

WICKED MOON

Vampire for Hire #23

by

J.R. RAIN

MATTHEW S. COX

The World of Samantha Moon

VAMPIRE FOR HIRE

Moon Dance
Vampire Moon
American Vampire
Moon Child
Christmas Moon (novella)
Vampire Dawn
Vampire Games
Moon Island
Moon River
Vampire Sun
Moon Dragon
Moon Shadow
Vampire Fire
Midnight Moon
Moon Angel
Vampire Sire
Moon Master
Dead Moon
Lost Moon
Vampire Destiny
Infinite Moon
Vampire Empress
Moon Elder
Wicked Moon

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Blood Moon
Parallel Moon

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New Moon Rising
Moon Mourning
Haunted Moon

SAMANTHA MOON ADVENTURES

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Witch Moon

Moon Goddess
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Moon Shots

Wicked Moon

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Reading Sample: The Beast of Devil's Creek

About J.R. Rain

About Matthew S. Cox

Wicked Moon

Chapter One No Monster

Time can be strange, especially right after you've been shot in the heart.

People much smarter than me—and with loads more free time to think about this stuff—describe time as fluid. I have no idea what they mean by that. The closest I've ever been able to think of time in the sense of it being a liquid is Salvador Dali's melting clocks. I *do* know time can do messed up things on occasion. The nature of an experience can drastically change how time feels. For example, thirty minutes in a dentist's waiting room feels longer than my kids' entire childhood.

Some egghead somewhere claimed time actually does move faster in certain situations, though I sincerely doubt either a dentist's office or a speedboat could exceed the speed of light. Supposedly, time gets pretty weird when you go that fast, or when you get too close to a black hole—or when ancient mysticism intrudes on life in suburbia.

Sorry if that's confusing. I'd explain more, but time isn't on my side right now on account of my being dead. Or at least, as dead as my body is capable of managing to be. So much has changed in such little time, it's difficult for me to keep track of everything. Fortunately, being a supernatural creature of some kind—exactly what I am now, who knows—still comes with a seriously good healthcare plan.

The roar of a boat engine breaks the relative quiet of my mind. Oh, goody. I'm waking up. As my senses come back one by one, I take stock of my situation. Hearing's first. The boat engine means we haven't gotten to wherever these guys are taking what they think is my dead body. If I had to guess, we're going to some point in the ocean far enough from land they think no one will find my remains.

My sense of touch returns next. Along with the feeling of vibration all along my back, tightness around my left ankle tells me they've attached some manner of weight. The constriction is only around one ankle, though. I'm not tied up—why would they bother? They think I'm dead. An ongoing conversation between two men reaches my mind in mid-sentence.

“...to go before we toss this annoying bitch overboard?” asks a man in a highly impatient tone.

Guessing he's asking when they're going to dump me.

“I think this is enough weight.” Someone tugs on the rope tied to my leg.

The boat hits a small wave with enough force to make me bounce an inch off the deck. Three men in close proximity to me make noises of surprise and irritation at the hard jostle. A thud tells me one of them even falls over. The engine roar drops off dramatically to an idling purr. Whoever is driving this thing probably rammed the throttle lever all the way down. Boats don't exactly have brakes, so we continue gliding forward, losing speed gradually.

While the guys scramble to get their footing back, I take the opportunity to sit upright and have a quick look around.

I'm in the back of one of those cigarette boats, as they call them. Only usually see these

things in James Bond movies or on the news whenever the US Coast Guard intercepts some drug smugglers. As far as I know, Nasir Ahmad is not involved in anything like that. Dude is crazy rich though, mostly from diamonds, oil, and arms deals.

Who is Nasir Ahmad? Oh, just a wealthy jerk my present client hired me to investigate before trying to divorce him.

Anyway, the second I move, the three thugs in the boat with me all scream and flail their arms like kids in a haunted house. The Caucasian dude closest to me is bodybuilder big. He's wearing a dark blue pullover and track pants like the errand to murder me and dump my body pulled him away from his gym time. Guy next to him in a white turtleneck looks as if he ought to be posing for the cover of the Saudi equivalent of GQ Magazine. He's also about to faint. Driver Guy's a little grungier, somewhere between a hung-over Mark Ruffalo and a late-thirties Al Pacino who's been awake for an entire week while slurping down half a Starbucks worth of espresso. Bodybuilder dude doesn't appear to be a Saudi national. Ahmad must have hired some of his goons locally. Wonder if these henchmen are union? Do crazy evil millionaires have a place they can go to in order to hire muscle that doesn't ask questions? A Craigslist for goons?

Anyway...

Turtleneck dude shouts '*Bismillah*' at me a few times, then keeps muttering the same couple of words over and over again in a repetitive manner while evidently contemplating jumping out of the boat. All three stare at the bloodstains on my shirt.

I was wrong. It's not a rope around my left ankle. It's a padlocked chain connected to a pair of car batteries. Hope they are dead and/or old. Be a shame to throw useful stuff into the ocean. Actually, it's bad to throw batteries into the sea live or dead. Acid, lead, plastic—all really nasty for the environment.

"What?" I ask, casual as anything. "You guys never heard of a bulletproof vest before?"

Bodybuilder makes the most epic 'nope' face at me while reaching for the enormous handgun in a holster under his left arm.

I spring upright and lunge at him, simultaneously palming the elbow of that arm—pushing it against his chest so he can't pull his weapon out—and clocking him across the jaw with my other hand. The hit throws him backward over the boat's tiny windshield to land flat on his back on the ridiculously long front end.

Driver, apparently irritated with Turtleneck's terrified praying (and lack of trying to shoot me) shoves him at me. Turtleneck legit screams like a teenager seeing the monster in a cheesy slasher movie. He also has a (much smaller) handgun in a detective-style holster under his left arm, but makes no attempt to reach for it. His associate's push sends him stumble-charging at me in a slightly less telegraphed manner than the nameless bad guys from a Stephen Segal movie. Ever notice how so many of them obligingly run in wildly just asking to be thrown? While I sincerely doubt this guy is a stunt double planning to take a fast dive, the setup *is* too perfect for me not to exploit it.

Aikido isn't in my skill set, but they did teach us a little jiu-jitsu at Quantico. It, plus my strength, is enough to flip the guy overboard. I recover from the throw in time to make eye contact with Driver while he pulls the trigger on his Sig.

Thankfully, the idiot is so rattled by seeing 'the dead come back to life' he misses, sending a bullet over my head.

He barely has time to make an 'oh crap' face before I grab him by both shoulders and slam

a knee into his groin, hard. His body flies up off his feet into the air. Since I'm still holding onto his shirt in both hands, he ends up hovering there for a second completely horizontal. All the veins in his face bulge in sheer agony. Oops. Okay, kicking a guy in the jewels with the force of a forklift might count as 'cruel and unusual,' but the dude *did* shoot me not long ago with intent to kill. Before gravity can step in and pull the guy to the boat floor, I swing him sideways and toss him into the ocean toward Turtleneck.

I have the little speedboat to myself... well, mostly. Bodybuilder is still lying flat on the front end, but he's out cold. I jump in the driver's seat—or do they call it a pilot's seat? I don't know boats. Anyway, the controls are reasonably obvious: chrome lever for throttle and a steering wheel. It's got a computer type screen in the middle of the dashboard roughly the size of an e-tablet that's already open to a navigation system similar to the one on my phone, except there aren't too many roads nearby.

By now, the two guys on the second boat are aware something has gone wrong. Probably has something to do with the men I threw overboard shouting at them.

I shove the throttle lever up to about the halfway point.

Sudden acceleration causes the unconscious bodybuilder dude to tumble over the windshield again—hey, it's only like eight inches tall—and come spilling into the seating area. His massive hand cannon falls from his grip and lands on the floor beside my left foot. Oh, that's convenient. Leaving the boat to drive itself for a moment, I grab the gun. My left ankle is still connected by a yard-long chain to a pair of car batteries. Not exactly the safest fashion accessory to be wearing on a speedboat.

People have occasionally accused me of being impatient, but sometimes efficiency matters. Like now. Two of the three men who were about to dump what they thought was my corpse into the ocean are themselves in the ocean. I have no idea who has the key for the padlock, nor do I want to waste time looking for it with another speedboat turning around to chase me.

Using a .50 cal Desert Eagle handgun to blast apart a padlock attached to my ankle is not the safest thing I've ever done. Kids, do not try this at home. I'm a trained professional. I hold my leg up in the air, grab the DE in both hands and line it up on the dangling lock.

Relax, Sam. Even if it hurts, it will heal.

As the other boat's engine screams up to a roar, I squeeze the trigger. The brass padlock detonates into a hundred pieces, most of which go flying past my foot into the water. Remarkably, I didn't injure myself at all, though I would not call the sudden, sharp yank on the chain 'comfortable.' Nice of my 'killers' to put the chain on the outside of my boot. Yeah, this is what I get for trying to talk first and be reasonable. Stupid international waters. Rich jackasses don't think they have to obey any laws out here.

I yank the hasp of the padlock out of the chain and kick it off my leg, then turn my attention back to the steering wheel. The other boat coming up behind me goes right past the two guys I threw in the water. Oh, wow. They'd rather try to kill me again than save their friends from drowning. Assholes.

Grumbling, I stare past the nice, expensive white steering wheel—possibly ivory—at the vast ocean racing toward me. There is a reason I didn't swerve hard to toss Bodybuilder into the water. No, not to get his gun. I could probably have snapped the chain, or at least the padlock, by hand. He's seriously out cold, perhaps with a broken jaw. People don't swim very well when they're unconscious.

Sure, speedboats are new to me, but it's kinda obvious trying to crank the wheel for a hard

turn would end poorly for me at this speed. So, I don't. Instead, I ease the wheel around. The two dudes chasing me aren't expecting my turn and overshoot me, going off about fifty yards before they start slowing down to change course.

Guess they don't want to flip their boat either.

Once I'm heading back toward the two guys treading water, I accelerate. Shortly before reaching them, I cut the throttle completely and drift up beside them. Predictably, they waste no time swimming close and climbing on board. As soon as they're both fully in the seating area, I ram the throttle all the way up while cutting the wheel.

The acceleration plus rapid fishtail turn initially throws them to the floor. Both guys just about get their balance back before the two men in the other boat start shooting at us. Turtleneck shouts at them in Arabic while the former driver yells curses. Both dive to the floor as bullets whistle by, one or two hitting the boat with sharp *clacks*.

Ever see a cartoon where a high-performance boat is going so damn fast only its rear end touches the water? Yeah, that's kind of how it feels right now. I can't see how much of our boat is in contact with the ocean, but it feels like we're only one slight breeze away from doing a backflip. Turtleneck and Driver slide to the rear end of the seating area—which, by the way, is not very big. Eighty percent of this boat's length is in front of the windshield. The back only has a little driver's seat and a white cushioned bench about wide enough for three adult men to share without being uncomfortably intimate.

The guys stare at me in disbelief. Turtleneck still has a gun under his left arm, but he's evidently forgotten about it for the moment.

"You guys need to choose more loyal friends." I gesture at the boat chasing us. "They were going to leave you to drown."

"You're crazy," says Driver.

I shrug one shoulder. "You aren't the first to say that."

They give each other a 'let's get her' look. Wow, some people. Even after I pulled them out of the ocean so they didn't drown, they're going to keep trying to kill me. So rude.

As they start to push themselves up to their feet, no doubt to charge at me, I siphon energy from them quite a bit less gently than I usually do to people. At least *one* thing about my life is still reasonably consistent: feeding off mental energy. Definitely beats blood, that's for sure. And hey, coming back from death is exhausting. I really did need a snack.

The guys go derp-faced and collapse on top of Bodybuilder.

More gunfire ripples by the water nearby.

Right... time to go.

I ram the throttle lever forward and keep my head down.

Chapter Two Hollywood

Wow... here I am in a speedboat out on the ocean.

Not where I'd expected to be this afternoon. Not even close. Thankfully, this boat's navigation system is already showing me directions for returning to the yacht. Another thankfully, there are no roads, trees, walls, or cars on the ocean. Yeah, I know it sounds stupid to say that, like duh, obviously... but it also means I can travel in a straight line from where I am to my destination.

These 'racing-type' boats are notorious for being stealthy, fast, and extremely difficult to intercept, perfect qualities for smugglers. This particular one may or may not be used for activities more illegal than dumping bodies. It's quite fancy, with leather and ivory and chrome. Probably cost close to a million bucks. Maybe more. I have to assume the two guys chasing me are well aware of the boat's value and, consequently, hesitant about putting more holes in it.

Nasir Ahmad is 'nesting yacht' rich, but he'd still be furious with them for blowing up one of these boats. I suppose it should comfort me to a point that his men would choose to protect his boat over killing me. Or, maybe it's just the speed we are going that's making it so difficult to hit me they stopped trying.

Whatever. Bullets aren't flying at me. I don't really care what the reason is.

So, anyway... what's a private investigator doing on a high-performance boat out on the ocean with a bullet hole in her shirt? I'm sure most people are familiar with Murphy's Law, but they've probably never heard of Pinkerton's Law. That is, the most innocuous sounding cases will often go wrong in the wildest of ways. Like, a PI gets hired to find a missing cat and they end up trapped on a speeding bus with fifty pounds of C4 about to explode.

Sure, that's an exaggeration, but my point is the same. Sometimes, the most mundane sounding cases end up going off the rails and not in small ways. And no, I have no idea if there really is a 'Pinkerton's Law.' I made that up. I'd call it Sam's Law, but there are no demons involved. Hopefully, I won't have to worry about that for a long time.

So, how did I end up being taken out to sea to be dumped overboard with car batteries chained to my leg? Simple: a woman wanted to divorce her husband and hired me to help her find dirt. To be fair, I've worked dozens of cases similar to that. At first, it didn't *sound* crazy... until I started digging into the facts.

A doctor named Kyra Lockwood, by all accounts a reasonably ordinary American citizen—not rich, not famous, fairly smart, fairly pretty—ends up meeting a Saudi national at a medical conference and they hit it off. Suffice to say, they rushed into a marriage and she had no idea who he really was. We have that in common. I didn't really know how dark my Danny could get until my life went crazy.

Anyway, Dr. Lockwood neglected to tell me about him in great detail before I took her case. She didn't omit *too* much information, only that he could be on the list of the 500 wealthiest men on Earth. So what if he'd be close to the bottom of the list, it's still a damned exclusive club.

Another technicality... he's not actually *on* that list. Guy likes his privacy. He'd been working as the CFO of a two-year-old medical tech startup company. Dr. Lockwood suspected her husband was embezzling and hired me to find evidence of criminal conduct she could use

at the divorce proceedings. Unlike most divorce-related cases, the guy hadn't cheated on her with another woman. No, he wanted to leave the country and take his wife and their daughter along, but something about it felt off to her. Rather than go live like royalty, she worried about ending up a powerless trophy wife in a country where women have no rights and no ability to get back home if things truly went bad.

I don't know the full extent of what happened in their relationship, but it bothered her enough to begin planning for divorce and get me involved. She wanted anything she could use to show evidence he presented a flight/kidnapping risk to the daughter when she pressed for full custody. Turns out, the guy *was* stealing from his employer and sending the money overseas to suspicious parties... the kinds of suspicious parties who buy RPGs and shoot them at NATO soldiers.

How did I find this out? Mostly because the government agents already sniffing around his activities got wind of my involvement and we had a 'you need to back off and leave this to the professionals' meeting. The guys weren't as condescending as they usually are when dealing with private investigators, since I used to be a HUD agent. They didn't think of me as a complete civilian idiot. Still, I am no CIA agent.

Anyway, Nasir became aware of me investigating him, and when I suddenly stopped—at the request of the FBI—he evidently decided to believe I'd found incriminating evidence bad enough to land him in prison for the rest of his life... and he promptly stepped up his timetable to get out of the USA.

If it's any indication of what kind of man he is, Kyra flat out told him she would sign whatever she needed to sign to divorce him without taking even one dollar of his money as long as he gave her full custody of their only child, fourteen-year-old Ariana. What did he do? Leaves his wife locked in the bathroom, grabs the daughter, and rushes to his superyacht to leave the country.

Kyra thinks he's doing it purely to hurt her. According to her, he hadn't been the most interested of fathers. Neither mean nor abusive, simply uninvolved. If he gets Ariana overseas, it's going to be near to impossible for Dr. Lockwood to get her daughter back—and the girl is likely to have a less than happy life. I can't imagine a kid raised in the USA would fare well in a desert kingdom with limited freedom.

Now, normally, a case of corporate embezzlement wouldn't lead to me going full Jane Bond in a cigarette boat chase, but the guy skedaddled with his daughter onto this massive yacht he never bothered to tell the wife about. I haven't exactly had time to look into who really owns the boat. For all I know, the official owner might be some mysterious international corporation that exists purely as a money-laundering mechanism to funnel cash into various militia groups acting over there.

Regardless of who legally owns the giant yacht, Nasir wasn't happy to see me on it. Sure, I'm faster and stronger than normal people, but speed only goes so far when eight bodyguards all open fire on me unexpectedly in the middle of a wide-open area. I did my best, but one of them got lucky.

That's when I woke up on this speedboat.

And yes, I'm well aware that sneaking onto a yacht I don't own is not the purview of a private investigator. However, Ariana sent her mom a panic text explaining that her father was forcing her to live with him overseas.

Kyra was certain she would never see her daughter again. Like, ever.

Okay, yeah. Not on my watch.

I don't exactly know how much time has passed since I ate a bullet. Can't see land anywhere, so I'm fairly sure we are in international waters, which starts only twelve miles off the coast of California. Too far for the USCG to have jurisdiction and I don't know if the Navy will get involved in something like this. It's not like Nasir has abducted a government official.

More bullets whistle past, way too close for comfort.

The silvery-white form of the *Khulud*—Nasir's big ass yacht—appears as a speck in the distance up ahead. I have three choices at the moment: turn around and go home, storm the *Khulud* and shoot or kick the ass of everyone in my way, or try to somehow sneak onto the boat and find Ariana. Choice one isn't going to happen. I'd rather get shot in the chest again than tell Dr. Lockwood I said screw it and gave up on her kid. Choice two, while possible, isn't something I really want to do. The men and women on that boat may or may not be personally invested in separating a girl from her mother... but they don't deserve to die for it. Maybe some of them do, but I don't want to be their executioner. My abilities are impressive, but not infallible—as has been proven already on this case.

While I can definitely take on two or three guys at once and beat them senseless without fatalities, it's considerably more difficult to engage in a fistfight with bullets flying.

No, stealth it is.

I cut the throttle to about one-third and steer away from the *Khulud*. As my boat comes around in a wide, sweeping turn, I take aim at the other speedboat using the Desert Eagle, then return fire, trying to knock out their engine instead of killing the guys. Four shots have no appreciable effect on anything other than my ears.

Dammit. Why can't this be Hollywood, where a couple of shots blows the enemy spy's boat up in a fireball? Oh hell. May as well get hands-on. And by hands on... I mean ramming them.

The two guys trying to shoot me appear momentarily baffled when I steer on a collision course. Can't imagine what's going on in their heads at the moment. All five of them had to have seen me 'dead' before. Not only did I sit back up, this is the second time I've gone from running away to charging *at* them. They probably think I've completely snapped and am intending to crash into them and destroy both boats, because I'm some kinda djinn or monster that won't die in the resulting fireball.

They'd be partially correct. A big fireball probably wouldn't kill me, but holy cow would it suck. We're talking like months of agonizing pain. For whatever reason, burns heal super slow. Go figure, an ordinarily fatal gunshot to the heart takes just a few hours to heal, but when I scorched my neck with a flat iron a few months ago... that hurt for a week.

I pull my feet up so I'm squatting atop the driver's seat, then line the boat up like a watery version of a jousting knight, aiming for a near-miss drive by. An instant before the boats pass each other, I ram my throttle lever to the stop position, then leap across the maybe three-foot gap of ocean. My flying tackle drills both guys over backward. They shout in Arabic. No idea what they're saying, but their tone of voice is pretty freaked out. Neither of them are as buff as Bodybuilder, but these guys are definitely experienced in hand-to-hand combat. They leap to their feet and attack in a series of punching and chopping strikes in a martial art style I don't recognize. Might be Krav Maga or something else unique to the Middle East.

I'm able to dodge the majority of their attacks and shrug off the few I don't expect while punching the left side guy in the head twice, dazing him. The other guy grabs me by the throat,

trying to choke me out. I thrust both hands up between his arms, forcing them apart and away from my neck... and punch him in the throat.

In that brief span of time, the other guy recovers and jumps on my back, snapping a collapsible baton out to length and trying to put it across my throat in a rear chokehold. Ugh. What is their fascination with my neck?

I reach up over my shoulder, grab the guy by the hair, and yank him forward, smashing his skull down into the other guy's head with a dull, meaty *thud*. The baton slips from the guy's fingers, clattering to the floor beside me. Good, they're both unconscious... or close to it. I pick myself up to kneel, then drain off enough mental energy from them to ensure they stay asleep for a while.

In the moment of calm, I just sprawl there trying to catch my breath. Aches and pains all over my body fade over the course of a few minutes.

Ahh... that's nice. Okay, back to business.

I jump into the driver's seat, slow down, and turn this boat around to catch up to the one I left to drift. Moving two guys is less work than moving three, so I transfer these two into the boat I woke up in before collecting all firearms in easy sight and taking them with me back to the second boat. The brutes should all be reasonably safe—if uncomfortable—drifting around for however long it takes them to regain consciousness. I'm not going to be a complete bitch and take the key. As soon as they come to their senses, they can restart the engine and go somewhere.

With a boat all to myself, I set a course for the *Khulud* and push the throttle up. With any luck, people on the ship are expecting these small boats to return and won't immediately go on high alert when I get there.

I glance at the small pile of handguns on the rug beside my seat. Two Sigs, a Beretta, a Glock, and the Desert Eagle. Not my style, but dammit... if I have to choose between shooting someone or failing to stop a kidnapping, I'm gonna err on the side of bullets.

Chapter Three **International Waters**

My almost-killers were considerate enough to pre-set the route in the navigation system.

It's kind of impressive, really. Even though the *Khulud* is moving, this thing is giving me up to the minute course corrections. Following it is pretty much the same as using a GPS in the Momvan except for the bouncing. No, not the waves, my van. I think I need to get the shocks replaced.

The yacht is so big I'm not sure if I should call it a yacht. Damn thing is closer to a cruise ship in size. Since there's no way to predict what kind of reaction the security people are going to have to my arrival, I play it casual, circling to approach from the left rear while trying not to look like I'm in a tremendous hurry.

About twenty feet from the stern on the left side, the outline of a door tells me where the docking bay is. This is what I meant by 'nesting yacht' rich. Nasir Ahmad has so much money his boat has little boats inside it. Reminds me of those Russian dolls. The cigarette boat's dashboard has some buttons (marked in both English and Arabic) to control the door. It's not a complicated system: one for open, another for close.

I pull up alongside the yacht at a speed feeling like a veritable standstill compared to how fast I'd been going, and hit the open button. A huge slab of the yacht's hull extends straight out a short distance before rising up out of the way like a cross between a two-car garage and a massive refrigerator. Another bit of 'door' below the waterline merely opens down in a manner similar to a standard oven, allowing the little boat access to the ocean-water pool inside the docking bay room.

Luck is with me. There's no one in the room to see me or get in the way. It's difficult not to stare in awe at feeling like I'm in *Star Trek*, but I have work to do.

My inhuman reflexes make the task of lining the small boat up and entering the docking bay possible. I say 'possible' rather than 'easy' for two reasons. One: I've never done anything like this before. Two: the big boat is powering forward. I'm not sure people are supposed to launch or recover these small boats while the 'mothership' is moving. I basically have to match, then slightly exceed the ship's speed and pull off a fast ninety-degree right turn before the ship moves too far forward.

I do bump the side mildly once I'm inside the docking bay, thanks to the forward motion of the *Khulud* creating a swirl in the 'pool.' Yeah, pretty damn sure they're supposed to bring the big boat to a stop. Let's hope whoever's running the show on the bridge isn't paying attention. I'm sure they've noticed the door open, either because of an indicator light or a little bit of drag causing the ship to veer to one side.

Once inside, I hit the button to close the door. The mechanism is surprisingly quiet, only a faint *whir*, not even as loud as the cigarette boat's motor. Wow, there's even a little pump to refuel the baby boats. A quick scan of the console confirms this thing has enough fuel to make it back to shore... provided I don't take too long. No need to bother trying to work out how to pump gas in here.

Not being a total idiot, I decide to keep the key in my pocket after shutting the engine down. Last thing I'd need is to get back to the boat ready to leave and find the key missing.

The Glock and one of the Sigs have the most ammo remaining, so I take those. Because the

Sig has an actual safety, that one goes in my belt and I hold the Glock at the ready while making my way out of the boat onto the narrow walkway between the berths. *Mission Impossible* music is practically playing in my mind as I enter the hallway outside. Not far to my right, a white wall and door marked 'crew only' leads to—at a guess—the engine room.

It's a fair bet Ariana won't be in the guts of the ship, so I head left toward what I assume are the individual cabins. Sure, it's beyond obvious I'm an intruder. As if having a gun out in my hand wasn't clue enough, my 'suburban mom' outfit is way more Target than Dior. Anyone looking at me will know I'm not a guest. My top and jeans are also not a uniform of any kind, so I'm clearly not ship's crew. Suppose I *could* try to do the proper spy thing and look for a uniform. However, I'm in a hurry and the odds of me finding a crewmember who wears clothing in my size aren't great.

Screw it. I tried to talk to them first last time and they opened fire. Anything that happens to any idiot pointing a gun at me now is their fault.

I head down the hall to the first stairwell and make my way up. Fortunately, this is a private mega-yacht and not a cruise ship. It's not going to have a crew of hundreds plus passengers. My guess is they're running the bare minimum required to get the ship moving. Nasir left in a serious hurry, so he wouldn't have had time to arrange for stuff like a chef or yoga instructor or whatever else people in his financial weight class consider normal to have on a boat this size.

It does kind of feel like I'm exploring a ghost ship with all these empty hallways and rooms. As quickly as I'm able to do without running, I go from door to door and peek in. A few times, I spot men or women in white polo shirts and khakis. It's not a 'uniform' per se, but it appears to serve the same purpose. Some are cleaning, some are lounging around as if on break, one woman's busily typing away on a laptop at a desk in a tiny office-like room.

Being fast comes in handy. None of them notice me before I back away from the door... though at least two got up to come look for what they saw move. Guessing a handful of people might start to believe this ship is haunted since they didn't catch sight of me.

I search all the rooms one level up from the docking bay without finding the girl. Grumbling, I double back to the midpoint of the ship and go up another set of stairs. A sign on the wall tells me I'm on the deck right below the outside. Bingo... this is probably going to be where the staterooms are. The level I just finished exploring looked more like crew quarters and storage rooms.

As soon as I step off the stairs and into a blue-carpeted hall, a man in a white polo shirt and khaki pants stops short with a gasp, gawking at me. I recognize him right away as one of the security guys present when Nasir told them to kill me and dump me overboard. Predictably, he's making the same face one might make when seeing the dead return to life.

Not giving him the chance to do more than gawk like a fish out of water, I pounce. He barely manages to emit a startled yelp before I grab him by the side of the head and introduce his face to the wall. A bloody splat from his now-broken nose bursts across the white paint. Oops. That's kinda obvious. He crumples to the floor, out cold. Dude's got a Glock in a hip holster, so he *was* a threat. He also shot me earlier, though his wasn't the bullet that put me to sleep. He'd definitely have tried to shoot me again once the shock of seeing me wore off. I don't feel guilty about hammering him.

Leaving him in the middle of the hallway is going to cause problems. So, I open the nearest door and drag him into an unoccupied stateroom. This close to the stern, I'm likely surrounded by smaller rooms for less-favored guests. The room's just big enough for a mini bathroom with

shower, a double-decker bed, and a little desk. Since I am not a total bitch, I swipe a pillow from the bed and put it under his head on the floor. Yeah, I know the dude tried to kill me, but his face already paid for it.

While a body in the hallway is a definite sign something is going on, a bloody smear on the wall is going to cause problems too—just not from all the way down the corridor. Someone is going to need to walk right past the bloodstain to notice it. However, if anyone *does* see the bloody smear, it won't be ignored. I now have a ticking clock hanging over me. Gotta find Ariana and get off this boat before the proverbial alarm goes off. Heck, everything about this guy so far has been James Bond villain level extra. It wouldn't shock me if they really do have an actual alarm.

I don't know many details about how Nasir treats his daughter. Dr. Lockwood—yes, she's going by her maiden name already even though the divorce isn't finalized—made it sound bleak from an emotional standpoint. According to her, the man essentially ignores their child's existence. It's difficult for me to determine based on that if he'd put her in a nice room or a crappy room. Hell, it's as likely she's wandering the upper deck, leaning on the railing and staring at the retreating USA as she is tied up in a closet somewhere. She might be his daughter, but with this case, he might not treat her like that.

No time to waste.

My care to remain stealthy wanes. I run from room to room on this level, primed to jump on anyone in my way who appears to be a threat. Honestly, bumping into a weaponless crew member worries me more since I couldn't in good conscience knock them senseless. They might be working for a wealthy international criminal, but to them, it's still just a day job. Most of them probably don't even know what their boss is doing.

Lady luck has my back today, well, except for the whole 'allowing me to get shot' before thing.

I'm about halfway through checking the rooms in this corridor when the soft sound of a young person crying reaches my ears. Yay for enhanced senses. My supernatural perception lets me skip over about eleven rooms, guiding me to one of the larger cabins on the left closest to the bow. I'm mildly surprised *not* to find the door locked. Maybe my opinion of Nasir's cruelty is colored by everything Dr. Lockwood said about him. Then again, he's abducting his daughter to a foreign country on a yacht. She's not going to swim home. No reason to keep her confined in her cabin. This isn't Medieval Europe where the mean baron locks the princess in a tower for not obeying him.

I step into a—for a boat—lavish bedroom, about the same size as a 'nice' hotel room. It's got a full bed, two wardrobe cabinets, and a little C-shaped sofa facing a flat screen television. A young girl roughly the same size as my adopted daughter, Paxton, lays on the bed crying into her pillow. If not for being on a ship speeding out to sea, it totally reminds me of how Tammy used to get melodramatic sometimes at the same age. Whenever she had an argument with one of her friends or broke up with a boy, she'd end up face-down on her bed sobbing into her pillow.

She's wearing a long-sleeved top, black tights, and pink socks. I don't see any shoes around. I'm guessing Nasir grabbed her out of the house in a rush and didn't give her the time to get ready. Or allow her to grab some shoes. A-hole.

"Ariana?" I ask in as comforting a voice as possible.

She jumps, rolling onto her side to stare at me. Fortunately, we met once at her home so

I'm not a *complete* stranger. We didn't exactly talk, just made eye contact briefly before I started my first meeting with Dr. Lockwood.

Her startled expression rapidly melts to confusion. "W-What's going on?"

"I'm here to bring you home to your mom... if that's what you want."

"For real?" She blinks.

"Yep."

Ariana's gaze drops to my shirt. She cringes back, covering her mouth. "Oh-emm-gee. You're like bleeding."

