincent Rowland, a former FBI agent, the father of his friend Jamie, who had died during a training assignment at Quantico, a man who knew exactly who he was and what he did for a living.

He drew in a sharp breath, hoping Vincent wouldn't blow his cover. He would soon find out.

But it wasn't Vincent who greeted him first; it was Hamilton, whose bright-blue eyes seemed to have dimmed the past few days.

"Wyatt," Hamilton said, coming forward to shake his hand. "It's good to see you. I'm glad Avery brought you. I hope we can find a few moments together."

"Of course."

"Daddy, this isn't the time for business with your favorite security guy," Whitney interrupted, as she joined them. "It's

Brett's party."

"Just a little business," Hamilton said, giving his daughter an apologetic smile. "It won't take long. You don't mind, do you, Brett?" he asked, giving Avery's father a questioning glance.

"It's fine with me," Brett said, waving them off.

Hamilton turned to Vincent, who was regarding them with a contemplative expression. "Vincent—I want you to meet Wyatt Tanner. He's running my security team now. Wyatt, this is Vincent Rowland, former FBI, long-time friend."

As he stepped forward to shake Vincent's hand, he couldn't help thinking that the last time they'd exchanged a handshake had been at Jamie's memorial celebration in New York a few months ago.

Vincent looked better tonight, wearing black slacks and a sport jacket, his black hair neatly styled. He was in his mid-sixties and had an air of wealth and sophistication about him, which made sense, since he was moving in the same circle as a billionaire and a celebrity writer.

"Mr. Tanner," Vincent said, a gleam in his eyes. "You must have a busy schedule these days."

"I do," he said, happy that Vincent was protecting his cover.

"Wyatt and I need to have a few words," Hamilton added. "We'll be back soon."

"Take your time," Vincent said.

As Hamilton motioned him toward the house, he glanced over at Avery, who gave him an uneasy nod, before turning back to her conversation.

Hamilton had clearly been in the home numerous times, as he confidently made his way through the living room and dining room, where a long table was laid out with fine china and expensive crystal, down a long hallway to a dark-paneled study at the back of the house that was clearly Brett's office.

A massive mahogany desk and leather armchair was placed in front of the window. On the desk was keyboard in front of a large monitor as well as several journals and a couple of framed photographs. On one wall were framed book covers and travel photos. On the other wall, a floor-to-ceiling bookcase held numerous hardcovers and paperbacks. Avery might not have a lot in common with her father, but they both certainly liked books.

"Well, what can you tell me?" Hamilton asked, as he shut the door behind them. "Do you have any more leads into who killed Ms. Price? Is it tied to my company?"

"Yes. I believe her death is tied to Nova Star."

"Damn. I did not want you to say that. Please don't tell me Jonathan is the best suspect."

"Not yet, but that will change when the FBI figures out that Jonathan met with Ms. Price two days before her murder."

"You haven't told them that, have you?"

"No, but we need to head this off. Have you spoken to Jonathan?"

"Briefly. He brushed me off. He said he ran into her at the restaurant, and her date had bailed on her, so they had a drink."

"That's not what happened."

Hamilton gave him a pained look. "Jonathan likes women, and I know his marriage is not as happy as it could be, but he's not a murderer. Nor, is he a thief. He was just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Twice," Wyatt pointed out. "Right before Jia Lin was killed and now Noelle."

"It's a coincidence. And you need to prove that, Wyatt."

"Which is why I intend to speak to Jonathan tonight. He needs to know how high the stakes are."

"If he doesn't know that, he's a fool," Hamilton said. He might be loyal to his son, but he also had little patience for bad behavior. "What else have you learned?"

"Carter Hayes, Noelle's boyfriend, went through Noelle's desk after she left work Friday night. He was definitely looking for something, and it appears that Noelle might have had two phones, one of which is missing."

"And that's what everyone is looking for?"

"Possibly. Carter has been interrogated by the FBI with more interviews on tap. Carter works in Larry's department."

"Larry mentioned that. It does concern me since legal obviously has access to our patent information. But Larry assured me that Carter is a stand-up guy and a loyal employee, and Larry has always been a good judge of character. Anything else?"

"There was an email hack attempt made on Kyle's work email, and the ISP was tracked to this house." His gaze traveled to the computer on Brett's desk.

"What?" Hamilton asked, surprise in his eyes. "You're saying someone in this house tried to get into Kyle's email?"

Then you're talking about Brett or Whitney."

"Or perhaps Kyle was here."

"He never comes over here unless there's a mandated event, like tonight's party." Hamilton paced around the room. "No. This is just a continuation of someone's plan to target my family and set them up for whatever crimes are going down. First, Jonathan, now Whitney or Brett. We have to figure this out fast."

"Agreed." He could see the agitation building in Hamilton's eyes, and he hadn't yet dealt the biggest blow. "I also wanted to let you know that the man who broke into Noelle's apartment yesterday was found dead this morning—executed."

Hamilton sucked in a breath, his skin turning as white as his hair. "This gets worse and worse."

"I think you should postpone the launch on Tuesday."

"That's asking a lot. There are so many moving parts, Wyatt."

"I believe the launch is a target. It's a big risk to move forward with all of this going on."

Hamilton shook his head in frustration and anger. "It takes years to get to where we are right now. It wouldn't be like postponing it for a week—it could be a month or more before we could get back to a good date. We'd have to wait for the right weather conditions, and we'd have to run through all the tests and pre-checks again."

"Better to wait than to lose your satellite or more lives," he said bluntly. "There's too much we don't know."

"How do you know about the man who was found dead today?"

"I have a friend in the police department," he lied, needing to keep his connection to the bureau a secret. If he blew his cover now that he'd given Hamilton even more to worry about when it came to his family, he'd be out the door faster than he could turn around.

"But the FBI took over the case."

"They're still sharing intel with the police. You might want to reconsider your stance on the feds. Maybe working with the bureau would be helpful."

"No. We need to keep this in-house. Hell, it could be someone from the FBI trying to frame my sons."

"But you brought an ex-FBI agent to this party. I'm curious as to why."

"Oh, Vincent is an old friend," he said, waving a dismissive hand. "And he's been out of the bureau for ten years."

"Have you spoken to him about what's going on?"

"A little. He supported maintaining my own investigation, so I need you to keep doing what you're doing but do it faster. We should get back to the party. This is Brett's night, and Whitney will have a fit if we mess it up."

"What do you think of Brett?" he asked, his gaze moving toward the desk where a photograph had caught his eye. It was a picture of Brett and an elderly Chinese man standing in front of the Temple of Heaven in Beijing.

"Brett knows how to make the most of what he has. He spent a year traveling the world. China was one of his favorite places. According to him, what he learned there changed him forever."

"Interesting that he was in China."

"He went other places as well," Hamilton said, a tight note in his voice, as he read Wyatt's thoughts. He waved his hand toward the photographs on the wall. "There he is in front of the Taj Mahal in India, Buckingham Palace in London, Moscow's Red Square. Because a man is well-traveled doesn't mean he's guilty of anything. Brett can't be involved in this. I've welcomed the man into my family. He wouldn't betray me. Hell, he's Avery's father, and she loves the company as much as I do."

Wyatt waited for Hamilton to run out of steam. He didn't want Brett Caldwell to be involved in anything, either, because no matter how complicated Avery's relationship was with her father, she loved the man even more than she loved Nova Star. And the last thing he wanted to do was bring Avery more pain. She'd just lost her best friend; she couldn't lose her father, too.

"Whitney is crazy about Brett," Hamilton added. "I haven't seen her this happy since before her mother died last year. Brett brings out the best in her. She'd gotten so bitter, so angry all the time. I sometimes felt like she blamed me for not saving her mother. But I got the best doctors. We tried every experimental opportunity we could. It just wasn't enough." He cleared his throat. "Let's go back to the party. This conversation is pointless. Noelle's murderer is not part of my family circle."

He nodded, following Hamilton out of the room. He would go back to the party, but he was not going to let Brett Caldwell off the hook just yet. The timing of his entrance back into Avery's life, his fast-moving relationship

with Whitney, and the fact that he'd been in both Russia and China in the past year made him a very good suspect for something...

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

AVERY RESTED her forearms on the rail and stared out at the view. After exchanging small talk with the Nova Star executives and their spouses as well as Hamilton's friend, Vincent Rowland, she moved across the terrace to take a moment for herself. Whitney was checking on dinner, and her dad had disappeared somewhere, and she just didn't have it in her to exchange party talk when her head was filled with questions and her heart was still breaking over Noelle's death.

Plus, she couldn't stop wondering what Hamilton and Wyatt were talking about. They'd been gone a long time.

"Avery? Drink?"

She glanced at her dad as he joined her at the rail. She was about to say no when she realized he was holding a lemonade mixed with iced tea.

"Your favorite," he said with a smile.

"You made me my first Arnold Palmer when I was about eleven. I've been hooked ever since." She accepted the glass and took a sip. "Perfect."

"I know this is difficult for you, honey. If you want to leave, I would understand."

"I want to stay, but I might make a quick exit after dinner."

"Whatever you want. Jonathan just arrived. Kyle and Liz are on their way, so we'll be eating shortly."

She had been wondering where the Tremaine sons were.

As she glanced past her father, she saw Jonathan having what appeared to be a heated conversation with Whitney. "Is something going on with Jonathan and Whitney?" she asked.

Her father turned his head, following her gaze. "Sibling rivalry, probably. Whitney is very competitive when it comes to her brothers. She can't stand it if they get something she doesn't."

"What did Jonathan get that she didn't?"

"I have no idea, but she keeps track of every little thing that Hamilton does for Jonathan or Kyle and doesn't do for her."

"Like..."

"You want an example?" he asked, a curious note in his eyes.

"I'm being nosy, I know. It's just nice not to talk about anything serious or depressing."

"I can understand that. Well, Whitney got pretty ticked off when her father gave Jonathan his Porsche."

"I remember that. Kyle wasn't too happy, either."

"No, but Kyle is the one pushing Nova Star forward with his new technology, so he's getting lots of attention from his father for that. Let's face it, Whitney, Jonathan and

Hamilton are just along for the ride when it comes to what's really happening at the company. It's Kyle's work that drives the business."

She thought her father was along for the ride, too, but she wasn't going to get into that with him on his birthday. She sipped her drink. "This is good."

"I wish I could do more than just give you a drink—and one without alcohol at that."

"The last thing I want is alcohol right now. I need to keep my wits about me."

His gaze narrowed. "There's something you're not telling me. What is it?"

"It's nothing. I'm just shaken after what happened to Noelle."

"From what I hear, it doesn't appear to have been a random attack. Do you think it was her boyfriend?"

"I honestly don't know, Dad."

"Well, it wouldn't totally shock me if Noelle had gotten herself into some trouble. She was no stranger to crossing a line she shouldn't cross."

"She didn't like rules, but she wasn't a criminal. She didn't break the law."

Her father didn't appear totally convinced. "I hope not."

"Now I feel like you know something I don't," she said suspiciously.

"I ran into Noelle a couple of weeks ago when Whitney and I stopped by Nova Star to drop something off at Kyle's office. I was out in the hall, because it takes like ten badges to get into Kyle's office, and I personally don't find him to

be particularly interesting or friendly. He doesn't like that I'm with his sister."

"Okay. Where does Noelle figure into this story?"

"She came out of some back hallway, and when she saw me, she gave me a shocked look, like I'd just caught her doing something she shouldn't have been doing."

"She was in the engineering building?"

"Wherever Kyle works. I lose track of what's what."

"Did you talk to her?"

"For a minute. She said how grateful she was to you for getting into the company and that she wanted to make you proud of her. But she was fidgety and acted like she couldn't wait to get away. I asked her if she was okay, and she gave me a look that took me back to when she was a little kid and she'd done something wrong but didn't want to own up to it."

Her stomach twisted at her father's words. "She didn't say anything else?"

"Well, it didn't make sense to me, but she said she was fine and that she'd finally figured out she didn't always have to pick the bad boy or the wrong path; she could use her power for good. It was just a matter of choosing which side to be on. I didn't know what she was talking about, but then someone came down the hall, and she took off."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"When would I tell you? We don't speak all that often, Avery," he reminded her. "And I still don't know what she meant. Do you?"

"Not really. Her boyfriend was different than anyone else she'd ever dated. He certainly wouldn't be considered a

bad boy; maybe she was talking about him."

"I haven't helped, have I? I've made things worse."

"You couldn't make things worse, Dad. But I have to know why Noelle died the way she did. She's not here to fight for herself, so I have to fight for her."

"I can understand that. But be careful. I don't like that you were with her Friday night and that her killer is still at large. Someone could think you had seen something or heard something from Noelle. Is this man you brought tonight acting as a bodyguard?"

"Of sorts," she said. "Not that I need one. But Hamilton asked Wyatt to keep an eye on me, and he's been willing to do that. Let's talk about something else. It's your birthday. And Whitney has obviously gone to a lot of trouble."

"She's been great. I know you don't like to hear it, but it's true."

"Well, that's fine. As long as you're both happy."

"I'm crazy about Whitney. She's smart and strong and a little ruthless. I like that fire in her."

"You like that she's ruthless?" she asked doubtfully.

"Let's just say I like how she goes after what she wants. She's a firecracker. Your mom was—"

"I don't want to talk about Mom," she said cutting him off.

"I know you feel like you had to take her side."

"You left. There was only one side to take."

"I left because I was searching for something missing in my life. Your mom and I were eighteen when we met—childhood sweethearts. We grew up and we grew apart. I don't know who was right and who was wrong anymore,

but I've learned a lot about myself in the past several years, and I know now that I wasn't mature enough to be in a relationship with your mom."

"I'm sure she'd agree with that. I have to admit, Dad, since we're being honest, that I'm less confused about who was right and who was wrong than you are."

"I know I disappointed you. I let you down."

"You did. Many times."

"But I want to make all that up to you now. We can't change the past; we can only move forward. Are you willing to try?"

"If I wasn't, I wouldn't be here."

"Good." Relief appeared in his eyes. "I'd like to believe I'm a better person now than I used to be, but you'll have to judge that for yourself."

His words reminded her of what Noelle had said to her on Friday night, that she was trying to be a better person. *Why was she always surrounded by people who were trying to be someone else? Why couldn't they already be good?*

"What are you two talking about so seriously?" Whitney asked, interrupting their conversation with a speculative smile.

"The past," her father replied.

"Well, since it's all ancient history, maybe we should focus on right now. It's your birthday. I'm sure Avery wants you to enjoy it."

There was a challenge in the look that Whitney gave her, and she had no choice but to respond. "I do. It's all good."

"Glad to hear it. Kyle just got here," Whitney added, glancing at Brett. "He said he has something for you, for

your special day, and he wants to give it to you inside. He sounded rather mysterious. Do you know what he's talking about?"

"I don't, but I'm going to find out," Brett said.

"Do it now. We're almost ready to eat. He's in the house."

As her father left, Avery was hoping that Whitney would follow, but she lingered behind.

"Are you all right, Avery?"

"I'm still a little rattled," she admitted.

"That's understandable. I know that woman was your friend. She seemed very nice."

"You met her?" she asked in surprise.

"Yes, Brett introduced her to me a couple of weeks ago. We ran into her in the cafeteria at Nova Star. She was quite beautiful, very bright."

"She was."

"Although, I guess she had some financial problems."

"How did you hear that?"

"Brett said she told him she needed to make more money and she might need to get a second job."

"Really? He never mentioned that to me." Her father had just related his conversation with Noelle to her, so was Whitney embellishing? Or had her father left something out?

"I probably shouldn't have said anything. I know he offered to help her, and I think she said she might take him up on it. Your father is a very generous man, sometimes too generous. I hate to see people take advantage of him.

Anyway, can I get you a drink, maybe something stronger than that lemonade?" Whitney asked.

"No, this is fine."

"I'm going to check on dinner."

"Sure," she said, happy to see Wyatt return to the patio with Hamilton.

As Whitney left, Wyatt moved across the terrace to join her.

"How did your conversation with Hamilton go?" she asked. "Anything new?"

"Not really. Just giving him the update. I don't think I made his night any better. I noticed your father and Kyle going upstairs, deep in conversation. I wonder what that was about."

"Whitney told my dad that Kyle wanted to give him something for his birthday."

"Interesting."

"Is it?" she challenged. "Or is it just ordinary birthday party stuff, and we're both being paranoid?"

He shot her a quick look. "What are you being paranoid about?"

She hesitated. "My dad told me he ran into Noelle at Nova Star, in the engineering wing, and she looked startled and guilty when she saw him. But maybe she was just surprised to see my dad there."

"It sounds like your dad and Kyle have more interactions than we would have thought."

"I don't know. He said he went to Nova Star with Whitney who was dropping something off with her brother. He waited in the hall for her. That's where he ran into

Noelle." She sipped her drink, feeling parched and tense. "This party was a bad idea. Everyone is looking like a villain. I don't know who to trust."

"Good. Because right now, you really can't trust anyone. Why don't you go inside, see if you can find a bathroom, maybe one on the second floor?"

She stared back at him, pondering the sudden change in conversation. "You want me to spy on my father and Kyle?"

"If you happen to overhear anything... But if you'd rather not..."

"I could do that. I could go upstairs. No one would think anything."

"Exactly." He nodded. "I'm going to talk to Jonathan. We'll meet up in a bit."

"Okay." As Wyatt headed in Jonathan's direction, she walked into the house relieved to see no one near the staircase. She headed up the stairs and down the hall until she heard voices.

Her father and Kyle were speaking in the upstairs family room, and the door was ajar. She looked over her shoulder to make sure she was alone and then moved down the hall, her nerves tightening with every step. Hopefully, someone wouldn't suddenly come down the hall or out of a bedroom and catch her spying on an obviously private conversation.

"Dammit, Kyle, this is not going to work," her father said. "I don't care about your excuses. You told me what you were going to do, and you didn't do it."

Her eyes widened at her father's words. *What had Kyle said he would do that he didn't do? And what did that have*

to do with her father? She didn't even know that they had a friendship, much less anything they were working on.

Kyle said something in return, but she couldn't hear him.

What she did hear were footsteps coming up the stairs. She whirled around and got herself as far as the bathroom door when Whitney reached the landing.

Whitney gave her a look of surprise. "Problem, Avery?"

"No, the bathroom downstairs was being used. I hope you don't mind."

"Of course not. I was just looking for your dad. Dinner is ready."

The door to the upstairs family room opened and her father and Kyle walked out.

"There he is," she said, waving her hand toward her dad.

"Dinner is ready," Whitney told Brett.

"Great, I'm starving," Brett said with a smile. "You coming, Avery?"

"In a second. I was just going to use the bathroom."

"See you down there," Brett said, as he put his arm around Whitney's shoulders.

Kyle gave her an odd look. "Avery."

"Kyle," she returned. "It's nice to see you. Is Liz with you?"

"She's downstairs." He paused, an awkward expression on his face. "Sorry about your friend."

He didn't sound sorry, but then she'd never heard Kyle express any kind of emotion. He was a short, heavily bearded man with dark hair and dark eyes that were always guarded. He never had much to say at family

gatherings, usually letting one of his more outgoing siblings, his father, or his wife take the lead.

"Thanks," she said. "Did you know her—Noelle?"

"No," he said, a brief hesitation before his response. "I never met her. But it's tragic."

"I thought she might have done some work in your department."

"I don't think so, but I suppose it's possible. We have over eighty people in the department. Sometimes the admins bring in outside help."

"That's true. It's hard to keep track of everyone. Is everything all right with you and my father?"

"I was giving him his birthday present."

"What was that?"

"Oh. It was tickets to the Lakers. I got courtside seats for him for a game against the Warriors."

"I'm sure he'll love that."

"I'll see you downstairs," Kyle said.

"Yes," she said, slipping into the bathroom, as he continued down the hall. She stared at herself in the mirror. Her eyes were way too bright, and she looked guilty as hell. She really made a terrible spy. *And what had she even learned?* That her father was angry with Kyle about something he'd promised to do but hadn't done. And that Kyle claimed he'd never met Noelle, but had backtracked rather hastily, as if he'd realized he'd just told a lie he could be caught in.

But what did any of that mean?

Hopefully, Wyatt was doing a better job at getting information.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

WYATT FOUND Jonathan sneaking a smoke on a side patio, which was absolutely perfect for a private conversation. Hamilton's oldest son had turned forty a few weeks earlier and had silvery strands of gray in his dark hair. But he appeared lean and fit in his dark slacks and dress shirt.

Jonathan flashed him a guilty look as he took another hit, and then flicked the ashes into an outdoor planter. "I thought you were my sister for a second. Whitney doesn't like smoking around her house, but it has been a stressful weekend."

He nodded. "Yes, it has. Your wife isn't here?"

"No, she had a headache. She gets a lot of headaches these days," he muttered.

As suspicious as Jonathan's behavior had been the last few months, the number of times his name seemed to come up with security breaches or homicides, there was something about the man that didn't make him a good suspect. Just mentioning dryly that his wife got a lot of headaches was a little too forthcoming for someone who

might have a lot to hide. He'd want to keep up the illusion of the happy marriage, the great life.

"Sorry to hear that," he said.

Jonathan shrugged. "It's fine. Whitney and Steph don't get along that well, and Steph thinks it's absolutely creepy that Whitney is sleeping with a man old enough to be her father."

"They seem to be in love."

"Whatever that is," Jonathan said cynically. "I'm surprised to see you here, although I shouldn't be. My father likes you a lot. Probably more than his own sons."

"I doubt that."

"He likes talking to you. You're a soldier. He respects you. Last thing I would ever want to be is a military man."

"Well, you seem to have a good career going."

"Courtesy of dear old Dad." He blew out a swirl of smoke. "Whitney says you came with Avery."

"I'm keeping an eye on her since the murder of her friend, Noelle Price."

Jonathan took another puff of his cigarette. "That's nasty business. I need to offer my condolences to Avery. Is there going to be a memorial?"

"Avery is working on that, but I haven't heard any details. Did you know Noelle?"

Jonathan's gaze sharpened. "Since my father already spoke to me, I know you're aware I had a drink with her last Wednesday. Apparently, you saw us together. Quite a coincidence. Were you following me?"

"It doesn't matter. What matters is that the FBI will be knocking on your door soon, and if you want me to help

you, you need to be honest with me."

"Why would I need your help?"

"Because you're in trouble. Noelle is dead. Jia Lin is dead. And both women met with you shortly before they were killed."

Jonathan stared back at him and then stubbed his cigarette out on the stone planter and tossed it into the dirt. "I'm being set up."

"Help me prove that."

"Why would I trust you? You show up out of nowhere a month ago, and suddenly you're running our entire security operation? Men my father trusted for years have been relegated to lower positions since you came on board."

"Because I'm experienced in foreign and industrial espionage. You don't have to trust me, you just have to work with me. Your father wants me to protect you. I'd like to try."

Jonathan's lips tightened and then he gave a resigned shrug. "Fine. I didn't just run into Noelle. I asked her to have a drink with me, and she said yes."

"But she has a boyfriend."

"And I have a wife—so what? We weren't having sex; we were having a drink."

"How did you meet her?"

"At work. Noelle was friendly, funny. She smiled at me, which was a nice change from the glaring, irritated looks I get at home. It felt good to relax and talk to someone who didn't have any expectations."

"Are you sure she didn't want something from you? I hear she needed money."

"Yeah, she told me that. Her mom had financial trouble, and she was trying to help her. She said she was interested in working her way up at the company and wanted to know if I could give her any tips on how to get promoted. I told her to let me know if she saw any openings that she thought she might be qualified for, and I'd try to help her."

"Why would she ask you and not Avery?"

"She said Avery had a rather low opinion of her, and rightfully so. She admitted to leading a wild, irresponsible life. I liked that she was honest. Most people aren't. I guess she didn't want Avery to know that the job she'd helped her get wasn't quite enough."