"I'm okay. It's not my blood." Big time lie, but there's no way I can tell the truth here. "Clock is counting fast. If you want to go with your dad, I'm not going to force you to come with me. But your mom thinks—"

The girl springs off the bed, instantly forgetting about the blood on my shirt. Fear once again takes over every aspect of her expression and demeanor. "Yeah. I really don't wanna go with him. He hates me, and it's like super scary over there. I'll probably be dead before he can make me marry someone when I'm old enough—if he waits that long."

Wow. I can only assume her mother's been telling her horror stories, perhaps even exaggerating how bad it is for women there. Don't have the time to talk about it now.

"How did you get here? How are we gonna get out of here?" Ariana rushes over, grabs my arms, and stares pleadingly at me.

Poor kid's so scared she's literally trembling.

"I borrowed a boat. You have shoes?"

"No. My father dragged me right off the couch and out the door." She fidgets, her huge brown eyes begging me to 'do something' fast.

"Okay." I take her hand. "Follow me and keep your head down."

Ariana starts to nod in response, then notices the gun I'm holding—and the one in my belt. She hesitates for only an instant before giving me a 'let's go' nod.

I poke my head out into the hall, looking both ways. No one there. Perfect. I lead her out at a brisk jog. It doesn't take but six steps for her to pass me and start pulling me forward. Wow, this kid definitely wants off this boat. I speed up to keep pace.

"Where are we going?" whisper-shouts Ariana.

"The, umm, docking bay."

She almost trips over her own feet while staring at me. "A docking what?"

"I don't know what they call it. There's like a garage with small boats in it."

"Wow, seriously?"

"Yeah."

She's never been on this ship before. Hell, my client didn't even know about it.

A figure pops out of a doorway up ahead, a small black object in their hand. Instinctively, I swing my right arm up to aim the Glock—and stop myself. It's just a guy in a polo shirt carrying a small box. No idea what it is, but it's not a gun.

He screams as he leaps back into the doorway. Ariana screams and swerves to hide behind me. As soon as she realizes no one's getting shot, she resumes running. Her socks aren't an issue until we hit the uncarpeted stairs. *Running* down stairs in sock feet is a good way to break your neck. Good thing I've got her hand. By the third step down, her feet shoot out from under her. For a second, she dangles by my grip before I swing her up into my arms and carry her the rest of the way to the bottommost deck... and keep carrying her down this corridor so I can run

as fast as possible.

No carpet here; it's plain white vinyl or something similar to it. Ariana doesn't appear to object, clinging to me as I sprint to the docking bay entrance. One good thing about her state of panic: she doesn't seem to notice we're going *much* faster than normal humans can run.

A security guy is standing in the way, eyeing the speedboat. At the sound of my hasty entrance behind him, he spins while reaching for the gun on his belt. I whirl, shielding Ariana with my body while swinging my left leg around in a reverse heel kick that connects to the side of his head. He flies over the console at the edge of the 'pool', smacks into the wall, and collapses in a heap. His handgun goes into the water.

Ariana shrieks *after* I finish the spin and have both boots on the floor. She's a bit disoriented from the inhumanly fast maneuver but seems unaware of exactly what happened. Good. After all, it's a little tricky these days for me to keep certain secrets.

I rush down the narrow walkway between the two speedboat bays and jump into the only boat there at the moment.

"Stay down," I say.

Ariana emits a cry of alarm at the handguns next to her feet. She jumps over them as if they were rats likely to bite her, then drops to the floor against the rearmost bench seat, curling into a ball.

After fishing the key out of my jeans pocket, I jam it into the dashboard and turn it to the 'on' position to activate the electronics. As soon as the navigation screen powers up, I mash the button to open the 'garage doors.' Nothing happens. Dammit! Someone on the bridge must have locked them remotely.

Grumbling to myself, I jump back out of the boat and run over to what appears to be a control mechanism on the wall beside the hatch. Sure enough, the screen indicates they've been locked by the bridge. However, there is a manual override here in the form of a hand crank. They've shut down the powered system, but electronics aren't going to stop good old manual labor.

Still grumbling—louder—I grab the knob on the silver wheel and start cranking it as fast as I can move my arm. This has to look like a fast-forwarded video to anyone watching, but I'm in a hurry. Don't care if someone sees something impossible. Ariana's staying down out of sight, so I don't have to worry about her asking why my arm is a blur.

The echo of approaching footsteps creates a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. Whimpering from the boat tells me Ariana hears them, too. Only one choice now. Sigh. While still cranking the wheel with one hand—these massive doors aren't exactly fast in manual mode—I point the Glock at the doorway.

Giving only the slightest hesitation to ensure the guy attempting to rush in is actually holding a weapon, I fire a shot over his head the instant he appears. Someone behind him yanks him back into the hall.

I finally notice a switch marked 'remote' presently set to 'on'. Turning that off appears to be a local override, disconnecting the bridge controls for the doors. Nice! Whew. I fire another shot into the hallway to keep the guys ducking and hit the button to start the powered system for the bay doors.

The lovely sound of whirring fills the room.

I leap straight from the corner by the outer wall into the cigarette boat. A standing long-jump of like sixteen feet isn't *too* suspicious, is it? Another guy tries to poke around the

doorway. He fires mostly blind at the back where I no longer am, then ducks away before I can shoot him.

The instant I start the boat's engine, two men abandon caution and pull a commando charge. In the second or so I'm occupied pushing the button to get this thing going, the guys each manage to fire two shots. Their first two bullets miss, going out over the ocean somewhere. Guy on my right puts a bullet into the cushions a hand's width away from Ariana's leg. Other guy's second shot nicks the windshield in front of me, the ricochet careening to the right and hitting the top of the gas pump machinery near the speedboat.

Gah! Be careful you jackass!

Grr. These damned idiots are shooting at me with Ariana in the line of fire. They clearly know she's there. In fact, the guy who almost hit her appears to be adjusting his aim *at* her.

Time seems to slow down.

Dr. Lockwood's voice replays in my memory as she tearfully explains her soon-to-be-ex-husband doesn't *want* Ariana, nor does he particularly like her. The only reason he took her was to hurt his wife. I'm not the sharpest when it comes to math, but my brain can process *some* equations with lightning speed. Nasir is too afraid of the FBI to risk returning to US soil. If Ariana gets away from him now, he'll lose his ability to use her to hurt her mother. Therefore, he'd rather kill her to inflict an even bigger emotional wound.

Bastard.

Enraged, I react without thought, shooting the man pointing a gun at a fourteen-year-old twice in the heart exactly as the government trained me to do. The other man shoots at me again. He's dividing his effort too much between aiming and diving for cover, so misses me. Not wanting to take the chance he tries to shoot Ariana, I pop him in the right shin. He face-plants the floor, screaming and clutching the wound.

Poor kid behind me is shrieking almost as loud as the boat's motor.

Before anything gets worse, I jam the throttle lever down into reverse. The boat lurches backward, scraping the walls as we slip out into the ocean from the side of a moving yacht. I'm not sure how fast the big ship is going, but it's got to be steaming along at close to its maximum speed. It's enough for us to end up in a churning spin, the big boat pushing the nose end of our little one. Ariana spills forward since she doesn't have a steering wheel to hold on to. She slides into the wall behind me on her side.

I wait just long enough for her to grab the strut holding up my seat, then do the boat equivalent of 'stomping on the gas pedal.' Well, almost. I'm a little afraid of the power this thing has and I really don't want to flip it over. The engine roars. We lurch forward and bounce over a few shallow waves. By the time we hit the third crest, we've picked up enough speed to catch a little bit of air. Ariana isn't the only one who screams when we land.

Hey, I might be an immortal, but this is still kinda scary.

Snaps and pops go off behind us like a small town trying to have a fireworks display for July Fourth. I duck and twist back to look over my shoulder. Seven or so guys on the upper deck of the yacht are shooting rifles at us—including Nasir Ahmed himself.

Ariana, clinging to the base of my seat, gawks at them. The look of abandonment, betrayal, and pure anger on this kid's face is almost enough to make me turn right around and go on an ass-kicking spree.

I don't, mostly because bringing a child *toward* a gunfight is exactly the wrong thing to do.

"See?" shouts Ariana. "I told you he hates me!"

A bullet hits the boat somewhere, making a *snap* barely noticeable over the engine. She screams. I push the throttle up a little more while steering slightly to one side or the other randomly. Going this fast, I can't turn the wheel too much or we'll flip. It doesn't matter to me if they only miss by a few inches as long as they miss.

After thirty or forty seconds that feel more like two days, the continuous popping of distant rifles stops. I wait another sixty seconds before cutting the throttle to idle.

"Why are we stopping?" asks Ariana, a note of worry in her voice.

I turn to look down at her. "We're not stopping... I just needed the engine to be quiet for a moment so we can talk. Are you okay?"

She swallows, stares at me for the span of two breaths, then lets out a heavy sigh before examining herself. "I didn't get shot and I'm not bleeding, but I think I'm going to need more therapy. What, specifically, do you mean by 'okay'?"

"Needed to know how fast to drive. If you were shot, we'd be in a much bigger hurry." I overact a sigh of relief. "And sorry about all that. I had no damn idea they'd open fire on us with you in the boat."

Ariana looks down. Though she doesn't cry, her expression is a mixture of 'what's wrong with me that he hates me so much' plus a good deal of anger.

"Hey. Your father doesn't hate you. He hates your mother. He tried to harm you to hurt her."

She gives a humorless chuckle. "It's almost worse that he doesn't care about me at all. At least hate is feeling *something*."

"I know how you feel." I swing around to face forward and push the throttle up to a more modest—and much safer—cruising speed. "Both of my parents were, umm, 'uninvolved' with me and my siblings. We all lived together, but it felt more like having two much older housemates who paid the bills and let us mooch off them. They were reasonably nice to us but didn't really do the parenting thing at all."

Ariana pulls herself up to sit on the bench seat rather than the floor. "Wow. Sorry."

"Thanks. I have an older sister who basically took care of me. Think of it this way... your mom loves you enough for *two* parents."

She blurts a sobby, "Yeah," then cries into her hands for a few seconds before calming down. I've seen similar reactions from rookie agents and even some cops the first time they're shot at and walk away unscathed. It's all over her face. She's having a 'holy crap I almost died' moment.

I keep steering the boat toward land. Thankfully, the weather's on our side. Any trace of a storm and we'd be in deep trouble.

"Ms. Moon?" whispers Ariana. "Do you have a phone on you? I left mine at home."

"Sorry... nope. It's in my van." I offer an apologetic smile. "Didn't want to drop it in the ocean."

She wipes her eyes. "So, umm... I guess you aren't an accountant."

"Nope." I glance back at her. "Is that what your mother said?"

"Yeah." Ariana looks me over. "You're like a SEAL or something?"

That gets me to laugh. "Nope. I'm just a private investigator."

"No way."

"Way." I smile at her. "I'll show you my ID when we get back to my van."

"Yeah, but were you like a commando or whatever before?"

“Not really. Just a federal agent.”

This seems to explain things enough for her. She probably thinks of ‘federal agent’ in action movie terms, not ‘nine hours a day behind a desk’ terms. Ariana looks back at the fast-shrinking speck of the *Khulud* on the water. Her expression makes me think she’s reassuring herself they aren’t turning to chase us more than feeling sad over never seeing her father again. Even if Nasir wanted to, there’s no way a boat that size would ever catch this thing.

A few minutes of silent cruising later, she finds her voice again. “What are we gonna do now?”

“Go back to port, find my van, and I’ll take you home.” I smile at her. “Assuming the police aren’t waiting for us on shore.”

She gasps. “Are they gonna arrest you for stealing this boat?”

“Nah.” I wink. “I’m only borrowing it.”

Chapter Four

Happy Normal

Ugh. This sucks. Judge Judy is retiring.

After a case like the one I just finished, it's time for a break. Part of me always feels a bit guilty-slash-mercenary taking money from a client after bringing their kid back to them, but Dr. Lockwood isn't hurting financially. She's likely facing a long, tedious process to get legally divorced from a foreign national who is no longer residing in the country. Then again, it's not as if she's itching to re-marry anytime soon.

Anyway, today's my day to laze around the house and do as little as possible, let the mental dust settle so to speak. I'm presently stretched out on my couch watching the judge read the riot act to this twenty-year-old guy named Brett. His (now ex) girlfriend is suing him because she loaned him a couple thousand bucks to cover expenses and tuition so he could go to mechanic school, but the idiot blew it on stuff to trick out his car and has made no attempt to pay her back.

Judge Judy calls him an idiot to his face, as well as ungrateful since he had a girlfriend willing to trust him with a loan of so much money—almost her entire savings.

Gotta say, I agree with her.

At least the girlfriend isn't dumb. She must have suspected he'd do something shady since she recorded the video call where they worked out the deal. As stated—and for all to hear—she offered to *loan* him four thousand dollars to take the mechanic class and get certified. She even repeated the word 'loan' a few times. Got him to say the word 'loan,' too. This of course completely torpedoed Brett's claim he thought the money was a gift.

Hmm. Clever girl. Could use someone like her to help me out.

Anyway, watching him squirm under Judge Judy's scolding is both gratifying and disheartening. It's close to a mom yelling at her son for doing something stupid. Brett's too old to need to be talked to in such a manner. He should know better. Oh well. I'm thankful *my* son isn't the sort of guy who'd do anything like that... and it's not simply because he doesn't have a girlfriend.

Is it strange it bothers me more that Judge Judy is retiring than my son is sixteen and still never went on a date with a girl once? No, he's not in the closet. Our lives have been supernaturally complicated, and he doesn't want to drag any innocent people into the mess.

Like I said, good kid.

The doorbell rings.

I'm briefly maudlin over *not* hearing either one of my kids shout 'I got it' and race each other to be the one who answers the door. That's not a recent thing, by the way. They grew out of that before twelve. Since I appear to be the only one in the house who notices (or cares) the doorbell rang, I get up and head over to see who it is.

Josh Cooper and Mike Harris stare at me when I open the door in that odd, unsettling way teenage boys tend to stare at the woman who looks a little too young to be Anthony Moon's mom. It's nothing dirty, they're too busy being confused. I don't even remember what excuse I used for why I barely look thirty. Think it was something lame like ancient Chinese moisturizing oil.

"Hi, Ms. Moon. Is Ant here?" asks Mike, the shorter of the two.

It's one of those fundamental laws of the universe, at least in the US. Everyone has a friend named Mike, or at least knows three people named Mike. The boys are my son's high school friends.

"Sec, gotta hit the bathroom," shouts Anthony from down the hall.

I wave the boys inside. They've known my son since about second grade. Except for the five or so months he spent at Max's school, they've been here pretty much all the time. Anthony decided to come back here and resume going to his ordinary high school. He missed his friends, but had other reasons, too. For one thing, that school couldn't really teach him anything. He's not one of those kids with magical talents. He's neither witch, nor wizard, nor 'sorcerer of the light' or whatever they are. So, that portion of the school isn't helpful to him. The other part that trains young people into warriors is more his speed but, again, he's such a unique case. Anthony is superhuman. He doesn't have to work out to develop strength. He's also evidently on the path to becoming an angel someday. Again, that portion of the school isn't of much help to him. He didn't know anyone there, and while his time was pleasant, he decided to come home.

Speaking of guardian angels, he's appointed himself protector of Tammy and Paxton. Me, too, but I don't need it as much. As far as the outside world goes, Anthony went on some foreign exchange trip for a few months, and now he's back to normal.

And yeah, he's still the Fire Warrior. Bad guys beware.

You seriously *don't* want to mess with my son.

We chat briefly about the boys' plans to go catch a movie at the theater where Mike works, then come back here to hang out. With the sound of a flushing toilet filling the hallway behind him, Anthony jogs into the room and hugs me with one arm.

"Bye, Ma. We'll be back right after the movie."

I pat him on the back. "You boys stay safe, okay?"

"Will do, Ma." He grins before turning to follow his friends outside.

The boys don't notice me hovering in the door watching them jump on their bicycles and ride off down the street. I'm all too painfully aware that my son is no longer a little boy. He's sixteen now and as big as an adult. Even these last few years of teenage freedom-slash-innocence are going to be gone before I realize it. That's the way things are supposed to work, but I'm still going to miss these years.

I sigh, close the door, and head back to the sofa. Girls' voices from the hall—Paxton, Renae, and two of their friends from school—are hanging out in her room. Hearing such normality in my life makes me smile. My adopted daughter still remembers seeing a demon peering in her window some weeks ago, but she's set it aside as a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Poor kid's the type to jump up and stand on the bathroom sink if she sees a spider. Demons are *way* out of her league. She doesn't deserve that mess, and I'm sure what I've done will spare her having to deal with it in the future.

At the corner of the sofa, I pause, gazing down the hall and listening to the girls talk. Yeah. I'm sure I did the right thing. Doesn't feel like I chickened out or anything. A wise person knows when the needs of others come before their own. Hopefully, the universe thinks I did the right thing, too.

Eyes closed, I think back to the moment two weeks ago...

I'm standing out in my back yard at a little past two in the morning. Couldn't sleep due to worry. Another demon came to say hi. It didn't get inside, but it scared Paxton so badly she stopped breathing for a moment. Not like a drowning victim stopped breathing. She remained awake and staring at me, but couldn't breathe in or out due to extreme fear.

Elizabeth's influence over me was waning. I didn't have much telepathy left. Couldn't make Paxton forget seeing the horror outside her window... but my attempt to do so mostly defanged it from 'drop dead' scary to merely nightmarish.

I had to do this. I went outside in my nightgown, Devil Killer sword in one hand, arms out to either side, and called on Azrael.

A moment later, I appeared in the clouds, my nightgown gone, replaced with a gossamer whorl of pure white fabric like something you see in Renaissance paintings of angels. The garment defies physics, somehow staying in place despite having no physical construction capable of keeping it from falling right off me.

Azrael, in a similar—though more chest baring—version of the same garment appeared in front of me, wings outstretched, his expression understanding yet ever so noticeably disappointed. Or maybe that's only me reading too much into his eyes.

"You know," I say.

He nods once.

"I'm sorry."

"Do not know regret, Samantha." Azrael glides toward me and lifts the Devil Killer from my grasp. "No burden is permanent for any but a true angel. We are set to our tasks for all of time. Mortals are not. Neither are ones such as you."

I let my arm drop to my side. It would've been a lie to say I didn't feel any sense of loss or something giving up such a powerful weapon. But... the sword not only proved an insurmountable weapon against the forces of Hell, it attracted them like idiot moths to a bonfire. Demons and devils didn't hate me so much as they hate the one who wields the Devil Killer. Sure, a stray demon or two might come back for personal revenge, but not for decades. I'll find a way to deal with them. Taking on a single angry fiend without the sword is much easier than fighting back a constant stream of them with it.

Almost lost Paxton. I can't allow that to happen again. They will come back if I don't do this. And they will eventually kill her, Tammy, and maybe even me.

Azrael rested his hand on my shoulder. "Your time as a demon hunter is at an end. There will be another. This is expected and known to me. All happens as it is planned to."

I half-smiled. As much as I feel as though I've let him down, putting my girls at risk is too much. "Thanks." Sighing, I glanced left and froze in stunned disbelief. My wings... still there. He must not have gotten around to it yet. This is like resigning from the agency or as a cop. Hand in the badge and the gun. Or in my case, the sword and the wings.

"Go ahead and take them." Yeah, I'll miss them terribly, but I don't love them more than my kids. Not even close.

"Take them?" asked Azrael, his lips curled in an amused grin. He knows full well what I mean, but for some stupid reason, I assumed he wanted me to say it.

"Take the wings back. They come with the job, right?"

He waved dismissively. "They are yours to keep, Samantha Moon. You are no longer my agent, true, but you have many, many more miles to walk in service of the light."

I bowed my head in thanks. When I looked up again, I'd returned to my backyard. Everything seemed normal. Nightgown again instead of an impossible angelic raiment. No sword. No weird glowing clouds. Despite knowing nothing would happen, I reached for the Devil Killer in its astral sheath. And sure enough, nothing appeared in my hand. But, when I tried to extend my wings—there they were. Sometimes, it's the smallest comforts that did me the most good.

Letting the memory recede, I open my eyes and sit on the sofa.

I may or may not have let my wings out purely to stretch them. Hey, it's relaxing. They have muscles. After the episode of *Judge Judy* ends, I get my normal on with some housework, mostly laundry. On a less than ordinary note, my blood washed out of the shirt I wore the other day. Alas, it's got three somewhat obvious sewn holes in it, so I'm likely only to wear it around the house now. It's more than the simple vanity of not wanting to be seen in a damaged garment. What if someone asks about it? I could tell them straight to their face some guys shot me in the heart and they'd think me joking. Come to think of it, it's kinda weird the blood washed out. Blood stains are usually notoriously difficult to get out of fabric.

Guess I'm special. Or my blood is.

Okay, that I don't doubt.

I stuff the next load in the washing machine and make my way back to the house from the annoyingly detached garage. Yeah, it's still separate. I decided against going crazy with the contractor. You'd think the money from selling a massive mansion would last forever, but it's disappearing much faster than I imagined possible. No, I'm not broke—far from it—but I can't be stupid with money. Spending eight grand or whatever it would've cost to create an enclosed connection between the house and the garage seemed excessive to simply deal with an 'annoyance.'

Rather than build out into the backyard to add a new room (my office is now Paxton's bedroom), I decided to rent some space in downtown Fullerton and be all official about the investigation thing. It's got an added bonus of not requiring me to invite clients to my home, which is safer.

I'm just passing Paxton's room when the front door closes hard. Right away, I know it's Tammy. Anthony's never been a door slammer. When he's upset, he gets quiet and likes to be alone with his thoughts until the mood passes. Besides, he's watching a movie with his friends... though it should probably be done soon.

Paxton, meanwhile, hates loud noises. I'm sure it has to do with her growing up with a sad excuse for a father who kicked and slammed random objects constantly whenever he was angry... and her desire to remain as inconspicuous as possible. She doesn't try to do it, but she inadvertently sneaks up on Tammy and Anthony all the time and startles the heck out of them, just because she exudes *quiet*. It's almost comical in a way. They jump and shout when she surprises them, then the noise they make scares her into jumping. When she's upset, she hides in her room.

My older daughter, on the other hand, likes to let the world know when she's in a mood.

Hmm. Not a full slam. So, she isn't *pissed*. This feels more like frustration. I pick up my step a bit and hurry down the hall to the living room, where Tammy's kicking her shoes off by

the door. As soon as she sees me, she raises both hands and shakes them, making claw motions as if to say ‘argh! I’m so frustrated.’ She appears to be trying not to smile, so whatever’s getting on her nerves isn’t too serious.

“Some idiot cut you off on the way home?” I ask.

“Ugh, no. Well...” She rolls her eyes. “Yes. This *is* California, after all. Can’t drive down the block without running into an idiot on the road.”

“Want to talk about it?”

She shrugs. “I’m just frustrated.”

“That’s obvious.” I smile.

“It’s just... I don’t know how to deal with people anymore.”

“Welcome to being human.”

Tammy gives me that ‘you’re not helping’ look she perfected at age twelve. “I mean... how the hell do people know how to react to each other without telepathy?”

Oh, this. I sit on the sofa and pat the cushion next to me. “So, to be clear, you’re not asking me to go over all the material they trained us on about how to read body language cues?”

She flops next to me. “Mom, I’m in high school, not interviewing criminals.” She starts laughing before I can crack a joke about high school boys being *more* dangerous than some suspects. “I just made an idiot out of myself.”

“Oh?” I raise an eyebrow.

“Vicky said something sarcastic but her face was totally serious so I didn’t realize she was being sarcastic until everyone was laughing at me. I feel like that purple guy from *Guardians of the Galaxy* who takes everything literally.”

I squeeze her hand, trying not to laugh. Having Elizabeth inside my head since my daughter was only four had ‘side effects’ on my family. Tammy has spent her entire life being extremely telepathic, able to read the minds of people around her as easily as overhearing conversations in a school cafeteria. She never learned to rely on social cues or body language or even tone of voice since she always *knew* exactly what everyone thought. Their outward presentation didn’t matter whatsoever.

We’ve learned something recently. That whole telepathy thing? Yeah... we didn’t actually *have* the power... it all came from Elizabeth. Like when you run an electrical current through wire coiled around a metal block, the metal block becomes a magnet? Shut off the power, it’s just metal. Well... I went and killed Elizabeth. A whole bunch of complicated crap went down after that. It took a few weeks, but we ran out of telepathic gas. All the mental powers we vicariously borrowed from her went away.

My daughter is now totally normal. Well, she’s far from ‘normal’ in the traditional sense. I mean she is normal supernaturally.

Tammy’s complete lack of making a face at me for thinking about her as ‘not normal’ *still* feels strange. She’s staring at me, trying to read my expression while her face tells me she’s worried she’s going to misinterpret my mood.

“It’ll be okay, sweetie. I promise.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I kinda do. Now, tell me about the game. How was it?” I ask, referring to the big Friday Night Football Game at the high school. My daughter’s not really the ‘go watch sports’ type, but one of her friends is dating a player and she went to hang out with her friends.

“You know how it is...” She shrugs. “A bunch of big guys crashing into each other,

shouting, and fighting over a ball.”

I picture her sitting there watching everyone around her, feeling like a space alien observing humans for the first time. “You had a rough time, didn’t you, Tam Tam?”

Her eyes tear up. “I don’t know what to say or how to act anymore. I feel so lost—don’t you dare say it.”

“What? Welcome to Planet Earth? Never!”

“Such a butthead.”

“Hey, that’s Mommy Butthead to you, young lady.”

She giggles and I keep hugging her. “It’s normal to not know what people think, sweetie. Half the fun is figuring it out.”

“But I must look so weird to my friends now, like a deer caught in flashlights.”

“Headlights. And don’t let it bother you, hon. They’ll just think of you as... quirky.”

“You think I’m ‘quirky’?”

“Tam...” I squeeze her. “Everyone is quirky to someone. But, no. I think you’re perfect. You just have experiences that no one else does and are going through adjustments that other people don’t have to cope with.”

She leans against me. “Yeah. I guess. Still, I wish I knew what people thought.”

“It used to drive you nuts... you really hated it sometimes.” I bite my lip, remembering how close my daughter got to hurting herself to make the voices stop.

Tammy lets out a long, slow breath. “Yeah. I am happier now, but it can be seriously frustrating not knowing what someone’s thinking. When I *could* read everyone’s mind, I wished I couldn’t. Now that I can’t, I want it back... well, kinda. One of those ‘you don’t know what you got ’til it’s gone’ things.”

Heh. I can’t help myself and start softly singing *Don’t Know What You Got* by Cinderella. Not the Disney movie, the glam band.

Tammy scrunches her nose at me. It takes her a few seconds to remember why the song sounds familiar... it’s the stuff I grew up listening to. Used to have it playing around the house when she was really small. She whips out her phone, looks up the lyrics, and soon, we’re singing it full blast together and hamming it up like an Eighties hair band. Hey, at least we both have the hair for it—even if we haven’t teased it up into pom-poms.

We’re right in the middle of the chorus when Anthony and his friends walk in.

My son stares at us singing, shakes his head, and wanders off down the hall muttering, “You guys are dorks.”

His friends seem caught off guard by our complete lack of embarrassment. They don’t know whether to stand there watching us or laugh. Turns out, they do a little of both before following my son down the hall to his room.

Tammy and I crack up laughing.

Chapter Five

Mom

Day two of my ‘vacation.’

Hey, I legit died. I can claim two days off work, right? It’s not about feeling sluggish and sore—though it plays a factor. No, the Lockwood case flew way off the rails and gave me an adrenaline high the likes of which I hadn’t experienced in a while. Takes time to recover. And no, I’m *not* an adrenaline junkie. If I never work a case more nail-biting than sifting through a pile of paperwork again, I’ll be happy.

It’s almost 2:30, and I’m sitting in the Momvan outside Paxton’s school. Unlike normal children, she’s happy to have her mother pick her up in front of all the other kids. As close as Tammy and I are, she *still* found it embarrassing to have her friends see me there waiting for her. If a case is so urgent I can’t be here to pick her up, Tammy fills in. We got her a Prius—yeah, I know—but she loves doing her part for the environment.

Meanwhile, the Momvan’s had so much work done, she’s practically a new car under old skin. So what if it isn’t normal to be so sentimentally attached to a car. I don’t need fancy, and I’m not normal. Some people still drive cars from the 1950s, so I can nurse this one along. I might not be carting children to soccer practice anymore, but a van’s got a ton of space to carry memories.

I am one of a few dozen parents all lined up in their cars, waiting. We see each other five days a week, so it’s almost a parental social club—except we never talk to each other. Everyone’s in too much of a hurry to get out of here and go back to doing whatever they’d rather be doing more than sitting in a line of cars.

Before long, the doors open and out spills a flood of fifth-through-eighth grade students. Paxton’s currently in seventh. Tammy’s due to graduate from high school at the end of this academic year. Ant’s presently a sophomore, so he’ll be a senior when Paxton starts high school. At least I won’t have three kids in high school at the same time. Strangely enough, part of me is getting emotional thinking about it being only a few short years before they’re all done and I don’t have *any* kids in twelfth grade or lower. Is it going to drive me nuts *not* having someone to take care of?

I spot Paxton near the school doors. She’s chatting with some friends and totally looks like the popular girl hanging out with the geek squad... except there’s no trace of scheming manipulation in her. My youngest daughter really *is* a geek. She’s into science fiction, video games, comic books, and so on.

I remember as a kid growing up how video games and such made someone into a socially outcast nerd. Nowadays, geek culture has gone mainstream enough for kids not to relentlessly tease anyone for being interested in ‘nerdy’ stuff. Heck, Vin Diesel plays D&D, right? One of these days I might ask Anthony to explain to me what D&D actually is.

Other kids come running over to various cars in front of and behind me. As their parents drive off, more people from farther back in the line pull up and take their spots by the curb. I’m in no particular hurry today—unlike the woman right behind me who’s doing a spot-on impression of an over-caffeinated pigeon attempting to breakdance, craning her neck to glare at the crowd of students. I swear, if she had telekinesis, some poor kid would be physically dragged over and thrown into her car. The woman is in a serious hurry to get out of here.

Watching Paxton standing there, clutching some books to her chest while talking to two other girls sends a warm tingly feeling through me. She could totally pull off the cheerleader look, but doesn't. Her wardrobe is distinctly more innocent. She tries to look cute on purpose, and it's *adorable*. The bright pink backpack is a nice touch. I still can't tell if she's doing it on purpose, as a defense mechanism, or if she simply adores cute things. Maybe a little of all three.

Either way, seeing her happy reassures me I made the right choice when I 'retired' from Azrael's service. The Devil Killer sword was handy, but I do *not* miss the danger of having demons attack me and my family constantly. The poor kid doesn't deserve to live in fear. She had enough of that, spending twelve years and a couple months with her horrible excuse for a father. He'd been volatile and nasty to begin with, and it only got worse when he found out she was gay. There's a special place in hell for parents who betray their kids' trust.

Even though the bastard did murder his wife—her bio mom—it's unlikely he'll get the death penalty. Yes, major ough. Poor Pax didn't know the truth, believing her mother died in a car accident. I only found it by reading the guy's mind when I still had telepathic abilities. Figured he'd be a danger to her, so I was going to make him forget her existence, but the son of a bitch murdered the woman in a fit of rage. I don't think he *intended* to kill her, but he's a mean drunk who had a bad habit of beating his wife... and one night, things went too far. Pax wasn't even old enough to walk at the time if I remember right. I compelled the guy to confess to the cops and even show them where he buried her. So yeah, he's going to be out of circulation for a long time.

Mind control powers do come in damn handy. Life is much more complex without that, but honestly... if the price for me having mind powers is Elizabeth's continued existence, I'm happier without.

So, yeah. I gave up working for Azrael to keep my kids safe. What kind of mom would I be otherwise? With great power... and all. I could handle the responsibility, but it's not fair of me to ask my kids to do it, too.

I don't know if my decision inspired Anthony to change his mind about the special school or being in a major hurry to become an angel. As far as I know, he's still destined to 'earn his wings' at some point, but for all I know it could be fifty years from now. He's in no rush. For him, the most important thing in the world is looking out for his sisters. Like me, he's taking pleasure in the more ordinary side of life whenever he can. He seems happy being relatively normal.

Same here, kiddo. Same here.

Of course, I'm not exactly normal. But my present reality is a lot closer to it than I ever imagined would be possible... and it's awesome. Inconvenient sometimes, but awesome.

Paxton gestures at me while saying something like 'I gotta go, Mom's waiting' to her friends.

The kid adores pointing out that she has a mother. She was really small when her bio mom died so she never really knew her. Because of that, she doesn't have any internalized guilt that she's abandoning her 'real' mother to call me 'Mom.' I'm the only mother she really ever knew... and she is *attached*. I'd make a joke about her still living with me when she's thirty, but for one thing I don't think it's really going to happen... and for another, I wouldn't mind.

Her friends wave. One rushes to catch the bus before it pulls away. One simply heads off down the sidewalk—she lives two blocks from the school. Renae, my daughter's girlfriend,

walks beside her on the way over to the Momvan. More often than not, I end up giving her a ride home, too. Alas, here at the school, they act like close friends. I'm somewhat surprised no one suspects anything odd.

A tall—for a middle-schooler—athletic boy hurries over to the girls, practically jumping in front of Paxton. She and Renae stop short. A brief conversation ensues. Paxton fidgets, looks down, and appears to be giving him one or two-word answers to whatever he's saying. The boy's got his back to me so I can't even try to read lips. Renae's scowl is subtle but fierce. She looks ready to scream at the kid, but holds back.

The boy makes this douchey little hand gesture at her, smooths his hair, and strides off. Paxton looks down, guilt all over her face. Renae mutters something and nudges her. The girls trudge the rest of the way over to the Momvan and climb in, Paxton in the passenger seat and Renae on the middle bench seat.

"You okay?" I ask.

"Not really," mumbles Paxton.

"It's not your fault," Renae says, sighing.

I glance back at her, then at Paxton, then face forward and start the engine. "Is this something you want to talk about or am I too old?"

Renae chuckles, though still sounds a bit put out.

"Brice asked me out," mutters Pax. "He plays football."

"Well..." I playfully elbow Paxton. "Do you blame him? They all want to date the prettiest cheerleader."

Paxton blushes. "I'm not a cheerleader."

Renae grins, leans forward, and wraps her arms around Paxton from behind. "I got her first."

"He took it rather well," I say.

"That's the thing..." Renae scowls to the side. "She didn't tell him no."

"I really don't want to date him," whispers Paxton.

"Okay, see you Friday' isn't a no." Renae frowns, then looks over at me. "She's afraid of him."

My mom-sense tingles. Paxton's a legit empath. She can't read minds, see the future, or pick lottery numbers out of thin air, but she *can* pick up a highly accurate 'read' on a person's emotional state. If she is afraid of someone, there is a damn good chance that person poses a threat to her safety. A kid simply being an arrogant jock or an entitled douche wouldn't scare her.

Paxton looks up at me as soon as my protectiveness and worry break off their leash and run wild around my brain. Her eyes well with tears, though she isn't exactly crying yet. "I'm sorry, Ren... I shouldn't have said yes."

"I know. We can't talk about it later." Renae shoots a scowl out the window.

"We're not 'out' at school yet." Paxton hangs her head. "I almost told Brice right there *why* I didn't want to date him, but I'm a big chicken."

Renae holds her hand. "No, you're not. I don't trust him either."

I stop at a red light and look over at her. "Did this kid threaten you?"

"No..." Paxton shakes her head. "I don't trust telling him the truth because I got a feeling like he'd freak out and make a big deal out of it for being rejected. He'd say I'm lying or worse... and then spend the rest of the year making life horrible for us."

The three of us sit in silence for a moment. I don't know what's going through the girls' heads, but me? I'm thinking about a recent news story... specifically about the kid who asked a girl out, got told no, and brought a gun in the next day to shoot her for 'humiliating him.' I don't know what infuriates me more between living in a society that can't teach boys how to take no for an answer, or how the media framed it as the girl 'being cruel' to him and driving him to do that.

No idea if this Brice kid is that unstable or vengeful. It's far more likely he'd just make a jackass of himself and tease her relentlessly for being gay.

"What are you going to do?" I ask. "And how can I help?"

Paxton shrugs. "What else can I do but go on a date with him and hope it's over fast."

I sigh.

"You don't have to feel sad, Mom."

"Hon, that boy's inability to handle not getting what he wants is not your problem."

She stares down. "Yeah... I know. But... if I just tell him no, he's going to do something crazy bad. I just feel it in him."

"Brice doesn't like to fail," mutters Renae.

"The only real thing I can do except date him is to come out *before* he can turn it into something bad." She squirms a little. "I'm just scared. Renae's not out either, even though her parents are totally cool with her... with us."

I grip the wheel a bit tighter. Renae's parents have known their daughter was attracted to girls since their daughter became aware of attraction. They've supported her from day one. I'm getting angry Paxton never knew that kind of security from her bio parents.

"Your mom's totally cool with you, Pax," says Renae.

Paxton looks at me, inches from breaking down in sobs.

"Damn right." My anger fades in an instant. I smile at her. "I could always make a phone call to Sherbet. I'm sure he could ask a couple of uniforms to scare this Brice kid off you if need be as a favor. But if you want to come out, I'll support you all the way."

"I know, Mom." She studies the tissue she used to wipe her eyes for a moment. "It feels really good to say that... 'mom.'"

Aww, dammit. Something in my eye. I'm too choked up to speak.

"We could even have a party with a giant rainbow cake if you want," says Renae.

Paxton sob-giggles. "You don't like rainbows. The cake should be dark chocolate, with like ravens on it."

Renae rubs her chin, thinking. "Black icing, rainbow insides?"

The girls both laugh.

They're definitely an interesting couple. Gloomy Goth Girl and Rainbow Brite.

I ask about how the rest of the day went, and our conversation for the remainder of the ride home is wonderfully ordinary. Paxton sounds happy at school, Brice notwithstanding, though her voice has a nervous edge. As soon as I pull to a stop in the driveway and cut the engine, Paxton gives a deep sigh and lets her head fall back against the headrest.

"You're right," says Paxton. "It's not fair to lie to him, or to make Renae watch me fake date him. Or to keep lying to everyone."

Renae's eyes widen. "You're seriously...?"

"Umm, maybe." Paxton exhales. "Let me think about it?"

I give her a reassuring pat. "Okay."

Chapter Six Office Hours

Two days is enough of a break.

I'm still a little stiff and groggy. Getting killed takes a lot out of a person, ya know? Still, I can't complain. Whatever sort of 'creature' I've become has an interesting relationship with death. It would be foolish of me to carry on as though nothing in the world poses any threat to my continued existence. I have no specific evidence or suspicion about what could potentially end me permanently beyond the usual assumptions dogging me since my life first turned upside down. Namely: acid baths, falling into a volcano, bombs, and silver to the heart.

Anyway... I spent so long just wishing I could have a normal life that getting one back—sort of—is proving to be a bit of adjustment. No, there's no regret here. Besides, it's not like I chose to give up telepathy like I relinquished the sword. That's life. Bad things happen and what really matters is how we deal with them. I'm not a complete scrub, though. Not all of my abilities came from her. My dependence, so to speak, on her broke the instant I vomited her out. Now there's a memory I could do erasing. Ugh.

My connection to Talos survived the destruction of Elizabeth, as did my ability to teleport. Though, teleportation kicks my ass now. It's tiring. Unless I land in a room full of people I can siphon energy from right away, it leaves me feeling like I just worked an eight-hour shift in customer service.

Despite her frustrations, Tammy really does seem much happier now. *Not* being constantly aware of the deep inner thoughts of everyone around her allows her to pretend humanity is reasonable. Not every dark thought people entertain is going to be acted on. I swear, my kid used to pick up some seriously depraved things in random people and, not knowing if they were going to act on them or just idle fantasies, she wracked herself with guilt about getting involved or not.

Now, she gets to be normal.

She's not even bitter about losing most of her childhood to the craziness. Tammy never really got to 'just be a kid.' Though, given her difficulties reading people's body language and social cues now, she comes off as kind of innocent.

Speaking of Tammy, she decided to come with me to the office this morning because her school's doing some kind of faculty thing and the kids got a day off. It's Friday. Yes, I'm strange to take a Wednesday and Thursday off and 'go to work' on Friday. Whatever. Money won't make itself, and my investigation business is starting to grow. Can't abandon it for too long at a stretch. By grow, I mean there is now a fairly steady influx of easy desk work. I say 'easy,' but what I really mean is tedious. Also, it's the kind of thing that doesn't require running all over town. I'm talking background checks, employment verification, residency verification, insurance stuff, and process serving. Routine office work for the most part. I'm no longer the stereotypical movie private investigator who sits around drinking whiskey and waiting for a client to show up.

I still wait for clients to show up, but I've got enough paperwork to fill the time and keep a modest income stream going. It's almost to the point where hiring an assistant might be necessary—assuming Tammy gets bored helping me out and stops. She quit her job at the Wendy's due to the manager treating her—and everyone else there—like serfs, expecting them

to work whatever hours were needed. The woman even had the nerve to ask Tammy to skip going to school one day to cover an earlier shift when one of the retirees got sick.

It feels super weird to officially ‘employ’ my daughter and pay her. Tammy’s kinda awkward about it, too, since she was willing to just come here and help out. Still, it wouldn’t be fair for me to take advantage of her time, even if she is my daughter and this is (or has become) something of a family business. We decided it’s normal, despite feeling strange. I mean, people in the restaurant business do it all the time: hire their siblings and/or children and pay them. *Weird* would be asking my kids to pay rent for their bedrooms, which I’d never do.

She stepped out to grab us some coffee. It’s surreal watching her acclimate to ‘work life’ so readily. Then again, she’s kind of used to a similar routine, approaching high school like she’s going to a job she doesn’t get paid for. Most days, she’s got Starbucks in hand on the way in the door. Crazy how she’s eighteen going on thirty. I’d say I’m the reverse, but I only *look* like I’m creeping up on thirty.

I sigh, thinking of Mary Lou. My sister is and looks like she’s in her fifties. Whenever we go out in public now, people assume she’s my mom. Honestly, the way we grew up, she might as well be. I think Mary Lou was more upset than me over the mind reading stuff. To her, I’m like a superhero who lost their super powers. Really, though? If superheroes were real, a surprising amount of them would probably jump at the chance to retire and just be normal.

Tammy’s been a bit down lately, but not over the telepathy thing. She broke up with her boyfriend, Kai. As far as I know, their relationship ended on friendly terms. She hasn’t gone into great detail yet, though I suspect his parents most likely kept pestering him about how she’d grow old and die in the veritable blink of an eye to him.

Sigh.

I don’t like thinking of my daughter getting old and passing away, even though I am likely to witness it. Knowing her soul will come back around in another life makes me feel a *little* better, but she still won’t be my Tammy. Anyway... the breakup hit her fairly hard, but she’s coping. She had to have known it wouldn’t work out between a human and an elf. Unless they had some strange thing they could do like whisk her off to elf-land where she could be immortal, too, but stuck there unable to ever return to the real world.

Yes, I’m making that up. I don’t know if such a thing is even possible.

For that matter, I’ve started to wonder if the boy (and elves in general) really exist. The breakup coincided (perhaps coincidentally so) with our telepathy fading away. A beautiful elf boyfriend might have been a product of my daughter’s imagination that she telepathically inserted into the minds of everyone around her, making us believe he existed.

Then again, vampires are real, maybe Kai is, too. The timing of their breakup and our mental powers evaporating is a bit strange. If my daughter didn’t cook up an imaginary boyfriend to help cope with being ‘the weird girl’ at school who boys ignored, it’s possible Kai lost interest in her when her abilities faded. Maybe he’d been sent to ‘watch’ her due to dark energies. Not that Tammy is evil, but her powers came from Elizabeth. Who knows? No point dwelling on what exactly happened. He was real enough to her even if he doesn’t actually exist. And if he does exist, he’s no longer in our lives.

It really is strange to think about Elizabeth being gone for good. She’d been part of my—our—lives so damn long, I can sympathize with women who had serious stalker problems finally learning the man who attacked them is dead. My brain is so programmed for defense, it still plans for it. Oddly, losing my own mental powers ended up being reassuring rather than

depressing. Their absence proves beyond any doubt the Elizabeth nightmare is over. I really don't mind.

I'm still not quite normal, though. I'm not discounting all my experiences. Everything happened. All that crazy stuff is actually out there. Except for me dating a werewolf, having a witch for a best friend, and being a psychic vampire, my life is completely normal. What I mean is, now that Elizabeth is gone and I'm no longer in the crosshairs of Hell's army, the frequency at which crazy supernatural stuff intrudes on my life ought to be a bit more manageable.

Or so I hope.

As a way to help take my daughter's mind off the 'boyfriend situation,' I asked Tammy to help me set up the new office. I'm renting a space on West Commonwealth in a two-story grey and glass building sandwiched between a tattoo place and King's Flowers. My business is one of four using the building. I'm on the ground floor closest to the florist with a door directly to the sidewalk. The other ground floor space between me and the tattoo place is presently home to one Larry Bergmeyer, CPA, and his staff. Met the guy a few times. Seems nice enough for an accountant. By that, I mean he tries to be friendly, but he's got the extreme social awkwardness common to serious nerds. Can't blame him for it. We are products of our environment after all. My ignoring his awkwardness and not giving off the sense I wanted to chew my arm off to get away from him has apparently endeared me to him, thankfully not in a romantic way. The man is married after all, plus looks old enough to be my father.

Kingsley suggested a graphic of a giant moon on the glass with a wolf or two howling at it. I went for a more professional look: simple text reading 'Moon Investigative Services.' Tammy likes the acronym M.I.S. Makes it sound, as she says, 'all official and government like.' So, yeah. My front door has gold lettering on it, with 'M I S' above smaller letters that spell out the full name.

Anyway, 'helping me set up the office' turned into Tammy dropping by whenever her friends were busy with work or family... which turned into her officially working for me after she quit her Wendy's job. Normally, she shows up after school and leaves when I do, which is often around 5:30 to 6:00 p.m. Depends on if I'm making dinner or not. Though, the past month or so, Anthony's stepped up to handle cooking at night. It started when Tammy made a remark about spaghetti sauce after a crazy-busy day forced me to settle for using the stuff out of a jar. She'd commented about how Anthony could make spaghetti that tasted exactly like Danny's.

So, now, my son's interested in cooking. Like seriously interested. The boy wants to go to culinary school after he graduates high school. Maybe he'll be the next Gordon Ramsay, though I can't see my son yelling at people on TV. Bet he can whip up an amazing angel food cake.

Tammy being here is kinda nice, too. Yeah, I'm being a bad mom encouraging her clinginess. I know that according to the Rulebook of Parenting, I'm supposed to be encouraging her to spread her metaphorical wings and find her own way out there. Alas, they wrote that book in the 1950s and today's world isn't exactly too friendly to young people. My daughter isn't the only one with a bad case of cling, either. It wouldn't bother me if she never moves out... as long as she's happy.

Ugh. Someday people are going to think she's *my* mother. I'll never be ready for that moment.

It's not like I asked to be turned into an immortal, but dammit... they never warn you about stuff like that.

Tammy breezes in carrying a coffee caddy in one hand and a paper bag in the other, deftly using her foot to close the door behind her. "Sorry it took so long. The place had a line and this woman ahead of me couldn't make up her mind."

Chuckling, I take the coffee she hands me. "No problem. Welcome to adulting."

She playfully raspberries at me, then fishes one of two egg sandwiches out of the bag, handing it over to me. "Adulting is overrated."

"Agreed." I set the sandwich down on my desk and open the paper while she heads to her desk six steps away. "Enjoy your last five months of being a high school student. Don't be in a rush."

"I'm not." Paper crinkles from her desk. "You sound sad."

"I'm not." I wink at her. "A little maudlin maybe. I remember being in such a hurry to stop being a kid, to grow up and get out there. Looking back, I wish I'd savored the time more."

She leans back in her chair, poised to take a big bite of her breakfast. "When we're kids, we don't think about that stuff."

"True."

We bite into our sandwiches at the same time.

After chewing a bit, she mumbles past a full mouth, "I could fail on purpose so I have to repeat twelfth grade."

I nearly spit eggs all over my computer screen trying not to laugh.

"Psych," says Tammy. "I'm *so* done with that place."

Yeah... my kid isn't so much of a kid anymore.

We plug away on the computers, processing a handful of routine background checks waiting in the queue. It's both strange and exciting to have so much going on I needed a 'ticket tracking system' to organize client requests. Not that I'm terribly interested in tracking productivity or anything, but the software has a field to 'take ownership' of each ticket. We generally don't bother using it, but every so often, Tammy will put one in my name when she doesn't feel qualified to handle it or is afraid to. She avoids process serving since some people can react poorly to someone trying to hand them legal papers they're attempting to avoid.

The phone rings when my mouth is full of egg, cheese, and bread. Tammy rushes chewing and beats me to answering. Hearing her say, "Moon Investigative Services, this is Tammy, how can I help you?" is simultaneously cute and makes me feel old.

I continue eating while she 'mm-hmms' and 'yes-es' her way through a brief conversation that ends with her giving the caller our office address.

"Thank you. See you soon," says Tammy before hanging up. "Incoming client. About an hour. I don't think this one's going to get you shot at, but no promises."

"Heh. You said that about the last one."

Tammy makes a 'what, how could I have known' face at me. "Well, I didn't think it would."

"Neither did I." I laugh.

"How's the girl, by the way?"

"As far as I know, traumatized but okay." I sip coffee. "Could've done without the FBI interview afterward, though."

She peers over her half-sandwich. "Since when does the FBI bother you?"

“They don’t. I just kept worrying I’d run into my old boss, Nico, and have to come up with an excuse for why I still look the same as I did when I worked there fourteen years ago.”

Tammy tilts her head. “Didn’t he retire? And wasn’t he with HUD?”

“Same building. And, yeah, I think he did.” Crap. I’m old. “Chad’s still there, though. And at least one of the other guys. So, who’s the new client?”

My daughter starts typing on the computer. “Gwen Stafford. Her brother died and she doesn’t think it was natural. Wants to hire you to find proof someone killed him. Poisoning, she thinks. She suspects his wife.”

The first thought to jump into my head is ethylene glycol, but medical examiners have gotten better at detecting it. I can’t think of any other common methods of killing that are sometimes mistaken for natural causes. Granted, I’m no doctor or toxicologist. I’m sure nature has many substances that can kill while appearing to be something else.

“Hmm. Should be interesting.”

Tammy nods, still typing. “She sounded sincere.”

I nod.

She stops typing and looks at me. “Is it strange I know that?”

“That she sounded sincere? Not if she really believed someone killed her bro—”

“Not what I meant. I mean... someone’s voice on the phone, I can kinda tell if they’re being sincere. But if they’re right in front of me, I can’t.”

I wad up the empty paper from my sandwich and toss it in the wastebasket. “Not strange at all. When you were on the phone with people before, you couldn’t see into their minds... at least not right up until recently when things went off the rails. So, you’re used to dealing with people on the phone based on how they sound.”

“Oh. Yeah. That makes sense.”

We do the day job thing for a while. Tammy’s getting quite proficient at the phone ‘legwork’ part of background checks. Not only does she like spending time with me, even if doing so means working, she appears to enjoy the task itself. I was one of the rare HUD agents who never minded the tedium of the office work. Guys like Chad couldn’t wait to get out there and ‘do something exciting.’ At least, younger Chad was like that. He mellowed out.

Tammy seems to have inherited my ability to cope with repetitive, tedious tasks. Uh oh. She’s been cagey about her plans for after high school lately. Vague talk about going to college, but not where or for what major, has all but ceased. She briefly rambled about going to art school or even becoming a novelist. Now, I’m wondering if she’s thinking of working for me full time after graduation.

While flattering, and I certainly won’t tell her no, I do kind of want her to prepare herself more fully for life. E.g. go to college or even a trade school. Get *something* under her belt she can rely on if anything ever happened to me or she decided private investigation didn’t do it for her anymore.

Ah, well. I’m going to worry no matter what. It’s my job as mom.

At 9:30 a.m., I have a brief meeting with two young reps from a nearby Burns Security franchise. They’re looking to outsource background checking of prospective guards they hire. I appreciate the business, though I am highly aware of potential liability blowing back in my face if I miss something on a check and someone ends up being a problem later on. It’s not enough worry to make me decline the contract, but it does get me to keep my rate a little higher than I would otherwise. They are apparently okay with it and we sign some paperwork for a six-

month deal.

All new-hires they process will have their background checks done by *moi...* or Tammy. Considering the potential risk here, I'm going to insist we double check them before submitting anything to the client. While I mostly want to reprocess the ones she works just to make sure she didn't miss anything, it's also not a bad idea to have her reprocess the ones I do, too. Another pair of eyes is never a bad thing.

And it's not that I don't trust her. I'd double check the work of anyone who's been doing this stuff for less than three months, especially when we're legally on the hook if we let someone slip by who has something on their record that ought to have disqualified them from security work.

It's a few minutes past eleven when the door to the street opens. In walks a young thirties woman with long, straight brown hair and blue eyes. Her clothes are nice but not designer, in good shape, and clean. Generally speaking, people going through difficult financial times don't often hire private investigators. Based on her outfit, I'd guess the woman isn't rich, but likely has 'discretionary money.' Her stride, expression, and overall body language convey a sense of mild impatience and anger, but not with me.

Tammy and my desks are toward the back of the large front room of my new office space. I'll never need a waiting area big enough for thirty people, but the space is aesthetically nice being open. Maybe I'll expand at some point and branch out into notary services or something else. Bail bonds are kinda sketchy in my opinion. I don't really want to get involved with the sort of element that introduces. Or expose my daughter to it.

Anyway, future plans can wait for now. I'm fairly sure Gwen Stafford has arrived.

Chapter Seven

Gwen

Since I'm not in a private office tucked away in the back, she walks right up to my desk, offers a brief smile of greeting in Tammy's direction, then looks at me. "Samantha Moon?"

I stand, offering a handshake. "Yes. Are you Mrs. Stafford?"

"Miss." She smiles while shaking my hand. "I appreciate you seeing me on such short notice."

"No trouble at all. Please, have a seat."

Gwen sits in one of the two burgundy chairs facing my desk. She's not giving off any hints of unease or nervousness. The mild impatience around her strikes me as nothing more than her urgency to find answers regarding her brother's death. I've been doing this long enough now to be able to get a decent read on people even without the ability to see into their heads. I started off having to do things the 'hard way' per se. So, doing it again feels like hanging out with an old friend. Sure, it makes the job a little more difficult, but it's definitely worth that bitch being gone forever.

"Would you like coffee or water or something?" asks Tammy.

"Water would be lovely, thank you." Gwen smiles at her, then looks at me. "Are you two related? You look so much alike."

I nod. "We are."

Gwen beams at us. "Oh, your parents must be so proud. It's nice to see sisters working together."

Tammy bites her left wrist to stop herself from bursting out in laughter before scurrying off to the mini fridge in the back room.

"Thanks," I say, smiling while opening up the new case file on the computer.

Gwen gives Tammy an odd look. "I'm sorry, did I say something off? Didn't mean to offend."

"No offense," I say. "I'm used to it. Tammy's my daughter."

The woman stares at me for an awkward moment. Once she decides I'm not about to laugh and tell her I'm kidding, she whistles. "What's your secret to looking so young?"

"Excessive amounts of Starbucks."

She chuckles, then sighs. "I suppose we should get down to business."

"If you're ready."

"I am. I'm here to look into Vincent's death."

"Vincent is your brother?"

Gwen nods once. "Yes. He died five months ago, in September."

"I'm sorry."

"Thank you. It's been harder than expected." Gwen swipes a strand of hair out of her face. "Sorry. I've been beside myself ever since. It wasn't his time."

"It's all right. Take whatever time you need. But I will need to ask some questions. The more information I have, the more likely it is I can help you."

Tammy returns carrying a bottle of spring water. She hands it to Gwen with a professional smile, then hurries back to her desk before she can think too much about being mistaken for my sister and laugh while the poor woman talks about her dead brother.

"I understand," says Gwen before taking a few breaths. "Ask whatever you need to ask."

I type 'cause of death:' in my notes. "You mentioned Vincent's death was ruled natural. How exactly did he die?"

"Maybe I should explain."

"Of course."

"Vince has MS. Err, he *had* MS. We, the family I mean, expected his life wouldn't be as long as most people... but he wasn't supposed to go into decline like this until at least his mid-sixties, depending on which doctor you believed. He was only forty-one. Nine years older than me."

Ah, crap. Okay, I don't know too much about MS. I add it to the notes in the file. "I can see how you suspect something happened. Twenty-something years is a bit much for the doctors to be off."

"Yes, it is. He suffered from MS but it was managed. Most people who met him couldn't even tell. At some point, a decline is inevitable... but Vincent went downhill so rapidly I can't believe it was really a natural course of his disease."

"All right. Did the doctors say anything about it being odd?"

"No." She looks down. "They all thought his MS decided to get aggressive out of the blue. Umm, Ms. Moon?"

"Yes?"

Gwen lifts her gaze off the carpet to make eye contact. "I don't know if you believe in this sort of thing, but I had a dream that Vince was standing in my bedroom after his death, trying to tell me something wasn't right."

I smile gently. "I've heard some wild stories. Many of them are much crazier than ghosts of departed loved ones appearing to the family at the time of their death." I add this to the notes as well. Most PIs probably wouldn't, but then again, I don't think too many PIs have gone where I've been.

Or seen what I've seen.

Tammy stares at Gwen, seeming frustrated. She gives up trying to read her mind after a moment with a resigned—and somewhat relieved—sigh. My kid doesn't have to be 'the weird girl' who avoids people because she can't bear to see what's going on in their heads constantly anymore. She will be happier once she gets used to normality; she just doesn't know it yet.

"I think someone poisoned him and the doctors didn't find it." Gwen frowns. "Someone did something to him that made his MS go nuclear. It just doesn't do that on its own at his age."

Reality can be weird. I need to keep my mind open to the idea Vincent Stafford's death may very well be due to natural causes. Doctors are not infallible. Though it's kind of a long shot to think the medical establishment made a mistake like this. That said, it's quite likely the poor man simply died because of his condition and poor Gwen simply can't accept reality. She might need someone to blame.

"Did your brother have a lot of money?" I ask.

"He did well for himself, but I wouldn't say he had so much money someone would kill him for it."

I add that to the file. "But he did have some assets then? Who was in a position to benefit financially from his death?"

"Dianne and the kids," says Gwen.

"Forgive me. Who is Dianne?"

“Oh. Sorry. I’m still upset.” Gwen pretends to smack herself in the head a few times. “I really need to give you as much information as possible so you can find who killed my brother. Dianne is his wife. They have a daughter, Averie, and son, Parker. The kids are fourteen and nine. My brother left me a few keepsake items from our childhood home, but no cash or anything of value. Dianne has full control of his finances.”

Something about the tone in her voice raises my eyebrow. “You suspect she might be involved with his death?”

My daughter starts to shoot me an ‘I already told you that’ look, but doesn’t say anything, realizing I’m prodding Gwen for more information. I’d like to get a feel for *how* she accuses the wife.

“The thought crossed my mind,” replies Gwen in something of an icy tone. It’s not full-on hatred, but I get the feeling she and Dianne aren’t the best of friends.

I ponder for a moment. Gwen’s thirty-two, single, and comes off as being unusually attached to her brother. My gut tells me she had a dependent relationship with him, though I can’t say for sure if she mothered him or if it’s something else. There’s a definite protectiveness in her demeanor—and jealousy. She probably resented Dianne from the start as if the woman had ‘taken Vincent away from her’ to some extent. Gwen not having a relationship of her own is somewhat common among people who become caregivers to their chronically ill siblings or parents. They dedicate their entire lives, their entire reason for being, caring for the family member. Not saying this is for sure what’s going on here, but it feels close to right.

The first thought that comes to mind when a wife kills the husband is life insurance money... or she’s been abused and fears for her life or the kids’ lives. I pepper Gwen with some questions about Dianne and Vincent’s marriage. Her responses are heavily laced with disdain toward Dianne, but she doesn’t mention any strife in the marriage. No abuse, no serious arguments. She describes the kids as happy—well, they *had been* happy prior to their father’s sudden downturn.

“... simply been miserable the last five months.” Gwen stops herself. “Ugh. I can’t believe so much time has passed. I don’t mean the most recent five months... the last five months before he died. He started having trouble a year ago, last February. Eight months after he fell in the bathroom, he was dead.”

I wait a moment for her emotions to stabilize before asking, “I know this might be difficult for you, but any information you give me can help. What symptoms did he show during his sudden abnormal sickness?”

Gwen lets out a long sigh. “At first, he started having coordination problems. He fell getting out of the shower because his legs wouldn’t listen to him. In April, his hearing and eyesight worsened and he started having memory loss. By the end of that month, he couldn’t move his left arm anymore. He lost the ability to walk or really care for himself in June. He went blind and mostly deaf in July. By August he was... basically comatose with his eyes open. He had to stay in the hospital so they could feed him intravenously. My brother died the following month, in September. I’d been visiting him every day, talking to him, just hoping he might hear me and realize I was there... and remember who I was.”

Tammy sniffles.

This poor woman. Ugh. She sat there watching her big brother waste away. Okay, she’s highly emotional about it. I can’t dismiss the possibility this is simply her searching for something (or someone) more tangible than bad luck to be angry at for what happened.

However, I can still start an investigation.

“Can you think of any reason someone out there might have wanted your brother, ah, out of the way?” I ask as gently as possible.

Gwen stares into space. “Vincent didn’t have any political connections. He definitely didn’t associate with criminals. No gambling. No drugs... umm, except for what they prescribed him. I suppose it could be life insurance... hmm, and I don’t *think* Dianne was cheating on him. Vince wasn’t... I mean, until he went into his downward spiral, he wasn’t *obviously* sick. I’m sure he could, uhh... keep his wife happy, if you know what I mean.” She turns scarlet.

Tammy bites her arm again. She’s not harming herself, merely trying not to laugh. My daughter is still young enough to consider adults talking about sex as ‘funny.’

“How strongly do you feel Dianne might be involved?” I ask.

“If she did it, it’s her twisted version of mercy. She might have become sick of living with a man suffering from MS. It’s possible there’s life insurance, but I don’t know.” Gwen sighs. “Though she and I didn’t agree on many things, I have difficulty accusing her of it. Hmm.”

“What?”