Jonathan's story was so basic it actually seemed plausible. "What about Noelle's boyfriend, Carter Hayes? Do you know him?"

"Barely. I've seen him with Larry. Frankly, he didn't seem like someone Noelle would be with, but she said she was trying to make better choices in her life."

That resonated with what Avery had said.

"So, what do I need to do?" Jonathan asked.

"Do you have an alibi for Friday night?"

"Not really. I was at home alone. My wife was out with her friends."

"Well, if the FBI questions you, don't lie. Tell them what you just told me. Noelle wanted to talk to you about a job transfer. That's it."

"All right."

"Anything else you want to share? Now is the time."

"Whatever I say stays between us, right?"

"It stays between us," he lied.

"I've been thinking about why I'm on the hot seat when it should be Kyle."

"Why Kyle?"

"He asked me to take the meeting with Jia Lin when I was on my way to San Francisco. I don't normally meet with engineering candidates, but he wanted to know what I thought of her as a potential employee." Jonathan paused. "And when I first met Noelle at work, she made a point of telling me that Kyle had suggested she talk to me about a job. That's when I asked her to get a drink."

"You're saying your brother put you at both meetings?"

"Yes. But I don't think he's selling secrets or trying to sabotage the company. Why would he? This satellite is his baby. He's going to make my father proud. He's the star of the family. He wouldn't have any motive to try to take Nova Star down."

"Maybe he just wants to take you down," he said bluntly.

"Believe me, Kyle does not look at me as competition," Jonathan said, a bitter note in his voice. "He's always been the smartest one in the family. I'm the one who gets by on charm and connections."

"What about Whitney? Where does she fit?"

"Daddy's little princess. But she doesn't care about Nova Star. She's consumed with love these days and improving her spiritual life." Jonathan drew in a breath. "I know it's a big coincidence that I met with both Noelle and Jia, but they were innocent meetings. Someone is setting me up, and it's not one of my siblings. We don't sell secrets and we don't kill women. So, do what my father pays you to do, and find the real killer before someone else pays with their life."

On that note, Jonathan pushed past him, almost slamming into Avery as she came around the corner.

"Sorry, Avery," he muttered. "Didn't see you."

"No problem. Is everything all right?" Avery asked.

"Great. Dinner ready?"

"Yes, Whitney sent me to look for you guys."

"We better not keep her waiting," Jonathan said, moving quickly away.

"He seems angry," Avery said.

"We had an interesting talk. But I'm not sure we have time to rehash it now."

"We don't. Whitney is getting antsy. But can you give me the highlights?"

"Jonathan says Kyle put him at both meetings. Kyle asked him to meet with Jia and also told Noelle that she should talk to Jonathan about a job promotion."

"Kyle told me he didn't know Noelle," Avery said, her brows knitting together. "Although, he was quick to prevaricate that it was possible he'd met her but didn't remember."

"That's curious. Did you pick up on anything in the conversation between him and your dad?"

"Only that my dad was angry about something he'd asked Kyle to do. I have no idea what that was about. Whitney came down the hall, so that's all I heard, before they ended their conversation. We better go in to dinner."

As he followed Avery into the house, he thought about what he'd learned. Kyle was become more interesting by the minute. Unfortunately, so was Avery's father.

Dinner felt interminably long, Avery thought an hour later, as she sat at a very long table in the dining room, eating pretentious food and having meaningless conversation with Karen Bickmore, wife of Nova Star's senior counsel. Across from her, Wyatt had been squeezed in between Kyle's wife Liz and Tawny's husband Walter.

Whitney had deliberately put her at the complete opposite end of the table from her father and from Hamilton, but since she wasn't really in the mood for the party at all, she didn't much care. If Whitney needed to be by her father's side, that was fine with her. She was definitely playing the role of supportive girlfriend, chatting on about Brett's newest book, bragging about how great it was going to be.

Maybe this was what her father had needed all along, she couldn't help thinking—a relentless cheerleader. Whitney had time to cheer him on, because she didn't have to work, didn't have to raise a kid as her mother had. And all her father had to worry about was himself.

As she glanced down the table, he gave her a smile, and for just that brief moment, she thought maybe he did remember that she was there, that they had a relationship that preceded all of this.

Or did she just want to believe that? Did they even have a real relationship? Or had he used her to get to this table?

She was the one who had introduced him to the Tremaines, to Whitney, who had brought him into the inner circle, which made what she'd heard upstairs very

disturbing. On the other hand, it seemed ludicrous to think that her father could be involved in espionage. *He wouldn't betray the very people sitting at this table? He wouldn't betray her, would he?*

She rolled her neck around on her shoulders, thankful when Whitney finally got up to check on the cake.

Smaller conversations broke out around the table now that Whitney had stopped holding court. A few of the men got up and wandered outside, including Wyatt and Hamilton.

"Well, that seemed endless, didn't it?" Karen murmured, as she finished what had to be her third glass of wine. "We should get some more wine. Larry, can you pass that bottle?" she asked her husband, who was sitting on the other side of her.

"I think you've had enough," he said tersely. "Excuse me for a moment."

As her husband left the table, Karen grabbed the bottle and refilled her glass. "Want some, Avery?"

She shook her head. "No, thanks."

"More for me," Karen said with a bleary smile. "Larry is always so controlled, so proper. Sometimes I wonder why I ever married him. But then we've been married a long time, almost ten years. Maybe he would have loosened up if we'd had kids. But it wasn't meant to be."

"Sorry."

"I'm sorry for you," Karen returned. "About your friend, Carter's girlfriend. It's so sad."

Her gaze narrowed at Karen's words. "You know Carter?"

"Sure. He's been to our house a few times. He's trying awfully hard to impress Larry—works late, volunteers for whatever is needed. It's a little much sometimes, but I get it. Carter wants to get ahead. I can't blame him for that. Plus, he's very attractive. That doesn't hurt."

Avery's stomach turned over at the look in Karen's eyes. "Did Carter ever bring Noelle to your house?"

"No. He didn't bring any woman. He didn't have to. If he wanted entertainment..." She paused as she gulped down more wine, then she giggled, licking her lips. "I shouldn't have said that. No one knows. It's a secret." Karen put a finger to her lips. "Sh-sh."

"When did it happen?" she asked quietly, not that anyone was listening to their conversation.

"A couple of weeks ago."

"When he was with my friend?"

Karen looked startled, as if she suddenly realized what she'd said. "I—I don't know if he was with her then. I think it was before."

Avery didn't believe her for a second. "Carter was cheating on my friend, wasn't he?"

"Well, I suppose he was, but he didn't really want to. He wanted me to get some files for him so that he could impress Larry. I told him there was a price, and he was happy to pay it."

Karen was so lit, she had no idea what she was saying.

"You gave Carter files from Larry's office?"

"They weren't important. Just small cases. Nothing big. He keeps the big stuff in his safe, and I cannot get in there. Sometimes, I wonder what else he has in that safe. He

won't even tell me the combi—nation," she said, stumbling over her word with another giggle. "Where's the cake?"

"I think it's coming soon."

Karen's wine sloshed over her glass as she took another drink.

"Karen," Larry said sharply, as he returned to the table. "It's time for us to go."

"We haven't had cake yet," Karen complained. "I'm hungry. Did we eat dinner?"

"We did." He put a firm hand around his wife's arm and pulled her to her feet. "We have to leave now."

"But, I don't want to go," Karen protested.

"We're all leaving," Avery put in, wanting to make it a little easier for Larry, who was clearly embarrassed, now that some of the other guests had returned to the table and were watching the interaction.

"Oh, we are?" Karen asked.

Avery helped Larry get his wife out of the dining room and to the front door.

He paused, as Karen went stumbling down the front steps but somehow managed to stay on her feet. "I'm sorry about this. She's been having some hard times."

"Take care of her," she said, shutting the door behind him.

As she made her way back to the dining room, she wondered where Wyatt was. Hamilton had come back to the table, but Wyatt was still absent.

"Come sit next to me," her dad said, patting Whitney's empty chair. "Until Whitney comes back."

She almost refused that invitation, thinking how sad it was that he only wanted her next to him until his girlfriend returned, but it was his birthday, so she did as he asked.

"Larry's wife had a few too many," he commented. "That seems to be happening quite often."

"She does seem to have a problem," she admitted. "Whitney is taking a long time with the cake."

"She likes everything to be perfect. Do you want to leave?"

"I'll wait until the cake is served." She didn't really have a choice. She needed Wyatt to go with her, and he was nowhere in sight.

"I'm glad we have a minute," Vincent Rowland said, offering Wyatt a brief smile, as they moved into the shadows at the far side of the terrace. "I bet you were surprised to see me."

"I was. Thanks for the cover."

"Reminded me of the old days," Vincent said. "You're looking into the security leak?"

"Did Hamilton tell you about that? Or was it Joanna Davis?"

"They both did, as a matter of fact. But I didn't share my conversation with Joanna with Hamilton, if that's what you're wondering. Are you getting close to a breakthrough?"

"I have some new leads, but I'm not sure where they'll go yet."

Vincent nodded. "You've always had good intuitive instincts and the ability to slip into any persona at any moment. I was never good at that. I could never be someone else quite so easily." He paused. "I think Jamie would have been good at it, though. He could charm anyone."

His gut tightened at the mention of his friend. "I'm sure he would have been great. I heard Cassie is getting married."

"Yes. She had a big engagement party last night. That's why I'm in town. I stopped in at the office earlier today, and I saw Bree. She looks good. I hear she has a new man in her life."

There was a definite edge to Vincent's voice now. Maybe Bree was right. Maybe he never had liked her and always thought she was somehow responsible for Jamie's distraction, his death. But Vincent couldn't have been more wrong.

However, as much as he wanted to defend Bree, this was not the time or the place. Anyone could walk out at any moment. He cleared his throat. "How long will you be in town?"

"A few days." Vincent glanced around to make sure they were still alone. "What's your relationship with Avery Caldwell?"

"I'm watching out for her."

"Seems like there's some interest between you two."

He shrugged. "She's a job."

"Well, it's good that she's not more than that."

"Why is it good?"

"Because I'm concerned about her father. Ever since Hamilton told me about the problems he's having, I wondered if he wasn't looking past what was right in front of him: a man who has traveled the world, has many friends in China, Russia, and elsewhere, and made a surprising entrance into his family, into his company, into his daughter's life."

"It would be difficult for Brett to get access to the kind of information that's already been shared."

"Maybe—maybe not. I would just caution you not to be blinded by the brunette with the pretty brown eyes, who would probably not want you to go after her father."

"We should get back to the party," he said, not really caring for the conversation. He didn't need Vincent to tell him how to do his job, that Brett was a good suspect, or that Avery would hate him if he revealed her father to be a part of whatever criminal conspiracy was going on.

"I'll be in shortly. I have to make a call," Vincent said.

He walked around the corner and ran into Avery.

"There you are," she said. "Who were you talking to?"

"Hamilton's friend. Did Whitney bring the cake out?"

"Finally. She sent me to find you."

"Here I am."

"I have a lot to tell you when we're done with this party."

"I have a lot to tell you, too," he said.

"I wonder if it's going to be about the same person," she murmured.

As he took her back into the dining room, he wondered that, too. But, somehow, he didn't think that Avery would

have come to the conclusion that her father was a traitor and maybe a murderer.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

DESPITE WANTING to leave right after the cake had been served, it was another half hour before they were able to get out the door.

As Avery slid into the passenger seat just after eleven, she let out a sigh of relief. "That took forever. Can you turn the heat on?"

"Sure. You should have brought something warmer than that wrap, as pretty as it is."

"I was going to, but I realized the only coat I packed was the one that has Noelle's blood on it." She glanced out at the starry night sky as they drove away from her father's house and said, "Maybe I should go up in a rocket. Another galaxy is looking pretty good right now. But I know I can't run away from reality, as much as I want to." She turned her head toward Wyatt. "Did you learn anything else at dinner or afterwards?"

"Not really. What about you?"

"Karen Bickmore told me in a drunken ramble that she was sleeping with Carter."

"What?" he asked in surprise.

"She said Carter is very ambitious and came out to the house a few times and even asked her to get something out of Larry's desk, but she didn't say what."

"That's new."

"I just don't know if she was telling the truth. She was wasted."

"It doesn't seem like something she'd make up. This is good, Avery."

"Really? I feel like it's all just random pieces of information. Nothing goes together."

"Not yet, but we're getting closer."

"Or farther away." She paused as Wyatt took a turn, heading into the canyon that would lead them back to the beach and to their hotel. "Did you ever ask Kyle about the email hack?"

"I did. He said he hadn't attempted to access his email from Whitney's house. He was going to speak to Whitney and Brett about it."

She glanced at Wyatt. "You don't think my father is involved in this, do you? He's a lot of things, but he's not a killer. He's not violent. Words are his weapon."

"He has spent time in China and Russia."

She frowned, wishing Wyatt had given her a different answer. "So have millions of people. And his contacts are spiritual advisers. They're not tech people."

"Your dad is probably completely innocent. I'm just curious about his conversation with Kyle, what he wanted Kyle to do that didn't happen."

"I should have asked my dad; I just didn't want him to know I was eavesdropping."

"It's best that you didn't. You don't want to show your hand."

"Not that I have any good cards," she countered. "I'm not a very good detective or spy."

He flashed her a smile. "You're doing very well, Avery. Answers can take time."

"I feel that might be time we don't have."

"We're working as quickly as we can."

As they drove through the dark canyon roads, the headlights from the car were the only light they had. It felt a little eerie, and she kind of wished they'd gone around to the freeway instead of cutting through the hills. But that was silly. No one else was even on the road.

No sooner had that thought crossed her mind when she saw a light in the side-view mirror.

She shifted in her seat and glanced over her shoulder.

"It's fine," Wyatt said, but she could hear a tension in his voice.

"Is it?"

Wyatt didn't reply, his gaze darting from the road to the mirror as the lights behind them got brighter. He pressed his foot down hard on the gas, taking the next turn at a fast rate of speed.

She looked over her shoulder, hoping to see that the other vehicle had fallen back, but it was drawing closer. It looked to be a large SUV of some sort.

"Hang on," Wyatt said.

"What are you going to do?"

"Outrun him."

Despite his promise, their car was bumped from behind a moment later. They swerved toward the hillside, but Wyatt quickly brought the vehicle back under control. Swearing under his breath, he pushed the car to the limit, but the vehicle behind them had more power and was soon within inches of their bumper.

The road grew narrow, twisting and turning through the hills—nowhere to turn, nowhere to escape.

She grabbed onto the armrest, biting down on her lip, wanting to close her eyes, but afraid to stop looking ahead in case she could help Wyatt in some way. They were coming out of the canyon. Maybe once they reached the Pacific Coast Highway, the person would back off.

If they didn't, she really didn't want to think about the fact that going south on the highway, they'd also be on the ocean side of the road, and at some points that road went along a very high bluff over the ocean.

Her heart thundered against her chest as the car hit them hard from behind once again.

Wyatt hung on to the wheel as the back end of the car fishtailed for a moment, sending up dirt and rocks in their wake. And then Wyatt sped ahead once more.

They came out on the highway. She searched the road for somewhere to hide or run...

"Around the next curve," she said, remembering a spa she'd once gone to that was hidden away down a narrow road behind a wall of trees. "There's a road to the left. It comes up fast."

"Got it," he said in clipped tones.

She held on tight as Wyatt pushed the car as fast as it could go. The other car fell back.

They flew around the curve. Wyatt saw the road and took it on two wheels, turning off the lights as they disappeared into the trees. She knew he didn't want to hit the brakes, didn't want any light to show, but they were going too fast; another curve was coming up, and she held her breath, hoping this escape wasn't going to end in a fiery crash.

Finally, he slammed on the brakes as they went around another corner, and the side of the car skimmed off two trees, sending branches across the windshield, but, thankfully, the glass didn't break. They came to a halt. Her heart was pounding so loud, she couldn't hear anything else.

Wyatt turned in his seat. She did the same, as they both looked behind them. The road was empty, but she didn't know if they were safe or not.

Once the other car realized that they'd turned off the highway, they'd be back.

Wyatt must have had the same thought. "Where does this road go?" he asked.

"To a spa. It's a dead end." She really wished she hadn't used the word *dead*.

Wyatt threw the car into reverse.

"What are you doing?" she asked in alarm.

"Getting out of here."

"What if they're waiting for us on the highway?"

"That's why we have to move now."

He turned around and then went back the way they'd come, keeping the lights off, which made the journey even more harrowing as there were so many trees, so many shadows. When they got back to the highway, he looked in both directions. There was a small coupe coming from the north, definitely not the car that had been behind them, and nothing from the south.

Wyatt pulled out onto the road heading north. He drove two miles and then turned in to the parking lot of a twenty-four-hour supermarket. Parking between two trucks, he cut the motor and the lights. From their position, they could see the entrance to the lot, and they watched for several tense minutes as cars passed by on the highway, with a minivan turning in, followed by a sedan. A woman and an older teenager stepped out of the van, while a young couple exited the other car.

"Do you think we lost them?" she asked.

"I think so. But we can't stay here. And we can't go back to the hotel."

"Why not? They followed us from my dad's house, not from the hotel. They might not know where we're staying."

"I'm not taking that chance." He pulled out his phone.

"What are you doing?"

"Calling for a ride."

"We're leaving the car here?"

"Yeah. We'll get it later." He paused. "There's a driver two minutes away."

"Where are we going to go, Wyatt?"

"We'll find another hotel. But right now, I just want to get us out of this car and on our way to another location."

She liked the idea of switching cars, although she wouldn't have thought of it. But Wyatt had. He'd driven through the canyon like a race car driver, never panicking, never losing control. He'd kept his head, and he'd probably saved her life—again.

She pulled out her phone and searched for a hotel. "What city do you want to go to?"

"Let's get into a more populated area."

She looked through the hotel listings. "There are a bunch of hotels by the airport."

"Perfect. Pick one, and I'll put in our destination."

She picked the hotel that was located between two others, thinking maybe it would be safer, although she had no idea why that would be. She gave him the address.

Wyatt tapped in the address and they waited in silence until their ride turned into the lot.

They got out of the car and met their driver in front of the market. He was a college kid driving a small black Hyundai. She kind of wished they'd gotten a ride in a more substantial vehicle, although maybe this was less obvious.

She wanted to talk to Wyatt but didn't want to say anything in front of the driver, although the young male was rocking out to a rap song blasting out of the radio and not paying them a bit of attention.

It took twenty minutes to get to the airport hotel, and she felt like she was holding her breath the entire time. When they got to the hotel, they made their way quickly inside. Wyatt checked them in, using a credit card, which worried her, but she didn't say anything until they were on their way upstairs in the elevator.

"Can't someone track us through your credit card?" she asked.

"Don't worry about it," he said vaguely.

She frowned at that answer, once again thinking that no matter how much she liked Wyatt and had come to depend on him, he still seemed to have his own secrets. But she still stayed close to him as they walked down the hall and entered their room—one room, she couldn't help noticing, although there were two beds.

"It's all they had left," Wyatt said, reading her mind. "You can trust me, Avery."

"I'm not worried about sharing a room with you. But tell me about the credit card. Can't someone trace it to us?"

He stared back at her. "I told you I changed my name."

"Yes."

"Well, I didn't change all my cards."

"It still seems like it could be tracked to you."

"It would take some work and some time. We'll be gone by then."

"Will we?" she asked, wandering around the modest, impersonal hotel room. "What happens next? I have to go to work tomorrow. The reporters are coming in for the show. I'm sure you have things to do."

"We'll figure it out, Avery."

She stared back at him, feeling wired and terrified and restless. "Someone tried to kill us just now. They tried to run us off the road. We could be dead."

"But we're not. We're very much alive."

"Why aren't you having a reaction?" she demanded, annoyed with his calm demeanor.

"I feel like there's no good answer to that question," he said carefully. "Do you want some water?"

"No, I don't want some water," she said with irritation. "I want you to feel the way I do. I want you to be normal, to be afraid, to be human, instead of like some ice-cold, superhero."

He walked across the room and put his hands on her shoulders. "I'm not a superhero."

"The way you drove tonight, you could have fooled me."

"It's over now, Avery. We're okay for tonight. We'll be safe here. You can breathe again."

She stared back at him, really wanting to believe him. "Do you think they were waiting outside my dad's house?"

"I'm guessing they picked us up after we drove through the guard gate. I didn't see anyone until we hit the canyon, but they were probably hanging back."

"Do you think it was the man with the tattoo again?" Something shifted in Wyatt's gaze. "What? What aren't you telling me?"

"That man is dead, Avery."

"Seriously?" she asked in surprise. "How do you know that?"

"I followed up with the FBI earlier."

"When we were at Nova Star?"

He hesitated. "Yes."

"But why didn't you tell me, Wyatt? Didn't you think I'd be relieved to know he was dead?" She paused. "Wait a second. Who killed him?"

"All I was told was that it looked like a hit."

"Like a hit? What does that mean?"

"Someone took him out, Avery. Maybe whoever he was working for knew we could identify him. He became a loose end."

"So, they just killed him? Just like that? What kind of world is this?"

"Not a world you should be living in," he said tersely. "I need to get you out of it."

"But I am living in it. And I'm still in danger. *We're* in danger."

"Until we figure out who is responsible, yes."

She paced around the room, wishing she could be happy that the man who had pulled a gun on her was now dead, but it just seemed to make things worse.

Wyatt sat down on the bed and took off his shoes. The casual gesture startled her.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Getting more comfortable. Why don't you try it?"

"I'm too tense. I can't just sit down and relax."

"Then pace it out. I wouldn't try the screaming exercise here," he said. "Or security will come running."

"You're joking right now?"

"Just trying to lighten the mood. Sit down, Avery. Take a breath."

She made three more trips back and forth across the room before she moved to the bed and sat down on the mattress across from him. After a moment, she kicked off her high heels.

"That wasn't so hard, was it?" he asked.

"Yes, it was," she said. "How do you handle it all so well, Wyatt? You don't seem bothered by what happened."

"I'm concentrating on the positive. We survived. We're safe. I'm staying in the moment, Avery. It's all we can do."

"Is it all we can do? I'm thinking we should call someone—the police or the FBI. You said you spoke to an FBI agent earlier today. You must have a number. We should tell someone that we were almost killed tonight. Maybe they can do something."

"There's nothing anyone can do tonight. I couldn't identify the car, other than that it was a large, black SUV. I didn't catch the license plate. I couldn't even tell you how many people were in the car."

"I couldn't say that, either," she admitted.

"We can touch base with the bureau in the morning. It's almost midnight. I think we should get a few hours of sleep. We'll go into work tomorrow. While you handle your show and the media tour, I'll call the agent I spoke to today, let them know what happened and see what I can find out."

His logic was difficult to argue with, and as the minutes ticked by, she found her panic beginning to subside. Wyatt was right. They were safe for now. And with no information to go on, no one was going to be able to catch whoever had been following them anyway.

Wyatt took off his suit jacket and tossed it on the end of the bed. Then he leaned against the pillows, his legs stretched out in front of him. "This bed isn't too bad," he said. "You want to turn on the TV?"

"This is so weird," she said, with a shake of her head. "You're trying to be normal, but this is not normal."

He smiled. "What is normal anyway?"

"Well, it's not this."

"So, no TV then. What do you want to do?"

She stared back at him, and suddenly her tension shifted.

What did she want to do? What she should not do!

Wyatt's mouth tightened, and he gave a subtle shake of his head. "Forget I asked that."

"Why?"

"Because what you're thinking is a bad idea."

"How do you know what I'm thinking?" she challenged.

"Your eyes are glittering. Your face has new color in it. And you're looking at me like a woman feeling incredibly reckless."

"I do feel reckless," she admitted. "We almost died today. Hell, we almost died yesterday. Who knows what's going to happen tomorrow?"

"We're not going to die."

"You can't promise me that."

His jaw tightened, and his gaze filled with shadows. "You're right. I can't promise you that, but I can tell you I'll do everything in my power to protect you."

"Why? Because Hamilton asked you to?"

Her simple question hung in the air for a long minute.

"Because I care about you," he said slowly.

Her whole body tingled at his words. "I thought I was just a job."

"I've been trying to keep you in that category, but I can't. You're a beautiful woman, Avery, not just on the outside. You're kindhearted, generous, and fiercely loyal, putting your own life at risk to get justice for Noelle. And you're a dreamer. Earlier today, you made me look up at the

stars, and I haven't done that in a really long time. You made me think about possibilities." He paused, meeting her gaze. "It's hard to be cynical around you."

His words pulled at her heart. "Really? I feel so pessimistic right now."

"That's not pessimism; that's fear. But you're fighting. You haven't given up. You haven't thrown in the towel. You have courage."

"I don't have courage. I'm terrified."

"But when you act in the face of fear, that's bravery. It doesn't matter if you're scared. It only matters what you do."

"Is that what they taught you in the Marines?"

"It's what I've learned over my lifetime. I've been in some bad situations. As long as you don't give up, you can always find a way out. So, we're not going to give up."

"No, we're not," she agreed. "Wyatt...what you just said—it was really nice. If you were trying to make me like you less, it didn't work."

His lips curved into a sexy smile and her breath caught in her chest.

"Wrong tactic, huh?" he drawled.

She nodded. "That connection I was talking about before—it's even stronger now. I've never felt like this before, and it's not just because you're protecting me. It's because I can talk to you. I can be my complete and utter self and know you're not going to judge."

"I'm the last person who should judge anyone. There's a lot you don't know about me, Avery."

There was a warning note in his voice, but she blasted right through it. "There's a lot you don't know about me, too. But isn't part of the fun finding out what we don't know?"

He cleared his throat. "Where's that TV remote?"

She gave him a knowing smile. "Now, who's getting scared?" she teased.

"I'm trying to be professional, Avery."

"You don't have to be professional after midnight." She checked her watch. "And it's two minutes after." She got up from the bed and breached the distance between them, sitting down next to him and putting her hand on his very hard, masculine chest.

"Avery, stop," he said, covering her hand with his. "We can't do this."

"Why not?"

"You're too vulnerable. This isn't what you want. I'm not *who* you want."

"Yes, you are."

"There's too much you don't know, Avery."

"The only thing I need to know right now is whether you want me, too."

Shadows flew across his face. There was a fight going on in his eyes, and she didn't know why. "I've never really had to talk anyone into taking me to bed before," she murmured. "Have I misread this? Do you not feel the same way?" Doubt suddenly ran through her. "Am I embarrassing myself?"

She tried to pull her hand away, but now he was holding on to her instead of pushing her away.

"You aren't misreading anything. I want you, too—in every possible way."

"Then why are you saying no? Why aren't you following your philosophy to live in the moment?"

"I don't want to hurt you."

"I've been hurt a lot already. I don't think tonight is going to be about that."

"Tomorrow might be."

She smiled at his cynicism. "Hey, look up, remember," she said, squeezing his fingers. "See the possibilities, not the improbabilities. I borrowed that from Hamilton, by the way."

"It's a good line," he said. "But not as good as this." He pulled her forward, so close she could feel the heat of his breath, but still he hesitated. "I know we should not do this."

"And I know we should. No regrets," she whispered. "Just you, me, tonight...that's all we can count on. All we need." And with that, she put her mouth on his.

All hesitation, reluctance, restraint, worries about doing the right thing, vanished with their first kiss.

It didn't just feel good—it felt right...*perfect*.

She couldn't get enough of Wyatt's mouth, his taste, the slide of his tongue against hers, his warm, sexy heat. Pleasure spread through her, tingling every nerve. She wanted to touch him, and the buttons of his shirt were right in front of her.

She flicked them open, one by one and then pressed her palm against his skin, running her fingers through the smattering of brown hair. She pressed her mouth against

his chest and took delight in the groan that escaped his lips.

She lifted her head and smiled into his eyes. "You like that?"

"I like you." He ran his hand through her hair, pulling her down for a kiss.

And then he turned the tables on her, switching positions, tumbling her onto her back. She sank into the soft mattress as he covered her body with his.

He ran his thumb across her mouth, following that gesture with his lips, and she drank him in like a long, cool drink on the hottest day imaginable.

His hand ran up her thigh under her dress, and she shivered with anticipation, wanting him to touch her there and everywhere.

"You're so amazing, Avery," he breathed, lifting his head to gaze at her. "I want to take my time but damn...the way you kiss..."

Her heart pounded against her chest at the hungry look in his eyes.

"The way *we* kiss," she breathed. "The way *we* touch. It's not me or you—it's us."

"Hell, yes, it's us," he said, pulling back so that he could take off his shirt.

She caught her breath once more at the sight of him. Wyatt was in incredible shape. He actually had a six-pack, and his well-defined abs, muscular arms, and broad shoulders all made her mouth water. If anyone was amazing, it was him. She almost felt a little self-conscious

at her soft, not-at-all-defined muscles, but she didn't have time to think about it as Wyatt took off his pants.

"Wow," she muttered.

He smiled. "Your turn, babe."

She sat up and pulled her dress over her head, glad she'd worn a lacy black bra and matching thong. She'd always had full breasts, and Wyatt's appreciative gaze made her feel beautiful, feminine, wanted... But as he came in for another kiss, the sane part of her brain made one last gasping attempt to make her think.

"Wait," she said.

His gaze darkened. "Second thoughts?"

"Condom. I don't have any with me."

"Right." He reached back for his pants and pulled out his wallet and a foil package.

"Always prepared."

"Since I met you," he said.

She didn't really believe that, but she pulled him down on top of her. "Thank God you sometimes think ahead and don't always live in the moment."

"Thank God," he echoed, as he lowered his head and kissed her again. And then he dropped his mouth to her breasts, his fingers slicing underneath the lace of her bra, teasing her nipples into tight points of pleasure. She ached with need, running her hands over his back as they moved together, kissing, touching, and loving each other in all the ways she'd ever imagined...

CHAPTER NINETEEN

WYATT TIGHTENED his arms around Avery as he woke up just before five. The room was still dark, and the air had chilled considerably since their fevered lovemaking of the past few hours. He didn't know when they'd finally fallen asleep. Maybe an hour ago?

He pulled the covers up and over them. Avery snuggled closer to him, her face just inches away from his own. He smiled to himself, feeling ridiculously...what was the word...oh, yeah—happy. He felt happy, and he couldn't really remember when he'd felt this happy. It wasn't just the sex that had been spectacular. It was Avery. She'd blown him away even before they'd gotten naked together, but tonight...

He didn't even know how to describe it. But for the first time in a long time, he felt himself, which was crazy, because he was still living a lie. But for a few hours, he hadn't been undercover, he hadn't been an FBI agent, he hadn't even been the guy who'd watched his father and brother go to prison. He'd just been himself—the person he'd thought he'd lost, forgotten, or maybe just put away.

He frowned at the direction of his thoughts. Talk about losing the happy mojo as fast as possible. He needed to keep hanging onto the moment, because he was pragmatic enough to know that this moment wasn't going to last forever, or even for very much longer. The light was coming, and he wished he could hold it off, let Avery relax and sleep in blissful oblivion for a while longer.

He'd told her he would do everything he could to protect her, and he believed he could keep her out of physical danger, but emotional danger...that was another story. His gut was telling him that whoever had killed Noelle, whoever had gone after them last night, was probably someone Avery knew, maybe even someone she cared about. He really hoped it wasn't her father. She could probably handle betrayal from the Tremaines, but her dad—that would devastate her.

"You're crushing me," Avery said, blinking her eyes open.

"Sorry." His grip on her had obviously gotten tighter as his thoughts had gone to a dark place.

"What time is it?"

"Five-ish," he said. "You can go back to sleep."

"But you can't," she said, making it a statement and not a question.

"I don't think so. My brain has fired up."

"Come to any answers?"

"Unfortunately, no, but we have a lot of leads to follow. Hopefully, one of them will take us somewhere."

"Somewhere that doesn't involve my dad," she said.

He stroked the soft skin of her back. "That would be my preference as well. I just wish he hadn't spent time in Russia and China."

"The Tremaines have traveled there as well, and my dad has no motivation to spy on Nova Star."

"Money is always a motivation."

"He's already rich. It's not him. He's not a criminal, even if he's not the greatest father or even person."

"Okay," he said, seeing the agitation in her eyes.

"You don't believe me," she said with annoyance.

"I just remember saying the same thing about my father at first. I couldn't believe the evidence that was in front of my eyes. Eventually, I had to acknowledge that I was wrong, that I couldn't defend him."

"This situation isn't the same, Wyatt. And I'm not wrong."

"All right. We'll work all the other angles and leave your father out of it."

"Thank you. There are certainly a lot of other people with more to gain. We should make a list. I like lists. They keep me organized."

He smiled. "I bet they do, but we can do that later," he said, kissing her forehead.

The smile returned to her eyes. "Really? You have something else you want to do now?"

"I do actually."

"So, do I."

"I like how we're on the same page."

"I like a lot of things about us," she murmured. "Kiss me already."

His lips had barely touched hers when a loud bell went off in the hallway.

"Is that the fire alarm?" she asked.

He jumped out of bed and began collecting their clothes. "Get dressed," he said, as the bells continued to ring.

"Maybe it's a false alarm," she said, as he handed her dress to her.

Or maybe it wasn't a fire but a way to get them out of the hotel.

He threw on his clothes at record speed. He could hear doors opening and closing, people talking in the hallway, and his gut told him this was bad—very bad.

The phone by the bed rang, and he grabbed it as Avery put on her dress and slid into her heels, shaking out her tangled hair with her hands.

The call was recorded, alerting them to the need for them to evacuate their room as calmly and as quickly as possible, using the closest stairwell.

"What did they say?" Avery asked, as she picked up her bag.

"To leave our room in an orderly manner." He put on his jacket and made a quick check of the room. They hadn't brought anything with them, so there were no bags to worry about, and Avery already had the strap of her purse over her shoulder.

They walked to the door, and he took a quick peek outside before he opened it.

"Are you checking for fire?" Avery asked, her hand on his back.

"Yeah," he said shortly. But he was more worried that someone had followed them to the hotel than that there was a fire. Although, that was probably shortsighted, considering what had happened to Noelle's apartment building.

He opened the door. An elderly couple was making their way down the hallway, the man grumbling about the damned fire alarm. He didn't smell smoke, but that didn't necessarily mean anything. They followed their fellow guests to the stairwell, making their way down six flights of stairs. He grabbed Avery's hand as they neared the first floor and the emergency exit.

He leaned in and whispered, "Stay close to me. If I say run—run."

She glanced back at him, her eyes widening as she realized he was concerned about more than a fire. But he saw the gleam of determination enter her gaze.

"Got it," she said.

The emergency exit led them out the back of the hotel, and they were quickly pushed along with the others into the parking lot. While they were surrounded by people, he still felt exposed. He saw no flames, and while there appeared to be fire engines in front of the hotel, he still wasn't convinced there was a fire.

Unfortunately, they couldn't go back inside, nor could they easily leave. It was five o'clock in the morning and they didn't have a car. Calling a cab or a rideshare service was going to take a few minutes.

"What do you think?" Avery asked, huddling close to him as he held tight to her hand.

"I don't like it."

"Should we try to go somewhere else?"

"Yeah, let's move toward the front of the hotel where there are more people. The group they'd been in was quickly dispersing. They'd no sooner taken a step when he felt something whiz by his ear and the front window of a nearby car shattered. A moment later, another window blew out.

Someone yelled, "Shooter."

He broke into a run, pulling Avery along with him, as they dodged between cars in the huge parking lot, glass being broken every few seconds.

Thankfully, there were probably fifty or sixty cars, not only in the hotel lot, but in the rental car parking lot next door. Plus, there were now a lot of people running, so they weren't as noticeable.

He tried to get them away from the lights, into the darker corner of the lot, relieved when he heard more sirens.

He started flipping car door handles, until one opened. It was a rental car sedan. As Avery got in the passenger side, he ran around the car and got behind the wheel, slamming the door fast so there was no light.

Avery stared back at him with terror in her eyes and she slinked down in her seat. "Now what? Are we sitting ducks?"

"No." He pulled a set of keys out of the console.

"No way," she breathed.

"Must be our lucky day." He started the car and backed out of the spot, heading toward the exit. There were other

cars leaving the area as well. He didn't know if any of those held the shooter or if they were filled with people trying to escape, but hopefully they would blend in.

When he got onto the street, he sped up, then maneuvered his way through the city by taking side streets and making unexpected turns to make sure no one was on their tail.

They'd gone about five miles when he started to breathe a little easier.

"I think we're okay," he said, looking over at Avery.

The sun was starting to come up, and he could see her face better now. She was pale but stoic, no sign of tears or panic. Considering this was the second time in less than twelve hours that they'd had to run for their lives, she was holding up amazingly well. He turned at the next corner and pulled into a parking lot behind a trio of retail shops. He turned off the lights but kept the engine on in case they had to make a quick exit.

"Why are we stopping, Wyatt?"

"I'm trying to figure out where to go," he admitted. "I'm also trying to figure out how they found us at the hotel."

"The fire alarm—it was just to get us out of the hotel."

"Yeah. I had a bad feeling about it. We probably should have stayed put."

"I don't understand how they found us."

"Maybe they traced the rideshare pickups in that area."

"Wouldn't that take some kind of police warrant? Would the people following us have that capability?"

"I don't know, but they found us, so they did something." His gaze fell to the handbag on Avery's lap. "Let me see

your bag."

"Why?"

"Just let me take a look."

She handed her bag over, and he searched through it, pulling out her wallet, a brush, a couple of lipsticks, sunglasses, and a compact. For a woman's purse, it was fairly tidy—typical Avery, he thought. But there was something loose at the bottom. He pulled out what looked like a bead from a necklace and held it up to Avery.

"Recognize this?"

"No. What is it?"

"It's a GPS tracker. Someone put it in your purse."

"Oh, my God, they could be right behind us."

"Not for long." He checked to make sure there was nothing else in her bag, then tossed the bead out the window and peeled out of the lot.

He got on the nearby freeway and drove south for several miles, then exited and drove city streets, carefully checking his mirrors for a tail. The sun was coming up higher in the sky and the neighborhoods were starting to wake up.

As he stopped at a light, he looked over at Avery. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. But do you have a plan beyond just driving around?"

"We need to kill an hour. We can go to Nova Star at seven. That's when all the security will be coming in, setting up for the day, checking the offices, the building, in preparation for the media."

"All right. I guess we can just drive around—" She stopped abruptly, her gaze dropping to his chest. "Oh, my God, Wyatt, you're bleeding."

"What?" he asked in bemusement.

"Your side. There's blood all over your shirt. You were hit."

"I don't feel anything," he said. But as he looked down, he could see blood all over the bottom half of his shirt. As the light changed, he pulled over to the side of the road. Then he pulled up his shirt, revealing a slice wound across his side. "It's not a big deal," he said, the pain starting to come now that he was coming down off the adrenaline high. "It's just a graze."

"It's still bleeding," she said with concern. "And that's a big deal. You need to have that cleaned, maybe stitched. We have to go to the hospital."

"No. They'll find us there. If they think they hit one of us, that's the first place they'll check."

"Well, we can't just sit here while you bleed."

No, they couldn't. He needed to get Avery somewhere safe, and right now there was only one person he could trust. Luckily, she lived about ten minutes away. He didn't want to bring danger to her, but if anyone could handle it, it was Bree.

He pulled out his phone and sent her a quick text, hoping she'd answer by the time he got to her house.

"Who did you contact?" Avery asked.

"A friend. We'll go to her house."

"I don't think we should bring anyone else into this."

"She can handle it."

"She?" Avery echoed.

He didn't answer as his phone buzzed. He glanced down at the text. Bree had sent him her address and told him to park in the driveway. "It's going to be fine," he told Avery.

"Why don't I drive?"

"I can make it," he said, forcing the lightheaded feeling out of his head. He powered down his phone, then turned to Avery, realizing he should have gotten rid of the phones at the same time he got rid of the tracker, but, clearly, he wasn't thinking as well as he should be. "Give me your phone."

"My phone?" she asked unhappily. "I have everything on my phone."

"It's backed up, right?"

"Yes."

"Then you don't need this one." He turned it off and then drove down the alley and tossed both phones into a nearby dumpster.

With the pain starting to increase in his side, he drove as quickly as he could to Bree's house.

She met them at the door. "Come in," she said. "What happened?"

"We got shot at," he said, his words starting to slur.

"Wyatt got hit," Avery put in, her arm sliding around him.

"It's nothing. I just need to sit down," he said.

Bree put her arm around his other side, and the two women helped him to the couch. Then Bree ran into the nearby bathroom and came back with some towels.

"Put pressure on the wound," she said to Avery, handing her a towel. "I'm Bree, by the way."

"I'm Avery."

"I know," Bree said. "I'll be right back with my first aid kit."

Avery helped him off with his jacket and then pressed the towel against his wound. "Sorry if I'm hurting you."

"It's okay. This is nothing. I've been hurt a lot worse."

"I really think you need a doctor."

"Bree can fix it up."

"She can?" Avery asked with a raised brow. "Is she a doctor?"

"No, I'm not a doctor," Bree said, returning with her kit. "But I think I can take care of this. Do you mind?"

Avery didn't look too convinced, but she moved to the other side of the couch, still staying close to him.

Bree handed him three pills and a glass of water. "Start with these."

He tossed them down his throat as Bree opened up his shirt.

"Probably going to scar," she said, as she cleaned the wound.

"That will just make me hotter, right?" He tried to smile at Avery, but she was staring back at him with worry and a bit of wariness. He probably shouldn't have brought her here, but he'd had to go somewhere, and Bree was his best option.

"Please don't agree with him," Bree said to Avery. "Wyatt's ego is already too big."

"Where do you two know each other from?" Avery asked.

Bree remained silent, letting him come up with the answer. "We met a while ago, in class," he said vaguely, hoping Avery would think he was talking about college.

"This might hurt," Bree said, as she cleaned his wound.

Avery slipped her hand into his. "Hang on to me," she said, holding his gaze. "You can break my fingers if you need to."

"I'd never want to do that." He winced as pain rocketed through him. Fortunately, Bree worked quickly.

"I'm just going to butterfly this," Bree said, putting bandage strips over his wound. "You could probably use a stitch or two."

"This will be fine," he said, as she finished.

"So, what happened?" Bree asked, getting up from where she'd been kneeling on the ground and perching on the edge of the coffee table in front of him. She wore leggings and a long T-shirt and, clearly, she'd been in bed when he'd called.

"We were staying at a hotel—someone pulled the fire alarm. When we got outside, shots were fired." He knew Bree would read between the lines.

"How did you get away?" she asked.

"That was luck. Hotel was next to a rental car agency. Found a car in the lot with the keys in the console."

"That is lucky. You really do have nine lives, Wyatt," Bree said. "Although, you have used up a few of them."

He could see Avery's interested gaze following their conversation. He turned to her. "Do you think you could get me a glass of water?"

"Of course. But this is Bree's house. Maybe she should do it. Unless you want to talk to her without me? If that's the case, I'm going to use the restroom."

"It's down the hall on the right," Bree said, as Avery got to her feet.

"Thanks. I'll bring you some water when I come back."

Wyatt waited until he heard the bathroom door close. He just hoped Avery had actually gone inside the bathroom before closing the door and wasn't listening in the hallway.

"Here's the deal," he said. "We went to Avery's father's house for dinner. Someone followed us through the Santa Monica Mountains, almost ran us off the road. We switched cars, went to a different hotel, but I didn't find out until a brief while ago that someone had put a GPS tracker in Avery's bag. I got rid of it, as well as our phones, right after I texted you. Hopefully, no one knows we're here, but I can't promise anything."

"I'm sure you were careful. Someone put the tracker in Avery's bag while you were at the party?"

"I think so. She put it down by the front door when we walked in, although we were at Nova Star earlier in the day."

"Who was at the party?"

"Almost everyone who's a suspect. But if someone at that party was responsible for everything that came after that...it's someone Avery knows, someone I know." He paused. "I'm worried it's her father. He spent a lot of time in China. He likes money. He showed up at Avery's door several months ago. He's now practically engaged to a Tremaine heiress..."

"I'll look into that angle." She paused as Avery came back into the room. "Why don't I make you both some coffee, maybe breakfast?"

"I would love coffee," he said. "Avery?"

"Sure, why not?" she said, a hard note in her voice. "And then, maybe you can tell me who you are to each other."

"I told you we're friends," he said.

"We really are just friends," Bree added, with a reassuring smile. "I have a boyfriend—actually, a fiancé. He's just out of town today."

"I'm not jealous," Avery said, folding her arms in front of her. "I'm suspicious." She glanced at Bree. "You know how to take care of a gunshot wound. You were willing to open up your door at six o'clock in the morning and not ask any questions about how Wyatt got shot. I don't think you're just a friend." Her gaze moved to Wyatt. "But I don't want to hear the story from her. I want to hear it from you. Start talking, Wyatt."

He could see the determined glint in her eyes and knew he had no choice but to give her the truth. "Okay. I'll tell you who Bree is."

"I'm going to take a shower and then make some coffee," Bree said, giving him a commiserating smile. "Good luck, Wyatt."

After Bree left, Avery sat down on the couch, keeping more distance between them. It was hard to believe now how close they'd been only a few hours ago.

Drawing in a breath, he said, "Remember when I told you that you didn't really know who I was?"

"Yes. So, who are you? And who is Bree?"

"Bree is an FBI agent." He paused. "And so am I."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY

AVERY SUCKED in a breath at his words. She didn't know what she'd been expecting Wyatt to say, but it wasn't that. As soon as he'd contacted Bree, as soon as they'd stepped into this house, she'd known something was off. Watching Bree take care of his wound in such a professional manner for a non-medical person had only reinforced that idea.

But now...now she had to deal with a truth she wasn't ready for, and that truth was that Wyatt had been lying to her.

"You're working for the FBI?" she said slowly.

"Undercover."

"So, Hamilton doesn't know—"

"No one at Nova Star knows—except you."

"And I only know because we're here. You weren't going to tell me, were you?"

"Not while the job was on," he admitted.

She thought for a moment, still trying to process his words. "I don't understand. If you're a federal agent, why did you sneak into Hamilton's company?"

"Because he shut the FBI out. Because Nova Star's new satellite defense system has far-reaching implications, and if anyone steals it or sabotages it, the country as a whole could suffer serious consequences. The bureau could not make Hamilton understand that. Actually, that's not true. He understood. He just wanted to protect his family and try to handle things himself."

His words made sense, but as she thought about everything he'd told her, she realized just how underhanded he'd been. "You said that you saved Hamilton from a carjacking, and that's how you met him, how you got the job. That's a big coincidence."

"It was a set-up. The two men who attempted to rob Hamilton were FBI."

"So, you were never in any danger when you saved his life?"

"No. It was my way in. And it didn't start there. We made sure that Hamilton's former security director won an unexpected lottery prize and suddenly had the money to retire with his wife. Then we made plans on how to insert me into his operation. He obviously wasn't looking to hire a stranger off the street. I had to make him trust me. Then when Hamilton saw my Marine-issued duffel bag, we bonded as former soldiers. He wanted to reward me for saving him. I said I didn't want charity, and after some discussion, he gave me a job in security. Once there, I showed him I could be of help to him, and he handed me more responsibilities. He told me about the security breach, the FBI, and his concern for Jonathan. I've been working on finding the truth from the inside. It actually

worked out well, because Hamilton did want someone looking into the breach; he just wanted to protect his family at the same time."

His words were delivered in a pragmatic, and non-emotional tone. There was no regret in his voice, no guilt about the secrecy, the lies.

She twisted her fingers together. "Were you even a Marine?"

"No, I wasn't."

"But you have the tattoo on your wrist."

"It's fake."