“Well, now that you mention it, I believe she grew up kind of poor. Money *might* be a motive. Vincent wasn’t rich, but he did have a decent amount of money in the bank. Some of it came from our inheritance when our parents died. The rest, he gets from his company. Dianne is also some kind of scientist. She’s always been kinda... eccentric. I used to think she was just really introverted and shy, but I think there might be something mentally wrong with her. She is really smart, though. I’m sure she’d be able to come up with a way to kill him the doctors couldn’t find.”

I type this into the file... and whistle internally.

Wow, the people who come into my office off the streets...

Gwen bites her lip, seeming nervous and a touch guilty. “Ms. Moon, do you think I’m just being emotional? Could my brother really have just been sick?”

“Too early for me to say.” I lean on my desk. “I’m not in the business of taking advantage of people. If you want to continue with an investigation, I will charge my base rate and do as much as possible in two weeks. If I find anything to clearly prove no foul play happened, I’ll stop and refund any unused time. However, if there *is* something to your fears, we can talk about next steps once we’re at that point.”

“That’s fair.” Gwen exhales in relief. “If you find information that makes you start to believe someone killed him, I definitely want you to keep working.”

“You mentioned his company... he was able to work?”

Gwen almost frowns. “He had MS. He wasn’t crippled. My brother... before he went downhill, you really wouldn’t know he had anything wrong with him. He looked as healthy as anyone else on the outside.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right. Most people don’t really understand MS.” She sighs. “Yes, my brother worked. Not only did he work, he was co-owner of his company.”

“Which company?”

“Grand Galleon Imports,” says Gwen. “They do international shipping, mostly commercial, but also high-end art and artifacts.”

Oof. That could be a possible angle for a killer. If the company got involved with something unsavory, even if they didn’t realize it, the consequences could’ve been deadly. Let’s

hope I'm not about to go up against something like the Russian mafia or whatever. I'm trying to cut down on being shot to no more than once per year and I've already hit my quota this year. They say women 'of a certain age' should take iron supplements, not lead pills.

"Any idea what your brother's company might have been doing around the time he started to show increased symptoms?" I ask.

"No. I'm sorry. I wasn't involved with—or quite understood—the import thing. I'm bad with math and stuff." She offers an embarrassed smile. "I'm an artist. Right brain type. When our parents passed, they left us enough money to last the rest of our lives if we managed it carefully."

Wow. Must be nice not to have to worry about needing a job or working. Might be a tiny bit jealous. Considering I grew up having to steal food off a neighbor's farm to survive, it's pretty safe to say we come from entirely different worlds. This woman's definition of 'not enough money to be worth murdering him for' is quite likely distorted. A few million in the bank might not seem like much to her. She mentioned that Dianne came from more modest means... so, yeah could be a motive.

We briefly discuss my rates and fees. Gwen doesn't flinch at any of it, so I draw up a work agreement, which she signs. Tammy and I sit there in silence for a little while after Gwen leaves.

"Wow, that poor woman," says my daughter.

"Yeah..." I drum my fingers on the arm of my chair.

Tammy walks over and sits on the edge of my desk. "Think she's super upset and just desperate or did someone really kill Vincent Stafford?"

"No idea... but I'm going to find out."

Chapter Eight

The Price

Several hours of online research and a number of phone calls later, I've managed to confirm a few things.

Vincent Stafford did officially die of natural causes ruled as complications of multiple sclerosis. The hospital where he spent his last month among the living wouldn't give me any real details since I'm neither law enforcement with a warrant nor family. Gwen's approval won't help since she's his sister and he was married. I'd need to get Dianne's permission (his widow) to see medical records.

I'd say it would be a good indicator of guilt if she refused... but it isn't. People like privacy. You'll see people out there yelling 'if you haven't done anything wrong, you have nothing to hide'—but those people are the first ones to refuse to show anything to the cops when it's *them* under the spotlight.

Grand Galleon Imports has a small website but no Facebook presence. As far as I've been able to tell, their clients are extreme opposites. On one side, there's manufacturing companies looking for the cheapest possible way to ship large quantities of whatever they make to the US. On the other end, Vincent's company assists amazingly wealthy people with the acquisition of near priceless artifacts. They've transported pieces of shipwrecks, Spanish gold recovered from the ocean floor, vases, mummies, paintings, jewelry supposedly belonging to ancient rulers, and so on.

The thing that stood out most to me was a series of news articles from about two years ago concerning an international dispute with some 'artifacts of cultural significance.' Vincent's company transported several items recovered from a tomb in Egypt to a private buyer in the UK, and the Egyptian Ministry of Cultural Affairs accused them of taking the items out of the country without permission.

It's not exactly the kind of international intrigue that results in spies assassinating people, but who knows? If those items had religious significance, someone might just get angry enough to kill over them. Feels like a distant possibility but it's gotta go on the proverbial whiteboard as a possible motive.

"Hey, Mom..." Tammy leans back in her chair. "Looks like the wife did have a life insurance policy on Mr. Stafford for 250 thousand. Just got off the phone with the provider. They told me the policy has existed for four years, but wouldn't tell me if it's been claimed or how much it was worth."

It's not *too* suspicious since the policy seems to have been initiated four years ago. I shift my jaw side to side, thinking.

"How did you get the insurance company to talk to you?" I ask.

"Told them I was Dianne. Plus, I had the policy number."

Indeed, Gwen had managed to scribble down the policy number to the life insurance prior to her brother's death, having spotted it in her sister-in-law's purse during a hospital visit.

"Wow, sneaky," I say.

"I learned from the best." She smirks.

"Pretty sure I never taught you *that* trick."

She points to the side of her head. "I have ears. I hear you working the phone. Plus, I think

I'm a natural at this stuff."

"Lord, help me."

"*Anyway*, since they had the policy for a while, does that make it, you know, legit?"

"The policy is legitimate either way, but, yeah. In most cases when a spouse is going to kill for life insurance money, they don't wait four years after getting the policy." I chuckle. "It's usually kinda obvious when someone buys life insurance only a few months before a suspicious death."

Tammy folds her arms, raising an eyebrow. "Unless the killer is smart enough and patient enough to wait so it doesn't look so obvious. This lady is supposed to be a brainiac, right?"

"True." I grab my purse off my desk. "Need a break from phone calls and computers. Going to go face-time the widow."

Tammy rolls her eyes at my 'old person' joke.

"You okay holding down the shop by yourself, kiddo?" I ask.

"Yeah. Why wouldn't I be? Not like someone's going to kick in the door and rob the place." She gestures around. "Nothing here but office stuff."

Of course, this gets me worrying right away—and my mom sense tweaking. It's not tingling... I don't feel like something is imminently about to happen, merely generalized worry. A young woman alone in an office is a risk. It's far less likely we'd be robbed than someone I've made an enemy of will come back for revenge. Thankfully, the list of people who might be violently angry with me for how my investigations turned out is fairly short, but Nasir Ahmad is at the top of it. He definitely has the resources to send a final f-you. Depends on how upset he is over me depriving him of the chance to hurt his ex-wife in the most horrible way possible. I still have trouble really processing that the guy would rather kill his own daughter than let her go back to her mother—for no reason other than to inflict emotional damage.

As a general rule, I don't approve of killing people or vigilante justice. However, if I ever bump into Nasir Ahmad, I may just forget myself for a moment and throw him out of the gene pool. Fortunately for him, he's likely back in Saudi Arabia now where he's going to stay. The odds of me ever going there are about as good as a Justin Bieber song finding its way onto my playlist.

"If you're worried, you could always keep a gun in the office," says Tammy, her voice casual with a bit of nerves. "Or like a can of mace..."

I cringe. "I know you're an adult now but it still freaks me out to think of you handling a firearm. *If* that happens, it's not going to happen until after you've gone through a few courses and gotten certified."

She momentarily gives me this annoyed teenager stare, but it doesn't last long before she grimaces. "Yeah, okay. I kinda don't wanna be around them either. Just... you know, want to be safe."

"I'll swing by a place on the way back from my interview with Dianne and grab a can of pepper spray or something."

"Cool." Tammy turns her attention back to her computer. "Get the stuff that'll make a moose pass out."

I raise an eyebrow. "Are you expecting a problem?"

"No, but if the stuff is too weak, it'll only make the guy mad."

I'm not sure what scares me more between the idea of Tammy being alone or Tammy being armed. Just don't like the idea of mixing my daughter in any scenarios involving lethal

weapons. It's also really unusual she came out of the blue with concerns about being here alone. This isn't the first time she's held down the fort while I've gone out to do stuff. I wonder if this is some kind of a psychic premonition.

"Back soon," I say, while heading for the door.

"How long?"

"Depends on how talkative the widow is." I wink at my daughter. "If Dianne Stafford tells me to go 'f' myself, I'll be back in about twenty minutes."

Chapter Nine Technicalities

A fine line exists between lying and not telling the truth.

Some people might argue that simply omitting a statement of truth is the same as lying. Alas, this is a tightrope that certain people such as cops, lawyers, and PIs occasionally have to walk. I'm not sure who started the rumor about cops aren't legally allowed to lie to suspects, but it's bogus. The police are under no obligation to be truthful during interrogations or interviews. As a PI, I'm a little more vulnerable to lawsuits than cops, but I should be okay. Enough vagueness should lead Dianne to believe I work for Santa Ana Mutual, the company that issued the life insurance policy.

And yes, I am fully aware the company's initials have my name all over them.

Traffic isn't horrible but it's also not great. Takes me a while to get to Yorba Linda where Dianne lives. Their house is really nice. It's no mansion, but it's definitely out of my price range. Well, I mean, I probably *could* technically buy a house like it, but doing so would wipe me out and I'd never be able to pay the taxes on it. I can think of far more productive ways to light money on fire than buying a house I'd lose in a year. I'm happy where I am.

The driveway's an asphalt slab big enough to land a Blackhawk helicopter on. At the moment, it's home to a white Escalade and a forest green Audi. Still, I'm not an invited guest, so I park on the street. I've got a little briefcase I usually use for whenever I end up being needed at a trial. Carrying it with me now makes me look more professional... somewhere between a newbie lawyer and an auditor for an insurance company.

A fairly long decorative stone pathway leads from the sidewalk to the front porch. It's impossible not to notice a large arrangement of flowers sitting there, still wrapped in plastic with a card as if a delivery person decided to simply leave it on the porch rather than ring the bell.

Odd. It's been five months since the funeral. Bit late for flowers... and it doesn't look at all like the sort of flowers one might send to a burial service. No, this definitely has a romantic vibe to it. Interesting.

I push the doorbell, setting off a cacophony of chimes and barking dogs inside the house. The sources of the barking zoom closer, ending up right behind the front door in mere seconds. A woman who I assume to be Dianne Stafford opens the interior door a minute after the dogs arrive. A pair of golden retrievers squeeze around her to press themselves against the screen door. The dogs emit cute, pleading whimpery noises while staring up at me. Both look ready to snuggle-pounce me the instant the screen door opens. I gotta say, whatever I am now has a much nicer effect on animals. They all seem to adore me.

Dianne wobbles, nearly falling over at the jostling from the dogs. "Benny, Jerry! Shush... settle down."

I can't help but snicker. Easy money says the kids named the dogs.

With some difficulty, Dianne manages to extricate herself from the dogs and slip outside without letting them run wild. The dogs continue whining on the other side of the closed interior door. Somewhat frazzled, the woman finally pauses a moment to take in my presence.

"Sorry. Those two aren't normally so pushy." Dianne's expression shifts to confusion when she realizes she has no idea who I am. "Can I help you?"

I smile. “Good afternoon, Mrs. Stafford. My name is Samantha Moon. I’d like to go over a few things in regard to the policy you took out with Santa Ana, if that’s all right.”

Her confusion lasts another few seconds before her expression changes to a mixture of ‘ugh’ and worry. “Is there a problem?”

“It’s too early to say. I’m conducting a routine review of your husband’s death.”

Dianne blinks. “You can’t be serious. The policy’s not worth killing someone over.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Who said anything about killing?”

She hesitates, staring at me for a long, awkward moment. “Well, someone must be thinking about it if you’re here.”

A slight facial twitch gives away an unspoken reaction. There’s definitely something on her mind she’s trying not to show. I haven’t engaged her long enough to know if it’s a ‘tell’ giving away deception or if she’s merely stressed out over one more thing potentially going wrong in her life. Gwen didn’t tell me one way or the other if she confronted Dianne about the death. Whether or not Dianne knows Vincent’s sister believes his death wasn’t natural is a mystery to me still.

“I understand his passing was declared natural.”

“*Declared* natural?” Dianne sighs. “It *was* natural... just, much sooner and faster than any of us expected.”

I’m paying attention to her mannerisms, eyes, and body language more than her words. One of the most common mistakes people commit when faking grief is to overact. Screaming and histrionics are incredibly difficult to pull off in a believable way when they’re not genuine. Dianne’s pronounced *lack* of emotion is possibly a red flag. She seems bummed out like a dinner date with an old friend got canceled at the last moment. Granted, it has been five months since his death and she’d known for years that her husband had an illness that would invariably kill him at some point. Her tame emotional response to talking about Vincent’s death could be a sign she wanted him dead as much as it might simply come from her having made peace with it already.

“Yes, it seems the medical reports indicated his condition was managed well. From all indications, he shouldn’t have experienced anything like this for many years.”

She nods.

“It doesn’t seem suspicious to you?” I ask.

Dianne draws in a breath as if she’s about to yell at me, but holds it, then sighs. “I know where you’re trying to go with this. Insurance companies are all the same. You’re looking for any excuse to deny the claim. I’m sure you’re aware of our financial situation. The policy is hardly worth killing my husband over. *If* anyone somehow managed to convince his MS to act up early, it wasn’t me, and it wasn’t for money.”

Hmm. “Do you mind if I ask why you said the policy wasn’t enough motivation to kill over?”

“Well, to be blunt—not that it’s really any of your business, but... it isn’t much compared to our other marital assets. Besides...” She flings her arm in a gesture of exasperation. “I haven’t touched the money at all. The policy was split in half and went into two separate savings accounts for our kids’ college fund. Vincent would’ve wanted that... one thing we agreed on.”

“One thing?” I tilt my head. “You didn’t agree on much?”

She pinches the bridge of her nose. While grief and frustration can often look similar, my

gut tells me this is grief. “We fought more than I would have liked. It’s not his fault... it was his condition. I knew the day would come when I’d lose him. Do you have any idea what it’s like living every day knowing the man you love is going to die early and no one can stop it?”

“I’m sorry.”

Dianne rakes a hand up through her hair, sighing. “I knew the day would come. Suppose I could have handled the stress better, but if you’re thinking I killed him, you’re wrong. I absolutely did not want to lose Vince, but I knew it would happen eventually. I wasn’t ready for it to be this soon. Our kids aren’t even in high school yet.”

Okay, now I kinda feel like a bitch for the unspoken accusation. Her reaction is either genuine or she’s an extremely dangerous psychopath.

“You’re not from the insurance company, are you?” Dianne narrows her eyes.

I offer a pleasant smile. “No.”

“You never said you were, did you?”

“No, I did not.”

A little color drains from her cheeks. “I’m such an idiot. Who do you work for?”

“I’m a private investigator. I’ve been hired to look into your husband’s death by someone who doesn’t believe his passing was as natural as everyone seems to think.”

Dianne gazes up at the clouds, shaking her head. “Gwen hired you, didn’t she?”

“I can neither confirm nor deny...” I smile apologetically. “Client confidentiality.”

“I know it was Gwen. Well, do you believe her?”

“At this point in the investigation, I haven’t seen enough to form an opinion either way.” I open my case and pull out a business card, which I offer to her. “I’m not here to make something out of nothing. If the evidence supports the official cause of death, that is what I’m going to tell my client. In the interest of thoroughness, do you know of anyone who might have wanted to harm your husband?”

“No...” She takes my card without looking at it. “Vince knew he wouldn’t have as much time as everyone else, so he tried to be as positive as he could with everyone. I respected him for that. I’m not sure I would have been as gracious.”

I nod, thinking for a moment. It’s honestly strange she hasn’t gone off on me yet. A killer is prone to act overly grief stricken or get highly defensive and combative. An innocent person accused of a crime can also get defensive and angry, but this feels different. Dianne’s non-reaction is markedly odd in either case.

“Forgive me for saying this, but you don’t seem—”

“Upset enough?” asks Dianne, leaning back.

“Yeah.”

She bows her head. “My husband had multiple sclerosis, Ms. Moon. He was going to die... eventually. Maybe it’s bad of me to say this, but after bracing for it for so many years, part of me is relieved it’s over.”

That does make sense to me. I let her continue.

“The anticipation of tragedy is worse than the tragedy.” Dianne shoots a sideways look at the flower arrangement. “I’d give anything to have him back, but it’s not fair to him. He’s finally free of a long, awful death sentence. Those last few months watching him waste away... I don’t think I’ll ever be able to process it.”

I also glance at the flowers. “Secret admirer?”

She halfheartedly chuckles. “Not so secret. They’re from Walton.”

It takes a second for the name to click into place with the information I'd spent most of the morning going over. Her husband had been the co-owner of Grand Galleon Imports with another man. "Walton Osborne?"

She nods, then goes stone-faced. "I know how this looks but it isn't what you think it is. There's nothing going on between us. Walton's only trying to be comforting."

Sending floral arrangements so long after her husband died is a little past comforting. Something's going on here, even if it happens to be one-sided. I might not be able to read her mind, but her body language has gone super defensive. Damn. She's either worried they got caught or furious with Walton for making her look bad.

Not sure which it is, though.

On a lark, I ask, "How were things between Vincent and Walton? Did they have any problems at the import company?"

"If so, nothing bad enough for him to mention anything to me." Dianne picks up the arrangement. "Can't just leave these poor things out here. It's not their fault. I'm not interested in Walton, Ms. Moon. It's honestly a little strange of him to keep sending these."

Grr. Now I'm getting confused. Most people wouldn't open up and talk about personal details to a complete stranger—especially not to someone who just implied she might be involved in murdering her husband. Is Dianne saying all this on purpose to throw me off or is she really the sort of person to talk freely about such things with people she doesn't know?

I didn't find much in the way of other family members. Vincent's parents are both dead. His sister Gwen, my client, is his only surviving blood relative other than his children. Haven't looked too deeply into Dianne's background yet, though I do remember seeing she's got a father in Portland and a mother somewhere in Florida. Gwen mentioned something about them divorcing years ago when Dianne was around ten or eleven years old.

"It is strange, yeah." I eye the small card attached to the flowers. "Have you asked him to stop?"

"I have. He's one of those 'no means try harder' types."

I nod, cringing a little.

She stands there for a moment as if she isn't sure what to do or say next, then looks me in the eye. "If you end up talking to him, maybe you could try to convince him he has no romantic future with me?"

"If I get the chance to mention it, I will."

"Thanks." She turns to reach for the door, but hesitates. "Ms. Moon?"

"Hmm?"

"If you *do* find something that suggests my husband's death wasn't natural... please do whatever you can to bring it to light."

I smile. "That's the plan."

"Thank you." She again seems to freeze like she isn't sure if she's supposed to wait for me to start walking away before she breaks eye contact. After an awkward pause, she turns and opens the door.

The two golden retrievers, still right at the threshold, stare longingly at me for the few seconds it takes her to go inside. I head back to the Momvan, mind spinning with ideas and theories. It's not unheard of for someone guilty of murder to ask investigators to find the killer. The overconfident ones do it to make people think they're innocent. Doesn't help that the genuinely innocent also demand investigators find the killer.

I flop into the driver's seat of the Momvan and let out a groan of annoyance. Few things suck as bad as going to find answers and walking away only with more questions. At the moment, I know exactly how my daughter feels. I kinda miss being able to read minds.

However, I do *not* miss feeling like a monster.

Some things just aren't worth the price.

Chapter Ten Gordo

Remember that fundamental law of the universe regarding ‘Mikes’?

My son has a friend named Mike, and there are two other boys in his sophomore class with the name. As luck would have it, Vincent Stafford’s best friend is also named Mike. Michael Gordon to be exact. Since I’m already out and about, I decide to swing by his office and see if he’ll give me the time of day.

After a brief text exchange with Tammy to let her know where I’m going and check to make sure she’s okay, I drive to Anaheim. Mike is the manager-owner of a small art gallery there. From what Gwen told me, Mike and Vincent were inseparable as kids well into their college days. She and Vince called him ‘Gordo’ rather than use his overly common name. Even up until Vincent became bedridden, they’d often gone on weekend trips or hung out at bars. Gwen admitted to having a crush on him. Alas, her daydream of dating her brother’s best friend ended rather suddenly when Mike announced his intention to marry a man named Alfred.

No, he and Vincent didn’t have anything more than a friendship going on. Those weekend trips involved everyone: his sister, the kids, Mike and Alfred. Sometimes, Gwen even went with them. She admitted the tension between her and Dianne was the reason she stayed home, as she didn’t want to ruin everyone else’s time.

The gallery isn’t too difficult to find, nor is it terribly large. Despite being small, it gives off an air of wealth and/or exclusivity. I’m half expecting someone to shoo me out for not being dressed up enough to be in a place this fancy, but it’s not as if I’m here for pleasure.

Surprisingly, I spot Mike Gordon as soon as I go through the door. He reminds me a bit of Morgan Freeman playing the role of Bruce Wayne’s butler. Maybe that’s in my head because he married a guy named Alfred. He’s presently talking to a young woman with dark hair in a bob. She can’t be much older than Tammy and, though she’s dressed up fancy, the poor girl is still giving off serious ‘first day at my first job’ vibes. It’s either her overly eager smile, the worry in her eyes, or that dress... it’s like something a girl would wear to prom.

Anyway...

Both of them give me this ‘are you lost’ glance as I walk toward them past a series of small vases and statues on plain white pedestals. The entire space is overwhelmingly white. Silver-edged white floor tiles remind me of being in a car dealership. White walls. All the little statues, vases, and sculptures on display are perched on plain rectangular pedestals at varying heights—also white. I’m sure someone considers the scattering of displays ‘artistic.’ To me, it looks like they just put stuff randomly wherever they felt like. All of the art is encased in Plexiglas, but I can’t imagine they’ve put seriously valuable things out where any random person could walk in and knock them over. I don’t know much about the art world beyond hearing someone once tried to say a banana taped to a wall was worth hundreds of thousands of dollars not too long ago. Or the time someone sold a blank spot on the floor for twenty grand. Call me a critic but sometimes the art world can be silly.

Mike gives the young lady an ‘I got this’ look, then approaches me. “Hello, miss. Do you need assistance?”

He asks it in the sense of wondering if my car died or if I ducked in here to avoid some creep following me. Everything about his presence seems confused why I’m in here. I don’t

take it as an insult. One doesn't grow up like I did and not have at least a little resentment toward the rich. All things considered, I really don't have a problem with rich people... just don't want to be 'like that.' Yeah, I have some money now but I'm never going to be a snob.

"I'm looking for Mr. Gordon," I say while offering one of my business cards.

"You have found him." The man's smile takes on a more genuine quality as his concern for what possibly chased me in here gives way to curiosity. "Hmm. Private investigator. I can't imagine why you're interested in me, but I do love a good conversation."

"I won't take too much of your time," I say, my voice echoing over the gallery. "I understand you were a good friend of Vincent Stafford. I'm looking into his death."

Mike's demeanor immediately changes from somewhat aloof art gallery owner to ordinary guy who recently lost a dear friend. He slouches, covering his mouth with one hand, and takes a moment to collect himself. Wordlessly, he gestures for me to follow him, then goes through a doorway of black bead curtains. I step past the clattering wood-and-stone beads into a short corridor with grey carpeting. He leads me to a nice office at the end on the left, but doesn't go around behind the large faux-onyx desk, remaining on his feet near the middle of the room, hands behind his back.

For a few seconds, the only sound is the soft burble of the massive fish tank on the right.

"Do you mind if I ask why someone hired you?" asks Michael, in an almost whisper.

Normally, as a PI, I like to keep my client's confidentiality. In this case, though, based on what Gwen told me about Michael and Vincent, plus the man's obvious emotional reaction to the situation, I feel it's more advantageous to the truth to be up front with him. He's going to know that Gwen has her brother's best interests in mind, so if he is aware I'm working for her, his responses should be more open.

"I don't mind. His sister isn't fully convinced the doctors made the right call declaring the death as natural."

"I see." Michael looks down. "Poor Gwen's been inconsolable ever since. I'm worried for her. She is not handling his death well at all."

"How so?"

"She practically lived in the hospital with him the last few months. Whenever the nurses or, god forbid, Dianne, suggested she go home and rest, Gwen would start screaming at them about how no one really cared about Vincent and how she thought everyone just wanted him to hurry up and die so they could go back to being normal."

I blink. "Whoa."

"As far as siblings go, those two were close, especially growing up. Their parents had 'better things to do' than bother with children."

"I can sympathize with that." Though, I doubt the elder Staffords were in the habit of smoking themselves into another dimension every day like my parents. Swear, my dad goes through more weed in one month than an entire hospital's worth of glaucoma patients.

"Vince basically raised Gwen. Their relationship was much closer to a father and daughter than siblings, even though they're only nine years apart. She's been very territorial and jealous around every girl he ever dated. When Dianne married him, Gwen actually ended up in the hospital."

"Mind if I ask what for?"

"It's a bit unclear. I think it was melodrama. Officially, she tried to commit suicide, but neither I nor Vince truly believed she wanted to hurt herself, merely try and get him to change

his mind about the wedding.”

Holy co-dependence, Batman.

“She was what, around sixteen at the time?” Michael scratches his head. “Not the most worldly kid. And, well...” He chuckles at the floor. “She also had a crush on me and recently learned why it would never work.”

Oh good grief. I know sometimes killers will loudly and obviously demand the authorities find the killer as a psychological trick to defray suspicion, but I’ve never heard of a killer hiring a PI to investigate a murder they already got away with. It hadn’t occurred to me until just this moment Gwen might be involved. Am I looking at a jealous sister pulling the ‘if I can’t have him, no one can’ thing? What if she has borderline personality disorder and some alternate version of Gwen killed him while another one doesn’t know about it?

Chill out, Sam. That’s way far-fetched. But dammit. Now I’ve got to eliminate her as a suspect, too, even though she’s the one who hired me.

“Would you consider Gwen mentally unstable?”

Michael thinks for a moment, then shakes his head. “Not now. No... She’s fine. Teenagers can be volatile, especially when they didn’t have the best emotional support growing up. Once she figured out Dianne wasn’t ‘stealing’ her brother away from her so she’d never see him again, she mellowed out. Gwen still lives in the home they grew up in. Vince and Dianne got a place in Yorba Linda.”

I nod. “But you’d call her possessive of him?”

“More clingy than possessive. When Dianne wasn’t in the room with them, everything felt normal. But add the wife and you could practically see sparks flying between them.”

“Gwen resented her?”

Michael ponders, tapping a finger to his chin. “See, their relationship started to change once Vince was diagnosed with MS. She went from the kid sister he had to take care of to his caretaker, even though he really didn’t need it yet. Gwen believed that only she had Vincent’s best interests in mind. As much as Dianne claimed to love him, as far as Gwen was concerned, she had a closer connection and true loyalty because they were blood.”

I whistle. Wow. “Do you think there’s any possibility Vincent’s death might have been something other than a natural progression of his MS?”

“Never honestly thought about it before now.” Michael purses his lips, tilts his head to the left, then exhales out his nose. “I can’t really think of anyone who’d want to kill him. But... his MS was relatively mild. If he didn’t tell you he had it, you’d never know. I remember the doctor said something about it being ‘relapsing-remitting’ type MS about ten years ago. Vince had some attacks, but it didn’t rule his life. He expected to live into his seventies at least. The way he died seemed to come out of nowhere. It did feel strange to me, yeah. But...”

I give him a moment to collect his thoughts. “But?”

“Well, I just can’t imagine how anyone who’d want to hurt Vince could command his MS to dial it up to kill him, you know? Pardon my French, but that would be some real voodoo shit.”

I, perhaps better than anyone, know the power of voodoo. That stuff is no joke. Hell, it sent me back in time a hundred and fifty years... but that’s another story. I take out my notepad and hastily scribble a summary of what he’s saying.

Hate to say it, but however unlikely it might be, a murderer using magic to kill someone might really have happened here, though unlikely. Ninety percent of humanity doesn’t believe

it's real. Argh. Here I go coming up with *more* questions again instead of finding answers. Vincent's import company occasionally handled artifacts of cultural significance. What are the odds they transported something they shouldn't have and a vodoun got pissed off and cursed him? Hell, I know for a fact his company was involved in a questionable relocation of Egyptian artifacts. Pharaoh's curse anyone? Something like that could theoretically take advantage of an existing medical condition and make it go crazy.

"Are you all right, Ms. Moon? You look worried," says Michael.

"Yeah, fine. You just got me wondering exactly how crazy this case might get." I swipe a strand of hair off my face.

He chuckles. "You're not seriously suggesting actual voodoo is involved?"

"Let's just say it's not something I'd instantly rule out as impossible." I tap my pen on the pad. "Do you know of anything going on at his import company that might have angered someone capable of throwing voodoo at him?"

"Are you patronizing me, Ms. Moon?" His attitude shifts defensive.

"Nope. Swear. Completely serious." I grimace smile. "I've had some... interesting experiences. As far as I'm concerned, stuff like this is a real possibility. Though, if true, there's almost no chance I'd ever be able to convince the police to open a homicide investigation."

Michael relaxes. "Well, Vincent and I often talked about the art world. Both of us dreamed of becoming artists when we were kids, but it didn't quite work out. I ended up running galleries and he got into the import-export business. The bulk of the rarer pieces his company handled came from China and the Middle East. They also move a large amount of goods from all over Africa, too—not just Egypt. Nigeria, Congo, Botswana, Zimbabwe even. Plenty of wealthy Americans have a penchant for 'authentic' tribal artwork. Alas, I can't think of any particular artifact he handled that originated from a region where voodoo might be involved. Most of that stuff is cheap tourist nonsense. Nothing anyone would be upset over selling it to Westerners."

"Doesn't have to be just voodoo. There are other forces out there."

"I suppose so. Still, you're talking about curses." He smiles. "I don't generally believe in that sort of thing, but Vincent did and liked to tell the story of the Earl of Carnarvon and his team. Apparently, many people believe such a curse killed those guys, but the earl happened to be quite in frail health at the time. Sixty or so people were involved in the opening of King Tut's tomb, but only eight died within twelve years. Hardly anything to raise an eyebrow over."

"True. People do so adore jumping to fantastical conclusions when there's no evidence for another explanation." I shift my weight to one leg. "Do you think Gwen *needs* there to be foul play to somehow cope with the loss?"

"That, I can't answer. I'm no psychologist." Michael wanders over to a cabinet on the opposite side of the room from the fish tank. "Care for a water?"

"Sure. Thanks."

He takes two small bottles out of the cabinet, which conceals a tiny fridge, and offers me one. "I understand why she feels that way. Vince's downturn did come out of nowhere. It didn't fit into any of the prognoses any doctor had ever given him."

"Do you mind if I ask for details about what happened? If someone did contribute to his death, knowing exactly what went on might help identify how they did it."

Michael takes a long swig of water, then lets a resigned sigh slide out of his mouth. He doesn't seem happy to think about his friend's death at all. It briefly looks like he's about to ask

me to leave, but he re-caps the bottle and nods. “Vince had the occasional attack. He’d suffer spasms, have periods where he couldn’t move his limbs, or lapse into dysarthria for hours or days.”