She let out a breath. "Wow, I really don't know you."

His hard gaze met hers. "I didn't lie about everything, Avery."

"You didn't? Because it sure seems like you did."

"What I told you about my family—that was all true. It happened. My father and brother went to jail. I lived through that. It's part of my real life, a part that very few people know about."

"A life you lived under another name, which I still don't know." She shook her head in bewilderment. "How does that make this better?"

"I don't know about better, but I wanted you to know that not everything I told you was a lie."

He grimaced as he shifted position, and her heart tweaked a little, knowing he'd just taken a bullet for her. But she was still angry, still hurt, and she needed to stop letting her emotions rule her decisions.

"Let's get back to your cover. Hamilton doesn't know you're on the inside, but you're not really on the opposite

side. He wants to find the mole and so do you."

"Yes, which has made it easier. But Hamilton was still reluctant to give me real access to his sons until Noelle was killed. He'd convinced himself that Jia Lin's death was one isolated incident and that whoever had stolen the classified information had either gone underground or no longer had access to anything with our new enhanced security procedures. Noelle's death changed that."

"Why didn't you just tell me this before, Wyatt? Maybe not right away, but what about yesterday? What about last night? We escaped with our lives twice. Couldn't you trust me with the truth?"

"I'm trusting you now."

"It's a little late, Wyatt."

He frowned. "I know. We shouldn't have slept together."

"This isn't about that."

He gave her a long look. "Isn't it partly about that, Avery?" He paused, waiting for her answer, but she didn't feel like providing one. Then he continued. "In my defense —"

"You have a defense?" she asked, cutting him off.

"Last night, I told you there was a lot about me you didn't know. You said you wanted to live in the moment, that you didn't care," he reminded her.

"But I didn't know what I didn't know," she protested, wishing she had a stronger leg to stand on. But he was right. She had ignored the fact that they didn't know each other well. She'd wanted him, and she'd acted on it.

"And I said that you'd regret it, that you wouldn't want me if you knew me better, and you told me not to tell you

what you wanted."

"I know what I said," she said, getting to her feet and looking out the window as the sun rose higher in the sky.

"I'm sorry," Wyatt said. "For what it's worth."

She turned around. "For what exactly?"

"For not being able to tell you the truth. I do trust you, Avery. That's why I brought you here, why I let you meet Bree, why I'm telling you all this now." He let that sink in, and then added, "And why I have to ask you to keep my cover. Someone is trying to kill you, and we need to deal with that before we deal with the rest."

"Kill me or kill you?" she wondered, returning to the couch. "It occurs to me that I've been in more danger since I've been with you."

"It's possible they're after both of us," he conceded.

"Because we can identify a dead man? That doesn't make sense anymore, Wyatt. The man is dead. What does it matter if we can put him in Noelle's apartment after the murder? He's not going to jail. He's not going to tell us what's really going on." She stopped abruptly. "Wait, let's back up. When we went to the police station together—"

"I called the bureau and asked them to get there first," he said, obviously reading her question before she could spit it out. "They needed to take over the case, so we could keep the police away from my cover and out of our investigation."

"When you say it like that, it feels like Noelle's murder was of lesser importance."

"It wasn't," he said forcefully. "But it was a piece in a bigger puzzle. I'm part of a specialized task force that has

been running data and financials and tracking people at Nova Star for the last few months."

"But with all that, you haven't found the leak."

"We didn't have a lot to go on until Noelle was killed. Now we have more."

"And my friend is dead." She paused.

"I would have saved Noelle if I could. I hope you can believe that, even if you can't believe anything else."

She did believe that, because the Wyatt she knew wouldn't have walked away from an injured person. *On the other hand, was she being a fool to think she knew anything about this man?*

"So, what do we do now?" she asked, knowing she couldn't deal with the emotional fall-out from Wyatt's lives right this minute. It was just too much.

"We keep looking for the traitor."

"How? You're hurt. You should be at the hospital right now."

"I'm fine, although I might need a new shirt before we go in to Nova Star."

"Are we going in to work like nothing is happening?" That idea seemed completely ridiculous.

"Right now, it might be the safest place."

"Even though all the suspects work for the company?" she countered.

"Yes. And you can't blow my cover, Avery. If you do, it will set everything back. Hamilton will lock all the doors behind me, and not just me—probably you, too, maybe this entire investigation. You have to stay silent."

"You're very persuasive when it comes to protecting yourself."

"This isn't about protecting me. You can trust me on that."

"I can't trust you at all," she snapped. "So, stop talking about trust. If I keep your cover, it's because I want to find who killed Noelle and who has been trying to kill me."

"I understand."

"Do you?" she challenged, really hating the calm expression on his face, even though she should have learned by now that Wyatt did not show his emotions. "I thought you were different, Wyatt. I thought you were a man of substance. Someone I could count on. I trusted what I saw when I looked at you, when I spoke to you, even when I made love to you. But you're a chameleon. You change yourself into whoever you need to be to fit in. You lie so easily and so well. God, you're just like my father. You're a ghost. You have no substance. I can touch you, but I can't really touch you, because the real you isn't there."

"I was there last night."

"Were you?" she asked, searching the face she had come to love and now felt she would have to hate.

"I was myself with you. I couldn't be anyone else. You brought me out of the shadows, and even though I knew it was wrong, I wanted to be with you. If we could only have one night, I selfishly wanted that night."

"I don't know what to think," she said, completely bewildered. "You're a liar. It's what you do for a living."

"It is what I do," he admitted. "I lie to gain trust. That gives me access to information I wouldn't be able to get

otherwise. Then I take criminals down."

"But I'm not a criminal. So, what am I? Collateral damage?"

"I don't want you to be damaged," he said, an intensity in his gaze now. "I don't want you to be hurt at all. I've been trying to protect you, and I'm going to keep doing that no matter how much you may dislike me."

"You just can't protect me from you," she said, feeling an immense wave of sadness.

His lips tightened, but there was no defense he could offer.

"You know who you're also like?" she asked. "*Your* father. He was a con man, too."

"Yes. It was a skill I inherited from the old man," he said with a bitter nod. "Don't think I haven't thought that before, because I have. And you might not want to believe this, but you're the only person outside of a few close friends in the FBI that I've ever told about my father."

"That doesn't matter now." She drew in a breath and let it out. "I don't want to talk about us anymore, because there is no us. I want to focus on how we're going to catch the person who's trying to kill us."

"So do I."

Bree cleared her throat as she came into the room, wearing tight black jeans and a cream-colored blouse. "Sorry to interrupt."

"It's fine," she said, getting to her feet. "Wyatt and I are done."

"The coffee is ready in the kitchen. I'll make us some breakfast," Bree said.

"I don't need anything." She walked through the double doors leading out to the balcony and stood at the rail. Maybe it was dangerous to stand in plain view, but there was no one in sight, and she really just needed a minute to process everything.

Her mind was spinning with all that had happened. There was a part of her that was deeply hurt, and those emotions kept wanting to come out, pushing moisture into her eyes, sobs rising up in her throat. She had totally bared herself to Wyatt in so many ways, not just physically but emotionally. And to know that he'd been lying to her the whole time...it made her wonder if anyone would ever love her with any kind of honesty, and if she could ever trust her instincts.

She brushed her hair off her face as the wind picked up. She couldn't let herself cry. She couldn't let the emotion overwhelm her. Later...she could give in. But now she had to pull herself together and think. The sun was rising, the minutes were ticking forward, and somewhere out there was someone who wanted to kill her.

How was she going to figure out who was after her? And what was she going to do if she found out it was someone she knew? If it was her father...she felt like she just might break.

How many betrayals could one person take?

Wyatt changed into one of Nathan's shirts and then returned to the living room. He could see Avery still

standing out on the deck and as much as it pained him to see her making herself so vulnerable, he knew he had to give her a few minutes, so he moved into the kitchen.

Bree poured him a mug of coffee. "I've been keeping an eye on her."

"Is she crying?"

"Maybe on the inside." She stirred some eggs in a pan on the stove. "I've got bacon cooking and some toast. I hope you'll both eat something."

"Thanks—for everything. I didn't know where else to go."

"You can always come to me. You know that." She paused, giving him a thoughtful glance. "You like her, don't you?"

He sipped his coffee. "Maybe."

"No maybe about it. And she has a thing for you."

"If she did, it's gone now," he said tersely. "But it doesn't matter. We need to figure out what's going on."

"Any leads from the party?"

"A few. Larry Bickmore, senior counsel for Nova Star was there. His wife drank too much and told Avery that Larry and Carter were working on something together that required Carter to come to his house. It sounded interesting enough to follow up."

Bree slid the eggs onto a plate. "I agree."

His gaze shifted back to Avery. "Do you think you could get her to come back in here? I don't like her out there."

Bree smiled. "You think she'll listen to me over you? She didn't seem too friendly."

"She's very friendly; she's just upset."

"I'll give it a shot."

As Bree walked out of the kitchen, the bread popped up from the toaster. He smeared it with butter and put it on a plate as Bree returned with Avery in tow.

"I'll take some coffee," Avery said.

He was happy she was speaking to him, even if it was an unfriendly order. He filled her a mug and then helped Bree take the plates to the table.

While Avery at first seemed reluctant to join in, she eventually ate some eggs and bacon.

"Wyatt and I went to Quantico together," Bree said, breaking into the tense silence that accompanied their meal. "In case you were wondering how we met, Avery. We were put together in a group of six people. We spent most of our training together, working through mission assignments, stripping down each other's barriers, interrogating, grilling, competing with each other and learning how to watch each other's backs." Bree cleared her throat. "We were all really close, and then one of us was killed in one of our last assignments. We all blamed ourselves for not saving Jamie."

"Jamie?" Avery cut in, her gaze narrowing. "Last night at the party, I spoke to Hamilton's friend, Vincent Rowland, and he mentioned that he was in town for his daughter's engagement party and that he was happy for her but sad that her brother Jamie would not be there. Is that the same Jamie?"

"Vincent was at the party?" Bree asked in surprise, turning her gaze to his.

"Yes. He's apparently friends with Hamilton. Fortunately, he realized I was undercover and didn't say anything."

"Why would he have been at the party?" Bree asked. "There's something going on with him, Wyatt. I don't know what it is, but something is off."

"I know he wasn't particularly friendly to you when you ran into him the other day, Bree, but—"

"No, it's not that. It's that he's always showing up or being involved in some way in our cases."

"What do you mean?"

"Think about it. When you were in New York, your cover was blown with the Venturi family, Alan was killed, and Damon and Sophie were running for their lives, and Vincent was right in the middle of that."

"I wouldn't say he was in the middle."

"Damon and Sophie hid out at his house. Sophie communicated with Cassie, his daughter, while they were on the run."

"I don't know where you're going with this," he said with a frown.

"I don't know, either, but something has been bugging me since everything went down in Chicago on my last case. Someone lured me to Chicago, someone who knew my past, and I never really figured out who."

"I thought it was that serial kidnapper."

"It appeared that way, but I'm not sure. And then my FBI file showed up in the kidnapper's house. How did it get there? We assumed that the crooked cop got the file from one of his contacts, but he died, so I couldn't ask him. I always felt like something was off in the way everything

wrapped up, but I let it go." She paused. "Now Vincent shows up in the middle of your case. He's friends with your mark. He's suddenly interested in what you're doing. He's retired, for God's sake. Why the hell is he always around?"

"I think it's a coincidence."

"Since when do you believe in coincidences?" Bree challenged. "And let's not forget he met with Joanna before he went to your party."

"Because he was in town and they're friends. I don't see a connection here. Sorry, Bree."

"Maybe you're right. Maybe I'm just imagining things because his negative attitude toward me always bugs me."

"Why doesn't Mr. Rowland like you?" Avery cut in, interest in her eyes.

"I dated Jamie for a short time. I broke up with him before he died, and Vincent acts like I broke his son's heart and maybe that's why Jamie was distracted and lost his life."

"That's a lot to put on you," Avery said.

"It could just be that it's painful for Vincent to see you because he remembers when Jamie was happy and in love with you."

"You're probably right, and we are getting way off track," Bree said. "I'm sorry about all this. We need to get back to the case."

"Are you on the case?" Avery asked curiously.

"I came on board after your friend was killed."

"So, you know everything that's going on?"

"Pretty much. You should be aware that you're going to see me again later this morning. I'll be attending the press

briefing as a reporter for the *LA Star*. I'd like to know that I can count on you not to blow my cover."

"I'm not going to blow anyone's cover," Avery said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "I know what's at stake here."

He was happy to hear that. "Thanks, Avery."

She shot him a dark look. "I'm not doing it for either of you; I'm doing it for Noelle and for me. I need to stop at the hotel in Santa Monica on the way to Nova Star. I have to change clothes, and I have some things there I need for my work day."

"I don't like that idea," he said.

"Well, it has to happen."

"Why don't I go pick up your things?" Bree suggested. "I'll bring everything back here."

Avery glanced at her watch. "I need to be at work in an hour."

"Then I better go now," Bree said, getting to her feet.

Wyatt handed her the hotel key. "Room 423, Hotel Royale, Santa Monica. Bree, the rental car I pinched—"

"I'll ditch it," she said, taking the key from his hand.

"You're a lifesaver."

She smiled. "I'll be back soon. You can use my computer if you want to check in with Flynn." She paused, looking back at Avery. "Maybe you two can talk things out while I'm gone."

When Bree left the room, the tension between him and Avery went up a notch. There were things he wanted to say to her, but he doubted she wanted to hear them. Their

gazes clung together for a long moment, and then Avery got up and took her plate to the sink.

They did the dishes and cleaned up the kitchen in a very awkward and uncomfortable silence, and then Avery went into the bathroom to freshen up. He doubted she was going to come out any time soon.

He sat down at the dining room table and jumped onto Bree's computer. He sent Flynn a long message, updating him on what had happened since he'd last spoken to him. There were a lot of leads to follow, and he needed Flynn and the IT guys to run some of them down, starting with whoever had shot at them. Maybe they could pull some footage from the hotel cams.

When that was done, he got up and walked to the window, looking out at the water. He'd crossed a line he shouldn't have crossed last night.

But he couldn't take it back. *He didn't want to take it back.*

He wished he could make it up to Avery, but he didn't think that was possible. But at the very least he would keep her safe. That was all that really mattered.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

BREE CAME BACK to the house with their belongings and the keys to a small brown Toyota pickup truck. Avery didn't ask where she'd gotten the car and neither did Wyatt. She was more interested in changing her clothes and getting in to work. Even though it seemed surreal to be thinking about having a normal workday, she was actually eager to feel the familiarity that would come with being at Nova Star, doing her job, and having a chance to look up at the magnificent sky instead of at all the danger and uncertainty swirling around her.

"We don't have to talk," Wyatt said as he drove to Nova Star. "But we need to stay in communication, and we need to stay close. Just because you've discovered I'm an FBI agent doesn't change the fact that you're still in danger."

"I know," she said, wrapping her arms around her waist. She'd put on dark jeans and a long-sleeve lacy white knit top. Wyatt was still wearing Nathan's shirt, and she'd seen him wince as he got into the car, but of course he'd refused to let her drive. She was actually fine with that. She was operating on little sleep and too much adrenaline.

"How long will you be involved with the media?"

"About an hour."

"We'll touch base after that, figure out our next move."

"Sure, whatever," she said, too confused to imagine what their next move could be.

Several minutes later, Wyatt turned in to the employee parking lot at Nova Star, flashing his badge to the guard at the gate and exchanging a quick hello. He had apparently made it a mission to know every guard's first name and personal story. Obviously, he'd gotten very deep into his role as Hamilton's top security guy.

It was still mind-boggling to think that he'd set up a carjacking as a ruse to get into Hamilton's good graces and into his company. And Hamilton was crazy about Wyatt. She'd seen his respect firsthand. He was in for a big surprise.

Although, she couldn't totally blame the FBI for inserting Wyatt into the company. If Hamilton was being blind when it came to his family members, and the safety of their technology was in jeopardy and could possibly be used by a foreign power, what other choice had the bureau had?

But she wasn't going to tell Wyatt that. She was still feeling hurt and betrayed on a personal level, and she was not ready to let that go. It was that anger that was keeping the memories at bay. She couldn't let herself remember how good it had been between them, because whatever they'd had—the crazy connection, the ridiculous chemistry, the talks that had felt so honest, so real—was all gone now, part of an illusion, a cover.

Wyatt parked the car, and she grabbed her bag from behind the seat, wanting to keep it with her, not sure where the day would go or where she'd end up spending the night.

It felt good to walk into Nova Star, the building where she'd spent so much of her time the last three years. Even though there could be a spy, or more than one, somewhere in the building, this was her turf, and she felt more in control once she'd made it through security.

Wyatt walked her up to her office. She didn't bother arguing with him. There was no point.

Two women were waiting outside her door: Beth Meeks, a forty-year-old, ex-schoolteacher, who usually worked on school programs, and Kim Walton, the thirty-two-year-old director of media relations.

Seeing that she was in good company, Wyatt tipped his head and headed upstairs to his office.

She rolled her suitcase into the office as the women crowded inside, both giving her very curious looks.

"So, you and the hunky security guy—what's going on there?" Kim asked with a sparkle in her blue eyes. A single woman, Kim loved to talk about men. She'd joined Avery and Noelle at a few lunches and discussing hot guys at the company was always Kim's favorite topic.

"Wyatt was just helping me with my suitcase," she said.

"Why do you have your suitcase? Are you going out to the desert tonight? I didn't think you were going to the launch," Beth said.

"I'm not sure," she said, happy that Beth had actually given her a good excuse for having her bag.

"What's Wyatt like?" Kim asked. "He's so sexy. Does he have a girlfriend?"

"I don't know. Let's talk about the show, about today's events," she said, desperately needing to change the topic.

Thankfully, Beth took the hint and they got down to business.

After reviewing the schedule and their various responsibilities, they made their way down to the first-floor auditorium. Avery stepped up to the stage, made sure everything was ready to go and then asked the ushers to let the media in. She saw Bree in the first group of people. She took a seat in the second row, offering Avery a warm smile.

She didn't really know what to think about Bree. Clearly, she and Wyatt were the best of friends, and while she'd said earlier she wasn't jealous, maybe she was—a little. Maybe because Bree seemed to know the real Wyatt, and she didn't. But she couldn't think about Wyatt now, and she was happy to have Bree in the crowd.

Nothing was going to happen here. She was in the middle of a huge crowd, but she felt a little safer knowing there was an FBI agent nearby.

Wyatt checked in with his security team when he arrived at the command center. All the monitors were up. There were extra personnel on site, both at the exits and entrances but also walking the halls. Some of that security would leave at the end of the day and make the ninety-minute drive to the

desert facility where Nova Star would launch their new satellite early tomorrow morning.

It would be a big day for the company, an important step forward in the space race. But someone was determined to mess with that. He just wished he knew what the end game was. Did they want to stop the launch, steal the defensive technology, destroy the satellite, shoot down some other country's satellite? There were many possible scenarios, but the one that seemed most likely involved destroying the satellite itself, proving that the technology didn't work, which would send Hamilton and Nova Star from the top of the race to the back of the line.

He'd thought the threat was coming from China because of the connection to Jia Lin. Now, he wondered about the Russians. But the Russians and the Americans had worked together in space for a long time. It was China who had been the odd man out, who was desperate to get in the race. So where was the tie between a Russian thug and the Chinese government? There had to be a connection somewhere.

He grabbed his second work phone out of his desk and went up to the sixth-floor rooftop deck to call Flynn. Hopefully, the team had come up with something based on the information he'd sent earlier.

"What have you got for me?" he asked.

"We pulled footage from the hotel security camera where you stayed last night," Flynn replied. "We got a few images of the shooter from the roof of the hotel restaurant. Facial ID identified him as Ran Ding, a former soldier for the PLA."

Wyatt sucked in a breath. *There was his China connection.* The PLA stood for the People's Liberation Army of China. "Do you have him yet?"

"No. But I can tell you that he arrived in LA four days ago and was staying at a downtown hotel until yesterday. We're searching for him, but he could be anywhere."

"Has he had any contact with our persons of interest?"

"Still looking into that. We also ran financials on Larry Bickmore. He has a tremendous amount of debt, underwater on a couple of real-estate deals, living way beyond his means. His wife also did a stint in a very expensive rehab center about six months ago."

"That clearly didn't work. She was very drunk last night." He could hardly believe it had been just last night that he'd been sitting at a dinner party with whoever might have ordered someone to take him and Avery out.

"Unfortunately, we found no evidence that he has come into any money recently. He could be keeping it off the books or it's buried somewhere we haven't discovered yet."

"What about Carter Hayes?"

"Joanna wants to handle Hayes. She said she'd talk to him today."

"It had better be today. We're running out of time. But I'd rather we were doing the questioning."

"So, would I, but Joanna was pulling rank on me, and she was asking a lot of odd questions about you. Something is going on with her. I don't have a good feeling about it."

"What kind of questions about me?"

"Like whether you were checking in with me regularly. Was I concerned you might be getting into bed with Avery

Caldwell? Were you following up on her father, whose ties to China are worrisome?"

"I'm doing my job. That's all she needs to know."

"I agree, but I wanted to give you a heads up. The woman does not like you. Where are you now?"

"At Nova Star."

"And Avery?"

"She's putting on a show for the press." He hadn't told Flynn that he'd broken his cover for Avery. It was a calculated risk, but he didn't believe Flynn needed to know, and it would only complicate matters. "I'll talk to you soon."

As he put his phone into his pocket, he checked his watch. It was almost eleven. Avery's show would be letting out soon, and he wanted to be in the lobby when she came out of the auditorium, but he had time to stop by Carter's desk on his way downstairs. Joanna might want to lead that interrogation, but he was on site, and if he could get any information out of Carter now, that could only be helpful. If anyone was going to break, it would probably be Carter.

Unfortunately, when he reached the legal offices, Carter's desk was empty, and an admin told him that Carter had called in sick for the day, which, of course, was completely understandable considering the fact that he'd just lost his girlfriend.

He didn't doubt that Carter was heartsick; he just didn't know if it was for Noelle or for whatever part of the mess he was involved in.

He got back on the elevator and went down to the first floor, eager to see Avery again. Even though she was perfectly safe in the auditorium, he felt a little lost without

her, and that was a feeling he didn't want to examine too closely.

When he reached the lobby, there were dozens of people milling around the display cases and the gift shop. The show had obviously just let out, and there was a buzz of excitement in the building. He could practically feel the sizzle in the air. It would be even greater tomorrow on launch day, not that the launch would happen here, but there would be a viewing in the auditorium again for members of the press and also VIP guests who would not be making it out to the desert.

As he neared the auditorium doors, he saw Avery come out. She was speaking to a man wearing a press badge, and they were having quite an animated conversation.

His gut tightened as she smiled, then laughed, and the other man touched her on the shoulder with some gesture of affection.

Did she know this guy? Were they friends? And why the hell did it bother him?

Frowning, he pushed the unexpected wave of jealousy down. It was ridiculous. She could laugh and smile with someone else. And she probably would—lots of times. They were done, and he couldn't be surprised. He'd always known as soon as he told her the truth that she would feel betrayed and hurt, which was exactly why he shouldn't have gotten involved with her. He could have kept his foot on the brake. He just hadn't wanted to.

But he couldn't take back the last few days, and if he had nothing else, at least he had some hellishly good memories.

His job had gotten in his way before with women, but not like this. He'd never fallen for anyone while he was undercover. He'd had to play a role on occasion but what he'd felt for Avery was real. Unfortunately, she would never be able to believe that.

He saw Bree hanging behind Avery. She gave him a subtle nod and a somewhat knowing smile. He had a feeling too much was written across his face.

Avery gave the man a hug as they said good-bye. Then her gaze moved to his. They were standing at least twenty feet apart and there were dozens of people around, but all he saw was her. And there was something in her eyes that made him question if it was really over. Maybe there was some chance they could get past the lies. Or was he just being a fool?

A commotion at the front entrance broke their connection.

He swung around, his instincts back on high alert, shocked to see Joanna Davis and two male FBI agents, all wearing FBI jackets, walk into the lobby.

Had something happened that he didn't know about?

He started forward, planning to play the scene out in his role as security director, and Joanna immediately zeroed in on him.

She stopped in front of him and gave him a hard, cold look that he couldn't begin to interpret. "I'm glad you saved us the trouble of coming to look for you," she said.

"What's going on?"

"Wyatt Tanner, you're under arrest," she said.

"Are you serious?" He could not fathom what was happening, but the two agents flanking Joanna were now closing in on him.

He heard someone let out a shocked gasp, and he suspected it was Avery, but he couldn't turn around to look. As his gaze met Joanna's, he felt a chill run through him. This wasn't out of the playbook.

"Hold on. What's this about?" he asked, trying not to blow his cover but unsure where this was going. He told himself he had to trust she was doing this for a reason. *But why hadn't she informed him that she was going to make a very public arrest?*

"It's about national security, Mr. Tanner," Joanna said. "You're going to need to come with us."

As one of the agents cuffed his wrists, he glanced over his shoulder, seeing a troubled look on Bree's face. He didn't think she knew what was going on, either.

Avery also looked confused and worried.

But it was Hamilton Tremaine striding across the lobby who really caught his attention.

"What's going on?" Hamilton demanded.

He didn't know where Hamilton had come from, and he wasn't sure if the presence of the billionaire owner of Nova Star was a good thing or a bad thing. *Probably bad*, he thought, as camera lights flashed in his face. The media was all over the lobby, and his arrest would be on the news before he left the building.

"Mr. Tremaine," Joanna said, intercepting Hamilton. "I need to speak to you in private."

"Where are you taking Wyatt? He's my top security guy. You can't just come in here and arrest him without explanation."

"That's what I'm going to talk to you about—but not here," she said pointedly.

"Wyatt?" Hamilton asked, giving him a confused look. "Do you know what this is about?"

"I don't," he said honestly. "But I'll get it straightened out. Don't worry."

As Hamilton and Joanna walked away, the agents escorted him out of the building and into a dark SUV. He didn't know these men, and neither one was inclined to speak to him.

What the hell had just happened?

He wasn't worried so much about his arrest, but by the fact that Avery was now cut off from him. She might not want him in her life, but he needed to be there to protect her. His only hope was that Bree could step in for him until he could figure out why Joanna had made this abrupt and bewildering move.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

"WHAT'S HAPPENING?" Avery asked Bree.

"Take me to your office," Bree said, an urgent note in her voice.

As she and Bree entered the elevator, they were followed by a half-dozen people, several of whom were muttering about what had just happened. Wyatt's arrest had certainly been dramatic, and she had no idea what was going on.

How could he be arrested by the agency that he worked for? It didn't make sense. Was it part of the game, some part no one had prepped her for?

When they got to her floor, she led Bree down the hall, smiling and giving quick, positive answers as some of her colleagues asked her how the event had gone. Apparently, news of the drama that had occurred downstairs had not made its way to her floor yet.

When she got into her office, she closed the door behind Bree and said, "I didn't think there was anything else that could surprise me, but I was wrong."

Bree nodded as she finished tapping in a text on her phone.

"Who are you talking to?" she asked.

"Hopefully someone who can find out what's going on," Bree returned, a clipped, worried note in her voice.

"Does that mean you don't know?"

Bree raised her gaze to meet Avery's. "I don't."

"But I thought Wyatt works for the FBI. Why would that woman arrest him?"

"Wyatt is part of a special task force, separate from Agent Davis's department. But she's very aware of his role in this operation. I can't imagine why she would pull him out of his job in such a public way. It doesn't make sense."

A cold chill ran through her. "She said something about national security. Does she think Wyatt is..." She couldn't even get the word out.

"She knows what Wyatt came here to do," Bree said shortly, glancing back at her phone.

Whatever text had just come in obviously disturbed her, lines creasing her forehead as she frowned.

"What did they say?" she asked.

Bree looked back at her. "I need to go down to the field office, so I can get more information." She paused. "But I'm reluctant to leave you here alone. I know Wyatt would want me to stay with you."

"I'm not alone. I'm in a building filled with people. And I think Wyatt needs your help more than I do right now. You don't believe he's a traitor or a double agent, do you?"

"No possible way. Wyatt could never be bought."

She liked Bree's definitive answer. "I didn't think so."

"Good," Bree said sharply. "I don't know what went down with you two, but I know this—Wyatt is a good man. And he cares about you."

"Because I'm his job."

"No, because he has feelings for you. I've seen him on the job before. I know how he acts. He's not acting with you. He probably should have been, but somewhere along the way, he stopped."

"He told me about his parents," she said. "His father and brother going to jail."

Bree's surprised reaction told her that story was true. "He doesn't tell just anyone that story."

"That's what he said, but I don't know what to believe. He also told me he was a Marine."

"That was his way in to Hamilton's circle. But the other story is true. Wyatt hated the spotlight of his father's criminal activities. I don't know if he told you, but the media were relentless in writing stories about his family's downfall. Wyatt couldn't walk down the street without someone snapping a photo of him. He needed to get away from all that. He also wanted to right the wrongs in some way. That's why he came to the bureau, why he likes to work in the shadows, why he is devoted to taking down criminals, who never see him coming."

"To do penance for his father," she murmured.

"And because he hates when the wrong people have power. He's one of the best people I've ever known, Avery. He would literally lay down his life for you."

"You don't have to tell me that."

"I just want you to know that he's an amazing guy, and I consider him to be a great friend."

"Then go and help him," she said. "I'll be fine here."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"I'll check back in with you. Give me your number."

"Wyatt threw my personal phone away, but I have a work phone." She walked around her desk and pulled her other phone out of the drawer. She'd had all her business calls forwarded to her other phone, so she wouldn't have to carry two phones around, but she could change that. She gave Bree her number and then said, "Tell Wyatt...Just tell him not to worry about me. Tell him to take care of himself."

"I will do that. Stay here in your office. Don't go outside, Avery. There's a chance that this happened to separate you and Wyatt."

"And they were able to use the FBI to do that? Who is this person?"

"That's what I'm going to find out."

Wyatt had been released from his cuffs but locked in an interrogation room at the FBI field office for almost thirty minutes before Joanna Davis came in.

Finally, he would get some answers.

She sat down across from him and gave him a smug smile. "Hello, Wyatt."

"Why am I here? Why did you arrest me that way?"

"I had to." She took a file out of her bag and put it on the desk between them.

"What's this?"

"Bank records from an offshore account in your name."

"I don't have any offshore accounts."

"Take a look," she said.

He opened the file, his gaze running down a statement from a bank in the Cayman Islands that did bear his name, along with a series of deposits dating back two months. "This is fake."

"It's not fake. The money is there. The account is in your name. Your signature matches the one we have on file for you. But that's not all. Read the second page."

He did as she asked, trepidation growing inside of him. Someone had gone to a lot of trouble to set him up, and he didn't think they had started just yesterday.

"The deposits were made in the form of wire transfers from a company by the name of Walken Industries," she continued.

"I've never heard of that company."

"Well, it's a shell corporation with ties to the Chinese government. They've been paying you to act as a double agent, to protect their theft of secrets from Nova Star, to implicate Jonathan Tremaine as a traitor and a spy, and to infiltrate Hamilton Tremaine's inner circle to gain more access to proprietary information."

"This is all doctored." He closed the file and gave Joanna a hard look. "You have to know that, Joanna. This is just an attempt to discredit me and probably to separate me from Avery."

"I also know that you've provided very little information back to the task force," she said, her gaze unwavering.

"I've provided everything I had. Where's Flynn? Why isn't he here?"

"I assume he's now being informed of your arrest, probably by Bree. I hope you didn't get her involved, too. When she asked to move to your task force, I almost refused. I hate to see good female agents go down the wrong path, but I could see she was bored with her current duties, so I said yes."

"I had nothing to do with Bree's request to join the task force, and I don't know what she's doing with Flynn. I've been a little busy running for my life." He pulled up his shirt, revealing his bandaged wound. "I was shot this morning outside of a hotel by the airport. I barely got Avery to safety. I could have been killed. You think that's part of my cover?"

"I think that if someone wanted you dead, you'd be dead," she said pointedly. "It's rather convenient for a sniper to miss."

Her comments made him very uneasy. For the first time, he felt real alarm. "Come on, Joanna, you know me. You know Flynn. These bank statements are manufactured."

"I don't think I know you at all, Wyatt. I might have known you, if you'd let me get close to you, but you were never interested enough in me to realize I could be of real help to you. You were always so tight with your group of friends at Quantico. You thought you all could rule the world. Little did you know that you would have had a lot more power if you'd worked with me."

"This is about payback," he said slowly. "I'm disappointed, Joanna. I thought you were better than that. Someone is using you. How can you not see that?"

A frown drew her brows together. "I'm not being used. I'm investigating the information I received."

"Who gave you the information?"

"An anonymous source."

He sat back in his chair and shook his head. "Unbelievable. You pulled me out of an undercover operation based on an anonymous source."

"As you can see, the information is very credible, and I have to protect the bureau's reputation. If there's any chance you're working both sides, you could be a threat to national security."

"Keeping me here is a threat to national security," he snapped back.

"I don't think so. You need to start being honest, Wyatt. If you went rogue, or if Flynn's operation was always on the wrong side of the law, you need to come clean now and try to save yourself. Why don't you think about that? And get comfortable. You're not going anywhere."

"You're leaving Avery unprotected. Someone is after her."

"I'm sure someone else on the task force can watch out for her."

"She won't trust anyone else. You have to let me go."

"I don't have to do anything." She pushed back her chair and stood up. "I'll be back."

"I want to call my lawyer."

"Sure," she said with a smooth smile. "We'll make that happen—at some point."

"This is crazy. You know that."

"You know what is really crazy—secret task forces," she returned. "I've never found the need for them. They almost always have an agenda and they're usually run by people who cut corners, who don't like to play by the rules. We do better as an agency when we run clean operations, not secret ones."

"That's bullshit. We had to be covert. Hamilton Tremaine wouldn't let you into his company, but I got inside."

"But now we have the question of whether you're on his side or ours. Until I know for sure, you're staying here."

The door closed on her revenge-filled smile, and he ran a hand through his hair in anger and frustration. Someone had set him up.

Was it Joanna working on her own? Had she been bought off by the same people who had stolen secrets, killed Noelle? Or was she simply a pawn?

If she was a pawn, then it seemed as if someone would know that Joanna didn't like him, that she might be receptive to an attack against him. *Who would know that? Someone else in the FBI?*

Bree's words from earlier that day came into his head. She'd asked him why Vincent Rowland was at the Tremaine house. She'd suggested that Vincent had been close by during all recent cases involving members of Jamie's former team. She'd even suggested that someone in the FBI had given her file to the ex-con who had tried to kill her, and she'd never been able to figure out who in the

bureau would have done that. He'd dismissed Bree's words as pure conjecture, that she was just imagining that Vincent had something against her, because of her relationship with Jamie. But it did seem that their group of five was running into some unusual problems, often within the bureau itself, and who better to influence the agency than an ex-agent?

But did that really make sense?

It seemed more likely that one of the Tremaines or Carter or someone else at Nova Star had thought he was getting too close to the truth, too close to Avery, maybe even too close to Hamilton and decided to get him out of the picture.

Hell, maybe it was Hamilton himself.

That would be quite a twist—if Hamilton had figured out he was FBI all along and decided to use that to his advantage.

But that didn't seem logical, either, because ultimately someone was out to destroy Nova Star. And that wouldn't be Hamilton. It wouldn't be Rowland, either.

He shifted in his seat, feeling pain through his abdomen, reminding him of the wound that should probably be cleaned and re-banded at some point, not that Joanna had been impressed with his battle scars or his ability to dodge bullets.

Rolling his neck around on his shoulders, he considered the doctored bank statements. Was there really money sitting in that bank account or were the statements provided fake?

If there was real cash, then that meant someone with money had been willing to pay to set him up, because that account would be frozen by the FBI. He almost had to admire the move.

It was clever, and while it wouldn't work for long, because eventually the FBI would figure out he was innocent, it might work just long enough to keep him out of the way.

What he didn't understand was Joanna's motive for treating him like a criminal. She might have been forced to act on the intel, but she didn't have to act like this. She could have let him call a lawyer. She could have tried to work with him.

Was it just revenge because he'd turned her down years ago?

That seemed petty, even for her. As she'd said, this was about national security, and if he wasn't a double agent, then someone was still out there, someone probably about to sabotage the satellite, and he wasn't going to be able to do one damn thing to stop them.

And then there was Avery.

Putting him here had effectively isolated him from Avery. He had to hope Bree would stay with her. But Avery might send Bree away, too. She might think that he was guilty, that this was just one more lie he'd told her. *And how could he blame her?*

He slammed his fist hard against the desk. He needed to get out of here, but he was going to need some help to do that. Maybe Flynn would realize it was a setup. Or it was possible that Flynn might be coming into the room in

handcuffs next. Joanna might try to take down the whole operation. And Bree—she was on Joanna's hit list now, too, since she'd joined up with Flynn.

He needed a friend on the inside, but he didn't have one. He was going to have to figure a way out of this on his own.

Avery had been trying to work for over an hour, but it was a futile effort. Her mind was spinning, playing Wyatt's shocking arrest over and over again in her head.

She didn't believe that Wyatt was a double agent. It didn't make sense. He'd almost gotten killed several times; she'd been right beside him on all of those occasions. Just this morning, he had taken a bullet for her. It was only his quick thinking that had saved both their lives.

But the FBI had to have something on him to arrest him, especially since she'd recently learned he was also an agent. Going against one of their own people had to require some substantial evidence. *What on earth could that possibly be?*

Groaning, she pressed her fingers to her temples, feeling a blazing headache coming on. She was glad the media tour was over. The rest of her day was pretty open, since her part in the launch was done. She'd really like to take a nap at some point.

Closing her eyes for just a moment, she tried to breathe through the panic and anxiety. She'd already had a lot to worry about with someone trying to kill her, but now she

had to worry about Wyatt, too. Clearly, someone had set Wyatt up, and she didn't know what was coming next.

She could hardly believe how quickly everything kept changing. It was difficult to keep up. Her emotions felt like they were on a spin cycle. Every time the clock turned, she was hit with something new. The only steady person in her life the past few days had been Wyatt, and last night had provided a glorious few hours of happiness. She should regret making love to him now that she knew he'd lied to her about so many things, but she couldn't seem to drag up the anger.

Maybe last night was the only time they would ever have together. If so, at least she had those memories. And for a moment, she let her mind go back in time, let herself feel his kiss, his hands on her body, his breath against her face, his husky voice murmuring words of pleasure. The way he'd said her name, with so much passion, so much need, sent a deep yearning ache through her body.

She missed him. It was incredible how close they'd gotten so quickly. And it hadn't just been physical. Their talks had been deeply personal. They'd shared and shown their true selves to each other. She'd admitted fears to him she'd never told anyone about, and he'd told her about his family, about how it had felt to see his father go from a great guy to a criminal.

While her father had never fallen that far, she'd understood the disappointment he'd felt. It had been another connection between them. She'd felt the same kind of love and conflict when it came to her dad. And Wyatt had

made her feel like that was okay. Love and respect didn't always go together, especially when it came to parents.

She'd like to believe she'd had an impact on him, too. She thought about the expression in his eyes when she'd played the show for him in the auditorium yesterday, when he'd looked up after years of looking down, when he'd seen hope and possibility, when he'd perhaps lost just a touch of the cynicism he'd probably gained not only from his family circumstances but from his job. That had been a special moment, too.

She wanted more of those moments. She wanted a chance to get to know him—really know him. Because while it probably should be over between them, it wasn't—at least, not for her.

A knock came at her door, interrupting her reverie. Her eyes flew open, and she jumped to her feet.

Should she open it?

Bree had made sure she'd locked it earlier, but it wasn't much of a lock if someone really wanted to get in. She told herself not to get paranoid. Her office was in the middle of a very busy building, with thousands on staff, with security cameras in every hallway.

"Avery? Are you in there?"

Her tension eased at the sound of her father's voice, and she quickly crossed the room and unlocked the door.

"Dad," she said, surprised to see him there. He rarely visited her at work. "What are you doing here?"

He walked into her office. "I got a call from Hamilton earlier. He said Wyatt was arrested. Is that true?"

"Yes, but it's a mistake."

Her father gave her a speculative look. "Is it a mistake? Hamilton doesn't seem to think so. He's beside himself. He can't believe he might have hired a traitor, and not just hired him but made him a friend, invited him into his inner circle, entrusted him with your care."

She shook her head, hating that Hamilton was getting sucked in. "Wyatt isn't guilty of anything."

"How do you know?"

"I just know. My gut tells me he's being set up."

"Is that your gut or your heart?" he asked gently. "I know you don't think I know you anymore, Avery, but I always knew when your heart was breaking."

She didn't even think that was true, but his kind words made her tear up anyway. "It is breaking," she whispered.

"You care about him."

"I do," she admitted. "I know Wyatt is a good man. This is a mistake. He was getting too close to something and someone got nervous and turned the tables on him."

"I don't like any of this, especially the part where you're in danger."

A part of her wanted to tell him just how much danger she'd been in since she'd left his house last night, but what would that accomplish? Instead, she said, "I have to admit I'm scared. I don't know what to do next. Wyatt was my touchstone. When he was around, I knew I was okay."

"Making you feel safe used to be my job."

She heard a sad note in her father's voice. "We have a lot of history between us. I don't want to get into any of that now."

"I understand. I can't change the past—who I was, how I acted—but I can be there for you now. What are you doing the rest of the day?"

"I'm not even sure. I've been trying to work, but I'm incredibly distracted."

"Not even stars and planets and galaxies can ease your mind, huh?" he said with an affectionate, knowing smile.

"No. Not even space can do it for me today."

"Here's what I'm thinking. Tonight, Hamilton is having his kids over for a private dinner in honor of tomorrow's launch, which is also the one-year anniversary of his late wife's death. Since I never met Whitney's mother, I'm not going to be a part of that."

"Whitney didn't want you to go?"

"I think it was more Hamilton. I understand why he didn't want me there. Whitney and I are not married, and I didn't know her mother, and there will be a lot of shared stories and probably some tears, and it's best I'm not there." He paused. "Did you know Hamilton's wife, Margery?"

"Yes, I spent a fair amount of time at their house when she was sick. It was really sad when she died. I can't believe it's been a year. I know Hamilton wanted to launch on the anniversary of her death as a tribute to her. She was his partner in all this."

"Well, it will be a nice time for Hamilton and his kids to spend together. So, why don't you come back to the house with me? Whitney is spending the afternoon at the spa and then going straight to her dad's. It will just be the two of us—like old times. I even gave Lois the night off, so she can

watch her grandson," he added, referring to his housekeeper. "We can pick up some Tommy's Burgers on the way home and sit by the pool, and you can just relax."

"Now you're pulling out all the stops. Tommy's Burgers were always my favorite, although I have not had one of those incredibly delicious and really fattening chili cheeseburgers in a long time."

"Then you should have one now. Come on, Avery. You're not in any mental condition to work today. Let me take care of you for a few hours."

"Maybe just until tonight." It might be a bad idea, but this was her father. He had let her down before, but he wouldn't hurt her. He'd pushed her on the swings. He'd taught her to love the night sky. He'd bought her a gallon of ice cream after her first boyfriend had broken up with her. And she really didn't want to sit in her office all day. Her coworkers would start to wonder why her door was locked. People would be asking her about Noelle and the memorial she had yet to think about. She really did need to just escape for a few hours. And without Wyatt or Bree, her dad seemed like the best option, especially since Whitney would not be there.

She walked around her desk, pulled out her suitcase and pushed the roller bag in his direction. "Can you take this for me?"

"You always keep a suitcase in your office?" he asked with surprise.

"I haven't been staying at home since Noelle was killed."

He gave her a somber look. "There's quite a lot you haven't told me, isn't there?"

"We'll talk about it all after you buy me a cheeseburger. I'm holding you to that."

"You got it."

As they walked out of her office, a warning voice begged her to reconsider. But it was too late. She just hoped that she could trust her dad.

Once again, Noelle's voice rang through her head...*I trusted the wrong person.*

Noelle would have trusted her father, too.

Uneasiness ran down her spine. She didn't want any more horrifying surprises, but she had a feeling that it didn't really matter what she wanted.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

WYATT HAD BEEN BROUGHT IN JUST after eleven and almost five hours had passed since he'd been seated in an interrogation room at the LA field office. Although, he'd been shown an arrest warrant, he had not been photographed, fingerprinted, or given an opportunity to call an attorney. He had been offered bottled water, coffee, a day-old muffin, and a bathroom break in between questioning by two male agents he had never met before.

He'd answered some of their questions, while continuing to take every opportunity he could to request a call with his attorney.

He'd been told numerous times he would be able to make that call soon, but *soon* never came. Now, he was alone again, and had been tapping his fingers against the table top for the last thirty minutes. He was also getting damned tired of looking at his reflection in the two-way mirror on the opposite wall. He wondered if Joanna had been watching his interview. He found it oddly curious that she had not come in to speak to him personally.

Flynn had not shown up, either. He didn't know if Flynn had also been detained in some other room or what had happened to the rest of the team, including Bree.

He hoped Bree had found a way to stay with Avery. Because every minute that passed increased his tension and worry. The launch was less than twenty-four hours away. Time was running out, and if someone was going after Avery again, it would happen today, while he was stuck here answering ridiculous questions and trying to defend himself against bogus charges.

The door opened, and he straightened in his chair as Bree walked in.

"I hope you have good news," he said.

"Come with me," she said in a short, brisk voice.

She didn't have to ask him twice. He followed her to the door, thrilled to see the hallway outside the room devoid of security guards. Bree swiped her security card, opening the door, and then led him down another corridor before finally taking him down to the parking garage. She flipped the locks on a gray sedan, and he got into the passenger seat, not speaking until they reached the street.

"How did that happen?" he asked finally.

"Joanna left the office, and I still have enough rank to call shots." She flashed him a smile. "Sorry, it took me so long. I had to wait for my opportunity."

"You could lose your job, Bree."

"I could," she agreed. "But I don't want to work for an agency that doesn't support its people, and acts on bogus evidence. I saw the bank statements Joanna showed you. While they were good; they weren't that good. I know

they're fake, but I couldn't get Joanna to listen to me. She was quite gleeful about taking you out. Apparently, her dislike of you has overridden her intelligence. At any rate, I sent the information to Flynn. He's working on getting you cleared, but he had to move locations, so Joanna couldn't shut him down, too.

"Where's Avery?"

"I told her to stay at Nova Star, but I haven't talked to her in a few hours. I've been busy trying to figure out how to get you out of there before Joanna had you transferred to a real jail cell."

"You are a badass, Bree. I can't thank you enough."

"You'd do the same for me. Who do you think set you up?"

"Probably the real traitor at Nova Star. Although, I have to admit I started thinking about what you said about Vincent Rowland. Whoever set me up certainly had the ability to get the information to the right person at the FBI, someone who was willing to do the most damage to my game."

"I agree, but I could be wrong about Vincent. My feelings could be colored by his attitude toward me. I don't want to be like Joanna. I don't want to let my emotions cloud my brain."

"Well, it's something to keep in mind. While he might hate me, I don't see him selling out his friend's company. He also doesn't have access to proprietary information. But at the moment, who set me up is the least of my concerns." He paused. "Where are we going?"

"There's a rental car place near here. You're going to need some wheels."

"I need to get to Avery."

"And I need you to let me do that. You won't be able to get anywhere near Nova Star, Wyatt."

As much as it pained him not to rush to Avery's side immediately, he knew she was right. "True."