“I’m sorry... never heard that term before. Dysarthria?”

“A speech problem,” says Michael. “He’d lose the ability to talk for a while, only jumbled nonsense coming out of his mouth. You could tell he was just as frustrated as us. He wanted to say things but couldn’t.”

I jot this down on my notepad.

“The attacks used to happen once every five or six months, sometimes even longer. We all dealt with it. Fact of his life, you know. Last year around this time, he called me over to help him out at the office. He just had a real bad time with coordination. Couldn’t control where his hands were going. Tried to get out of his chair and ended up on the floor. Lasted all damn day. Never had one of those attacks go on so long as that. He didn’t think much of it so didn’t go to the hospital.”

I jot down ‘suffered coordination problems in Feb last year.’

Michael rubs his chin. “Can’t say it would’ve made a difference though if he’d gone right to the doctor. Couple weeks after that, the coordination problems came back and wouldn’t go away. He started to forget things. Unstable mood’s a common thing with MS, and he jumped on that rollercoaster—but fierce. He had anxiety. He had bouts of numbness. His hearing crapped out, then his eyesight. Four months before he died, he lost the ability to walk and it just kept getting worse. It’s like his nerves rotted away so his brain couldn’t talk to his body anymore.”

I write down numbness, loss of coordination, memory, hearing, and vision loss... all while my heart goes out to the poor guy. How terrible.

Michael chokes up and tries his best to be stoic.

I reach out and touch his elbow. “I’m sorry for making you relive this.”

“I hated seeing him like that. We all knew he wasn’t going to come back, you know? Eventually, all of us just kinda quietly hoped his suffering would stop. Even his sister.”

Damn. What if this *was* a mercy killing? Dianne might not have killed him for money at all. That’s yet another new angle I hadn’t considered.

“Before you ask, no, I didn’t do it.” Michael flicks his thumbnail at the bottle cap. “If Vince had asked me to, I would have. Maybe. But... he wasn’t in any position to ask anyone to do anything. Last week or two of his life, he just lay there, trapped inside his own body. Nothing left of him. Things like that make me not want to believe we have souls. I like to think that Vince was already gone by that point and had no idea, no awareness of being like that. It’s horrible to think of a ghost being stuck inside such a broken body watching all of us coming to terms with losing him. He had a couple seizures in that last week. One day, he just... didn’t wake up.”

I reflexively offer a hand.

Michael squeezes it.

“I’m sorry.”

“Thank you.” He takes a heavy breath, then looks me in the eye. “Do you really think someone did that to him on purpose?”

The feeling isn’t based on any hard evidence, but something has started needling at me. “I’m starting to think... maybe. In your opinion, is there any chance Dianne might be involved?”

He hesitates for ten seconds before shaking his head and muttering, “No.”

“You hesitated?”

“I... don’t believe she’d be capable of murdering him, or even mercy killing him. Or whatever it’s called. However, I do think it’s possible she’d have been willing to help him end his own life if he somehow managed to ask her to.” Michael fidgets at the water bottle. “Do I think she’d have up and killed him? No.”

The Kevorkian angle is an ethical dilemma for me. If I find out she, Michael, or Gwen herself participated in an assisted suicide, do I bother telling the police about it? From the sound of it, Vincent was already in a permanent vegetative state with no chance of recovery. Legally, it’s a crime even if the decedent wanted to die. But, morally? Ugh.

“Thank you for talking to me.” I give his hand another supportive squeeze. “If you think of any more information that might help, please call me.”

“I will.” Michael looks at me. “Do me a favor, if you can? If someone just helped him find peace, can you maybe forget finding whatever proof there is?”

“I will think about it.”

He nods, accepting that for now. “But if someone killed him with malice, I want them prosecuted to the furthest extent of the law. But it wouldn’t serve anyone any justice if Dianne or Gwen simply let him go after he’d deteriorated to such a state.”

I take in some air. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Chapter Eleven

Katrina

Breadcrumbs are handy for making meatballs.

They're also sometimes handy to follow... the metaphorical ones, I mean. Literal breadcrumbs are a poor navigation aid. So far today, I've thrown a few hours at research and phone calls as well as interviewed both the widow and the victim's best friend. It's probably premature to refer to Vincent as a victim just yet, but my brain wants to. The bad part here is that for all the work I've put in so far, my progress has been negative. Meaning, I now have a bunch more questions and possible scenarios than I considered when this case started and am not any closer to answering them.

Scenario 1: Vincent's death really was due to MS.

Scenario 2: Someone committed a mercy killing.

Scenario 3: Someone connected to the Egypt problem assassinated him as revenge for assisting in the 'theft of culturally significant artifacts.'

Scenario 4: He died as a result of weird stuff like a pharaoh's curse or voodoo.

Scenario 5: Dianne killed him for money and/or to get him out of the way to make room for a new man.

I think about those flowers on her porch. She didn't seem too happy nor upset to see them. Could be the woman has very muted emotions and is hard to read. Oh, right there's another possibility.

Scenario 6: His business partner, Walton, wanted to get rid of Vincent to steal his wife.

For that idea to hold water, I'd need to find some evidence that he'd been pursuing her for a while and she hadn't been interested in him, so he figured that by removing Vincent, she might be open to a relationship with him. It is extremely strange to be sending romantic type flowers to your former business partner's widow so soon after he died. At best, the guy sounds like a serious creep.

Since I need more information, I decide to visit a woman who appears to be a rather close friend of Gwen's according to their Facebook pages. My client's online presence appears normal. Her Facebook wall isn't some strange devotional shrine to her older brother. I mean, she shares a ton of stuff about MS charities, which, hey, considering their situation, that's completely understandable. However, the widow's page is also normal as far as I can tell, if a little boring. Dianne's Facebook wall is almost entirely pictures of her family. Husband, kids, dogs... vacations, random funny things.

The body language between Dianne and Vincent in the photos doesn't raise any red flags. This means they either really had no serious issues or she's an absolute sociopath. One thing I do note on Dianne's pictures: she's visibly socially awkward in every photo where she's not right next to Vincent.

Gwen's friend Katrina lives north of Anaheim Hills in a somewhat fancy area. It's the same neighborhood Vincent and Gwen grew up in. No, she's not dumb enough to publish her address. I messaged her on FB, explained exactly who I was and what was going on, and she invited me over to talk. From our brief conversation online, it's apparent she, too, believes someone killed Vincent. My guess is, she and Gwen are in frequent contact and Gwen has convinced her of this.

I arrive at a large-ish house with a sprawling front yard. A porch with red terra cotta roof tiles is a veritable greenhouse of creeping ivy. This is like the American Southwest version of one of those remote English manor houses they always use for creepy ghost stories. Whether or not there are any spirits here, I have no idea. It's been a while since I've seen any. Starting to wonder if my ability to see them also came from Elizabeth.

Whatever.

I duck past a curtain of ivy and cross a porch loaded with enough wicker furniture for the local elderly home to host an outdoor bingo night. A black wrought iron 'gate' covers a traditional front door. Suppose it's decent security while allowing air to flow through the house but it's not going to stop the bugs.

Katrina answers the door when I ring the bell. She's about Gwen's age, early thirties. The woman's so short she's almost a pixie, and gives off this contagious positive energy that makes me smile just from looking at her.

"Oh, hi!" she chirps. "You must be Samantha."

"I am." I offer her a business card. "Thank you for making time to see me."

"No bother at all." She unlocks the iron gate and pushes it open.

I head inside, following her to the living room where another woman of equally small stature who has to be well into her eighties is perched on the sofa watching some soap opera. Katrina gives me a 'one sec' hand motion, then approaches the elder, who she calls grandma, and checks on her to see if she needs anything. The old woman barely acknowledges her, murmuring about how the character on the screen is doing something dumb. If 'tired and just done with it all' had a picture, she'd be it.

"Someone's here to talk with me, Gran. We'll be just in the dining room. If you need me, just click your button, okay?"

The old woman nods once, manages a weak smile, then refocuses her attention on the TV.

Katrina checks to ensure her grandmother is still holding a small, white plastic device similar to a clicker for a car alarm. Satisfied the elder is okay for the time being, she waves me to follow and heads back into the same hallway as earlier. We go through an adobe-style arch into a dining room heavy on natural wood grain.

"Can I offer you anything to drink? Coffee, tea, water?" Katrina pauses by a chair she intended to sit in, giving me this eager look.

Some people really adore taking care of others and being helpful. Definitely get the sense this woman is going to be totally lost when her grandmother is gone and she has no one to take care of. Sad, but on the other hand, it's really nice to see someone so selfless. The world's too full of people who can't be bothered to even *call* their parents or grandparents once a month much less physically care for them to this extent.

"Thank you. I'm fine for now. Just had some water before. Unless you want something, then I'll have whatever you're having."

"Be right back." Katrina zooms out.

Well, okay. I sit and wait.

A few minutes later, she returns with a serving tray bearing a potbellied pitcher of iced tea and two glasses. It's also got a scattering of cookies, those nondescript mostly flavorless ones that usually come in a blue tin. Maybe they start to taste good when people pass a certain age. She sets the tray down, pours me a tea, pours one for herself, and sits.

"So, you believe her?" asks Katrina.

“Gwen? About Vincent?”

She nods.

“I haven’t found anything concrete yet. However, I do get the feeling there’s something not quite right.”

“Yeah.” Katrina sips tea. “Totally. Vince was doing okay. And like, all of a sudden, he starts having so many problems. I didn’t really think so at first, but Gwen is just *so* convinced he shouldn’t have died. So she really hired an investigator to go digging?”

“She did. What can you tell me about the situation? Did you notice anything unusual going on around a year ago right before his health took a downward turn?”

Katrina swishes ice around her glass, making pensive faces. “No, not really. I assume you’re trying to figure out if Vince and Dianne had any marital problems.”

“That’s part of it.” I nod. “Any unusual people showing up in their lives, threats being made, that sort of thing. Did Vincent complain about anything unusual going on at his import company?”

“Nothing I heard about.” She shrugs with such a blank, clueless expression it’s difficult to imagine she’s not being truthful.

We talk for a while about his family. According to her, Gwen is or was incredibly attached to her older brother owing to how he took care of her growing up. I already knew this, but having her confirm it is good. She describes their parents as distant. They provided materially for the kids but offered almost nothing from an emotional standpoint. Katrina tells me that around the time Vincent turned thirteen, the parents felt he was old enough to manage the house so they went on months-long trips to Europe, Asia, South America, Australia, basically wherever whim took them.

I whistle. Damn. So, Vincent and Gwen basically had this huge house in California to themselves as kids. It blows my mind to even think of leaving my kids alone at that age. I mean, we had a whole bunch of supernaturally messy BS going on in our lives, but even without that... thirteen-year-old Tammy was a handful. I wouldn’t have felt comfortable leaving her to take care of herself much less watch Anthony, too. Hell, eleven-year-old Anthony would easily have been the more responsible of my two kids at that point in time.

No wonder some rich people are seen as odd. They do stuff like this.

“Wow... so they left a thirteen-year-old home alone to watch a four-year-old?” I ask.

Katrina blinks. “Wait, no. I’m wrong. Gwen was like seven when the parents took off on permanent vacation. Vince had to be like sixteen.” She starts reminiscing about going over to hang out there with Gwen with no parents in sight. “... lucky we weren’t very wild. Vince still had his hands full even if the worst thing we did was stay up too late. He used to tell us if we didn’t listen to him, his parents would get in a ton of trouble and the government would take Gwen away so I’d never see her again.”

I bite my lip. He wasn’t far off. Parents who leave their seven-year-old in the care of a sixteen-year-old for months at a time probably would lose custody. “I suppose sixteen isn’t as bad as thirteen. Still, that had to be rough.”

“Yeah. Gwen’s still mad at her parents even though they’re both dead.” Katrina sighs.

“Do you mind if I ask... were Gwen and Vincent late babies?”

“How do you mean?”

“Were their parents on the older side? He was forty-one and she’s barely into her thirties. Seems kind of early to me for both of their parents to have passed.”

I'm wondering if resentment for her parents boiled over. If they died early under suspicious circumstances... it makes me wonder. Is Gwen a budding serial killer?

"No, they weren't that old." Katrina pours more tea into my glass, then refills hers.

Interesting. "How would you describe Vincent and Gwen's relationship with their parents?"

"A little icy. It was almost like a business arrangement. Like, 'we gave birth to you so we're obligated to feed and shelter you.' I'm surprised they didn't kick Vincent out of the house the day he turned eighteen, but really... Mr. and Mrs. Stafford spent so little time at the house it wouldn't matter."

I blink. "Wow. Mind if I ask how the parents died?"

Katrina laughs.

That makes me raise both eyebrows.

She covers her mouth after a few seconds to collect herself. "Sorry... I'm not laughing at their death. You're wondering if maybe Gwen killed them."

"I need to eliminate all possible scenarios."

Katrina nods, dabbing laugh tears away. "I understand. No, the idea of Gwen or even Vince killing anyone is pretty hilarious. Mr. and Mrs. Stafford died in a cable car accident."

I raise an eyebrow. "A cable car?"

"Yes. I think it was in Germany or... Switzerland... one of those countries over there with mountains." Katrina waves randomly. "I don't remember which country it happened in. They were riding this giant cable car when an idiot in a military jet flew by too low and hit the cables. The car fell a couple hundred feet. All twenty something people on board were killed instantly."

"Ack." I cringe.

"Yeah. It was so sad." She frowns. "Some kind of navigational error. The pilot didn't realize the canyon he flew into had cable cars and he was way too low."

Okay, well at least I can easily dismiss the notion of Gwen being a family-murdering crazy person. It's extremely unlikely she's in any way responsible for a military pilot killing people in a tragic accident.

"Italy!" yells Katrina. "It happened in Italy. '98 I think. Vincent was twenty-three. Gwen was only fourteen. It caused a big international incident because the pilot was found not guilty, but I don't remember too much about it. Just Gwen being weird."

Notepad time. "Weird how?"

"When they told her that her parents died, she didn't really react much." Katrina idly twirls some hair around her finger. "It's understandable. Poor girl hadn't really seen them very much since age seven, about as often as most people see aunts or uncles. Once or twice a year for holidays. She was mostly worried about having to go into state care. However, since her brother was twenty-three at the time, it turned out not to be a big deal. He got guardianship of her and they just carried on the same way they had been before." She sighs. "Can't miss what you never had."

"Wow. I can't even."

"Seriously." Katrina picks up a cookie. "I agree, this is sad. I need sugar."

I have one, too.

"Okay, so on a more cheerful topic... how would you describe the relationship between Gwen and Dianne?"

Katrina laughs—and almost chokes on cookie crumbs. When she recovers, drinking half

her glass of tea in the process, she shakes her head at me. “Oh wow. You’re good at the sarcasm thing.”

“I try.”

“Gwen and Dianne are, or were, like a couple of spoiled puppies fighting over a toy.”

“Pardon?”

“Vincent being the toy. See...” Katrina leans on the table, toward me. “Gwen loved her brother way more than most sisters love their brothers. And I don’t mean that in a creepy way. Their relationship was more like parent and daughter with a big dose of ‘you saved my life’ added.”

“Gwen almost died?”

“By not abandoning her, you know. Let me back up, though. When we were younger, she kinda hated how he treated her like a child, but at some point, she realized that her big brother could have been a real jerk. Like, how many teenage boys are gonna be willing to play dad? He could’ve run off to hang out with his friends or screwed around and ignored her. But he didn’t. She felt like, I dunno. Maybe guilty for stealing his childhood by merely existing? Anyway, like a year before the parents died, Gwen’s attitude toward Vince did a 180. She no longer complained about his rules or telling her what to do. She adored him for taking care of her when he was just a kid himself and didn’t have to.”

“Wow...”

“Yeah. Gwen is... was... beyond loyal to him. If she could’ve killed herself to cure his MS, she totally would have done it. Anyway, enter Dianne... and Gwen is no longer the sole person Vincent is concerned with.”

“Right. Jealous.”

“A bit. Honestly, it looked like jealousy...” Katrina picks up another cookie. “I really think it was more that Gwen wasn’t entirely convinced Dianne could be trusted to take care of him. Like, regarding their kids, Gwen never acted weird with them. She wasn’t jealous of Vincent having more people he needed to love than her. I really think she just didn’t trust Dianne.”

“What’s your read on Dianne, then? Do you trust her?”

She nibbles on the cookie. “It’s not that Gwen expected Dianne would do something *bad*, she just didn’t think Dianne could possibly take as good care of Vincent as she could.”

“Oh. Okay. That makes sense.”

Katrina finishes off her cookie, muttering past the crumbs while chewing. “Dianne of course picked up on this and kinda resented it.”

“Did they argue often?”

“Not really. Whenever the two of them were in a room together, it was like introducing strange feral cats. They’d just stare at each other with this bad energy hanging between them. You kept waiting for an explosion of fur and claws at any moment, but it never got to that point. Gwen didn’t think Dianne could take care of Vincent properly enough and Dianne felt insulted. I think Dianne *wanted* to say something, but the woman doesn’t have the nerve to start confrontations like that. She’s fairly quiet. I kinda feel sad for her. She probably got teased mercilessly as a kid in school for being weird and smart. The ice between her and Gwen got worse when he started to deteriorate.”

“I can imagine...” I pick up a second cookie. Hey, why not? It isn’t like I’ll get fat. Or develop diabetes.

“The two of them sparred verbally all the time. Gwen worried Dianne wasn’t taking good

enough care of him. I mean, it's not like he was—" A doorbell like chime comes from Katrina's pocket. "Oops. Excuse me a minute. Grandma needs me."

I nod.

Katrina rushes out.

I sit there patiently waiting while nibbling on my cookie as Katrina escorts her elderly grandmother to the bathroom. There are times when having supernaturally acute hearing is a curse. Any doubt I have as to the genuineness of Katrina's care for her grandma are thoroughly dispelled. This woman is not simply hanging on in hopes of an inheritance. No one simply in it for money (or a house) would stay so cheerful while cleaning up such a mess. Not to mention they easily have the means to afford a professional in-home care nurse. Katrina is, at least as far as I can tell, caring for her grandmother because she wants to. By the time she gets the elder back to the living room and returns to the room with me, she's verging on tears.

"You okay?" I ask in a soft voice.

"Not really. I hate seeing my grandmother like this." Katrina sighs into her iced tea. "She was always so strong and independent. Gran knows she literally can't live by herself anymore and it really pisses her off."

"Sorry."

Katrina fidgets at the glass in her hands. "I'm going to have to deal with losing her eventually. I'd just like to keep her happy and comfortable for as long as I can. But, grandma's eighty-nine. She's had a good, long life. Not like poor Vincent."

"How did Gwen react when his illness worsened?"

"Poor thing. She was beside herself with worry. When he really started to go downhill fast, she... well, maybe I shouldn't tell you this."

"Tried to hurt herself?"

Katrina cringes. "Yeah. When the doctors told her he would likely not wake up from the coma he slipped into, I caught her in the hospital bathroom with some pills. She thought she 'failed him' for not doing something right. After I talked her out of poisoning herself, she started ranting about Dianne, blaming her for not taking good enough care of him."

"Oof." I jot down 'suicide attempt?' in my notes. "You say poisoned. What was she going to take?" This, I ask, wondering if it might be the same substance used on Vincent to accelerate his symptoms.

She half smirks. "Aspirin. Gwen was so upset she just grabbed the first random bottle of pills she saw."

It's almost funny, but I don't laugh. Someone acting on a severe emotional impulse wouldn't have the presence of mind to properly plan out anything, including suicide. I'm nudging Gwen down to the bottom of the suspect list. She's got some issues—a whole suitcase full of them—but none of them feel right to make her into a killer, even a mercy killer.

"Is it true Dianne was cheating on him?" asks Katrina out of nowhere.

I think back to the flowers on the porch. "Undetermined at this point. What do you know about that?"

"She's getting a lot of flowers from some guy after Vince passed away. It's weird. Right? Like, the man's not dead two weeks and someone sends her flowers?"

"Yep. Definitely strange." I drink the last of my tea. "Did you notice anything like that prior to Vincent's death? Dianne taking odd trips, 'working late' a lot or spending time with some new 'friend'?"

“No. The flowers only started after the funeral. I really didn’t spend *that* much time around Dianne. I’m Gwen’s friend, not Vincent’s. But... I did go to the house all the time for like barbecues and birthdays and such. Never got the feeling she was having an affair. You might want to ask Gwen about that. She practically spied on the woman. I think if Dianne had an affair, Gwen would’ve gone nuclear.”

“Right. Then she would have ‘known’ she couldn’t trust Dianne to take care of her brother.”

“Exactly. But... yeah.” Katrina pours more tea into my glass. “I really think Gwen’s just overprotective. Dianne is fine. She’s nice, if a bit boring, but you know... scientists.”

“Scientist?” Wait, someone mentioned that before. Gwen had, in fact, but it slipped past my radar. “What kind of scientist?”

“Yeah. She works for some lab. The woman’s got serious big-time degrees. She’s a chemist or something.”

And there it is. A chemist. I pause, taking this in.

Would Dianne have access to toxic substances that could potentially mimic aggressive MS, assuming they exist? Possibly. Of course, there’s still the idea the Egyptian government might have sent an assassin, too. I’m sure they have chemists as well. But the assassin thing seems a long shot. Not as much as an Egyptian curse or voodoo, but still.

Dammit. The wife had the means but the motive is kinda weak. I poke and prod Katrina a bit more for her read on Vincent’s wife. She doesn’t give me any indication the woman would be capable of killing him maliciously. However, she does say it bothered Dianne a great deal to watch Vincent waste away, lose his memory, lose his hearing and sight... the more she talks about that, the more I start to seriously consider she might have helped him escape his suffering.

“... strange really,” says Katrina. “I’d never seen Dianne cry before. She’d always been so reserved. Gwen and I ran to the hospital cafeteria to grab something to eat. When we got back to Vincent’s room, Dianne was full-on sobbing. The strangest thing was watching Gwen’s reaction. If anything, she looked guilty... as if she had Dianne all wrong.”

“I see... Okay, awkward question time.” I look her in the eye. “Do you think there’s any possibility Dianne might have given him something to ease his suffering? Like, a mercy killing?”

Katrina bites her lip. “Umm. I never really thought about it, but maybe. But... if she did that, wouldn’t the doctors have found it?”

“Usually, but if no autopsy was performed because they all assumed he’d passed away from the most obvious apparent cause, it could’ve been missed.” I don’t tell her what my next thought is... the people involved in this case are all well-to-do. Any one of them could’ve paid off the hospital to look the other way. Kinda pessimistic of me. I’d like to think no doctor would want to be part of something like that, but in the context of a mercy killing, maybe.

“Wow.” Katrina exhales. “If someone really did hurt Vince on purpose, I hope you find them.”

“So do I.”

The little doorbell thing goes off again.

“I’ve taken enough of your time. Thank you for seeing me.” I stand.

“No bother at all.” Katrina smiles at me, then calls out, “Be right there, Gran,” at the doorway. “Let me walk you to the door?”

“Thanks.”

I think over some of the possibilities on the way out of the house and back across the huge front yard to my minivan. Katrina didn't notice the flower thing until *after* the funeral. Could be the guy only got obvious once Vincent died. Dianne's apparent disinterest could be from guilt. Having an affair is all fun and games while the sick husband is alive, then after he's dead... guilt could make her change her mind. Of course, by all accounts, Vincent wasn't overly sick up until his last year.

Dammit. Too many questions. Too few answers.

Time to fix that.

Chapter Twelve Distracted

I spend a little more time at the office before heading home.

Following up on information checked out to a point. Turns out in February of 1998, a US Marine Corps EA-6B Prowler jet collided with a cable car near the town of Cavalese in Italy during a low-altitude training mission. Its wing struck the cables, cutting them like a knife and sending the car plummeting something like 300 feet to the ground. No one in the car survived. The plane took only minor damage and limped back to its airbase.

I was able to verify that Elliot and Mathilda Stafford were among those who perished in the tragedy. So, yeah. No psychotic teenage Gwen poisoning her parents as revenge for emotionally abandoning her, then growing up to poison her older brother for abandoning her by marrying and moving out.

Maybe I've been watching too much courtroom TV lately.

All three of my kids are in their rooms doing homework. Tammy's never been a huge fan of homework, but she'd rather get it done on a Friday evening when she's got nothing else going on than let it interfere with the 'official' weekend. Anthony's approach to homework is about the same as his approach to green vegetables was growing up: he pinches his nose and gets it over with as fast as possible. Paxton and Renae are in her room, I think doing more talking than homework... but she's proven to be responsible about it so I don't see any reason to pester her. For all I know, they've finished already.

Anthony joins me in the kitchen and helps cook. Maybe we got on the same brainwave, but he appeared within seconds of me thinking about doing spaghetti with meatballs. Like a well-oiled team, he gets started on the sauce without so much as asking me which part of the process I want him to help out with.

We talk while cooking, mostly about his increasingly strong desire to go to culinary school once he graduates. Dinner, like the rest of our weekend, goes by way too fast. Before I know it Monday happens. Renting an office downtown definitely makes it feel like I have a 'real' job again. Of course, being my own boss, no one's going to write me up if I take a bit too long to get out of bed.

I spend most of Monday morning doing some routine background checks that are stacking up in the system since Tammy won't be here until after she gets out of school. Another reason is it distracts me from feeling frustrated at the Stafford case. I feel like the answer is staring at me right in the face and I'm too oblivious to see it. That said, I'm ninety-eight percent sure his sister didn't do it. And there really is no reason to consider Katrina a suspect at all. She has nothing to gain by harming Vincent.

I'm back to circular guessing between the wife, the partner at the import company, and I guess all of Egypt.

Also, I come up empty researching any poison that would kill Vincent the way he died convincingly enough to make doctors sign off on the death as a natural result of advanced MS. My phone chimes at me to remind me it's time to pick Paxton up from school. Awesome. I need some air.

Again I find myself sitting in the Momvan in a line with other parents.

I'm probably one of three who isn't desperate to get the hell out of there as fast as possible. All the other moms and a few dads fidget with impatience. I start to get kinda emotional thinking about how I savor these moments... about how it won't be all too long before she's outgrown school and won't need me to pick her up anymore. All these other parents are wasting this precious time, just focusing on it being an inconvenience out of their lives.

Sigh.

Once Paxton is grown up and on her own, I might just have to change my identity, move to a different city, and adopt some babies or something. My psyche might just fall apart if I don't have kids to take care of. I *need* to be 'mom.'

Just as I start to laugh at myself, I spot Paxton and Renae hurrying through the crowd of kids on their way to the van. They both seem a bit somber. Paxton's eyes are red around the edges as if she's been crying. Neither girl appears overly upset, so I manage to keep Mom Mode™ from going into overdrive.

The girls climb in as usual.

"Hey, Mom," says Paxton.

"Hi, Ms. Moon." Renae grunts from the effort it takes to close the side door, which gives off a grinding squeak as it moves. Damn, another thing to fix.

Normal people wouldn't think twice about the girls' greeting. Paxton sounded fine. But that's the problem. She sounded normal. There *should* be a little chirp to her voice. She's one of those overly cheerful kids most times, so her being merely mildly enthusiastic is a sign something happened.

No sooner do I start to feel concerned, she looks at me. Yeah, she's an empath alright.

"Something happened?" I ask.

"Yeah." Paxton squeezes the seat on either side of her knees, then exhales.

Unfortunately, *I* am not an empath. I can't read her emotional state directly from her expression and body language. She is presently giving off an oddly inappropriate mood: like she got away with doing something she should get in trouble for.

"Anything you want to talk about, hon?" I ask while starting the engine.

The girls exchange a look, then get emotional. Renae covers her mouth and tears up, the look in her eyes about halfway between finding an adorable kitten starving on the side of the road and narrowly avoiding being hit by a bus. 'Aww' plus 'holy crap I'm alive' is a strange combination. Paxton starts crying in a sense of being emotionally overwhelmed. She's neither sobbing nor wailing.

"Uh oh. What happened?" I ask.

Paxton lets out a long, slow breath and gathers her composure. "We 'came out' right in the middle of class today. Together."

I raise both eyebrows. Whoa. This is huge. She'd been so terrified for so long, expecting most people would react like her father had. The guy behind us honks—he's seen the kids get in and I haven't moved yet. I ignore him and stare at her. "You did? That's awesome. How did it go?"

Paxton blinks, gives me this disbelieving stare, then shrugs. "The whole room got quiet. Everyone stared at us. Katie looks at me and she's like 'you're gay?' I said 'yeah'. And she said 'cool.' Then... everyone just went back to whatever they were doing like nothing happened."

Renae drapes herself over the back of Paxton's seat and grabs her hand. "I couldn't believe it. I think a bunch of people already knew."

"How could they?" Paxton gasps.

"Well, for one, you didn't immediately do backflips and start squealing when Brice Combs asked you out." Renae examines her fingernails, the sarcasm in her voice obvious. "That means you're obviously gay... or dead inside."

Paxton shudders. "Yeah, he's cute but he's *such* a douche. Just... I was so scared to tell anyone and no one gave us any crap. I didn't expect it would be no big deal."

I resist the urge to flip the honking guy behind me off as I pull away from the curb. "Well, this *is* California."

The girls chuckle.

"Mom?" asks Paxton.

"Yes?"

"Why are you frustrated?"

"Work stuff."

"Oh." She cocks an eyebrow. "Wanna talk about it?"

"Hah. Turnabout is fair play, I suppose."

On the ride home, I explain the Vincent Stafford case as best I can without violating Gwen's privacy. Paxton and Renae seem far more interested than I'd expect from thirteen-year-olds, but then again, both girls like reading novels, so they probably think of it like a real-life mystery. We're still talking about the case when we get home.

The girls hop out.

Paxton leans back into the van before shutting her door—since I'm about to go back to the office to 'finish out my work day.' "Want me to get a feel on the widow?"

"Nah. Thank you, but I can't involve you with this stuff. Bad enough I already have *one* daughter working with me."

She chuckles. "Why is that bad? Family businesses are cool."

"Not so cool when the work can get dangerous."

"Eep. Okay." She looks at the house. "Is Anthony home?"

"I believe so." I send him a text, which he answers in twenty seconds, confirming he's inside. "Yep. He's here."

We briefly discuss a mall visit in the near future before the girls run inside. I do trust leaving Anthony in charge of the house. For one thing, he's an abnormally responsible sixteen-year-old. For another, it's not like he needs to wrangle *little* kids. Paxton isn't the type of kid to get into trouble by herself. And if trouble comes looking for us—burglars or whatever—my son is more than capable of managing the situation provided the person trying to break in isn't armed. He really doesn't need to worry too much about ordinary mortals with guns, but he might hesitate not wanting one of his sisters to catch a stray bullet. Or worse, *over* react and kill the guy if he thinks Tammy or Paxton are in danger.

You know what's seriously and totally messed up? If my son purposefully or accidentally killed someone in defense of his sisters, I'd absolutely hide the body and pretend nothing happened. Of course, I don't want that to happen. Besides, I think it might be against the rules for a proto-angel (or whatever he is) to kill. Maybe just staring at him would be enough to make an aggressor have a change of heart and leave.

Yeah. Gonna go with that. He won't need to hurt anyone.

Anyway... back to work.

Chapter Thirteen Minor Assistance

Tammy's at the office when I arrive, already working on the routine background check stuff.