"You should meet up with Flynn. I have his new address." She handed him a prepaid phone. "I put it on here as well as a new number for me."

"All right, but I'm going to make a stop on the way."

"Why? You need to stay out of sight."

"There aren't any cameras where I'm going. I want to talk to Carter Hayes. I tried to get in to see him earlier today at Nova Star, but he'd taken the day off."

"He's a minor player at best. Why waste time on him?"

"Because he's panicked, hanging on by his fingertips. I'm going to remind him that it's always the little fish who get caught up in the net first. With the launch tomorrow, Carter is our best chance to break open a lead."

"Joanna was going to speak to him, too. I hope you don't run into her." She pulled over to the side of the road, just down the block from the rental agency.

"I hope not, either." He put his hand on the door, then paused. "Take care of Avery, Bree. She's...special."

She gave him a knowing smile. "I know. And, by the way, she likes you, too."

"I sincerely doubt that."

"Have I ever lied to you?"

He shut the door on Bree's question, because he couldn't let himself hope for even a second that he might get another chance with Avery. That would only set him up for another fall.

After picking up the cheapest rental car he could find, Wyatt drove to Carter's apartment. He parked at the end of the block behind a large van and barely in sight of the townhouse and took his time making his way to the front door. It was quite possible that the building was under FBI surveillance, but he didn't see any of the usual signs, no cars with random people sitting inside, no dog walkers strolling the street, no repair vans used in stakeouts.

It was a risk going out in the open. The last thing he wanted to do was end up back in the interrogation room or in jail. But he had to find a way to crack open the case before it was too late.

He stepped under the overhang by Carter's front door, but as he reached for the bell, he saw that the lock had been broken.

He heard a thud and pushed the door open, readying his gun for whatever he might be facing. Carter was on the floor, writhing in pain, and an Asian man with a gun was standing by the balcony.

The next shot came in his direction, but he was able to jump out of the way. When he moved back to take his own shot, the man was already vaulting over the balcony railing. He ran across the room and out onto the deck, seeing the

man disappear around the corner of the next building. There was no way he was going to catch him.

Going back inside, he grabbed a sweatshirt off the couch and knelt down by Carter, who had been shot in the right side of his chest.

He pressed the towel against his wound. "Who was that?"

"I don't know," Carter moaned, practically crying.

"You do know. Why did he shoot you?"

"Gotta call 911, man," Carter pleaded.

"As soon as you tell me what's going on." Judging by the location of Carter's wound, he didn't believe the wound was fatal, but Carter didn't know that. "Unless you want to die. Who are you working with?"

"Bickmore. He said I could get a promotion, money. All I had to do was pass some things along."

"What kind of things?"

"Envelopes, flash drives, money, whatever. Didn't always know. Dropped them at the funhouse."

Another piece of the puzzle clicked into place. "Did Noelle make the drop for you on Friday?"

"Supposed to be Saturday. I didn't realize Noelle knew anything, but she must have been watching me. Asked me some weird questions about Bickmore. Must have been on to him. Must have figured out how I set the meet and moved it up. Didn't know she'd stolen the drive from me until that night."

Was that what Carter had been looking for in Noelle's desk? "Why did she take the drive? Why cut you out?"

"Needed money for her mom, I guess. But she didn't give them the drive. Told them it was over. Said she turned the information over to Hamilton, and they needed to leave me alone. They stabbed her to death." He groaned. "I can't do this. Help me. I'll tell you everything later."

"Who would you meet in the funhouse?" he said, ignoring Carter's plea, but he did keep pressure on the wound.

"Different guys, never the same one, mostly Asian men."

"Noelle didn't give Hamilton anything. Was she bluffing?"

"Yes. Bickmore says Hamilton knows nothing. Thinks Avery has it. Wasn't at Noelle's place," he gasped.

"Who else is working with Bickmore? Is he the top?"

"No. One of the Tremaine kids, I think."

"Why would they sell out their own company?"

"No idea, but Bickmore said everything is out of control." He sucked in a breath, beads of sweat appearing on his forehead. "God, I think I'm dying."

"You're not dying. Keep pressure on this," he said, putting Carter's left hand on the towel, as he pulled out his phone. He punched in 911 but before he connected the call, he said, "You're going to say you've been shot and give them your address. You speak my name, and I'll kill you before anyone gets here. Understand?"

Connor gave a weak nod.

Wyatt punched in the numbers and held the phone near Carter's mouth.

"Help," Carter said, "I've been shot. 442 Trenton Way." He paused as the dispatcher asked him if the shooter was

still in the house. "He's gone. I'm alone. Please hurry."

Wyatt hung up the call as the dispatcher asked for more info. "Do you know who set me up?"

"Set you up?" Carter echoed in confusion. "What are you talking about?"

"Bank accounts—Caymans."

Carter gave him a blank look. "Don't know."

"What about Noelle's missing phone? What's the story? Where is it?"

"Don't know. It's not here. But it doesn't matter. Everything is on the drive."

"Okay. Listen up. I was never here. You understand me, Carter? I'm your best chance at surviving this, but not if you talk."

"Won't talk. Need a guard. They'll come back to kill me."

"You'll get one at the hospital. No one is coming back now."

He got to his feet, looking around Carter's apartment, making sure he wasn't leaving any sign of his presence behind, but he hadn't touched anything but the now bloody sweatshirt.

He quickly left the townhome, staying in the shadows as he made his way down the long block to his car. As he started the engine, an ambulance came racing down the street, stopping in front of Carter's home. A police car arrived a second later. A couple of neighbors came outside at the commotion. He waited until the responders had gone inside, then pulled into a driveway, turned around and went in the opposite direction.

Carter would survive this, but Avery was still in danger. Whoever had tried to take Carter out would be going after her next—if he hadn't done so already.

That terrifying thought sent him straight to his phone. He punched in Bree's number.

"I was just going to call you," she said, a dark note in her voice.

His heart stopped. "What's wrong? Do you have Avery?"

"No. She's not at work. Her coworker told me that she left the building with her father a few hours ago."

His gut twisted as he remembered Carter saying Bickmore was working with someone big, possibly one of the Tremaines. Brett Caldwell wasn't a Tremaine, but he had access to the inner family circle and he also had connections with China.

Avery couldn't be in danger from her own dad, could she?

"Where would he take her?" Bree asked.

"I'm guessing his house in Calabasas. But I'm shocked she left work."

"She was shaken after your arrest. I'm sorry I left her hanging. I was working on getting you out."

"It's not your fault."

"She's with her dad. He's not going to hurt her."

He knew Bree wanted her words to be comforting, but they'd both seen parents do terrible things to their kids. "I hope not."

"What happened with Carter?"

"I got there just in time. He took a shot in the chest, not life-threatening. The shooter got away—Asian man in his

early thirties. I'm guessing it's the same man who shot at me from the hotel restaurant roof—Ran Ding. He's probably for hire. You need to get Flynn and the team down to the hospital. Carter needs a guard and I'm sure he has more information to give. He was working for Bickmore, making drops at the funhouse on a regular basis. He said Noelle must have gotten wind of the operation. She stole a flash drive from him and changed the time of the meet. But she didn't hand over the drive and was stabbed to death."

"So, everyone is looking for the drive."

"And killing anyone who knows about it." He got on the freeway as he ended that sentence, heading for Calabasas. "I'm going to get Avery."

"I'll take care of everything else."

He set his phone down, as he pressed his foot on the gas. He wanted to gun it. He wanted to drive as fast as possible to Caldwell's house, but he couldn't risk getting pulled over by the cops. He just had to hope that Avery would be safe with her father.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

"YOU SLEPT FOR A LONG TIME," her father commented as Avery walked into his study a little past six in the evening. It was already dark outside, and the warm light from the desk lamp lit the room.

"I didn't intend to," she said, giving him a still tired smile. "I guess everything just caught up to me."

After leaving Nova Star, they'd stopped at Tommy's Burgers on the way to Calabasas and then eaten their chili cheeseburgers and fries by the pool. Then she'd gone upstairs to freshen up in one of the guestrooms. After changing out of her work clothes, she'd put on comfy leggings and a long-sleeve T-shirt, stretched out on the bed for a second and had fallen asleep. That had been hours ago.

"Are you writing?" she asked, taking a seat in the chair in front of his desk. He had his monitor on, and she could see text on the screen.

"Playing around with my next book idea."

"What's it going to be about?"

"Not sure yet."

"You never like to talk about your books while you're writing them."

"Because they can always change."

"But you discuss them with Whitney. She was going on about your new project at dinner the other night."

"She only knows the general topic. She brags too much about me."

She smiled at that self-deprecating comment. "Come on, you like it."

He returned her smile. "Well, perhaps a little bit." He sat back in his chair, pressing his fingers together as he gave her a thoughtful glance. "You look better. Coming here was a good idea, wasn't it? Sometimes you can let your dear old dad take care of you."

She could have said it had never been her choice for him to stop taking care of her, but she didn't want to mess up the peace between them. Plus, he was right. She did feel better. But now that her brain was starting to work again, she realized she'd disappeared on Bree and she hadn't checked her phone since she'd left Nova Star.

"I should get my phone," she said. "I must have left it upstairs."

"Hang on," her dad said, before she could get up. "Talk to me, Avery. Tell me what's happening. I only have bits and pieces, and I think there is a lot going on I don't know about."

"There's probably a lot going on neither one of us knows about."

"Like what?"

"I think Noelle was involved in some sort of conspiracy at Nova Star. I'm not sure what her role was or who else is involved."

"And this conspiracy is about what?"

"Secrets, technology, proprietary information. It's possible someone is trying to sabotage the launch or the satellite itself."

"Then why hasn't Hamilton shut down the launch?"

"Because he thinks he has the situation under control. Or at least he thought that yesterday. I don't know what he thinks now since Wyatt was arrested. Have you spoken to him?"

"Not since I saw him earlier. I have talked to Whitney. She said her father is livid, that he thinks Wyatt betrayed him, that he came into the company under the guise of helping to find a traitor when he was there to steal from the inside."

She wondered if Hamilton had figured out that Wyatt was FBI or if he just believed he was a spy.

"I have to say, Avery," her father continued. "The FBI must have had some damning evidence on Wyatt to arrest him the day before the launch. He's Nova Star's top security guy. They left the company scrambling."

"I know. I've been thinking the same thing, but Wyatt isn't guilty. He's not a thief or a traitor."

"How do you know?"

It was a simple question, and, in reality, there was a simple answer. "Because I know what kind of person he is. I trust him." She realized how true the words were as soon as they came out of her mouth.

"Do you also love him?"

She hesitated at the blunt question. "Does love feel terrifying and wonderful at the same time?"

He gave her a faint smile. "That's a good description of it."

"I've always been a little afraid to love. When it ends, it hurts so much. I've wondered if it's worth the pain."

Shadows crossed his face. "That's because of me. I let you down. I hurt you."

"You did," she agreed, too tired not to be honest. "But it wasn't just that you left. It was that you and Mom were so happy together and then you weren't. I didn't know how you went from love to hate so quickly. How could I trust that my feelings about someone or their feelings for me wouldn't change just as fast?"

"Love and hate are two sides of the same coin," he said quietly. "Sometimes the love you have for someone doesn't last forever. That's not the fairy tale, but it's real life."

"Do you love Whitney? Will she last forever?"

He sucked in a breath. "I don't know, Avery. I don't have a crystal ball."

"But you have experience, and you know how you feel."

"I do love Whitney. She's more like me than anyone I've ever met. We understand each other."

She tilted her head, wondering about the odd note in his voice. "It sounds like there's a *but* coming..."

"But," he said with a smile. "I'm a lot older than her. She might wake up and wonder what she's doing with an old man when she could have a young stud."

"The age difference doesn't seem to bother her."

"I just hope she isn't using me to fill the hole in her heart."

"What do you mean?" she asked, surprised by his words.

"She adored her mother and her loss a year ago still haunts Whitney. She's not as close with her dad as she was with her mother. I think she often feels like the odd man out in the family, because she doesn't work at the company, isn't caught up in the space race as her father and brothers are. She only went to her dad's house tonight, because it's a celebration of her mother's life. She couldn't care less about the launch tomorrow."

"I guess I can understand that."

"I want to give Whitney what she needs. I'm happy to fill the empty places in her heart; I just don't want to heal her and then watch her walk away."

"It's a risk," she agreed, thinking that even when her dad was being open and honest, his ego still showed through. He had spoken of healing Whitney, as if he alone had that power, but that wasn't the way it worked. "I don't think you can give Whitney the peace she needs. Ultimately, that has to come from herself. Isn't that what you teach in your books and your seminars?"

"Some version of that," he admitted. "Have you read any of my books?"

"I might have skimmed through one," she admitted.

He smiled. "Good to know. I like that you wrote a book, too. I like to believe you got something from me."

"I guess I did."

His expression changed, his eyes turning somber. He looked like he wanted to say something else but couldn't

quite get the words out.

"What?" she asked. "What are you thinking?"

"That I wish I hadn't waited so long to come back into your life."

"Me, too," she said. "But as you said earlier, we can't change the past."

"I'm glad we're speaking freely now. I know that you don't love that I'm involved with Whitney and the Tremaines. This was your world, and I broke right into the middle of it."

"It has been awkward."

"I probably should have backed off in the beginning."

"But you didn't, because you wanted in with the Tremaines."

He looked a little surprised by her candor. "Is that what you think?"

"Yes," she said, not backing down. "I sometimes wonder if you reconnected with me just because you realized I could get you into their world."

"You think I'm a gold-digger, Avery? I have made quite a bit of my own money."

"I know that, but you like to live in luxury. Maybe you didn't come to see me with any kind of hidden motive, but when you saw an opportunity to get in with the Tremaines, you took it."

"Well, I guess I know what you really think now," he said, disappointment in his voice.

"I guess you do," she said wearily. "This wasn't a good idea. I'm going to leave. I'll get my things and call a cab." She got to her feet. She had no idea where she was going

to go, but anywhere else seemed like a good idea. Maybe she'd call Bree and see what she knew.

"You don't have to leave, Avery," her father said, as he rose. "Let's keep talking. Let's hash it all out."

"It's pretty much all out, Dad."

"Is it? Are you sure?"

As he came around the desk, he knocked over a framed photo. She instinctively reached for it. It was a photo of her father in front of a Chinese temple, another reminder that her dad had had a life she didn't really know much about. But her father wasn't hiding the fact that he'd been in China. *Was that because he was clever or because his trips there were completely innocent of what was going on at Nova Star?*

"Thanks," he said, as she handed him the frame, and he set it on his desk. "Now, are you sure there isn't something else you want to talk about? Believe it or not, I want to have a relationship with you, Avery."

She looked into his warm, familiar brown eyes and wanted more than anything to believe him. "We've said enough for now."

"Well, I don't want you to leave. Stay and have some birthday cake. We have a lot left over from last night, and Whitney won't be home for hours."

She brushed her hair off her face, feeling incredibly weary despite her long nap. The constant stress and uncertainty about everyone in her life was starting to get to her. "I suppose I could have a piece of cake, but I'm going to get my things together. I can't spend the night here."

"I understand. I'll drive you wherever you want to go. But I don't want you to be alone. Can I take you to a friend's house?"

"I'll figure it out. First, I'm going to take a shower and change clothes. Then we can have some cake."

"Sounds good," he said, relief in his eyes. "Take your time."

As she left the study, she walked toward the stairs. She had only gone up a few steps when she heard her father's voice. That gave her pause. *Her dad was on the phone.*

"Yes, Avery is here," he said, then fell silent. "Sure, no problem."

Her heart skipped a beat. *Who was her dad talking to? Why had he said she was at the house?*

She tried not to jump to conclusions. He could just be talking to Whitney.

But what if he was talking to someone else?

She suddenly didn't feel safe at all anymore. She jogged up the stairs and ran into the guest room. She took her phone out of her bag and saw a bunch of texts from Bree, asking her to call her. She would call her back, but right now she needed to get out of the house.

Forget the shower. Forget the cake. She needed to find some place to hide where no one, not even her father, knew where she was. She might be completely paranoid, but every instinct she had was telling her to run.

She put on her shoes and grabbed her open suitcase from the floor, so she could put her work clothes in it. As she did so, her gaze caught on the sleeve of her short black leather coat, the one still stained with Noelle's blood.

So much had happened since Noelle had been killed, and yet she still didn't know who had murdered her best friend.

When she pulled the coat from the case, something fell out of the pocket. She leaned down to pick it up from the bed, realizing it was the charm bracelet she'd taken from Noelle's apartment.

An uneasy shiver ran down her spine.

She'd completely forgotten about the bracelet.

She'd stuffed it in her pocket when she'd seen the autographed book on the floor, and from then on it had been a race to stay ahead of Noelle's killer.

But was the bracelet important? It didn't seem like it could be.

Noelle's last words rang through her head: *Left something... apartment...you'll recognize it from when we were young. So innocent then.*

She held it up to the light, the charms dangling in front of her. They were the charms of a young girl: a silver heart, a starfish, a guitar and a book. Her pulse beat faster.

She flipped open the corner of the book, remembering when they used to hide candy hearts inside the space. There was no candy heart today, but a tiny silver rectangle. She pulled it out with shaky fingers. A tiny button flipped open a flash drive.

"Oh, God!" she whispered. Her breath came fast as her fingers closed around the drive. *This has to be what everyone was looking for. She'd had it all along.*

"Avery."

She jumped as her father walked into the room.

His gaze narrowed as he looked at her. "What's wrong? You're white as a sheet."

"I—I..." She didn't know what to say.

"Honey, talk to me. You can say anything to me. Trust me."

Noelle's words rang through her head again...*I trusted the wrong person.*

Her fingers tightened around the drive. "I have to go."

"Not like this. You're upset. What changed? You weren't this distraught a few minutes ago." His gaze dropped to her closed hand. "What do you have in your hand?"

When she didn't answer, he looked disappointed. "You really don't trust me, do you?"

"I don't. I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because you were just on the phone telling someone I was here. And last night you had a cryptic conversation with Kyle about asking him to do something for you. Then Wyatt and I were followed when we left here, almost run off the road and later we were shot at..." The words poured out of her.

Her father looked at her in stunned amazement. "I have no idea what you're talking about Avery. Whitney called just now, and I told her you were here, and she didn't have to hurry home. We were catching up with each other. As for Kyle last night, I had asked him to help Whitney get into a country club she's on the waiting list for, but he keeps stalling. I was annoyed with him. I reminded him that Whitney does a lot for him."

"But someone tried to get into Kyle's email from this house. Was that you? Whitney?"

"I don't know. It wasn't me. It was probably Kyle. Did you say you were shot at?"

"Yes. Wyatt saved my life—not just once, but three times."

He stared back at her. "You need protection, Avery. I need to hire you a bodyguard or two."

"I wouldn't be able to trust whoever you hired. The danger is coming from someone close to me. The only person I know I can count on is Wyatt."

"You can count on me."

Before she could reply, she heard a noise from outside the room. "Who's here?"

"No one is here," he said with a frown. "It's just the two of us."

Her heart started pounding as she heard another subtle noise. This time her father heard it, too, his gaze moving toward the open door.

"He's here," she whispered, knowing in her gut that time had just run out.

"Who?"

"Whoever killed Noelle. Whoever wants me dead."

His face paled, but his eyes filled with determination. "We have to get out of here. Come on. We'll go down the back stairs."

She was afraid to leave the room and terrified to stay. They had no weapons, nothing with which to defend themselves, so they might as well try to make a run for it.

Luckily, the room she'd chosen was closer to the back stairs than the front.

Her dad went out the door first, checking the landing, then motioning her forward. She came into the hall and her father gently pushed her toward the back staircase, staying behind her, as they crept down the hall. Despite their efforts to remain quiet, they were making too much noise, she realized, as hard footsteps came after them.

She picked up the pace. It was now or never. They couldn't stop. They hit the ground-floor hallway, and she saw the front door wide open. She made a run for it, her dad on her heels.

And then she heard her father yell out. She whirled around as he crumpled to the floor, grabbing his left arm in pain. A stone-cold, dark-haired Asian man in a black T-shirt and black jeans pointed his gun at her.

"Where is it?" he demanded.

She realized she had the drive still clasped in her hand. If she handed it over, he'd kill her. If she didn't hand it over, he'd kill her.

She looked at her dad, saw anguish written across his face.

The man saw her indecision and pointed his weapon at her father. "Him or the drive."

"You're going to kill us anyway."

"I just want the drive."

She didn't believe him for a second, but what choice did she have? "All right."

Before she could open her hand, a blast rang out from behind her, deafening her, terrifying her. She dropped to

her knees as the Asian fell backward, a bullet hole ripping through his chest.

And then, miraculously, Wyatt was there.

"Avery, are you all right?" He came towards her, gun in hand, fear in his eyes.

"I'm okay. But Dad—" She moved toward her father. "We'll get help," she promised him. "Hang in there."

Wyatt took off his belt and strapped it around her father's arms as he propped her dad up against the wall. "That should stop the bleeding."

"Don't worry about me. Get Avery out of here in case there are more coming," her dad said.

"I'm not leaving you," she said, realizing he'd saved her life by making her go down the stairs first.

"My phone is in my pocket," her dad said, trying to reach into his pocket with his good hand. "I'll call 911 after you're gone."

"Here it is," Wyatt said, helping her father get his phone out.

"Get her out of here, Wyatt. I expect you to protect her with your life."

The two men exchanged a pointed look.

"I will," Wyatt promised.

Despite their agreement, she shook her head when he motioned her toward the door. "Not until I know help is here. I have to wait. He's defenseless."

"Give me the guy's gun," her dad said, as he got off the phone with 911. "I can take care of myself."

Wyatt walked over and picked up the gun. He also took a moment to go through the man's pockets, pulling out a cell

phone and a wallet. He glanced at the ID, then he returned to her father and handed him the weapon, putting the other items in his pocket.

"Get the hell out of here, Avery," her father commanded. "Now."

With both men adamant on her leaving, she gave in, and followed Wyatt out the kitchen door. He grabbed her hand and took her through the backyard, past the pool and the gardens, and down a long hill that led to a tall fence and a secondary gate to the property. The gate was propped open with a stick. Clearly Wyatt had used the gate to come in without anyone seeing him.

When they came through the gate, they jogged down another street and another. Wyatt seemed to have a clear-minded vision of where they were going, but she didn't understand why he had parked so far away.

She heard sirens in the distance and was relieved that help was coming. But along with that relief came fear.

"Are you still in trouble?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, his fingers squeezing hers. "But I'm not guilty."

She met his gaze. "I know."

His eyes brightened. "I'm glad. I had to park outside the development. Couldn't risk the guard turning me in."

"I understand."

They didn't speak again for several more minutes as Wyatt took her down a side yard, over a low fence and down another more rugged hillside to a parked car.

Her pulse was still racing, as he turned on the engine and pulled away from the curb. She was afraid to go

through the canyon roads again, but Wyatt turned away at the last minute, heading onto the crowded freeway.

There was a lot of traffic, which slowed their escape, but she also felt more hidden amidst all the cars.

A few exits later, Wyatt pulled off the freeway and turned into a crowded parking lot by a fashion center mall. While the lot was well-lit, he picked a spot in the shadows, then turned off engine and lights and then shifted in his seat to look at her.

"Are you all right, Avery?"

"You saved my life—again."

"Third time was the charm."

"That was actually the fourth time."

"But who's counting," he said lightly.

She shook her head, feeling overwhelmed with emotion.

"God, Wyatt, how are you always there when I need you?"

"I was afraid I wouldn't get there in time."

"But you did."

"And that guy won't be coming after you again."

"I just hope my dad—"

"He's going to be all right, Avery."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

It was ironic that the one person who had lied to her the most was the one person she absolutely trusted to tell her the truth now.

"I'm sorry I was gone all day, Avery," he continued. "I wish you hadn't had to go through that. I've been trying to get back to you for hours."

"What happened?"

"Someone set me up to look like a double agent."

"Who?"