"Hey, Mom."

"Hey yourself. All good?"

"Yep. Quiet. How's the case?"

We talk for a bit about my lack of progress before I start Googling. It's a good thing I'm a licensed PI with a background as a federal agent. Otherwise, some of the things I search the internet for would put me on an FBI watch list... kind of like a fiction author. 'How to kill someone and get away with it' or 'undetectable poisons' or 'why do women kill their husbands' and so on.

Maybe there's still some lingering mental connection between us, but Tammy shares my opinion that something definitely happened to Vincent beyond natural causes.

Eventually, it's 5:30 p.m., so we pack it up and head out. Tammy's got plans to go with her friends to the movies and out for dinner. She's home only long enough to change before her friends show up and they leave.

Anthony's twenty minutes into cooking by the time I walk in the door. He decided to ask YouTube how to make ravioli by hand and he's giving it a go. Gordon Ramsay would faint at the sight of this pasta mutation. But... considering it's his first time trying and he has zero actual training, it's impressive. The real test will be how they taste.

I've never tried to make my own pasta before, so curiosity keeps me there watching.

Renaë comes down the hall from Paxton's room, giving me this 'I thought I heard you come back' look.

"You girls having fun?" I ask.

Renaë blushes.

Her taking my question in a way I totally didn't mean it makes *me* blush. "Not what I meant."

Anthony whistles innocently, pretending not to have heard me.

"Doing homework, mostly." Renaë hooks her thumbs in the pockets of her black jeans. She and Tammy both have a thing for black, including toenail polish.

"Looks like you have something on your mind."

"Yeah." She nods. "So, umm. I started researching MS. You know, how it worked and stuff. The disease damages these things called myelin sheaths in the brain. And since you think someone killed this guy, I started hunting for stuff that causes similar effects."

I fold my arms. "I spent the past two hours looking for undetectable poisons. But you're suggesting..."

Renaë smiles. "Exactly. A poison doesn't have to be undetectable if it looked like MS. The doctors would probably just blame the disease."

"Possibly, yeah. You find something?"

She grins. "I think so. Heavy metal poisoning."

"The dude headbang himself to death?" asks Anthony.

Renaë gives him a 'wow, really?' stare for a moment, then sighs. "Not heavy metal music."

Actual heavy metals. The symptoms of such poisoning are really close to some of the symptoms of advanced MS.”

I narrow my eyes. A new wrinkle. Heavy metal toxicity makes me think more along the lines of accidental exposure. He worked at—well owned—an international import company. Not every country in the world has the same safety standards as the US. It’s possible he might have been inadvertently exposed to something toxic at his job. I’d been thinking his death didn’t sound natural, but the new wrinkle is it might not be premeditated murder as much as an accident.

“Nice work, kiddo. You’ve given me some food for thought.”

Rena beams.

“Told you she’s smart,” yells Paxton from her room down the hall.

I look up. Her head is sticking sideways out the door, long blonde hair hanging straight down. She’s got such a goofy smile on I can’t help but laugh.

“What the heck are those supposed to be?” asks Rena, pointing at the table. “Are you trying to make wontons?”

“Ravioli,” says Anthony.

“Before or after the exorcism?” Renee leans closer. “I think that one’s breathing.”

He slings a little pasta-dough ball at her.

I snag it out of the air before it hits her or the floor, and toss it back in the bowl. “Don’t waste food.”

Rena gives me this awestruck look. To her, my hand must’ve been a complete blur. “Whoa. Do you do karate or something?”

“Dabble.” I wink. “Now... hmm. I’m no doctor, but heavy metal toxicity ought to be fairly easy to detect.”

“Then why didn’t they?” asks Anthony.

“Because no autopsy was done.” I shake my head.

“Why not?” chorus all three kids together.

“The doctors didn’t suspect anything because of the MS diagnosis. Kinda weird honestly. Either they’re overworked, lazy, negligent... or something helped them not pay close enough attention.”

Rena scrunches up her nose. “What could make a doctor not want to be absolutely certain what killed their patient?”

“That... is the next question I need to answer.”

Chapter Fourteen Means

After dinner—the ravioli tasted way better than it looked—I call my friend Detective Sherbet.

Of course, when I mentioned calling him, the kids all decided they wanted orange sherbet. Anthony's taking the girls out for ice cream, or sherbet, while I get the non-frozen variety on the phone and fill him in on my case, then ask if he can sniff around with some of the people he knows in the ME's office.

I don't hear back from him until a little after ten the next day. It's Tuesday, and I'm alone at the office when he calls.

"Afraid I don't have much for you, Sam, but I got some info," says Sherbet.

"Something's more than I have."

He chuckles. "It doesn't look like an autopsy was performed in this case since the doctor who signed the certificate attributed the death to complications from multiple sclerosis. Everything seemed above board here. Didn't get any sense someone took a payoff. Cases like this where a death is ruled natural, autopsies would only be done at the request of kin. Unless, of course, the doctor suspected foul play or the person who died had some crazy rare condition they wanted to study. But, in that case, they'd need to get the widow's permission first."

"I see."

"As far as I can tell here, no autopsy was indicated or requested. The doctor didn't insist on it, neither did the coroner. The wife didn't either, but why would she if she poisoned him."

"My thoughts exactly."

Sherbet's chair creaks in the background. It's not as loud as I remember it, so I think he's winning his battle against donuts—or maybe he cheated with some WD-40 spray on the springs. "Unfortunately, I can't request a court order for an exhumation without enough evidence to convince a judge that foul play occurred."

"That's a big 'unfortunately.' I've got a whole lot of nothing. Bunch of wild theories. I can't even say for sure that he *was* murdered or even died as a result of accidental exposure. The only way to know for sure is to test the remains."

"Hair samples?" asks Sherbet. "If you're thinking toxic metal, it would show up in the hair."

"Hair from where?"

"Bathroom? A brush? Shavings in a razor?"

"Hmm. Even if there happened to be some of his hair lingering in the house this long after his death, I couldn't easily get to it. The sister hired me, not the widow."

"Hmm indeed." Sherbet taps his fingers on the desk, filling the phone line with repetitive drumming for a few seconds. "The widow could always request an exhumation."

"Yeah sure. If she's the killer, why would she?"

Sherbet's voice tells me he's grinning from ear to ear. "How she answers that question will tell you a great deal."

True. He's got a point. The woman is also a chemist. To me, 'death via heavy metal poisoning' is being bludgeoned with a slab of steel. Steel is obviously not a 'toxic' heavy metal. I'm sure the dangerous metals exist in forms much different from a big chunk. Dianne, as a

chemist, would know exactly how those substances work. If Renae is right and heavy metal poisoning does have similar symptoms to MS, it would make it an ideal way to kill Vincent and have it blamed on his condition.

“Thanks. You’ve been a big help. Let me do some digging and I’ll go rattle that tree.”

“Anytime. Stay safe.”

We hang up.

Okay, Dianne. Who are you?

I dive into the internet. It doesn’t take me too long to discover she works at a company called PEL Research. She’s been an employee long enough to have an entry on their biography page. Her tenure there is longer than her marriage. According to the company’s website, they are some kind of materials research and development facility. It’s difficult to get a real grip on what they do, since I’m not a scientist. The website mentions they manufacture and sell small quantities of rare chemicals used in industry but are more focused on serving as a testing and research lab. They are trying to develop new space-age materials for various applications. Just from this layperson’s opinion, looking over the various articles on their website, I’m sure they probably have access to some seriously nasty stuff. Can’t say for sure if any of it involves heavy metals... but a few pictures do show people in protective suits and using isolation glove-boxes to work on stuff that’s emitting smoke.

So, Dianne likely has access to substances that could mimic the symptoms of MS and result in a ruling of death from MS. I’ve got means for sure, but... why? What’s the motive? Tired of living with a husband she knows is going to decline and die decades before her? Affair? Mercy? It’s probably not money.

More digging and a phone call to Kingsley—who’s a bit more familiar with business stuff than I am—reveals Dianne Stafford sold off Vincent’s fifty-percent ownership stake in the import company... to Walton Osborne. Yeah, that’s a serious load of money but... it’s money they essentially already had as it represented Vincent’s stake in his company. The only way it wouldn’t be hers is if she planned to divorce him, and so far, no one I’ve spoken with has given off the sense their marriage was in trouble. It’s not an exact science, but my gut says she wasn’t cheating and had no plans to leave him.

So, money is an unlikely motive. At least, it’s less likely than the government of Egypt sending assassins.

Argh! This case...

I bang my head on my desk.

Chapter Fifteen Cultural Appropriation

It's later and I've stopped thumping my head against the desk.

Now, I'm staring at the PEL Research website and trying to formulate how to approach Dianne about requesting an exhumation and autopsy. If she's responsible for his death, she'll likely refuse. Killer wives in similar situations would also accuse me of not letting her poor husband rest in peace, ripping open emotional wounds, and so on. It's also quite possible that an innocent woman would refuse exhuming her husband's remains due to religious beliefs, or simple desire for privacy.

This is where it gets into the deep psychology stuff. *How* she refuses can tell me if she's guilty or not. Maybe I'll buy a little inconspicuous body cam so I can show the video of our conversation to Sherbet for his opinion. He's got more experience interviewing murder suspects than I do. After all, it's his day job.

If Dianne does agree to request an exhumation and autopsy, it's really likely she's innocent. Very few killers are confident enough to taunt the legal system like that. If she did it, she'd know they'd find something, so... calling our bluff takes balls the size of a semi-truck. Or... she's a straight up sociopath who doesn't care if she gets caught or not.

And there's still the chance this is all a wild goose chase and his death really was normal, albeit accelerated.

I'm going to feel like an absolute bitch if that's the case and the autopsy comes back with nothing. Not to be too insensitive here, but Vincent is dead. An autopsy won't bother him at all. I can't help but remember Gwen telling me she had a dream her brother came to see her the night he died, seemingly trying to urge her to investigate the circumstances.

If I hadn't been through all the supernatural stuff I've been through, I'd have dismissed the story the way most people dismiss the phone psychic hotline. Okay, bad example. My friend Allison really is a psychic, and she used to work for one such hotline. But really, the odds of getting an actual psychic on those things is one in a million. People who sincerely believe in those hotlines are the same sort of people who think supermarket tabloid newspapers are 'the real truth the government doesn't want people to know.'

Tammy walks in looking a bit disheveled. She does a 'Monday morning after a weekend of drinking' walk to her desk and falls into the chair.

"Everything okay, Tam Tam?"

"No. I might get suspended."

I blink. "Say again?"

"This jackass at school started giving me crap today during lunch."

"Crap about what?"

She leans back in her chair, letting her head hang backward, hair draped. "Specific crap. I don't even know the kid but he somehow found out about Paxton. I think his little brother is in her school."

"You hit him?"

"Not at first."

I blink. "Not at first means you hit him."

"I did..." She sighs at the ceiling. "I tried to walk away but he kept following me, teasing

me for not having a boyfriend and saying I'm probably gay like my sister. I kept walking. He grabbed my arm and yanked me back, said something like 'don't walk away from me' so, yeah, I slugged him in the nose."

"Good for you."

Tammy smirks. "Didn't bother him much. He laughed. Then shoved me over a garbage can. I got so pissed off, Ma. I scrambled out of it ready to rip his face off, but the guys held me back. He stood there taunting me until Mrs. Hudson sent us both to the office."

"It doesn't matter what the school does. I'm proud of you." I pat her on the shoulder. "If they try to suspend you, I'll fight it as hard as I can... unless you want the vacation."

"Not really. It just pisses me off that I'm getting punished because of that jerk."

"Well, don't worry about that jerk. What comes around goes around. Say, you didn't mention his name..."

"And I'm not going to. I can fight my own battles. Besides, I don't want him deposited on a cruise ship out in the Pacific, as tempting as that sounds."

I snort. "He would be so lucky. More like toss him *in* the Pacific."

"Exactly. No swimming with the fishes. I got this."

"Well, the school hasn't called yet."

"Maybe they're sending a letter... or having a hearing or whatever." She groans, rubs both hands down her face, then sits up. "Oh, wow. The queue's empty. No background checks. Umm. What should I do?"

I narrow my eyes at the screen. "You're a teenager. I need you to 'internet' as hard as you can. Vincent Stafford. Find out everything you can about him... let's see if we can find any connection to something that might be a motive for murder."

"Okay."

I stand.

"You're leaving?"

"Figured I'd interview the neighbors before I challenge the wife directly." I glance at her. "Hey, why don't you come with me. You're always stuck here. If you're thinking of doing PI work after school, you might as well see more of it."

She gives me an 'I dunno maybe' shrug in response to the notion of becoming a PI herself, but doesn't hesitate in jumping up. Her exhausted demeanor evaporates in an instant. Yeah, I have an eighteen-year-old daughter with a strong case of the clings. Honestly, I consider myself fortunate to have a daughter this age who loves spending time with me.

I hang a sign in the door indicating the office is closed and if it's between the hours of 9:00 a.m. and 5:30 p.m. Monday-Friday, I am out working on a case, so call the below number. We lock the door and hop in Tammy's Prius. She enjoys driving and, hey, we're not polluting as much in a half-electric car.

We drive over to Yorba Linda and start going door to door like a pair of missionaries, only without the matching clothing. The closest neighbors on either side are kind enough to talk for a little while but don't offer any information of use. They never noticed anything unusual around the house, such as loud arguments or suspicious activity. Next house on the left doesn't answer the door, the one after that shuts the door in my face the instant I say 'private investigator.' Across the street, we get shooed away by an older woman who thinks we're selling something, then have a pleasant conversation with a nice woman who tells us all about how her garden is doing and doesn't appear to even be aware she has neighbors.

On the way back to the car, Tammy groans. “Ugh, this would be so much easier if I could still read minds.”

I sigh. “No kidding.”

My daughter looks over at me, her expression slightly apologetic. “I’m not complaining. Well... I suppose I *am* complaining, but not seriously. I’m happy. It totally sucked not being able to turn it off. Thank God for the necklace Maple gave me. Then again, my greatest fear was that I might lose it.”

Mine, too, truth be told.

We pause at the curb. I can’t help but hug her. Even though we have no telepathic connection anymore, I still kinda know what she’s thinking. We’re both highly aware of how the unstoppable mess of voices in her head almost drove her to suicide. For a moment, we enjoy the silence together, happy to have each other and be as close to ordinary as we’ve been in fourteen years. It’s nice.

After we’re in the car, we both sigh at the same time.

“Well, that’s a big fat nothing,” says Tammy.

“Yep.”

None of the neighbors who talked to us said anything about fights, arguments, strange men showing up when Vincent was away at work or even unexpected work vans in the area. A plumbing contractor van sitting outside the house multiple times in a month is not always a sign of an affair. Unmarked vans are usually a red flag. But... nothing. No one saw any suspicious vehicles.

I remind Tammy that in itself is useful information.

We return to the office, bouncing ideas off each other about who we think had the best reason to kill Vincent. Even though we haven’t yet discovered any concrete evidence the man’s death *was* suspicious, we both ‘feel it in our bones’ that foul play occurred. My daughter seems to fixate on the idea of it being related to the Egyptian artifacts. She even suggests the killer or killers might have been some other government (or splinter group) upset over the theft of culturally significant artifacts hoping that Egypt catches any fallout for what they did. By the time we’re back at our desks, she’s almost convinced there’s a big conspiracy going on.

She dives into her computer to check for any other cases where Grand Galleon Imports managed the transportation of contested high-value items. Me? I’m starting to feel a bit desperate. I don’t like having such a strong hunch a murder happened in the face of such little real evidence. It goes against everything they taught me at Quantico. Hunches don’t win in court.

I wonder if we may truly be looking at a Pharaoh’s Curse situation. Weird paranormal stuff going on would certainly explain the doctors’ inability (or unwillingness) to recognize toxic metal poisoning in Vincent and brush everything off as MS. I really had been hoping my life might settle down and diverge from craziness, but this is *me* after all. The Universe has a strange way of continuing to throw me paranormal curveballs.

I’m tempted to visit Max to ask him about the Egyptian artifacts angle.

“Got something but it’s weak, Ma,” says Tammy. “Just emailed it to you.”

“Oh?”

“Check thine email, mother,” says Tammy in an odd, theatric voice.

Chuckling, I click over to that screen on my computer. “Thanks.”

The links she sent go to various news websites with articles about the Egypt situation.

From the looks of it, Vincent's company didn't do anything worse than get hired by someone to transport multiple artifacts taken from various archaeological sites. Grand Galleon Imports did not initiate the excavations or make the decision to move the items out of Egypt. It's possible they kinda hurried the shipment out of the country once it became clear the Egyptian government objected to the removal. Okay, that's something. No idea if Vincent had any personal involvement in smuggling this stuff under the noses of the law.

The transport of said items set off an international crap storm, though as these things go, it was minor and didn't get a lot of media attention. Alas, the western world doesn't tend to get very upset over people stealing from other countries. The Egyptian government claimed the people who shipped the items had no ownership rights to them and demanded their return, but the receiving museum and one private collector refused.

Tammy's staring at me as if she's waiting for me to read some manner of bombshell.

I give her side-eye. "What?"

"Keep reading. Seventh paragraph."

I continue reading. Paragraph six talks about a 'radical group' threatening revenge if the stuff didn't find its way back to Egypt. The reporter describes them like that sect from the *Mummy* movies, as if these dudes would come to America and go full *Mission Impossible* to steal the items back and/or kill those who desecrated the old sacred sites.

And... paragraph seven mentions the private collector being found dead. Mr. Gerald Brathwaite, a multimillionaire and British national died in a car bombing three months after a seven-foot-tall vase (or urn) supposedly taken from the tomb of Imhotep arrived at his home. The artifact wasn't stolen from his residence. Of course, a small group of assassins sneaking in to plant a bomb in someone's Rolls Royce probably wouldn't also arrive with the necessary equipment to move a 1,200 pound piece of pottery.

"Someone killed the rich guy," says Tammy as soon as she notices my eyebrows go up.

"Yeah. Coincidental at best." I start looking up the dead rich guy. "People with *that* much money sometimes have a long list of enemies."

"Well, it's something." She shifts to face her screen and starts typing.

I find some other stories online about Brathwaite being connected to the IRA. Can't imagine the British government was too happy to have a wealthy citizen sending financial support to the Irish Republican Army. Here, my gut tells me it's likely that Mi6 took him out... or maybe he decided to stop sending money to the IRA and they gave him a going away present. Either way, it seems far more probable his connection to a terrorist group bit him in the butt than a team of mystical defenders of Egyptian antiquity killed him.

I exhale hard.

We keep searching.

Two hours later, we both end up staring at each other making 'screw this, let's go home' faces. No one else connected to Grand Galleon Imports, or the museums involved in the Egyptian artifacts has suffered so much as a hangnail that's made it into the news cycle. If a group wanted to punish people for taking precious items out of the country, why only kill Vincent? He co-owned the business with that Walton guy, who is very much alive and well. The lower managers, the boat captains, crew, people at the loading dock who helped them—all alive. Though, some of the workers in Egypt who assisted rushing the items onto a ship while knowing the government didn't want them taken ended up in prison. Whether or not being alive in an Egyptian prison is better than death, I can't say.

Still, it makes me think no one killed them over the artifacts.

Vincent Stafford did not die because of what his company did. Can't prove it, but I feel it.

"Gotta be the wife," I mutter.

"Are you sure you don't want to Paxton-ize her?" asks Tammy.

I laugh. "Yes. I am quite sure."

"She wouldn't have to say a word. Just tell the woman you picked Pax up from school, then swung by to ask her something." Tammy starts gathering stuff off her desk into her purse in preparation to go home. "She can't read minds but she can tell us if Dianne's emotions are suspicious."

"You know how I feel about dragging my kids into dangerous situations." I lock the computer and stand.

Tammy gets up. "You think she's dangerous? Come on, she'd have no way to even know Paxton was doing anything more than just standing there. With all that pink she wears, she looks innocent as heck."

"Absolute last resort." I put an arm around my oldest daughter. "I have to keep my kids safe. That's the most important thing to me."

She exhales. "No one other than Vincent died under mysterious circumstances. That means there's a pretty good chance we're *not* dealing with a curse or even some angry radicals."

"Yeah." I head outside, hold the door for my daughter, then lock it.

Tammy, arms folded waiting for me to get the key out of the door, shrugs. "What's making you think the widow did it?"

I frown at the stupid key, wiggling it until it finally comes loose from the door. The lock (and key) are brand new. "Mostly that she had knowledge and access to crazy chemicals... and I got nothing else. There is also the 'flowers on her porch' thing. And her emotional response to her husband's death did seem a bit, um, flat."

"Hmm." Tammy walks beside me until we reach her Prius, which is parked three spots away from the Momvan. "Do you even know for sure yet he *was* actually murdered?"

Big sigh time. "No. Just a feeling."

"What's the best way to take a feeling and turn it into fact?" asks Tammy.

"Evidence."

She smiles. "Call Dianne's bluff. Ask her to have the body exhumed and tested."

Directly confronting a suspect runs the risk of alerting them to the fact they didn't get away with whatever crime as cleanly as they believed. They might destroy evidence, flee the country, or do something crazy like try to kill the investigator, kill themselves, or who knows what else. Still, my daughter's got a point. We have nothing else and I'd been intending to confront Dianne already... merely hesitating. Even her refusal to exhume would be a clue.

"Okay. You're right." I shift my jaw side to side. "I'll talk to Dianne... soon."

"Soon?" Tammy beeps open her car.

"Yeah. I need more information about what might have happened to Vincent." I smile to myself. "Lucky me, I recently did a huge favor for a doctor."

Chapter Sixteen Educated Guessing

The next afternoon, I arrive at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in L.A. to meet with Dr. Kyra Lockwood.

It's a little past noon when I walk into the cafeteria. Dr. Lockwood, who'd been sitting alone at a small two-person table, pops up to her feet and waves to get my attention. Wow. She looks noticeably younger than the last time I saw her. No, it's not magic. She was frazzled and stressed out before.

"Afternoon," I say while shaking hands. "Thanks for agreeing to meet."

"How could I not?" Dr. Lockwood grins. "You brought my daughter home. I'll always be in your debt."

We sit at the same time. It appears she's in the middle of lunch—a grilled chicken Caesar wrap.

"If you'd like to go get something, I don't mind waiting." She nods toward the serving line.

"Oh, I'm okay. I'll find something to eat." On that note, I send out a mental fishing net and siphon a tiny bit of energy from the 50 or so people around us. Individually, the drain is so little it's near unnoticeable. Me? I feel like I just overate, though it's not a 'stuffed stomach' kind of fullness.

"All right. The food here isn't bad. Don't believe what they say about hospital cafeterias." She winks.

"How is Ariana doing?"

Kyra's smile weakens a little. "She's having some nightmares and doesn't like being alone anymore, but otherwise, she's doing better."

Ugh. "Is she worried he'll try again?"

"I don't think so. She knows he didn't want her. The only reason he tried to take her out of the country was to hurt me. Proved it by having his meatheads shoot at the two of you when you got her away from him. He won't come back to the States now. He knows he'll be arrested as soon as he steps off the plane—or boat."

I wince mentally. Poor kid. No wonder she was terrified. Being stuck in a foreign country not known for women's rights with a father who'd rather kill her than let her mother be happy... yeah. At least it's damn unlikely he'll come back. The man seemed like a bit of a coward. I didn't see him on the ship until we were speeding away from it. Not like he had any clue I'm something more than an ordinary woman... yet he still hid behind several decks and a pile of hired guns.

"I'm sure Ariana will be fine, eventually." Dr. Lockwood glances down. "It might take a few months or a few years, but once she trusts he won't try to hurt her, she'll move on. Anyway, you said you had some medical questions you needed help with?"

The look on her face tells me she thinks I'm talking about myself. "In a manner of speaking. I'm working on another case and I needed help understanding a few things about someone I suspect may have been poisoned."

"Oh." She lifts both eyebrows. "Well, I'm no toxicologist but I can offer as much information as I'm able."

I explain the Vincent situation while she finishes her lunch.

After, she mulls for a bit, then clasps her hands on the table, fingers laced together. “It is difficult to say anything without seeing his medical history. MS can be cagey. Some sufferers, you’d never know they had it. Others require constant assistance.”

“Yeah... I’m not asking for a legal declaration, just... in your opinion, do you think there’s a chance a sudden change from manageable MS to such a rapid decline and death could be something other than natural causes?”

“Certainly. If he suffered a comorbid condition that exacerbated the autoimmune disorder it could have had any number of deleterious outcomes.”

I tilt my head. “How possible is it someone might have murdered him in a way doctors might have mistaken it for MS?”

Dr. Lockwood makes this face like ‘ugh, this isn’t my expertise’ though she does appear to be thinking.

“Heavy metals?” I ask.

A spark of insight flashes in her eyes. “Mercury poisoning can cause similar symptoms to late-stage MS. Again, it would depend on presentation. Since I haven’t seen the patient or his records, I’m not really in a position to say anything definitively. Then again, mercury poisoning would be very easy to detect during autopsy.”

“And if no autopsy was performed...”

She nods. “If the patient had a history of MS and the doctors had no reason to suspect he might have been exposed to toxic substances, it’s possible they might have attributed the death to his condition. I can’t imagine how it wouldn’t have shown up on routine bloodwork, though. Either they didn’t do a good job with diagnostic testing or someone was asleep in the lab. A little lazy if you ask me, but possible. Considering you described the patient as being almost normal functioning, to suddenly go into such a severe downturn would have had me asking questions.”

“You think it’s strange for MS to do that?”

“I do. I mean, it’s probably not unheard of... and bear in mind I am a cardiologist, not a neurological specialist. Those who work with MS patients all the time have seen more cases like this than me. I suppose it’s possible they’re so used to seeing patients deteriorate in a particular way, it didn’t strike them as unusual.”

“Right. Mind if I ask why you jumped straight to mercury?”

“The symptoms you described.” Dr. Lockwood fidgets with her plastic fork on the plate. “The most frequent cases of metal toxicity are probably from lead, arsenic, mercury, and cadmium. Each one has a slightly different presentation, but generally, the symptoms of heavy metal poisoning are similar. The rapidity of decline in the patient suggests an extremely high level of exposure. Lead takes time to build up to levels capable of causing detectable symptoms and it rarely kills so fast. Arsenic and mercury are the two most likely candidates, though arsenic poisoning does not usually stretch out over a full year. It’s much faster. Mercury, at least in my opinion, is the best fit for the time frame you’ve described.”

My poor little notepad is getting a workout. “Great. Thank you. Now for the hard part.”

“Hard part?” She raises an eyebrow.

“Well, hard for me.” I flip my notepad shut. “Getting actual evidence. Judges don’t like hunches.”

She chuckles. “Neither do surgeons.”

Chapter Seventeen
Check All Angles... Even Obscure Ones

Know what's kinda creepy? At least to me...

Having guys half my age checking me out. It's not their fault. They think I'm younger than I am. Mentally, I feel 'late forties.' Outwardly, I'm anywhere from twenty-five to thirty depending on how the light hits my face, how much makeup I have on, and how tired I am. Walking around the campus of Cal State Fullerton and having men young enough to be my sons giving me 'that look' is ack. I don't know how vampires are supposed to handle this.

And to be fair, most of these guys are like twenty-two or so. For them to be my son, I'd have had to get pregnant during my senior year of high school. So really, they're not young enough to be my sons because that's abnormally young for anyone living in a modern society to have kids. Maybe in 1704 people expected an eighteen-year-old to have at least one kid and another on the way, but times have changed.

I ignore them and make my way inside to the library. The *special* library. It's an outside chance and probably won't help. But, when I'm dealing with a case this thin... gotta check all possibilities.

The hidden library is simultaneously one of my most and least favorite places. All the dark tomes and evil crap Max has collected here floods the area with the ickiest feeling. My skin crawls as though I've got a billion maggots on me. The only other time in my life I've felt this disgustingly uncomfortable is when I'd been in the room with Danny's business partner at the strip club. Talk about a sleaze.

Anyway...

I hurry past the bad shelves and approach the big counter at the back end of the vast chamber that's not really fully in the material world. Max, as usual, stands behind it poring over some old book. Seems weird he's always here, but it has to be coincidental timing. The guy must somehow know whenever someone wants to talk to him and makes himself available.

The instant he looks up at me, I notice something is different. Takes me a few seconds to process enough to realize his hair is starting to go grey. He still looks relatively young—mid thirties maybe. Wait, he used to look like a college student.

"Hello, Sam." He smiles. "You seem troubled."

I lean on the counter. "Yes and no. Wanted to ask you about ancient Egyptian curses."

"Planning to go tomb raiding?" he asks with a hint of a chuckle.

"Ha. Actually, I'm wondering if someone already did and unleashed something..." I gesture at him, distracted. "Um, is your hair turning grey?"

He half-closes his eyes and gives off this tired kind of sigh I'd expect to come from an eighty-five-year-old retired laborer who's just totally done. "Yes, Sam."

"Er, why?"

"Because I'm aging."

"You mean... dying? Are you sick?"

"The only affliction from which I suffer is time." Max leans on the counter. "I've spent the past however many centuries dedicating my life to preventing my mother's horrible plan from spreading death and darkness across the world. We did it, Sam. *You* did it. She is no longer a threat to anyone. My work here is done."

I stare at him. “That’s no reason to die.”

“Or is it the perfect reason? Sam, I have decided that I’m tired. It’s time for me to move on.”

This hits me harder than I expected. I guess I always thought Max would be there for me. Dammit. “But I don’t want you to move on.”

He pats me on the arm. “There is no need for you to be sad, Sam. I’ve merely stopped going through the excessively laborious process of preparing the elixirs that allowed me to extend my life as long as I have. Unlike you, I am not immortal. Even with all of my skills, it’s not possible for me to exist *ad infinitum*. The potions are lasting for less and less time. In perhaps another two centuries, I’d end up spending *all* my time making them and drinking them with not a moment to spare for anything else. Eventually, even that would not suffice.”

I sniffle. “But that’s still two more centuries...”

“Ahh, Sam.” He reaches up to caress my cheek like an older brother. “I’m not going anywhere soon. I will merely follow the natural order and age until such time as I rejoin the cosmic whirlpool.”

“Not oblivion?”

He shakes his head. “No. I’m not an immortal. I’ll reincarnate as do all mortals. Perhaps our paths may cross again many years from now.”

“But you’ll have forgotten who you are. All your skills and knowledge—”

Max gestures at the shelves. “Most of which are in these books and in the students I teach.”

It’s hard to hear but, the more I stand here thinking about it, who am I to demand he do anything? If this is what he wants... and, he’s not going to be *gone*, only changed. Reborn.

“Your hair... it doesn’t mean you’re aging rapidly?”

“No. It’s a side effect of the elixirs. I am not going to age from young man to walking mummy in days. Remember, I’m quite old even though I do not look like it.”

“The grey hair looks good on you. Like that guy from the *Witcher* show.”

Yes, Tammy has kind of a crush. Okay, I do too. Shh.

We talk for a while about the nature of time and mortality and so on. I can’t help but attempt to convince him to stick around longer, but his mind is made up. He doesn’t say it outright, but I get the feeling something about the creation of that elixir is draining in a way he can’t describe. As if it eats at his soul. Perhaps doing it too much *will* result in his losing the ability to reincarnate. There’s a little guilt in him too. I don’t believe it’s anything as dark as creating the elixir requires him conducting a ritual sacrifice to steal someone else’s life force. It’s more likely it requires extremely rare substances and more than one assistant has died to various accidents, creatures, or other perils in the course of procuring the supplies.