"I don't know. Bree broke me out of there."

"What?" she asked in astonishment. "Bree broke you out of jail?"

"Not jail, just a holding room at the FBI field office. She knew I needed to fight for you, and I needed to be able to defend myself against the bogus charges. I wasn't going to be able to do that from the office."

She was amazed by Bree's actions. "Won't Bree be in a lot of trouble?"

"She could lose everything," he said tightly. "But that's what we do for each other."

"I can't imagine that kind of loyalty. Actually, that's not true. I can imagine it. Because you've shown it to me."

His gaze met hers. "There are a lot of things I want to say to you."

"I know, but now isn't the time. Who was that man in the house?"

"Ran Ding, a hired gun, tied to the Chinese PLA. He shot Carter before he got to you."

"Is Carter dead?"

"No, he's going to live. Carter told me Bickmore was using him to make drops at the funhouse. He was the go-between."

"Are you serious? He admitted that?"

"He thought he was dying. He said Noelle must have caught on to what he was doing. She apparently stole the flash drive he was supposed to deliver and set up her own meet. He thought she wanted the money to help her mom."

But he said she didn't hand over the drive. She told the person at the meet that the game was over, that everything on the drive had been handed over to Hamilton, that she'd come to tell them it was done."

"And they stabbed her. Why would she do that? Why didn't she just turn the drive over and not show up?"

"I don't know. Hopefully, we can fill in a few more blanks when Carter gets medical attention. At any rate, they didn't believe she'd given the drive to Hamilton, because Bickmore knew that Hamilton didn't have it and was going about his business as usual. So, they went looking for the drive. Carter told them that you had to have it, because he didn't. Or it was lost in the fire."

"I do have it." She opened her left palm.

Wyatt's eyes widened in surprise. "Where did you get that?"

"It was in the charm bracelet I took from Noelle's place the morning after her murder."

"You never said you took a bracelet."

"I honestly forgot all about it. When I got to her apartment that day, everything was such a mess. I was just wandering around, looking for some clue to jump out at me. I saw the bracelet and a heart necklace in her jewelry box, and I wanted to keep them to remember her by. I picked them up and put them in the pocket of my coat." She paused, trying to remember her exact movements. "And then I saw the book on the floor, and I grabbed it. After that, everything went crazy. When we got back to my place, I put the coat in the suitcase when I packed my bag, and I

haven't worn it since then because there is blood on the sleeve."

"But tonight..."

"I was repacking my clothes and I pulled out the coat, and the bracelet fell out. This was hidden inside the book charm." She held up the drive. "What do you think is on it?"

"Hell if I know, but we're going to find out."

"I left my computer at my dad's house. Should we go to Bree's?"

"No time." He glanced at the front door of the mall. "Looks like I picked the right place to park. I'm betting there's an electronics store inside."

"I'll go. You need to stay out of sight."

He didn't look like he wanted to agree, but what choice did he have. He was a wanted man. "All right." He took out his wallet. "You can use this card."

She took it out of his hand. "I won't be long."

He put a hand on her leg. "Avery...I'm glad you're okay."

"I'm glad you're okay," she said, feeling a rush of love that wanted to bring tears to her eyes.

Wyatt leaned over and kissed her, a warm, tender, promising kiss that she wished she could savor and revel in and keep on going forever. For just a moment, she closed her eyes and breathed him in, feeling warmth and pleasure wash over her. There were still so many questions, so much fear, but for this moment, everything felt—perfect.

Wyatt finally pulled away, as if it was the most difficult thing he'd ever had to do. "We'll talk more later."

She smiled at the word *talk*. "Sure. I can't wait for more *talking*."

He smiled back. "I can't believe you can joke right now. You're a lot tougher than you think, Avery."

"I'm actually beginning to think I'm pretty tough, too. I'll be right back."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

EVERY MINUTE that Avery was gone felt like an hour. He tapped his fingers restlessly on his thigh, wishing he hadn't had to send her into the mall alone. But he told himself that the immediate danger had been crushed with Ran Ding's death. It would take time for whoever had hired him to know he had failed.

At least, he'd taken care of one contract player, but there would be more until they figured out what was on the drive and who was really behind the killings. While he was waiting, he got on the phone to Bree.

"Wyatt," she said. "Tell me Avery is all right."

"She's fine. I got there just in time. Ran Ding is dead. Avery's father was shot in the arm, and he's on his way to the hospital."

"Where are you?"

"Sitting in a car at the mall," he said.

"Well, I didn't expect to hear you say that."

"Avery found the missing drive. She had it all along. It was hidden away in a charm bracelet. She went into the mall to get a computer."

"Why not just come here?"

"I need to look at that drive now, so I know what we're dealing with. It will take too long to get across town. I'll forward the contents as soon as I can."

"You still have the encrypted email?"

"I've got it. What's happening there? How's Carter?"

"He's in surgery, but it looks like he should survive. Unfortunately, we haven't been able to speak to him since he arrived at the hospital. Both Flynn and Joanna have agents down there, ready to interrogate him as soon as he's able to speak."

"Flynn and Joanna are working together?"

"They are now. Flynn was able to track down the bank account in the Caymans," she replied. "It doesn't actually exist. All the records were fake. There is no cash despite what Joanna thought."

"I'm not surprised."

"We sent the evidence both to Joanna and to her boss, so she couldn't bury it. She's livid that I helped you get away and even more furious that she was played. She's going to go to the ends of the earth to determine who used her—at least that's her story."

"How much trouble are you in for breaking me out?"

"There will be a lot of discussions for both of us after this is all over," she said. "But you're in the clear, and right now the focus is on Nova Star and the launch tomorrow. Call me back as soon as you know anything."

"I will. Can you also check on Avery's father? I'm not sure what hospital they would have taken him, too, probably whatever is closest to his house."

"Will do."

As he ended the call, Avery returned to the car with a triumphant gleam in her eyes. "I found a computer that still has a USB port to open the drive."

"That's great. Let's see what we've got." As Avery tore open the packaging, he added, "I asked Bree to check on your dad."

She paused to look at him. "What else did Bree say? I assume she's not under arrest since she reached you."

"No. In fact, my team leader has managed to find information to clear my name."

"Thank God for that." Avery tore open the packaging and turned on the computer. "Looks like we have enough juice to see what's on the drive," she said, as she inserted it into the USB port.

He leaned over the console as they both watched the screen light up. For a moment, he worried that the computer light was making them too visible, but he didn't want to waste time moving to another location.

"This better give us some answers," Avery murmured.

"I think it will." His instincts told him that whatever was on this drive would finally fill in the remaining puzzle pieces.

There was only one folder on the drive. It included several files. Avery clicked on the first one, revealing pages and pages of computer code. Another file contained specs and technical drawings of the satellite. The third file appeared to hold test reports and analyses, some with handwritten notes. Every page was stamped with a Nova Star watermark.

"Can you tell what these are about?" he asked.

"They're about the new defense system on the satellite," she replied, as she skimmed through the open pages, pausing every and now and then. "It's a bit too technical for me, but this information is clearly about the satellite. The test results look odd," she added, studying one page for another minute. "These results show more failures than previously noted."

"Maybe the system doesn't work and the reports you saw earlier didn't contain accurate information."

"Or these reports are wrong. Either way, there's a good chance there's a problem with the satellite." She gazed back at him. "We need to get this information to Hamilton. He has to stop the launch."

"He's been unwilling to do that."

"This should convince him." She frowned. "This information had to come from Kyle's division of the company. Not that it necessarily means he stole it."

"Nor does it mean that he didn't. Carter told me Bickmore is working for someone higher up, one of the Tremaines. We don't have a lot of choices."

"Would he really sabotage his own company?" she asked. "We're still missing something."

"Motivation," he agreed. "Maybe we'll find it when we show the family what we have."

"They're all together at Hamilton's house." She paused. "I should call Whitney and tell her about my dad."

"You can't do that yet. You'll tip our hand."

"My father might have called her from the ambulance."

"I'm going to hope he didn't. I want to send this file to Bree, but I need an internet connection."

Avery tipped her head to a nearby coffee house. "We can probably do it from there."

He nodded. "Let me drive closer. You might not even need to go inside." He started the car and moved it into a spot out the café.

"Got it," Avery said.

He took the computer out of her hand and went on the net, sending Bree the file through an encrypted email server. When that was done, he handed the laptop back to Avery.

As she put it by her feet, she said, "Did you check the phone you took from the gunman?"

"No, dammit." He reached into his pocket for the other phone, unable to believe he'd forgotten to do that.

"Is it locked?" Avery asked.

"It's actually not," he said. "It's obviously a burner phone and not meant to be kept for long." He opened up the messages and skimmed through them.

"What do the texts say?" Avery asked impatiently.

"There are two addresses, one for Carter's house and one for your dad's house."

"He was hired to kill us."

"Yes," he said shortly, moving from the texts to the voicemail. There was one number that he didn't recognize, but he pushed play and put the message on speaker, so Avery could hear it.

A familiar voice came across the line, and a shiver ran down his spine.

"This is your last chance. Avery has to die tonight. Call me when it's done."

"Oh, my God," Avery breathed, shock in her eyes. "Is that who I think it is?"

"Yes," he said grimly, thanking God again that he'd gotten to her in time.

"I can't believe it."

He revved the engine and pulled out of the lot. "Looks like Hamilton's private family party is going to get a little bigger." As he pulled onto the road, he handed her his phone. "Text Bree the latest. She'll send backup."

"If it's not there by the time we get to Hamilton's house, I'm not waiting," Avery declared, her fear turning to fury.

"Neither am I," he swore, impatient to end this once and for all.

Hamilton lived in a mansion in Calabasas, in a separate development from that of Brett and Whitney, but only a few miles away from where they'd just come from.

Avery's stomach churned as Wyatt sped down the freeway. She couldn't believe what she'd just heard. Betrayal, anger, hurt—so many emotions were running through her. She'd been targeted for death by someone she knew. She could hardly believe it.

"No guard gate here," Wyatt muttered. "Your father has more security than Hamilton."

"Hamilton always says he's not a man to hide behind gates," she muttered.

"One less problem for us."

When Wyatt pulled up in the circular drive in front of the three-story home, Avery jumped out of the car as it came to a rolling stop. Wyatt was right behind her.

She rang the bell twice, impatient to get inside, to face the person who'd killed Noelle, who'd shot Carter and her father, who'd wanted her dead.

Wyatt had his gun at the ready, but she didn't think they were going to need it. Someone who paid others to do the dirty work was a coward.

Hamilton's housekeeper, Rena Khouri, opened the door. She was an older Indian woman who had been working for Hamilton for almost twenty years.

"Avery," she said with surprise. "I didn't think you were coming tonight."

"I had a change of plans," she said, pushing past Rena. "Where is everyone?"

"They're in the living room, but this is a very emotional evening," Rena said, giving her and Wyatt a worried look. "I just took them champagne to toast sweet Margery."

"This can't wait," she said, storming across the marbled floor of the entry, pushing open the double doors that led into the luxurious living room.

They were all there: Hamilton, Kyle, Jonathan, and Whitney.

Hamilton stood up at their abrupt entrance, surprise and wariness in his gaze.

"What's going on, Avery?" Hamilton demanded. "What's he doing here?"

"Wyatt is with me." She saw more surprise, more worry, and even a little fear on the faces of Hamilton's three adult children.

"You bring a traitor into my house?" Hamilton asked in amazement, sending Wyatt a burning look. "I'm calling the FBI."

"Don't bother," she said sharply, happy to take charge, because she was full of steam, and she was ready to blow it out. "There is a traitor in your house, but it's not Wyatt. The past few days, since my best friend died, someone has been trying to kill me—someone in this room."

Whitney let out a gasp, putting a hand to her heart. "Don't be ridiculous, Avery. That's absurd."

"It's not absurd. I was in your house when a hit man came in. He shot my dad."

"What?" Whitney jumped to her feet. "Is Brett all right?"

There appeared to be genuine panic in Whitney's eyes, but at this point, Avery didn't really trust anyone. She didn't know if one of them was involved or all of them. "My father was shot in the arm. He's on his way to the hospital."

"I have to go see him," Whitney said.

"Sit down," Wyatt ordered. "You're not going anywhere. Brett will be fine. It was not a life-threatening wound. He's being taken care of, and none of you are going anywhere until we sort all this out."

"The gunman is dead by the way," Avery continued. "Wyatt killed him." She held up a phone. "But he left this phone behind. It has an interesting voicemail on it. I think you should all hear it."

She pushed play, and Kyle's voice rang out in the room.

Kyle jumped to his feet and rushed toward her.

But Wyatt was too quick, grabbing Kyle by the shoulders and slamming him into the wall by the fireplace, pinning him there, a gun at his head. "I don't think so," Wyatt said. "Your father needs to hear the whole message. Play it again, Avery."

She did as he asked.

"What did you do, Kyle?" Hamilton asked in shock, staring at his middle child.

"Yeah. What the hell did you do?" Jonathan demanded, also rising. "You're the one who's been setting me up? My own brother?"

Wyatt let go of Kyle but kept the gun on him. "You're not going anywhere, Kyle. It's over. Start talking."

"I have nothing to say," Kyle bit out.

"Not good enough," Wyatt said, slamming a fist into Kyle's stomach.

The man doubled over, gasping for breath.

"Try again," Wyatt ordered.

"I—" Kyle couldn't get the words out.

Hamilton moved forward, shaking his head in bewilderment. "You wanted to kill Avery? She's been a friend to you. She's part of the family. Why would you do that?"

"Because I have a flash drive that Noelle took from Carter," Avery replied when Kyle gave his father a helpless shrug. "I didn't actually know I had it until tonight, but it contains information about the satellite. It's apparently one of several drives that Larry Bickmore asked Carter Hayes

to hand over to a third party. But all that was done at the request of Kyle."

"You sold our technology?" Hamilton asked in astonishment. "Why? So much of it was your work. This was our dream—our family dream. Your mother...she would be so disappointed in you."

"Don't talk about my mother," Kyle said bitterly. "You're the reason she's dead."

"What are you talking about?" Whitney interrupted. "Dad didn't kill Mom."

"He did," Kyle said, fury raging in his eyes now that he realized he had no defense and his secrets were all coming out. "He kept pouring money into the space program instead of medical research. Billions of dollars went into putting rockets into space, all in the hopes of landing people on Mars. All that cash could have gone into finding a cure for Mom's cancer. She could still be alive if he wasn't so obsessed with space."

Hamilton turned white at his son's accusations. "I did everything I could for your mother."

"You didn't do enough. She didn't care about space. She just loved you with a blindness that never allowed her to see you for the selfish person that you are," Kyle ranted. "After she died, I was angry, so damned angry. And I wasn't alone. Larry felt the same way."

"Larry?" Hamilton echoed. "My best friend, Larry?"

"Who loved Mom as much as you did," Kyle reminded him. "Larry said that he never would have let her die, that with the kind of money you have, you could have hired a team of researchers the minute she was diagnosed. You

could have thrown all your money into the drug trials. But no, you just wanted to go to space."

"The cancer was too widespread," Hamilton said, pain in his eyes. "I loved your mother. She was my life. I would have done anything to save her."

"You didn't do anything. That was the point. I was going to quit Nova Star after she died. I was done. And then Larry introduced me to a woman—Jia Lin."

Avery shot Wyatt a quick look at the mention of the Chinese woman's name.

"She was very sweet, very smart, very kind," Kyle continued, seemingly resigned now to telling the entire story. Or maybe he just wanted his father to know the hatred burning in his heart. "Jia helped me through my pain. She helped me see that there was a way to get revenge and get myself out from under your thumb. She said I was the brains behind Nova Star. Why shouldn't I make more money, be the man on the magazine covers, be the one to pioneer space? Why give you all the glory? Her friends ran a private aerospace company in Beijing. They offered me money and a chance to be part of something that didn't belong to you. I thought what better way to take you down than to give my technology to a competitor, to a foreign country, one you believed would never make a dent in the space race."

"I can't believe this," Whitney said. "You sound insane right now, Kyle."

"I'm not the one who's crazy—it's him." Kyle tipped his head in Hamilton's direction.

"No, it's you," Jonathan said. "You're rewriting history. Mom wanted Nova Star to succeed as much as Dad did, and she didn't want extraordinary measures used to keep her alive."

"That's because she didn't want to take money away from Dad's dream when she was dying," Kyle shouted.

"What happened to Jia?" Wyatt interjected. "Who killed her and why?"

"She was killed because I started getting cold feet," Kyle admitted. "I was getting my head back together, and I wanted to back out. I realized what I really wanted to do was get out of the space race entirely, but I was in too deep. They killed Jia as a warning to me. And then they blackmailed me with recordings of all my conversations with her. If I didn't do what they said, they would kill me, too. I was trapped."

"You sent me to talk to that woman," Jonathan said, giving his brother a bewildered look. "You set me up, Kyle."

"I couldn't go myself. I was surprised she asked for me to come to San Francisco. She didn't realize she was being set up, that the information she'd been told to bring to me would actually be found in her car. Her employers wanted you to know there was a mole in your company, that it might be your son," Kyle added, looking at his father. "Just not the son you thought it was."

"I never believed it was Jonathan, but I also never could have imagined it would be you," Hamilton said, sitting down on the couch, suddenly looking every one of his sixty-eight years.

Avery felt sorry for Hamilton, but right now her attention was on Kyle. "Why did the Chinese, I assume it was the Chinese, want Hamilton to know there was a spy in the company?"

"They thought it would put pressure on me, and, yes, it's a Chinese company secretly funded by the state.

"How did Noelle get involved?" she asked.

"She was working in my department for a while. Larry was using Carter as a go-between. I guess Noelle got suspicious as to why Carter was in my wing of the building so often. I don't know. I asked him about it, and he said she must have figured out that he was selling secrets to secure a promotion from Larry. She had money problems of her own, so she took the drive that he was supposed to turn over on Saturday night and set up her own meet. But I guess she had second thoughts and didn't hand over the drive. My associates don't tolerate disloyalty, so she was killed." Kyle's gaze bored into hers. "I knew you had it, Avery. Where was it?"

"It isn't important where it was. You ordered me to be killed. This wasn't just about selling secrets; this was about murder. People died because of you, Kyle."

"I had no choice. I got caught up in a situation that went really bad. They put out the contract on you; I was just supposed to help them locate you, but Wyatt kept saving you. We were desperate. The launch is tomorrow. That's why I said it had to be done tonight, or it would all be over."

She couldn't believe how calmly he was talking about working with a hit man, about plotting out her death. "You

put the GPS tracker in my bag at the birthday party, didn't you?"

"That was easy. You left it in the living room."

"I thought of you as a brother, Kyle," she murmured.

"Yeah, you wanted to be in the family so bad, and Dad wanted you in our family, too, because you shared his dreams," Kyle said bitterly. "You were part of the problem. You encouraged him to go for everything he wanted. You became the voice in his head."

"What's supposed to happen at the launch tomorrow?" Wyatt interrupted.

Kyle hesitated, then shrugged, as if realizing it was truly over. "The satellite will destroy itself after it separates from the rocket. The Chinese company is already building a satellite defense system that will work, based on my engineering. Nova Star won't be able to regroup fast enough to beat them. It's the end of the race, Dad," he added, looking back Hamilton. "You're not going to beat anyone to Mars. You're going to be human, and you're going to die on Earth just like Mom did."

As Kyle stopped talking, they heard a pounding on the front door, a ringing of the bell, followed by shouts of, "FBI."

Rena threw open the door and a dozen agents swarmed into the house.

Wyatt put away his gun, grabbed Kyle's arm and turned him over to one of the agents.

Avery didn't recognize any of the men, but Bree and the woman who had arrested Wyatt earlier were front and center. She was surprised to see the other agent there.

She'd thought Bree and Flynn would bring their own team, and she really hoped Wyatt wasn't going to be arrested again, too. She felt like she was on the very edge of a breakdown, overwhelmed by emotion, and she couldn't lose Wyatt for a second time that day.

She instinctively took a step toward him.

Wyatt gave her a reassuring look. "It's fine," he said.

Hamilton was back on his feet now. "Agent Davis," he said to the blonde woman. "It turns out you were right. One of my sons was working with a foreign government to sabotage my company. But it wasn't Jonathan."

"I've been read in on everything," Joanna said, in a crisp, cold tone. "We also have agents arresting Larry Bickmore as we speak. We would like you to call off the launch tomorrow. That's not really a request, by the way. This is a matter of national security."

"I understand," Hamilton said, a weary note in his voice. "I'll make the call."

"We're going to need to interview each and every one of you as well as numerous individuals at Nova Star," Joanna continued. "Special Agents Adams and MacKenzie will take your initial statements now. This is just the beginning of a long investigation. But it will not be conducted by me. Agents from New York and DC will be in town tomorrow." Her gaze moved to Wyatt. "You have friends in high places, Wyatt. But someday you and I will finish our unfinished business."

That sounded ominous, Avery thought, wondering why the agent seemed so personally angered by Wyatt. Maybe

she was just embarrassed that she'd been used as a pawn in the game.

Joanna walked out of the room, followed by all the agents, except two people in plain clothes: Bree and an attractive man who had to be Flynn, the leader of Wyatt's task force.

"I need to get to my boyfriend," Whitney said to Bree. "He's been shot. And I don't know anything about any of this."

"We'll start with a few basic questions and then you can be on your way," Bree said, leading Whitney to another corner of the room, while Flynn isolated Jonathan.

That left Hamilton standing with her and Wyatt.

"Who are you?" Hamilton asked Wyatt.

"I'm FBI. I was inserted into your company by a secret task force after you refused to cooperate with the FBI. My mission was to find the traitor in your company."

"Even if it was one of my children."

"Yes," Wyatt replied, meeting Hamilton's gaze. "You didn't want the bureau in your business, but the stakes are too high when it comes to a foreign government and national security."

"You were very good. Very convincing. Are you even an ex-Marine?"

"No, but I knew you had a soft spot for fellow soldiers."

A growing awareness spread through Hamilton's gaze. "The carjacking—the robbery—"

"A set-up," Wyatt admitted. "Your former security director also won a lottery prize courtesy of the bureau."

"Which allowed him to move up his retirement. You thought of everything." Hamilton's gaze moved to her. "You knew all this, Avery?"

"Not until this morning," she said, hardly able to believe it had only been that morning. So much had happened in the intervening hours.

"So, he lied to you, too? But it looks like you've forgiven him."

"How could I not? He saved my life three times. And Wyatt is a good man. He was working to find the mole in your company. He was working to prevent a national security disaster. You might hate him for lying to you, but you can't deny that without Wyatt, you might be launching a defective satellite tomorrow, destroying your company and everything you have worked for."

Hamilton gave her a thoughtful look. "That's quite an impassioned response."

"I'm just telling the truth. I know you feel betrayed—"

"You have no idea how I feel," he said bitterly. "But most of those emotions are directed at my son."

"I'm sorry about Kyle," she couldn't help saying. "I didn't want it to be anyone in the family. I didn't want to believe that someone at the dinner table last night was plotting to kill me."

"And I'm sorry that you had to go through all this," Hamilton said. "You lost your friend. And you almost lost your life. I had no idea Kyle felt the way he did about his mother's illness and her death. Margery and I were a team. I begged her to let me get her the most experimental treatment in the world. I would have spent my entire

fortune to save her life, but there was nothing that could be done, and she didn't want any of that. She wanted to spend her last days with her family."

"I believe you," she said, seeing the pain in his eyes.

"Kyle was very close to his mother. I should have realized he was more deeply affected than the others, but he always keeps everything inside of himself. As for the security breach, I honestly didn't think anyone was conspiring with the Chinese to sell our technology, especially not Kyle. He was the brains behind the business, and I always gave him credit for that. I thought we had a shared dream, but I was wrong. I don't even know my own son." He paused, his eyes turning even more embittered. "And Larry—my best friend. He was conspiring against me, too. What's that old saying—it's always the person closest to you who carries the knife? I should have remembered that sooner."

"Larry has a lot of debts, from what I understand," she said.

"And a drunk for a wife," Hamilton added. "I've been bailing him out for years. I was happy to do it. I thought that's what friends did for each other." He let out a heavy breath. "I need to call the launch team, scrub the mission."

"You're not going to give up, are you?" she asked. "You can reschedule once everything is back on course."

"I don't know, Avery," he said with sad eyes. "Maybe this dream has run its course."

"Or maybe it just needs to be rethought."

He gave her a small smile. "I know you love space as much as I do. We might be the only ones."

"We're not the only ones. There are thousands of people at Nova Star alone who believe in your vision. You can come back from this."

"Thank you, Avery." He glanced at Wyatt. "And what will you do now, Mr. Tanner? Move on to the next case?"

"Eventually."

"You were a good undercover agent," Hamilton said with a note of admiration in his eyes. "You knew exactly what I needed, and you gave it to me."

"I doubt you'll believe this, but I actually enjoyed getting to know you, and I didn't want any of your children to be guilty."

"Well, you didn't make Kyle do what he did. That's on him. He's going to pay a heavy price, won't he?"

Wyatt nodded. "A very heavy price."

"I still want to protect him. How ridiculous is that?"

"It's not ridiculous. You're his father," Wyatt replied.

Hamilton looked back at her. "Is Brett going to be all right, Avery?"

"He will be. He put himself between me and a bullet. I don't think I ever expected he would do that."

"Funny. I would have never expected anything less. If I could take a bullet for Kyle, I would do it in a heartbeat. You love your kids even when you shouldn't—even when they hate you.

As Hamilton walked away, she blew out a breath, then turned to Wyatt. She wanted to throw herself into his arms, but she hesitated, thinking not here—not with so many people around.

But Wyatt had no such concern. He pulled her up against his chest and gave her a kiss. "It's all over, Avery. You're safe now."

She closed her eyes, believing every word. Not just because Kyle was on his way to jail and the contract killer was dead, but because she was back in Wyatt's arms, and that's where she wanted to stay.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

WYATT DROVE AVERY and Whitney to the hospital, leaving Bree and Flynn to finish up with Jonathan and Hamilton. He didn't know what was in store for his future career, but based on Joanna's cryptic comment, someone high up had come to his defense. He wondered who that could possibly be. He didn't know that many people in the upper echelons of the bureau. He also still wanted to know who had taken the time to frame him.

Maybe Kyle had done that, too, just to separate him from Avery.

But that was a problem for another day.

Both Avery and Whitney were quiet on the drive. He would have expected Whitney to be filled with questions, but since she'd gotten into the back of the car ten minutes ago, she hadn't said a word.

Avery shifted in her seat, glancing at him, and then over her shoulder at Whitney. "Are you all right?"

"I don't think so," Whitney said, a lost note in her voice. "I can't believe what Kyle did, how many people he hurt, how many lies he told. He even set Jonathan up. He would

have sold his own brother if he had to. He probably would have sold me out, too, if I'd had anything to do with Nova Star." She paused. "I really need to see Brett. I need to talk to him. He'll know what to say, how to make me feel better." She took another breath. "That sounded selfish, didn't it? That's me, always thinking of myself. I want Brett to be okay. I need him to be all right. He's everything to me."

"We'll be there soon," Avery said, not commenting on whether or not she believed Whitney was selfish.

"I know you don't like me," Whitney said. "Or at least you don't like me with your father. Oh, hell, maybe you just don't like me. But you have to know that I am crazy about Brett. He's the best thing that ever happened to me. I love him like mad. And, surprisingly, he seems to love me, too."

"He does love you," Avery said. "He told me that earlier tonight. He said the only thing he was afraid of was that you'd suddenly realize he wasn't that young."

"I don't care about his age. He gets me. You know how rare it is to feel free to be yourself with someone?"

"I do know," Avery said, her gaze moving to him. "It's very rare."

He gave her a smile, really wanting to get her alone, so he could tell her how he felt about her. Her defense of him at Hamilton's house had given him hope that they might be able to get past the lies he'd told her. He really hoped so. But he couldn't go there now. They still needed to tie up some loose ends, and one of those ends was her dad. Avery wouldn't be able to really relax until she saw that her father was all right.

A few minutes later, he dropped Avery and Whitney at the front door, then parked the car in the lot and headed inside. He found both women in Brett's room on the fourth floor. Whitney sat on the bed next to Brett, who was propped up against the pillows, pale but smiling, while Avery was in an adjacent chair, watching the two of them. She seemed to appreciate their loving reunion.

After undergoing minor surgery, Brett's arm had been bandaged and was now encased in a sling. He was apparently going to spend the night just to make sure there were no complications.

"Thanks for bringing these very special women to me," Brett told him, as he moved into the room. "And thank you for showing up at the house when you did. Avery and I owe you both our lives."

"I'm happy I arrived in time."

"I can't believe it was Kyle behind all of this madness," Brett added. "Avery was just filling me in. Hamilton must be beside himself."

"He's going to need some time to work it out," he said.

"My brother is truly crazy," Whitney put in. "I never had any idea he blamed my father for my mother's death. My dad really did try to save her life. But my mom didn't want experimental treatments. She just wanted to live while she could. I thought Kyle knew that."

"It sounds like he was blinded by grief," Brett told Whitney.

"We were all grief-stricken; he wasn't the only one. I was incredibly sad."

"But you're stronger than Kyle," Brett told Whitney. "And you'll have to use that strength to help Jonathan and your dad get through all this."

Wyatt saw Whitney respond to Brett's words like a flower opening up to the sun. She soaked it all in and somehow became a better person.

Avery got to her feet. "I'm going to leave you two alone. Dad, I'll call you tomorrow."

"Where are you going now?" Brett asked.

She hesitated. "I guess I'm going home."

"You're really safe?"

"I am, Dad. It's all over."

"Maybe you could still keep an eye on her," Brett told Wyatt.

"I am absolutely going to do that," he said, opening the door for Avery.

As they stepped into the hall, she said, "I still have my bag at my dad's house, but I don't want to go back there right now. I don't know what happened to that man's body, and I really don't want to see him again."

"You don't want to go back there anyway. The police and FBI are probably at your dad's house. It's a crime scene."

"Well, I don't need to break into any more crime scenes," she said lightly, reminding him of when they'd first met.

"That's a good idea," he said, as they walked out to the car. "You can pick up your things later. But you're not going home, Avery."

She frowned at his words. "My home is safe now."

"It is safe, but I'm fairly certain that your apartment was trashed at some point since we left on Saturday, and I don't

think you should deal with that tonight. I want to take you to a nice hotel by the beach. We'll get a room with a balcony and a view, so you can take a look at the stars before you go to sleep."

She gave him a smile. "That does sound nice. I'm exhausted, but I don't really feel sleepy."

"You're still coming off the adrenaline."

"That must be it."

Silence fell between them for a few moments, as they got into the car, and he maneuvered his way out of the parking lot.

"I want to stay with you at the hotel," he added, just so there was no confusion. "I'll sleep in a separate bed. I just need to be near to you." He turned his head when she didn't reply and saw her heart in her eyes. "Is that okay?"

"More than okay. I need to be near you, too, Wyatt."

"I know that you're still angry about the lies I told you."

"Honestly, right now I'm all out of anger. I'm tired of being afraid, worried, suspicious, or angry. I just want to breathe and be grateful that we're both alive, and my dad is alive, and we're going to get justice for Noelle. Although, I still don't really know what her motivation was. She kept telling me that night at the pier that she'd finally decided to do the right thing, be a better person, so why did she steal the drive but then not go through with the hand off? Why leave her bracelet in her apartment? It's really a miracle that I found it."

"Well, Carter is going to survive his wounds. He may be able to tell us more when he's not fighting for his life. My gut tells me that Noelle first saw the opportunity to make

some quick cash, but then she saw a chance to make a big play, to save Nova Star, the company she was coming to love, and maybe to impress you. I'm sure she thought the foreign agent would believe that the game was over, since Hamilton had the information, and that she could walk away, but that was naïve. She was in over her head."

"Noelle always leapt before she looked."

"Whoever stabbed Noelle probably consulted with Kyle right after her death. Kyle must have confirmed that his father was in the dark and that the drive was still missing."

"So they went to her apartment and then came after me. I wish she would have just talked to me, told me what she'd discovered. There were a few moments that Friday night when I thought she wanted to say something, but she didn't."

"I don't know why she didn't, Avery. Unless she was embarrassed that her new boyfriend was a thief and a traitor."

"Maybe it was that," she said. "I guess I just have to hang on to the fact that as misguided as her actions might have been, her heart was in the right place. And that's actually how Noelle always was—a good person, who didn't always make the best decisions. I'm going to miss her. I might have held her feet to the ground, but she always pushed me to let go, step out of my comfort zone." She paused. "I wish you could have known her."

"I feel like I know her through you."

"I still have to plan her memorial."

"You'll get to all that, but not tonight."

"Definitely not tonight."

Fifteen minutes later, he pulled up in front of the valet at a five-star beachfront hotel, hoping they could get a room. Since it was a Monday night in December, he was hopeful.

Their luck held out, and they were given an oceanfront room with a balcony.

"This is going to cost a fortune," Avery said, as he unlocked the door and ushered her inside.

"I've still got the two thousand dollars from the contract killer's wallet," he said lightly.

"Let's use that," she said with a reckless smile. "Although, it's probably against the rules, isn't it?"

He shrugged. "Since it was money toward killing you, I think if anyone deserves it, it's you."

"Me, too." She walked through the bedroom to the balcony doors and opened them.

He followed her onto the dark deck. The night was clear but cold, with a brisk wind coming off the water.

Avery looked up at the sky and let out a sigh that was more pleasure than weariness. "It's beautiful, isn't it? The stars are so bright tonight."

Gazing at her beautiful profile, amazed that there could still be wonder in her eyes after everything that had happened, he thought she was far more beautiful than the night sky.

She glanced over at him. "You're not looking up, Wyatt."

"No. I'm looking at you, Avery."

"And what do you see?"

"The brightest star...the one that can lead me home."

"Where is home?" she asked, a hushed note in her voice.

"I'm pretty sure it's wherever you are," he confessed.

Her eyes widened. "Really, Wyatt? That might be the best line I've ever heard."

"It's not a line, Avery." He put his hands on her shoulders, turning her to face him. "I'm being honest. I know that might seem ironic, because I've spent a lot of time lying to you. But that ends now."

"I was really angry at first. I felt betrayed...confused. But I've had a little time to think, and I know it was the job, Wyatt. You had to protect your cover. You didn't know who I was in the beginning. And even then, you couldn't really trust me because of my father." She paused. "I know you had doubts about him. I actually had a few myself."

"I didn't want him to be guilty. I'm glad he wasn't."

"Me, too."

"I hated lying to you, Avery. It's usually not a problem for me. When I go undercover, I'm normally infiltrating criminal organizations where everyone is bad, everyone is a liar. It was different being at Nova Star, getting caught up in Hamilton's dreams, and in yours. I'm not sure I could have kept up the pretense much longer, especially not with you."

"Your job sounds dangerous."

"It can be," he admitted.

"Do you always work undercover?"

"I have for the last five years, but I don't know what's next."

"Because you don't have another assignment..."

"Because for the first time in my career, I don't want to disappear into some other world. I don't want to become someone else." He paused. "I've been in the shadows a long

time. I liked it a lot at first. I'd wanted to disappear from my own life, and this job was the perfect way to do that. But as the years have passed, I've started to feel like I'm missing something. I've sometimes wondered if I'm forgetting who I really am. When I met you, something inside me snapped. I didn't want to keep my walls up. I didn't want to look down; I wanted to look up. You didn't just show me the universe, you showed me myself."

"I'm so glad," she whispered, her heart in her eyes.

"I know I saved your life."

"Multiple times," she put in.

"But you saved me, too. And no matter what happens, I'm never going to forget you."

"What you should never forget is yourself," she said.

"I'm going to try to hang on to that, too," he admitted.

"Could you work for the FBI and not go undercover, Wyatt?"

"Yes, I could. But I don't know how good of an agent I would be. I'm better on my own. No rules. No politics."

"Then maybe you should keep doing what you're doing."

"Or maybe it's time for a change, but a lot of that is dependent on what happens with any internal investigations the bureau decides to conduct regarding my behavior and Bree's."

"I hope she won't get into any trouble."

"I'm going to do everything I can to make sure she doesn't pay for my sins."

Avery gave him a questioning look. "That blonde agent who arrested you..."

"Joanna?"

"She has something against you, doesn't she? When she looked at you at Hamilton's house, it felt personal."

"I don't know exactly what her deal is, but she asked me out years ago when we were at Quantico, and I said no. She was one of the instructors, and she's ten years older than me. I thought it was inappropriate."

"Ah, a scorned woman. You do leave broken hearts behind you, don't you?"

"Her heart was not broken. We never went out." He paused. "I don't care about Joanna, and I will figure out who set me up, but that's for tomorrow or the next day."

"Are we back to living in the moment?" she asked wrapping her arms around his waist.

He smiled down at her and couldn't help but steal a kiss before he answered. "I definitely want to live in the moment with you again...I just want there to be a lot more moments in our future. I don't know what I want in my career, what will work for me, but I do know that I want a life that's more than my career. And I want you in it."

"You do?" she asked, uncertainty in her eyes. "Are you sure when all this excitement wears off, you won't find me incredibly boring?"

He laughed. "Never."

"I can be boring, Wyatt. The last few days aren't me. You know how you said everyone has a secret...well, I do have one."

"What's that?"

"When you turn off the lights in my bedroom apartment, the ceiling turns into the night sky. Yes. I am that crazy about space."

He laughed. "I can live with that. But I'm not trying to rush you into anything. I just want you to know that this is me, the real me. There are no more secrets. Everything I told you about my past was true. And the way I feel about you is true. I hope you can believe that."

"I do believe it. I trust you, Wyatt. And I want to get to know you. I want to hear all your stories. I want to meet your friends."

"I want to hear your stories and meet your friends, too." He paused. "But mostly I just want to show you that I'm not going to be like your dad. I'm not going to change into someone else and disappear on you. My professional life is not my personal life."

"I know that, Wyatt. I admit that at first, when I heard about your disguise, I thought that I'd been taken in again, but now after everything that's happened, I realize how wrong I was. When I made love to you last night, I told you I knew who you were, and I did, and I do. It doesn't matter what your name is. I know your heart." She put her hand on his chest and gave him a smile that nearly undid him.

"You are something else, Avery. You have knocked me off my feet. You have spun me around and turned me upside down. You have made me look at the world, at myself, in a different way."

"That wasn't all me."

"It was you," he said, pressing his lips against her soft cheek. "Last night was the most amazing night of my life."

"I hope you're talking about the hours when we weren't running for our lives."

"I am."

She smiled up at him. "Let's see if we can top it. You like a challenge, don't you?"

"Always," he said, as he slid his hands through her hair, trapping her face for another long, tender, promising kiss.

"Then take me to bed, Wyatt."

"I thought you'd never ask."

OceanofPDF.com

EPILOGUE

SIX DAYS LATER, on a beautiful but cold Sunday afternoon, Avery stood on the same beach where she'd let herself scream into the wind only a week earlier. But she wasn't crying this time. She was with Wyatt as well as friends and family who were coming together to celebrate Noelle's life.

Having finally decided that the last thing Noelle would want was a funeral, she had thrown together a gourmet picnic. There were a couple of coolers filled with drinks, and a dozen colorful blankets spread across the sand. Tomorrow, she and Wyatt would hire a boat to take them out on the ocean, so they could toss Noelle's ashes at sea, but today was to laugh and smile and live life the way Noelle always had.

"You did a great job," Wyatt told her, as he joined her at the water's edge.

"Thanks. I think Noelle would like it." She smiled at Wyatt, feeling her heart flip over just from gazing into his sexy brown eyes. They'd spent every night together, and most days, of the past week, sorting out their lives,

cleaning up their ransacked apartments, and dealing with the fallout from everything that had happened.

Wyatt had spent long hours with the FBI, following up all aspects of the conspiracy case, interrogating Carter and Bickmore and even tracking down the Chinese company involved and rounding up a few other people from Kyle's department who had been complicit in small ways.

After Hamilton had canceled the launch, she'd been kept busy at work, dealing with endless questions about Nova Star's future as well as keeping the daily programs going.

But every day, life had started to make a little more sense. And a lot of that had to do with Wyatt. She was getting to know the real him, and she was falling more in love each day.

She thought Noelle would like that, too. She'd always said that falling in love was the best feeling you could ever have, which was why she liked to do it so often.

"Hello there," Whitney said with a wave, coming across the sand with Avery's father.

"Thanks for coming," she said, giving both her dad and Whitney a hug. She was starting to like Whitney more, too, finally believing in the love she had for Brett. "I do have to warn you, Dad, that Mom will also be here."

"I can handle seeing your mother," her dad said easily. "And this isn't about us; it's about Noelle. What about Kari?"

"She's not going to make it. I sent her some money to help her out with her immediate bills and told her I would take care of everything here."

Her father gave her an approving nod. "You always do the right thing."

"I try."

"It's nice to see you as well," her father told Wyatt.

"You, too. Happy to see you got the sling off."

"Everything is healing well. I'm back to writing, too. The past few weeks have inspired me to dig a little deeper into family relationships."

She gave him a smile that held no more bitterness. Her dad might always be an opportunist, but he was still a good person.

"My father will be here, too," Whitney said.

She was surprised. She'd given Hamilton an invite but hadn't thought he would come with all the turmoil going on in his life.

"I'm so glad," she said.

"There he is now," Whitney said, tipping her head toward the path.

"I'm going to say hello," she said. "Make yourselves comfortable. Get food. Get drinks."

"We'll be fine," her dad said.

"I'll take care of them," Wyatt added.

She walked across the beach and gave him a big smile. "Hamilton."

"Avery," he returned, giving her a warm hug.

"I really appreciate you being here."

"Noelle was part of our Nova Star family. And since Kyle was also responsible for her death, I wanted to pay my respects."

"Thank you. How are you doing?"

"Well, the past week has been filled with revelations, most bewildering and disappointing. But I'm starting to see a path to the stars again."

She liked the gleam in his eyes. "Really? You're not going to shut down the company?"

"No. Kyle's actions have definitely set us back, but he wasn't the only engineer working on our technology. And I feel like I owe it to everyone at the company to keep things going. I also believe my wife would have wanted that. She did believe in this dream, Avery. And I did do everything I could to save her."

"I know that, Hamilton. I know you loved her. She was a special woman."

"I don't know what's going to happen to Kyle. He doesn't want to speak to me, and maybe that's just as well. There's really nothing to say. His actions are indefensible. Even if he believed I let his mother die, he shouldn't have done what he did. He left death and injury in his wake."

"I know it's complicated, though. As you said, he's your child."

"He is. And I'm going to make sure he has a good attorney. Other than that, he'll fight his own battles." His gaze moved past her. "I see that Wyatt is still here. The two of you are together, aren't you?"

"We are. I'm in love with Wyatt."

"It doesn't bother you how easily he became someone else?"

"No. I know who he is. And he's a good man. The two of you were actually on the same side. You both wanted the truth."

"But I didn't want it enough to risk my son's life. I thought I was protecting Jonathan. And there was even a point when I thought Whitney might be involved. She's always complaining about being left out. Kyle was my last choice. In fact, he wasn't even on the radar. I guess that's why you shouldn't investigate yourself."

"Probably not. Can I get you a drink?"

"I'll help myself. Go visit with your friends."

"Whitney and my dad are here."

"I see them. You really don't have to worry about me, Avery, but I appreciate your concern."

As Hamilton wandered off, she saw Wyatt talking to Bree. She thought about joining them, but her mom was coming down the path, followed by her boyfriend, Don. Her mom was not going to love the fact that she'd been shot at while she was gone, but she'd probably be happy to know she'd met the man of her dreams. They definitely had a lot to talk about.

"What are you going to do, Wyatt?" Bree asked. "Now that you've been completely reinstated, and your slate has been wiped clean?"

"I'm not entirely sure. Flynn might be moving on to another case."

"You're going to stick with Flynn."

"That depends."

"On Avery?"

"Yes," he admitted.

Bree smiled. "You finally found the woman who made you want to come out of the shadows."

"I did. And I'm not sure I want to go back under."

"There are jobs you can do that don't require that."

"I'm looking into all that. By the way, I still don't know who set me up. I've gone through the players involved, and no one seems to be a good choice for Joanna's anonymous source."

"Well, it looks like my instincts about Vincent Rowland were wrong."

"Why do you say that?" he asked sharply.

"Because I found out from Joanna that Vincent was the one who made calls on your behalf to the top people in the bureau. He basically saved your ass."

He thought about that, wondering why Vincent had gone to the trouble. "It would be an interesting play to throw me into the fire and then save me."

She gave him a doubtful look. "Now you sound like the one who's paranoid about Vincent."

"It just doesn't quite add up. And I trust your instincts, Bree."

"We should have a group chat one day soon—get Damon, Parisa, and Diego in on a call."

"We should definitely warn them to watch their backs, especially Parisa and Diego. If Vincent was part of what happened in New York, then he already messed with Damon. But we don't need to talk about that now." His gaze wandered to Avery, who was talking to her mother.

"Is that Avery's mom?" Bree asked.

"I think so. I've only seen her picture until now."

"So, you're going to meet her today," Bree said with a gleam in her eyes. "I know you can blend into any group, any situation, but how good are you with mothers?"

"I've never met one before now," he admitted. "Never got close to anyone to meet their family, to be my real self."

"She's going to love you, Wyatt."

"For saving her daughter?"

"And for loving her daughter. You do love Avery, don't you?"

"More than I thought possible. I feel like I've been punched in the gut and I can't quite catch my breath."

"Yep, that's love," she said with a laugh.

"Speaking of love, where's your significant other?"

"Nathan is coming back to town tonight. Maybe we can double date one day next week."

"That sounds almost...normal," he said with a laugh.

"Well, I wouldn't get used to it. Our lives don't stay normal for long. You think Avery is up for it?"

"Most definitely," he said, as Avery joined them.

"Am I up for what?" she asked, having heard Bree's question.

"Loving an FBI agent," Bree said.

Avery's gaze met his. "Most definitely," she said, echoing his answer.

Bree laughed. "You two are too much. I'm going to get some food."

"I hope Bree didn't bring bad news," Avery said, linking her hands with his as she faced him.

"All good. I have a clean slate. I can do whatever I want to do next."

"What's that going to be?"

"I have no idea," he said with a laugh. "We'll figure it out together. As long as you're in my life, I honestly could do anything."

"I feel the same way. We make a good team."

"We do." He gazed deep into her eyes. "I love you, Avery. You have my heart. It's a little battered, but it's all yours."

Her gaze softened with tenderness. "And you have mine."

#

OceanofPDF.com

ACCESS MEMBERS ONLY PAGE!

Would you like to have access to special deals, giveaways and sneak peeks at upcoming books?

[Sign up for my newsletter here](#) and then visit my Members Only Page!



[Click here for a complete list of my books!](#)

OceanofPDF.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Barbara Freethy is a #1 New York Times Bestselling Author of 72 novels ranging from contemporary romance to romantic suspense and women's fiction. With over 14 million copies sold, twenty-eight of Barbara's books have appeared on the New York Times and USA Today Bestseller Lists, including SUMMER SECRETS which hit #1 on the NYT.

Known for her emotional and compelling stories of love, family, mystery and romance, Barbara enjoys writing about ordinary people caught up in extraordinary adventures.

Her newest series include the romantic suspense series OFF THE GRID: FBI SERIES and the contemporary romance series WHISPER LAKE. Her CALLAWAY family series also has 14 books in it and is an NYT Bestselling Series.

[Click here for a complete list of her books!](#)

[Sign up for Barbara's Newsletter](#)



OceanofPDF.com