Finally, I get around to the reason I’m here and explain the Stafford case.

“... so, just wondering if it’s possible for anything like a Pharaoh’s Curse to exist, and if it does... how far-reaching would it be? Could it attack a guy who simply owned the company responsible for shipping stuff? Vincent never set foot in Egypt or touched any of the items taken from the tombs himself.”

Max gives me a ‘one moment’ raised finger, then spends a few minutes zooming around among the shelves. He returns with three books, each big enough to beat a person to death with. Only one gives me the heebies when I look at it, but compared to some of the ones in here, it’s mild. We’re talking ‘probably don’t want to touch that,’ rather than ‘oh my God, get that thing away from me now.’

He opens the first book—which is written in Egyptian hieroglyphics—and reads for a few pages. I watch him seemingly cross-reference it with another book written in something akin to Viking runes. The last book uses text much closer to what I think of as ‘normal,’ but it’s penned in an elaborate florid script like something the monks from 1300 used.

After a grand total of about half an hour, he looks up at me. “There are such things as curses. Contrary to what you may believe, they would not have been invoked by the pharaoh him or herself, but rather by the circle of priests interring the body. For every two dozen rumors of a curse, perhaps one of them is real. After so long, though, the magic would have weakened. As we’ve been talking about, nothing lasts forever.”

“Except me.” I smirk. “I’ll be sitting here on an empty rock after every other human has died. So, any idea if Vincent Stafford died as the result of a curse?”

Max glides to the left and plucks a softball-sized crystal ball from a purple pillow on a shelf above his head level. He sets it on the counter in front of himself, holds his hands over it, and stares into the murky depths. Finally, he shakes his head. “It is difficult for me to determine much since you do not have anything connected to him for me to work with. Hair, blood, bone, teeth, and so on. Unfortunately, I’m not seeing anything significant. Though I am hearing drums.”

“Drums?” I ask.

“Tribal drums, but only briefly.” He shrugs. “Scrying orbs are notoriously fickle. It is likely equivalent to attempting to tune in a particular radio station and briefly hearing something from a different one.”

“Right.”

Max replaces the orb on the pillow. “My instincts tell me his death is not connected to any sort of Egyptian curse. You told me he had MS before his company had dealings with these artifacts.”

“Yes.”

“When someone falls victim to these curses, they act in ways that are subtle to those who are unaware of this aspect of reality. Those of us who know, see it right away. If the man had developed MS out of the blue and rapidly died, that would be the work of a curse. Since he had been known to have this condition for some years prior to his connection to supposedly cursed artifacts, the death would have taken a different form.”

“Like a bus hitting him?”

“Too random.” Max rubs his chin. “Think more like a piece of an airplane breaking off and just happening to fall on him. Something so improbably unlikely people include it in compilations of ‘stories too bizarre to be true, but they are.’ Those of us who know how dark magic works would instantly recognize the manipulation of fate.”

“Isn’t that the opposite of subtle magic?” I ask.

“Yes. The entire purpose of these curses is to be obvious to the right people as a warning not to violate the tombs.”

“Ahh. Okay. That makes sense. Thank you, Max.”

He bows. “Anytime.”

“I’m going to visit you more often now that you’re on the clock.”

He holds his hands out to either side. “I do not object to this. You are one of my favorite people, Sam Moon.”

Can’t help it but hug him. “I’m going to miss you, Max.”

“Save the melodrama for forty years at least. I’m not drifting back into the cosmic machine for a while yet.”

“Good.” I exhale. “Keep yourself safe, Max.”

“Don’t be a stranger.”

“Fear not. I won’t be.” I hold his hand for a bit more, then remind myself this isn’t the last time I’m going to see him.

Chapter Eighteen When Things Get Hairy

It's somewhat nice working on a case where the subject of my investigation is already dead.

I'm not saying it's good he died, merely enjoying the lack of urgency like my previous case. That scramble to 'figure it out fast before bad stuff happens to a kid' is super stressful. My meeting with Max has put me in kind of a strange lonely mood. It's one of the rare times the particular flavor of loneliness I'm experiencing isn't a craving to be with my family.

Okay, in plain English, I'm in need of some Kingsley time.

Yes, that means what it implies. I'm a vampire. I'm not dead. I have needs. And right now, my needs involve de-stressing by burning off a few thousand calories with a big hairy beast of a werewolf boyfriend. As frustrating as it is to no longer be able to read minds, one really nice aspect of it is I can daydream about Kingsley without Tammy randomly screaming 'eww, Mom, Stooooop!' from the other side of the house.

The big guy's all too happy to make tonight a date night. It's been a little bit of a while. I'm turned on already just from thinking about him. Before leaving home, I slip into a sheer royal blue evening gown, matching heels, a few bits of jewelry... and nothing else. This may sound a little risqué, but as soon as we're at the table in the restaurant, I plan to tell him I'm going commando. Hopefully, he will be able to contain himself until we get back to his place.

Quite frankly, me too.

He picks me up at my place in a silver Rolls Royce. It's about seven years old, but still a Rolls. Kingsley appreciates the finer things more than I do. His rationale is why amass money if you don't enjoy it. I can agree with the idea. Perhaps I simply don't enjoy super fancy cars. Expensive material possessions are just something else to lose, have stolen, watch fall apart, or otherwise fail to scratch whatever itch made a person get them. I guess I'd rather use money for experiences, memories, and to help people.

We go to a Houston's steakhouse restaurant. They're nice. More than I'd want to spend on dinner out, but Kingsley is old school. The guy pays for the dinner. I don't feel guilty because he chose the place. Of course, I don't object. I like steak, too. It's so nice being able to eat it again. But really, a nice dinner out is merely an obligatory stopover on our way to the bedroom later. Kingsley certainly doesn't realize how fast my proverbial juices are flowing or he'd certainly have been totally happy to skip straight to that part.

I'm a grown, mature adult. I can wait. No 'I want it now' temper tantrums from me.

We chat over wine and the appetizer salad with complimentary bread. Another great thing about being what I am? I don't care about calories. Neither does Kingsley. He won't get fat either, just... bigger. Werewolves and food are probably like goldfish and tanks. The more they have, the bigger they get. Seriously though, they have a tendency to just keep developing muscles with age. How big is Kingsley? Well, compared to me we could cosplay as Beauty and the Beast and be fairly close to movie accurate. Okay, I'm exaggerating. He's not *that* big. He wouldn't be able to go out in public if he was.

Eventually, the topic of my current case comes up. I explain the basics.

"It's so frustrating. Usually, by now, I'd have a pretty clear indication of who the suspect is and be trying to find evidence to prove it," I say. "But, I still haven't found proof he was killed,

much less who did it.”

“Probably the wife,” mutters Kingsley around a mouthful of bread.

He hasn’t touched his salad. Go figure. Carnivore. I hate wasting food, so I swap salad plates with him and eat his. I next go over the things that make Dianne appear guilty, then list off all the other reasons why I don’t think she did it, such as seeming genuinely in love, the kids aren’t weird around her, no financial motive, and no one who knew them had any inkling to think she grew tired of caring for him.

Kingsley nods in all the right places, even while shoveling more bread into his face. Weirdly, his ability to focus on food *and* me is turning me on. Ugh. Gotta stop thinking about this giant pile of man in front of me for at least another hour or two. That must wait until we’re home alone. Distract yourself, Sam.

“Spoke to Max today...”

“Oh?” He raises an eyebrow. “Your MS guy somehow related to arcane stuff?”

“I don’t think so... but there’s something else.” I explain about Max weaning himself off his immortality elixir. “He’s really going to let himself grow old and die.” I exhale. There we go. My jets are cooled.

“Lucky bastard,” mumbles Kingsley.

Our steaks arrive. The one that lands in front of Kingsley is re-dic-u-lous. I could cut it into multiple smaller steaks and feed my kids for three days. Well, maybe not Anthony. He could probably eat about half of it himself.

The waiter asks us to make sure everything is satisfactory. Kingsley nods before touching his steak. To me, it’s obvious he can smell it’s been cooked to order. Still, he cuts into it and samples a bite before nodding again and the waiter accepts his response.

“Thank you, it’s lovely.” I smile at the man.

He bows and whisks off, leaving us to enjoy our meal.

“What do you mean lucky?” I ask.

“He gets to reincarnate.” Kingsley eats another piece of steak. “Go around again. Life is like one big immersive video game. Every play is different. Some good, some bad, but we all play and it’s got its fun moments.”

“You want to reincarnate?” I cut off a polite-sized bite of my steak.

“What I want doesn’t really matter.” He smiles at me. “Won’t change anything. We’re here for the long haul, kiddo.”

And from the philosophical, our conversation gradually returns to the romantic.

Upon arriving back at Kingsley’s place, we pretty much go straight to the bedroom.

He scoops me into his arms and carries me, part gallant lover, part beast. I yank my dress off over my head, kick my shoes off and recline on his giant bed. It’s an enormous bed for an enormous man with an enormous... life.

The big guy, alas, is wearing a nice suit which takes considerably longer for him to get out of. While he’s undressing, I decide to take my jewelry off so it doesn’t end up destroyed. Delicate things like necklaces and bracelets tend to break in the midst of two people with supernatural strength doing... athletic things.

Soon, we’re locked in a passionate embrace, kissing, our hands roaming all over each

other's bodies. There's nothing between us but his hair. The feel of it against my skin sends ripples of tingling excitement down my entire body.

We make love as though we were the only two people in existence. We are Cain and Lilith entwined on a rocky precipice under a raging thunderstorm. Back and forth we go. One moment, he's holding me down and rutting like a beast. The next it's me pinning him. Sometimes, he's so lost to the act he bites at my hair or shoulder. I think werewolves tend to do that.

Again, he flips me over, putting my back to the mattress. My long, dark hair splays out behind and above me. He's straddling me, gazing down at me. The reflection of my upper body in his eyes, so pale against his black sheets, makes me feel so small compared to this churning mountain of man flesh.

His gaze is full of love. His expression is all primal.

Kingsley's eyes glow bright yellow. The adoration in his stare bursts to panic, then blinding rage. Hair all over his chest and arms thickens. He grabs his head in both hands and growls, no sound any human throat should be capable of making. Far, far too deep. "No..." he grunts. "Not time. What is..." He arches his back and screams at the ceiling, his voice a mixture of pain and absolute fury.

He usually knows when a shift is coming each moon cycle. His servants—suppose we should call them employees in this day and age—shut him away in a reinforced chamber downstairs so he doesn't hurt anyone. Except there's no full moon tonight. What the hell is going on?

I reach up for him. "Kingsley? What's happening?"

"Sam," he rasps, his voice throaty and supernaturally deep. "Run. Get away."

It might not seem possible given how big he is, but I'm not actually trapped helpless under him even though he's basically sitting on me. I brace my hands against his chest, pushing him down off my hips, over my legs. I scramble around to kneel in front of him, grabbing his shoulders.

"Come on. Fight it. I'll teleport us to the downstairs chamber."

"No," he growls, pushing me away so hard I backflip off the mattress, to land on my feet. "Don't be in there with me."

"I'll pop right back out." I dig my fingers into his arms, summon the single flame—

Whack!

Kingsley—or the dark master inside him—backhands me across the face. I fly across the room and embed in the wall, seeing stars. High-pitched squealing comes from the bones in my cheek as they mend.

The big guy, now even bigger, is almost completely covered in wolf fur. He lurches off the bed toward the vast balcony window, only making it halfway there before he collapses to all fours and his body finishes changing into a great, black dire wolf. I've just about gotten my senses collected enough to realize I'm sitting in a hole I made when he dives out the window into the night.

Strange. Kingsley can control when he turns into the four-legged wolf. Not so much when he turns into wolf man each full moon. Had the dark master somehow gained control of Kingsley?

A tiny—barely one-foot-tall—grey creature perches on the balcony railing. It resembles a gargoye from a medieval church. The instant I look at it, I know it's a demon. They don't have

to be big to be dangerous. The tiny bastard gives me the middle finger. I'm certain it did something to Kingsley to set him off.

“Ooh, you little shit.”

Instinctually, I reach for a sword I no longer have. Then, too furious to think, just throw myself at the creature intending to choke the life out of it with my bare hands. It disappears in a cloud of dark smoke, leaving me grabbing the stone railing. From here, I catch a brief glimpse of Kingsley zooming off into the scrub woods surrounding his property.

Shit. This is bad. He's going to kill someone. Maybe multiple someones. No time to waste. Even if I had the time to waste putting my dress on, it's only going to get shredded. Holding a werewolf back is bloody business, but I have to at least try to stop him from savaging some poor innocent person.

I jump off the balcony, extend my dark wings and fly after him.

Chapter Nineteen

Blame the Booze

It would've been nice if Azrael let me keep the impossible angelic raiment, but I don't think they really exist. They're a coalescence of energy or thought... maybe. Or I just haven't earned enough frequent flyer miles for that particular reward.

Kingsley races among the trees like a dog fixated on a terrified squirrel. He's a streak of shimmery black fur on a mission. Generally, in his four-legged form, Kingsley has some sense of self, though the animal does tend to take over. My feeling is... something else entirely has taken over him. In seconds, I realize I'm going to lose him if I try to stay above the woods... so I dive.

My wings are great for flying fast in a straight line. They're not quite as good managing on-a-dime turns between tree branches. Even if the big guy didn't zigzag so much, going in a straight line this close to the ground is a challenge. My wingspan is wider than the average gap between the trunks. I chase him, flying in a continuous series of twists and rolls, pulling my wings in, and stretching them again as I weave among the trees at breakneck speeds. Pretty sure if I hit one of these trunks, I *am* going to break my neck.

My heart can't take such a sudden shift from extreme passion to extreme worry. Ugh.

Kingsley skids to an almost stop then veers off in another direction. I can't tell if he smelled someone tasty or merely gave up on the way he'd been going because he *didn't* smell anything. The entity inside him prefers to consume rotting meat. Some werewolves like fresh food, others prefer to gnaw on corpses left to decompose for a while. However, if he can't find anything rotten... the consuming madness will drive him to attack a live person.

It's kinda like trying to give three-year-old Tammy broccoli. She'll slowly eat it but make faces of protest the whole time.

I duck a low hanging branch, gasp at the scrape of leaves down my bare side, and weather a few bumps and bangs bouncing off tree trunks. Accepting a few scrapes to straighten my path lets me catch up to him. Having no other ideas, I swoop down and land on his back, riding him like a horse. Or one of those machine bucking bronco things. Wolves, especially ones this big, have an undulating gait at a full sprint. I grab two handfuls of fur near his neck and, as much as I can, wrap my legs around the narrow part of his waist.

Heavy repetitive grunting comes out of his throat. Drool seeps between his fangs. He's not Kingsley at the moment. He's pure animal—and not in a good way.

Trying to talk to him is useless, so I don't even bother. I'm pretty strong, but he completely ignores me trying to wrestle him over into a wipeout. It's plainly obvious I'm not going to be able to stop him outright... so I try pulling on his neck fur in hopes of steering him in circles and staying in the deep woods away from people.

If I have to do this all night, I will. I'd been hoping to, uhh, ride Kingsley tonight but this isn't what I had in mind.

Not sure how long we zoom for, but finally he slows out of his crazed dash to a fast trot. Oh, crap. He's got something. He's following his nose. Out of sheer desperation, I stretch my wings out as far as they'll go, hoping to use them as an airbrake. Everything I can do to slow or stop him, I try. And he's shrugging it off.

We jump a moss-covered tangle of multiple fallen trees and land in a small clearing. To my

horror, we're only about thirty feet away from the side of a road and a streetlamp. The presence of the road doesn't bother me... it's the disheveled homeless guy standing under the light, staring at us that bothers me. A thin trail of smoke rises from his cigarette. He's got a bottle of something in his left hand. Definitely booze but I can't tell what kind.

Kingsley's definitely seen—and smelled—him.

Trying to stop the inevitable mauling, I pull back on his neck fur as hard as I can.

Like a giant furry warhorse, Kingsley rears, howling and pawing his forelegs at the sky. I cling to him, flapping my wings a bit to help keep my balance. There I am, a naked angel with wings spread wide, mounted atop a massive black wolf steed. The homeless dude stares at us, more specifically at my chest. The cigarette butt in his mouth hangs from his lower lip as he stands there motionless and gawking. Kingsley drops down from rearing, head low to the ground, snarling.

I glance at the homeless guy, trying to act as casual as possible. Nothing strange here. Just an ordinary winged vampire out riding her wolf in the forest. So glad Kingsley's fur is lush as heck. Not only is he comfortable to sit on, it's kinda giving me some modesty. Not doing anything to hide my top half, though.

The cigarette falls from the homeless guy's lower lip. He still hasn't moved.

Crap... telepathy's gone. I can't make him forget seeing us. Oh, wait. Who the hell would believe him?

Kingsley emits a growling half-howl, then wrenches hard to the left. I manage to keep holding onto him as he retreats into the woods again. There's no chance of me stopping him, so I tuck my wings in and flatten myself on top of him, my face pressed into the fur at the nape of his neck. Physical strength is not working for me. I won't win this contest.

So, I do the only thing possible: I start talking to him. Telling him I love him. Telling him it's not his time to turn. A demon did something to him. I keep calling out to Kingsley, hoping he can hear me from beneath the influence of his dark master hitchhiker. He runs for a while more, then slows to a trot. I think he's about to give up and shift, then he darts off again.

Damn demons.

But the sprint only lasts a few seconds. He slows to a walk, then stops before collapsing over to one side. I stay on top of him as if my skinny self is going to hold him down. A moment after his chest hits the ground, he's back to human form. I lay atop his back, both of us naked as forest nymphs in the middle of the woods.

He's asleep as soon as the transformation is over.

Ugh. Just like a man.

Realizing what I must have looked like riding a giant wolf out of the woods gives me an uncontrollable case of laughter. That poor homeless man must have blamed his drink for what he saw. Well, I might not have had the romantic night I'd been hoping for, but I probably helped an alcoholic quit drinking.

Chapter Twenty **Killing the Mood**

“Come on, big guy. Let’s get you back to bed.” I crouch, roll him over, and admire the view for a moment before picking him up.

Oof. He’s heavy. No way would I be able to lift him as a normal mortal. Heck, if I was ordinary me—twenty-five years old and in peak fitness—I probably couldn’t even pull him up into a seated position. Forget carrying him.

I flap my wings.

My bare feet leave the ground by an inch.

Flap.

Same thing.

Grr.

I raise both wings up as high as I can and thrust them down. My feet lift off the ground maybe six inches.

Dammit, big guy. Why are you so massive?

My wings are wonderful. I’m nimble and fast. But... apparently, I’m also a sports car. Lots of speed, not much torque—so to speak.

Okay. I can fix this.

I set him down again, take a few steps back, and put my angel wings away before summoning Talos. Hey, I’m already naked. Why not?

The flame appears in my thoughts but it’s... empty. No Talos. Panic grips me. Have I lost my connection to him? I shake my head and try again, mentally calling out to him this time. A moment later, my old friend emerges from the shadowy recesses at the back of my mind. As if he’s punching through a thick, gummy veil of rubbery spidersilk, he claws his way forward.

I feel my body changing. I’m getting taller, bigger... wider.

When I next open my eyes, my vantage point is about ten feet off the ground. I am Talos, or at least, I’m borrowing his physical form.

What happened, Talos?

I’m not sure, Sam, but it’s so good to be with you again, says the rumbly-deep voice of the dragon in my head.

I imagine us as dragons, rubbing our heads and necks together in loving affection. It’s been such a long time since my incarnation as one of his kind, yet still, part of my soul remembers it. Reincarnated again and again since then, I no longer have romantic feelings for him. He also has abandoned any such emotions toward me. We still love each other, but on a pure and soulbound level.

It’s odd to think of Kingsley as small, but compared to this body, he is. Anthony described Talos as a creature he called a ‘wyvern,’ because my dragon form doesn’t have four legs. Instead, our forelimbs are wings. We stand on two powerful legs and a thick tail.

I tell Talos about what just happened while gingerly picking Kingsley up. The big guy is an awkward size. He’s a little too large to comfortably grasp in one clawed foot... and a little too small to attempt holding in both feet. Sorry, big guy. Hope this isn’t too uncomfortable for you.

After securing a one-taloned grip around his chest, I leap into the air. Talos’s great wing flaps make the trees sway and shake. Kingsley’s arms and legs dangle, but it can’t be helped.

Luckily, we aren't too far away from his place.

Hopefully, that homeless man is gone and doesn't see the dragon or he's going to have some issues.

Bothersome creatures, says Talos, responding to my explanation of the demon zapping Kingsley and somehow forcing his beast out.

Yeah. Seriously. Figures they'd do something to mess with me since it's gotten a lot more difficult for me to deal with them.

Oh?

I fill Talos in on the sword situation.

I understand. It is very dragonish of you. Nothing matters more than our brood.

Heh. Maybe I am still part dragon.

Your mind seems different, Samantha.

Yeah. The annoying roommate finally collected the rest of her crap from the apartment.

What do you mean?

The telepathy. She left it behind when I kicked her out. Pretty sure killing her permanently destroyed the energy source powering it.

Ahh. Yes. I see that. This would explain why I had to burrow a new connection to you.

Is that why you didn't at first appear?

I believe so. The issue should be fixed.

Thank goodness it worked.

Thank goodness indeed. I feel him grin, the warmth of his pure, protective love glows like a lava forge in my—well his—giant chest.

We fly up to the balcony at Kingsley's place. There's no way in Hades that Talos is going to be able to fit landing on the balcony or going into the room. So, I hover outside and set the big guy down as gently as possible.

We will share time again soon, Sam. Go, be with your mate.

I mentally hug Talos. Thank you, old friend. And yes, definitely. We'll spend time together soon.

In an instant, I shift back to myself and drop out of the air, landing beside Kingsley, who's still out cold. After snarling at the spot of empty banister where the demon appeared, I lug the big man back inside and get him situated on the giant bed. Once he looks comfortable, I curl up next to him.

Some time later he wakes, then sits up a little, looking around as if he isn't sure where he is. Two breaths later, he sits up the rest of the way and wipes a hand down his face. "Ugh. What happened?"

"The bastard took over. You wolfed out and ran into the woods. I think a demon might have done something to let him out of his box."

Kingsley grumbles.

"You didn't hurt anyone." I lean my head against his shoulder and rub a hand down his fuzzy chest. "You came to your senses in time."

"With a little help from you?"

"Maybe."

He seems to relax at this. "Sorry for killing the mood."

"It's all right. I'm happy the mood is the only thing you killed." I keep stroking my hand down his chest, literally petting him.

Kingsley laughs.

Motion catches my eye. I can't help but look down... and raise both eyebrows. "Seems the mood is not as dead as you think."

He glances at me questioningly. "Is it?"

I flash a coy smile. "Let's find out..."

Chapter Twenty-One **Rattling the Tree**

If you're going to rattle a tree, shake the hell out of it.

People who lie hate being caught off guard, even if they don't understand why. See, lies take preparation, thought, and consideration. If an interviewer catches a suspect off guard either by circumstance, direct challenge, or an abrupt shift in tone from friendly to accusatory, it can make them react naturally with the truth before they have time to run information through the rest of their brain and craft it into a lie.

I don't *know* if Dianne is the killer, but she is in the unfortunate position of being the most likely suspect considering the situation. She's a chemist presently working for a research company.

Speaking of which, as far as I know, Vincent spent the majority of his time in his office. He didn't handle any of the materials his company imported. Nothing I've seen so far suggested Grand Galleon Imports would facilitate the transport of toxic substances. However, they do a lot of bulk shipping for companies in addition to the pricey stuff. Indeed, the vast majority of business the company does is commodity shipping of ordinary things like consumer electronics, clothes, niche international food, wines, that sort of thing. I couldn't find any mention of Grand Galleon transporting medical equipment, nuclear or industrial waste, and so forth.

The thought he suffered accidental exposure to something at work doesn't seem plausible.

Probably why I haven't gone sniffing around in person at their office or warehouses yet.

I suppose it's a bit lazy but nothing's pointed me at the job as being responsible for his death. All the circumstantial evidence points at Dianne. The hard part is going to be finding tangible evidence of her crime. Might as well get around to whacking that tree now.

After leaving Cedars-Sinai, I go directly to Dianne's house in Yorba Linda. It's a bit of a ride but she doesn't expect me to drop in unannounced. That's the 'catching her off guard' part of this plan. My coming out of nowhere to tell her I think someone killed her husband and simultaneously asking her to request an autopsy ought to shake a branch or two loose.

I park on the curb again and cross their massive front yard to the door. Again, there's a delivery of flowers sitting there unnoticed. Whoa. This one's an arrangement of six white roses. Before ringing the bell, I pause to eavesdrop on voices inside. Normal people wouldn't be able to hear people in the house talking from here. Luckily, I'm far from normal.

The kids are discussing how to go about doing 'some kind of fundraiser' for MS research. Averie, the daughter, still can't seem to talk about her dad without her voice catching. Ugh. Poor kids. I really hope Dianne isn't as involved as she appears to be. It's going to be rough taking their mom away from them if she's a killer. Not going to lie to Gwen, but if this turns out to be a mercy killing situation, I may ask her not to involve the police.

Anyway...

I ring the doorbell. Dogs in the back yard burst into a symphony of barking.

The kids' conversation halts. A moment later, a little boy peers at me from one of the tiny windows on either side of the front door. I smile at him and mouth 'is your mother home?' He darts off. Not long after he's gone, the door opens to reveal Dianne. She appears confused at the sight of me standing there.

“Ms. Moon?” asks Dianne.

“Hello, Ms. Stafford. I won’t take too much of your time. Do you have a minute to talk?”

“What about?”

I lower my voice so the kids don’t hear me. “Your husband’s untimely passing. My investigation has led me to believe events were not as natural as they appeared. To put it bluntly, I think your husband was poisoned.”

All the color drains out of her face. She goes from vibrant and healthy to Morticia Addams in an instant. Her gaze drifts off from me, aimed at nowhere.

This is a complex reaction, not one I had been expecting. Truth be told, I’d been ready for denial. ‘You have to be mistaken, Ms. Moon. Vincent couldn’t possibly have been killed.’ Or something along those lines. That sentiment would be displayed by someone both innocent as well as guilty, the difference being the emotion and body language accompanying it.

While there is a bit of ‘oh shit I’m caught’ in her eyes, it’s tilted heavily toward the ‘oh shit’ and less on the guilt. I get the sense of a storm brewing in her head. The next few seconds are either going to contain violence or a blast of emotion. I subtly adjust my stance in preparation of needing to jiu-jitsu flip her to the ground if she does something stupid.

“Dianne?” I ask after a minute and still no reaction.

The instant my voice breaks the silence, her eyes lock onto mine. “You said... poisoning?”

“I did. Toxic metal poisoning, in fact.”

Dianne starts shaking her head and muttering, “Oh my god. I should have said something...”

“Said what?”

She tightens her jaw. “I saw what was happening. But it didn’t make any sense, so I brushed it aside. The way Vincent declined was so obvious...” Dianne swoons.

I catch her before she collapses on the porch and ease her onto a bench near the door. I sit next to her, a hand on her shoulder to keep her from falling over. After a moment, she seems to recover from zoning out and grabs her head in both hands.

“They’re going to think I did it.”

“Why would they?”

“Because... his symptoms. Just like organic mercury poisoning.”

“And you work with that stuff?”

She lifts her head from her hands, dark hair framing a face drained of life. Well, not literally dead. Dianne Stafford looks like a woman who expects to never see her kids again and spend the rest of her life in prison. “No... I don’t. The lab has some but I refuse to work with it. Dimethylmercury is far too toxic. I’m a bit of a chicken, really. You can’t truly appreciate how dangerous that stuff is.”

“Dimethylmercury...? Is that not the silvery stuff?”

“No, it’s a clear liquid. Extremely concentrated. It can pass right through nitrile gloves. All it would take is two or three drops making skin contact and a person is doomed. I’m...” She again makes eye contact, now with the demeanor of a frightened child about to ask a parent for help. “Nothing I do involves it. If they ever told me I *had* to work with the stuff, I’d quit on the spot.”

This is a new development. Her reaction is bizarre but feels genuine. Without being able to read minds, I can’t know for sure if she’s telling the truth. Her emotions have been far from ordinary so far. She *could* be one of those super smart people who simply has seemingly

strange emotional responses. For the kids' sake, I want to believe her. However, she's a PhD level chemist working at a lab where a person might be able to obtain toxic dimethylmercury. She knows how the stuff works. Knows exactly that toxic metal poisoning would mimic the symptoms of multiple sclerosis enough to potentially fool doctors into blaming the illness and not looking for signs of foul play.

"Ms. Moon... please help me." She looks down again. "I did not hurt my husband. Vince should have lived a meaningful life at least into his seventies. When he declined, part of me recognized what I was seeing but couldn't believe it."

"You knew he had toxic mercury poisoning?"

"Everything happening to him fit, yes. It's my nightmare. Well, one of a hundred nightmares." She gives a humorless chuckle. "There are documented cases of poisoning from all sorts of nasty substances found at my lab. I've studied all of them so that I could recognize it in co-workers, even myself. But... there's no possible way Vince could've been exposed to it."

"Except a case of someone poisoning him on purpose."

She wrings her hands and starts to cry.

Grr. No matter how hard I stare at her, whatever is going on inside her head remains a mystery to me. It's almost tempting to bring Paxton here. She'd be able to sense Dianne's emotional state... provided the woman isn't a sociopath. One has to have actual emotions for an empath to pick them up, after all. But, no. I can't use my daughter like a tool.

Dianne mumbles under her breath, talking to Vincent, apologizing that she let 'someone take him away' from her and the kids without saying anything about her suspicions. "... not like it would have mattered..."

I give her a moment to collect herself.

She sniffs, wipes her nose, nods. "If he really was poisoned with mercury, by the time he started showing symptoms, nothing could possibly have been done to help him, anyway."

"We can find who did it."

"How?" She continues kneading her hands.

"A good first step would be to prove his death was not natural. And the best way to do that would be to request exhumation of his body and have an autopsy performed. Toxic metal poisoning would be detectable, correct?"

"Yes. Quite easily. If they'd done an autopsy, I'd probably be in jail now." She rakes both hands up over her hair. "They're going to come after me."

"Did you do it?"

She stares at the ground for a moment before cutting a sideways glance in my direction. "You think I did, don't you?"

"It's... complicated. It's less that I'm convinced you're involved than I have no one else with the ability to have done it." I sigh. "Problem is, I can't work out the motive. Forgive my bluntness, but you didn't need the life insurance money and you don't appear to be rushing into the arms of another man. But, yes... you are a suspect. At least, in my book."

A flash of anger hardens her eyebrows for a few seconds. It's also one of those signs I look for. Guilty people seldom get angry at accusations. They focus on defense, distancing, and denial. "Look, Ms. Moon... even if I wanted to kill my husband—which I do not—I'd have to be a complete idiot to poison him with something like dimethylmercury. It's easy to detect and I'm a chemist. I would be the very first person the police would investigate. Assets like that are

kept under strict security at PEL. Go there. Check with them. You'll see that there's no dimethylmercury missing from inventory."

"Which is exactly what you'd say if you sourced it from elsewhere." I tap my foot. "But if you did that, there would be a paper trail. I'm guessing a person can't just buy that stuff off Amazon."

"Of course not."

We're silent for a few awkward seconds. I fidget at my sweater. "Honestly? I'm hoping you didn't because it would haunt me for the rest of my life if your kids lost both their parents... one to death, one to prison."

She exhales into her hands as if cold. "Well, whoever did it might get away with it. The police are going to suspect me immediately and then look for everything that backs up whatever theory they jump to."

"You've been watching too many movies." I nudge her. "The police don't look for the fastest way to close a case... well, not unless it's politically significant. At least, in my experience."

She groans and buries her face in both hands. "Would it be an ethical conflict for you if I wanted to hire you to find whoever really killed my husband no matter what happens to me?"

"I've already been hired to do just that. I couldn't take money from two different people for the same case. As far as it being a moral dilemma, I'd have to truly believe you weren't involved."

"You don't?"

"Like I said, there's no one else on my suspect list right now... except a crazy outside thought it might be some wingnuts in Egypt upset over some artifacts."

She shakes her head. "They were angry at the people who got the items, not the man who half-owned the company responsible for moving them. How can I convince you I did not poison my husband?"

"Request an exhumation and autopsy. As the widow, you can do it."

"And have them come after me?"

"It's a possibility." I nod once. "It looks more suspicious if you don't. And... do you want to know for a fact if your husband really died of natural causes or someone killed him?"

She sits there, silent.

I shift my tone to sympathetic, dialing back the confrontation. "You seem convinced someone killed him."

"Yes." She swipes her hair off her face. "Vince's decline was too sudden. It makes so much sense now."

"Who would want him dead?"

She breathes into her hands, gazing into space as if lost in thought. "I have no idea. My husband never did anything shady. We didn't really have much of a social life. We're kind of the nerdy, uncool parents. The most radical thing we did was take the kids to hands-on science museums. I... suppose it *could* be something from his import company, but I have no idea what. Vince had a somewhat bad habit of not possessing a filter between his brain and his mouth. Never determined if he was on the spectrum, but he'd just say things sometimes as if he didn't know or care how someone would react."

"He didn't sugar coat things."

"Exactly. He didn't beat around the bush. A man who used few words and wasted none."

She almost smiles. “Not the sort of husband you ever want to ask if an outfit makes your butt look big.”

Heh.

Her weak smile is short-lived and she’s soon crying again. This time, definitely grief. “Will you help me?” she asks after collecting herself.

“I’m after the truth.” I pause. “You weren’t having an affair, were you?”

“No. Never.”

I point at the flowers she has thus far either ignored or not noticed.

She almost rolls her eyes. “Walton again. It’s a bit weird, but his heart is in the right place.”

“Weird is one way to put it.” I smirk. “You asked me to tell him he has no chance with you. Unfortunately, I haven’t spoken with him yet. How long has he been chasing you? Did it start before Vincent’s death?”

Dianne looks at me. Initially, her expression says ‘you have got to be kidding,’ then, as she thinks about it, her face morphs into a ‘hmm, maybe.’ “I confess I’m not the most socially adept person. Maybe I missed the signals he sent out. At first, I thought he was just trying to be comforting after Vince’s death.”

“Sending flowers twice a week to a widow five months after her husband died is a little beyond comforting.” I narrow my eyes. “Has he ever been weird or creepy around you?”

She shakes her head. “No. Well, not that I ever noticed. But, I’m really not great on social cues. Maybe you could talk to some of the people at the import company in management, the ones who’d have been at holiday functions or whatever. Maybe even Gwen would know. She’s got a friend who I swear is like a relationship counselor. Karina or something. Little thing. Always trying to make sure everyone else is happy, never takes time for herself. They might have noticed something about Walton I missed.”

“Hmm.” I lean back. There’s a thought. Could Walton have been jealous of Vince and killed him to get at his wife when she refused to have an affair with him? Even if her ‘refusal’ to have an affair came from social ineptitude and being oblivious to his signals, he wouldn’t necessarily know that. “Do you think it’s possible Walton might have wanted your husband out of the way so he could get to you?”

Dianne covers her mouth to hold in a laugh. “He’s strange, but his heart’s in the right place. You don’t seriously think he is involved?”

“It’s something to look into...” I check the time on my phone. “I should really be on my way. Need to pick my daughter up from school soon. Are your kids okay? You kept them home today?”

“They’re not feeling well.” Dianne fidgets.

The kids didn’t sound sick. I get the feeling she knows they faked it and probably let them stay home thinking it will help them cope with grief. Can’t say I wouldn’t do the same. Their daughter didn’t seem able to talk about MS without crying. Vincent was a good dad. Kids don’t get that upset over losing bad parents. Example: Tammy wasn’t crying about Danny five months after his death. Then again, at that time, she was fairly pissed off at him. So was I.

“I’m sorry. They didn’t deserve to lose their father, and... you didn’t deserve to lose your husband.” I stand. “I’m going to find out what happened. It’s the least I can do for you and your kids.”

Dianne presses a hand to her chest, seemingly too choked up to speak. She rasps a quick ‘thank you’ and nods.

“You going to be okay?”

“I’m beating myself up for not saying anything to the doctors. I could’ve asked them to test.” Dianne slouches forward, then stands on wobbly legs. “If you’re after the truth, then we’re on the same side. Would it look bad if I retained a lawyer?”

“No. Some people say it does, but it’s never a bad idea. Even the innocent need advocates.”

She makes a face at me like she’s resigning herself to losing it all, then nods once. “All right. Thank you for being honest with me.”

We shake hands and I head back across the yard to where I parked. I can’t help but think I’ve just pushed a large boulder of crappola off the top of a mountain.

Question is: who is it going to land on?

Chapter Twenty-Two Close Call

Speaking of giant crap boulders falling on the unsuspecting...

My phone rings while I'm sitting in line waiting for the proverbial anthill explosion of children to burst forth from the doors of Paxton's school. I check the caller ID to see if it's something I can ignore for now—good grief I get a lot of telemarketing junk—but upon seeing Mary Lou's name, I flick the slide on the screen.

"Hey, Mare. What's up?"

"Sam," says my older sister, half frantic, half crying. "It's Rick..."

Oh, shit. Whatever she says next can't possibly be good, merely varying degrees of bad. I cross my fingers (and toes) hoping it's on the lighter side of awful. "What's going on?"

She lets out a slow sigh. "He collapsed at work. Mike told me he complained of chest pains before he passed out. I think he had a heart attack but the doctors aren't saying anything yet."

"You're at the hospital?"

"Yes. Anaheim Regional," says Mary Lou in half a sob. "Just me and Billy at the moment."

This is perhaps the first time in our lives where it feels like my big sis needs me to take care of her. I'm not sure she's even aware she needs me on a level conscious enough to ask for help, but she doesn't have to. Her sixteen-year-old, Ruby Grace, is still living at home despite splitting her time evenly between high school and early college courses. The kid's a literal genius. How she came from our genes, I have no idea. Her son, Billy Joe, works with his dad as an apprentice electrician. The oldest, Ellie Mae, is in Virginia now, halfway through college. She's even got a serious boyfriend and talks of marrying him once she graduates.

I can't even process that one of my sister's kids is fully grown up.

"I'll be there as soon as I can. Pax is about to walk out the door of her school."

Mary Lou sniffs. "Yes, of course."

We talk about the situation for about three minutes before the bell goes off in the school building. My sister doesn't know much yet. Rick was at work when he clutched his chest without warning and dropped where he stood. Fortunately, they'd been working at a site in Anaheim less than a mile from the hospital. Mary Lou is getting herself worked up in preparation for bad news. There's an unspoken subtext hanging between us where I think she's hoping I 'do something' to make Rick into an immortal if he should die. Unfortunately... my ability to pass this thing on might have died when Elizabeth and I separated. I changed from being a relatively standard blood-feeding vampire to a mental-energy consuming vampire who really doesn't care about sunlight at all. The typical way to pass vampirism along involves blood transfer, and I don't think *my* vampirism has anything to do with blood.

There may be an equivalent process involving mental energy, but as far as I know, I'm the only one of my kind and I haven't tried to turn anyone else into whatever I am. She's fully up to date on my weird new life, so maybe that's why she hasn't asked me to intervene.

Hundreds of fifth-through-eighth graders spill out of the doors and stream toward buses and cars, a few stragglers who happen to live close enough to walk home breaking away from the pack to follow the sidewalk away from the chaos.

The instant Paxton hops in the Momvan, she freezes stock still, staring at me. Worry consumes her expression.

“Uncle Rick’s in the hospital,” I say.

She makes an ‘oh no’ face at me.

Renae hops in the back, clueless to my emotional state until Paxton turns to tell her we have a family emergency. I’m expecting to drop her off at home, but Renae wants to go with us (‘if that’s okay,’ she says) to be there for Paxton. My youngest daughter has only known Mary Lou for a few months now. Sure, they get along well and like each other, but the level of worry and emotion surrounding her is a bit extreme for such a new family connection. She must be receiving and projecting *my* worry and concern for my sister.

The girls are mostly quiet on the ride to the hospital.

It doesn’t take us too long to find Mary Lou in one of the waiting rooms. By the time we get there, she’s having a conversation with a strawberry blonde woman in teal scrubs who appears to be an intern. She’s not; she’s the doctor. I think that’s one of the first signs you’re getting old when doctors start to look like college students.

I head over and sit next to my sister, the girls to my right. Billy Joe is pacing around, restless, still fully decked out like a junior electrician. Following a brief pause for Mary Lou to explain to the doctor that I’m her sister, their conversation resumes. Billy Joe hugs me, thanks me for being here, then waves at Paxton and Renae before he resumes pacing around.

According to the doctor, Rick didn’t suffer a full-on heart attack. The poor guy experienced a severe chest pain and between the pain and him freaking out with panic over possibly having a heart attack, he fainted. He did, however, have a serious obstruction in an artery close to the heart that required emergency angioplasty. Rick is currently in the OR. Turns out, this woman is the ER doctor who first saw Rick, not the surgeon who’s performing the procedure.

I sit there holding my sister’s hand as they talk. Paxton reaches over and grabs both our hands as well. Billy Joe finally stops walking around in circles and sits in a row of seats facing us on the other side of a small coffee table littered with magazines. He looks so grown up it’s blowing my mind. The kid’s eighteen but could pass for twenty-four. I can’t even fathom how the little boy who used to zoom around the house and yard screaming happily with his friends has become this overly serious young man.

Listening to my sister talk about Rick’s health with the doctor sets off a thunderstorm of guilt inside me for being outside the normal process of life. On one hand, Mary Lou will never have to go through worrying about me suffering anything like cardiac arrest, cancer, or other complications of getting older. On the other, I feel as awkward as if we’d all decided to participate in a marathon that I totally cheated at by hopping on a bus and have the nerve to stand among everyone else at the finish line commiserating with them for how grueling it was to get there.

Yeah, I’m being hypercritical. What I’m really guilty about is having my sister this upset, scared, and vulnerable and not being able to do a damned thing about it. Mary Lou has always been the strong one between us... even compared to our brothers. I hate seeing these cracks in her psyche. Knowing her, though, this is mostly a ‘shock of the moment’ thing. In a couple days, she’ll be back to her usual unflappable self.

Alas, I can’t help but dwell on mortality and the future. Someday, it’ll be Mary Lou in the OR and me sitting here biting my nails. Worse, someday, it’ll be Tammy or Paxton. The most inhuman, unnatural thing about what I’ve become is being forced to watch my kids grow old and die. It isn’t how the world’s supposed to work. Parents are supposed to be spared that horror by dying first. And yeah, I know... the world is full of tragedy. I really have no place to

be upset. My kids living a full life and dying of old age is a perfect scenario. It's not their fault I'll be around to see it. Too many parents lose their kids to tragic circumstances. They're the ones I should feel anguish over. Not me.

Okay, Sam. Pity train's leaving the station. Time to get off.

I exhale.

It's freakin' hospitals. They always get me thinking about death and mortality. Probably since I died in one, technically. Those first few days as my body slowly changed into a monster are still fresh in my memory yet somehow simultaneously a blur I can't truly interpret. I remember biting some old man but it also feels like a strange dream that might not really have happened. At least, in this case, I know it's memory fogged by the delirium of whatever process happened to me.

The doctor eventually leaves, after reassuring us Rick should be fine and promising to tell us as soon as we can see him. He will, of course, be unconscious for a while after surgery. As soon as the doctor is five steps away, Paxton zips around to sit next to Mary Lou on the left. There really isn't too much a thirteen-year-old can do to help in this situation, but she's offering herself as a live teddy bear for as long as needed. My sister puts an arm around her.

Billy Joe heads off to use the bathroom, which prompts Renae to do the same. This in turn gets Paxton moving because according to the Girl Union, one cannot go to the restroom alone.

Once the three of them are out of earshot, Mary Lou asks me if I think 'something dark' attacked Rick. The only thing supernatural about my sister is her iron willpower and drive to protect us. By us, I mean me and my brothers... and now our kids as well.

She *does* understand Tammy though. I spent many nights crying on the phone to my sister, worried to death I'd find my daughter's body in our bathtub or get 'the call' from the police after she jumped off some building downtown. To her, telepathy had been like Chinese water torture she couldn't get away from. Constant noise in one's mind could drive even the most hardened person nuts after long enough.

Every damn day, I am grateful she's free of that. I don't care how much more difficult it makes my life not being able to read minds.

Speaking of mind reading... my sister's kids don't know anything about how crazy their Aunt Sam is, and by crazy, I mean supernatural. Or what happened to Tammy and Anthony... or any of us, for that matter. Mary Lou had done a bang-up job keeping all things paranormal away from her family.

Minutes later, Billy Joe returns from his foray to the restroom, followed shortly by the two girls. Mary Lou and Paxton talk in a meandering conversation that drifts from happy memories to random comments about life, school, or music. I swear my kid would make an awesome therapist. She's totally gotten my sister out of her worry spiral.

Meanwhile, I multi-task. While half my brain is part of the conversation, the other half tries to make sense of the case that's come to dominate my time. I'm becoming increasingly convinced Dianne is innocent. True, she's a chemist working at a facility where she could obtain that dimethylmercury stuff. But if she *did* use it to poison her husband, it would essentially be asking the cops to catch her. It's such a rare and toxic substance, homicide investigators would almost certainly hone in on her as the prime suspect. Even if they couldn't establish a clear motive for her to kill him, they'd probably get blinded by the circumstantial obviousness of her accessibility to the substance and knowledge of its properties.

Killers typically want to distance themselves as much as possible from the crime.

Exception, of course, being the true psychopaths who are proud of their ‘work.’ It’s super unlikely for a woman who kills her husband to be a serial killer in hiding. Many serial killers have carried on seemingly ordinary family lives. They don’t usually crap where they eat, so to speak.

Dianne Stafford is a somewhat introverted, highly intelligent, socially awkward person. She’s probably a ‘stay home and play board games’ rather than the ‘going out for some wine with the girls’ type person. She doesn’t strike me as a serial killer, which means she’s too smart to kill in a way that practically paves a yellow brick road right back to her.

It doesn’t seem plausible to me that she’d deliberately do something so obvious and then claim someone set her up. Actual killers don’t want to be in the spotlight of an investigation... though they often obsess about them. Sherbet has all sorts of stories, like the guy who killed a woman who lived in the apartment across the hall from him who kept showing up on news cameras to do interviews. Turned out, he killed her. Can’t say if the dude wanted fame or just needed to know if the investigation involved him.

Yeah... Dianne doesn’t fit that.

Considering her skills and employment, denying involvement in Vince’s murder will sound like a lie, which makes it all the easier for this to really be a setup. Assuming murder really did happen here, it means the killer knows what Dianne’s job is—and that Vincent had MS. The Staffords didn’t go around making a big deal of his illness. Everyone I spoke to who wasn’t close to the family had been shocked to learn he had MS at all. He’d been visibly ordinary to all but the closest people in his life orbit. His best friend saw some attacks. Gwen, obviously, did as well. Katrina would’ve known his condition and Dianne’s job. Problem being, she seemed way too genuinely caring to have possibly concocted an elaborate murder plot.

Can’t work out what her motive would’ve been beyond an implausibly possessive-psychotic thing where she acted on Gwen’s jealousy of Dianne to kill Vincent to get him away from his wife who didn’t ‘love him enough.’ But, yeah. That’s silly. Besides, how the heck would she have gotten her hands on mercury in such a rare and dangerous form?

Foreign agents?

Mercenaries or even agents of the Egyptian government could have observed the Staffords for months, learning enough about them to do it. Still, it doesn’t feel right to me. Why kill only Vincent? He wasn’t the sole owner of Grand Galleon Imports. I should check on his partner Walton to see if he’s had any strange experiences that could’ve been failed assassination attempts. Even though I doubt the pharaoh curse angle, something about Max’s demeanor with the crystal ball makes me retain a bit of suspicion there could be something supernatural going on as well. Not a curse, but... something. What? No idea. That, I have to find out.

A nurse walks over and informs us Rick is out of surgery and on his way to recovery. “Everything went perfectly,” she continues. “He’ll be sleeping for a while but you will be able to see him briefly in a few minutes. I wouldn’t expect much from him in the way of talking for several hours, though.”

Mary Lou jumps to her feet. “Oh, thank you. Where is he?”

“On his way to a room. It’ll be a few minutes.” The nurse smiles. “I’ll be back as soon as I get the word he’s ready to have visitors.”

My sister reluctantly sits back down. “Okay. Thanks.” She eyes Paxton and Renae. “Oh, you girls probably have homework to do. You shouldn’t spend all day here.”

“It’s all right, Aunt Mary Lou.” Paxton grins. “Homework’s not too heavy tonight.”

“Yeah. And I’m glad he’s okay,” says Renae.

Mary Lou thanks them, then looks at me. “You really should take them home soon.”

“We’ll hang out for a while after we see Rick.” I smile. That’s my sister. Concerned about the kids’ schoolwork. And, I suspect, she’s convinced no teenage girl wants to sit around the hospital room of her girlfriend’s uncle for too long. She knows Paxton is happy to sacrifice her free time for family, even if it gets her in trouble at school for not finishing homework. Speaking of trouble at school, I still haven’t gotten a call from the principal about Tammy’s ‘fight.’

The way stuff like that blows up these days, the principal is probably hoping to keep it quiet. Whatever. As long as my daughter doesn’t get punished for standing up for her younger sister, works for me.

We sit around for another five minutes before the nurse comes back and waves us to follow her. She leads us to a recovery suite where they’ll be monitoring Rick for a few hours before moving him to an ordinary room. The poor guy looks pale and... old. Not like elderly, but he definitely looks like he’s in his fifties now. I have this mental image frozen into my brain of him being mid-thirties. Every time I think of Rick Warner, I see the memory. It’s a shock to experience reality, moreso due to his present condition making him look even weaker.

Mary Lou sits by the bed, holds his hand, and talks to him. She starts apologizing for ‘all the fried and heavy food’ and promises that they’ll be making some changes soon so this never happens again.

“Don’t blame yourself,” says Paxton. “It’s not your fault.”

We get into a conversation about food, health, and ‘clean eating.’ Paxton’s into healthy food. Her father regarded cooking as ‘girl’s work’ so she ended up doing all of it once she was old enough to see over the top of the stove. Bastard. Not only was he abusive, he basically used her as a house servant.

So, yeah. We talk about Mary Lou needing our help to convince Rick he’s gotta cut down on the double cheeseburgers and fried chicken. Even Billy Joe is on board with the idea. As much as the kid likes his burgers, he doesn’t want to lose his dad.

Roughly an hour after they let us visit, a different nurse gently shoos us out to allow Rick to rest. They suggest we come back in the morning, so we decide to relocate to my place after my sister picks Ruby Grace up from home. The poor girl’s gotta be going nuts. She’s home alone with only a stream of texts from her mother and brother about what happened.

Yeah... the remainder of today is going toward family time. Sorry, Vince, I don’t enjoy making you wait, but you’re already dead.

Chapter Twenty-Three Escapee

Vexing as my current ‘big case’ is, the nice thing about investigating a death after the fact is the lack of urgency.

It might sound insensitive or cruel to say Vincent Stafford won’t get any deader, but it’s the reality. Sure, there’s an element of time involved. Clues dry up and go away the longer any case goes unsolved. However, it’s not like I’ve been hired to find a missing person who might still be alive—and each passing hour reduces the odds of finding them alive. I hate those cases. So much stress.

Sometimes, an investigator really has exhausted all options for everything they can actively do to solve a case and it comes down to a little patience. I can’t help but feel *something* is going to happen soon. The universe is giving me this subconscious message that I’ve knocked something loose somewhere... like one of those elaborate set ups with the marbles that roll from one station to another, knock stuff over, move a ball that falls into a bucket, which slides off a block and swings into another ball, sending it rolling down a track and so on.

Right now, I only need to wait for the mechanism to run its course.

It’s Thursday, and I’m home again after putting in a day at the office. The day went by quick thanks to a giant warehouse in LA needing a bunch of background checks on a group of prospective new-hires. They evidently handle expensive electronics like computers and massive TVs, so they don’t want to employ anyone with a history of theft. Makes sense to me.

Seven-ish hours of repetitive drudgery from behind a desk does eat time. I’ve never been the sort of person who recoils at such work. Hey, I used to be a HUD agent. That job was *all about* boring paperwork and staring at computer screens. Not exactly what I’d envisioned when the idea to become a federal agent hit me, but... whatever. Another time, another life, another Samantha Moon.

Sometimes I do occasionally wonder where I’d be if my life had been different, and by different, I mean entirely mundane—not supernatural at all. Honestly? All I have to do is look at Mary Lou and that would’ve been me. We’re pretty similar in most respects, except that her need to protect generally only extended to her family. I took it to a whole new level by joining law enforcement.

So, yeah. Downtime—sorta.

I’m waiting for *something*. What it is, I don’t exactly know. My gut is biding its time. I no longer really think Dianne played a part in her husband’s death. I still believe Vincent’s death did not occur due to natural causes, more so now even with the wife telling me his decline matched the symptoms of toxic mercury poisoning.

The idea she, in fact, did kill him and is playing a role right now is damn near unthinkable to me. If so, she’s the coldest, most calculating, emotionless monster on the face of the Earth... and I say that knowing health insurance companies exist. Dianne isn’t exactly normal, though. She’s got... some issues. I suppose it isn’t uncommon for the ‘true nerds’ of the world to have serious oddities when it comes to social skills or emotional affect. What I mean by ‘true nerd’ is differentiating the people who like *Star Wars* and video games from the sorts of people who go to college at age twelve.

I found some articles about Dianne while digging into her background. And, yeah... she

was in the second category.

She started college at fifteen and she's on the list of the top fifty youngest people in California to get a PhD in chemistry. She's also got one of the absolute cleanest records I've ever seen. No traffic tickets, not a single brush with police. I couldn't even find any dark marks on her credit report.

Frustrating when all the evidence points to a suspect least likely to be the killer.

Meanwhile, I've been sitting here on the couch while I wait for the laundry to be ready. Been kinda busy with the case lately, so dirty clothing has piled up a bit. No, my kids aren't lazy... we've got chore schedules. Tammy's been vacuuming the house. Anthony's on kitchen, bathroom, and dishes, and Paxton has taken over changing the bed linens and dusting. Laundry is one of the things on my list.

We are, as they say, a highly functional family—which is amazing considering everything.

Tammy's kinda given up on finding a new boyfriend for now. I think it's partially that she's still sad over Kai breaking up with her. Also, she got a reputation at school of being 'the weird girl.' None of the boys in her class are interested in the freaky goth chick (as she tells me they call her) even though she's backed off on the moodiness and black clothing. The girl's got black hair naturally and is kinda pale, so she looks the part even if she isn't trying overly hard anymore.

Anthony's been a bit odd lately. Nothing serious, but I am tempted to think he might be sweet on a girl at school. Call it mom's intuition. The boy—I say boy but he's pretty much the size of a grown man at this point—has gone fist-to-snoot with werewolves and demons but has no experience dealing with girls. In truth, he'd been avoiding getting into any emotional entanglements with ordinary people to protect them from the crazy that haunts the Moon family. It seems the Universe is finally giving us a cookie for dealing with Elizabeth. I'd like to hope he's as relieved as I am we have a chance to feel somewhat ordinary.

If he's relaxing enough to consider dating a girl... my heart is all warm now.

Eventually, it gets late enough for Renae to go home. Her dad stops by to pick her up. I chat with him while we wait for the girls to pack up their school stuff. Yes, my younger daughter and her girlfriend were alone in Paxton's bedroom for a few hours. Nothing inappropriate happened. And yes, I know this for a fact. My ears are extremely sensitive. Besides, I trust Paxton.

That said, I wouldn't be thrilled about the idea if Tammy had a young man over in her room... but as cringey as it is for me to think about my daughter being an adult now, I'd much rather have her in her bedroom here than out at some questionable motel or an unknown boy's house. Same will go for Anthony when he starts dating. But... I really, sincerely doubt any of my kids would be comfortable enough to do anything with their mother in earshot.

Their mother with her super-duper hearing.

It's kinda neat having a conversation with Renae's father about the idea we might someday be the parents at a wedding. He's only semi-serious. After all, the girls are far too young to really understand love. Not to say that people who meet as kids and fall in love never end up married, but it doesn't happen as often as Hollywood likes to claim. Odds are, these two will break up before a year. Not wishing for it, merely being realistic. Renae seems like a nice, smart kid. I wouldn't mind having her around a little longer.

The girls emerge from the hall, Paxton in an oversized shirt and pajama pants, Renae still in her loose, black top, jeans, and 'cute boots.' The girls hug each other goodbye for now. I

can't help but notice Paxton getting a little emotional when Renae leaves. She's only sad for a moment. I mean it's not like they won't see each other again soon. Tomorrow morning at school isn't exactly far away.

An hour or so later, I'm walking into the house from the detached garage with a basket of laundry in my arms when Paxton emits a scream of terror.

Shit. Not again. I'm freakin' retired. Please be a spider and not a demon. I exhale hard. Paxton is not a fan of bugs. Honestly, she'd probably scream just as loud over a furry centipede as she would a six-foot-tall fiery fiend.

I set the basket down and jog into the house. Tammy and Anthony both peer out of their bedrooms into the hall making 'what the heck was that for' faces. Wow. Three kids in the house. We're a real family again. I really want to stand there and enjoy that thought, but can't. Youngest is potentially in trouble. I rush to her room.

There she is standing on her bed, pointing at the white dresser. No fire. No weird sulphur smells. No odd energy in the air. Whew.

Just a critter.

I snicker.

"It's not funny, Mom!" Paxton points. "There's a rat in here!"

Rat? Ack. I mean... they don't scare me. Just... ugh. In the span of four one-thousandths of a second, I try to figure out which kid is stashing food where it doesn't belong and come up empty. Ant has a bad habit of leaving mostly-empty soda cans or snack wrappers on his computer desk. Hey, the kid is amazing but he can't be *perfect*. I won't even get into the crimes he commits in regard to underwear. His legendary skid marks would survive industrial strength bleach. I don't think his messy desk is bad enough to attract rats.

Maybe it's only a wandering rodent gone exploring. More likely, it's a mouse rather than a rat.

I crouch and peer under the dresser. My eyes are capable of seeing clearly in even total darkness. Even though I'm no longer a nocturnal 'undead type' vampire, that part of it stayed. There, crouched against the wall minding its own business, is a light brown-and-white teddy bear hamster.

"Aww..."

"No aww!" squeals Paxton. "Rats are nasty."

I peer up at her. "It's not a rat. It's a hamster."

She goes from doing the 'eww dance' and being ready to climb through the ceiling to escape to making an 'aww a kitten' face in an instant. Her fear and revulsion are gone faster than the speed of a C4 explosion.

"Hammie?" she chirps. "Why is there a hammie in the house?"

This kid. So adorable. Hammie indeed.

"Good question." I reach in under the dresser and corral the little fuzzball. He's apparently domesticated enough to tolerate being collected without biting me.

As soon as she sees him (at least, I assume it's a 'him') Paxton squeals in delight and starts petting the critter. Wow. Talk about a one-eighty. Okay, my work here is done. The beast is defeated. I hand the 'menace' to Paxton who is all too happy to cuddle the hamster.

“Okay, can anyone explain to me why there’s a hamster in here?” I say in a loud ‘mom voice.’

Anthony and Tammy appear simultaneously in Paxton’s doorway. Tammy looks clueless. Anthony’s expression is more ‘oops.’ I raise my eyebrows at him.

“Sorry, Ma. I should’ve asked about it first but…” He stuffs his hands in his pockets. “I brought him home from school today because the teacher had to get rid of him and implied he’d be euthanized if no one took him in.”

“Eep! No!” Paxton turns away from us, cradling the fuzzball protectively.

“Chill, Pax,” says Anthony. “He’s fine. That’s why I brought him home.”

Paxton stares pleadingly at me. She’s not laying it on thick yet, but I can sense the tears being primed. She’s like an Old West gunslinger getting ready to whip her emotions out of the holster rather than drawing six-shooters.

“Relax.” I smile at her. “He can stay. I can’t refuse asylum to the little furball.”

Paxton grins big. Tammy seems more amused about her screaming at a ‘rat’ as if demons came back to kill us, and also has a bit of ‘aww how cute’ in her eye.

“Got a habitat in the room.” Anthony watches Paxton doting over the hamster for a few seconds. “Some food and stuff from the school, too, but it won’t last forever. Habitat’s kinda old. Guess he found a weak spot and broke out of ham-catriz.”

Tammy and I snicker.

“Ham-catriz?” asks Paxton, blinking.

“Yeah.” Anthony chuckles. “Like Alcatraz, but for hamsters.”

The kid gives me an ‘I don’t get why that’s funny’ stare, but decides it’s not worth asking about. She resumes holding the hamster up and touching noses with him, cooing at him, and otherwise being thrilled to interact with something cute.

At least, for about twenty more seconds.

“Eeek!” squeaks Paxton. “He peed on my hand!”

Anthony laughs. “They do that sometimes.”

She hands him the furball and runs off to the bathroom.

“I assume you’ll need to get him some more food,” I say.

Anthony nods.

“And a better house!” yells Paxton over the sound of handwashing.

“Thanks, Ma.” Anthony hugs me. “Sorry about not saying anything. Wasn’t sure you’d be okay with it. You never did let us get a dog.”

“Dogs are a ton more work than a hamster,” I say, smiling. “But… he’s a good first pet I suppose.”

Okay… so our family is plus one hamster.

Chapter Twenty-Four Day Job

I was wrong.

Our family is plus *three* hamsters. Friday after school, we ran out to the store with the idea of getting a replacement cage and some food. Paxton asked if she could have a hamster, too... and so did Tammy. Yep. So now we have three habitats and three hamsters, one per kid, per bedroom. Apparently, the little buggers (cute as they are) can be territorial and are likely to attack each other if put in the same cage.

So, anyway...

The following Monday is a random day off for Tammy and Anthony. Their school is doing some manner of renovation or cleaning project on the ventilation system as well as having a teacher workshop or some such thing. Anthony's got the day to hang out with his friends. Tammy decided to go with me to the office. As has become her usual practice, she stepped out to grab coffee and egg sandwiches for us. She returns twenty minutes later, sets my cup and foil-wrapped sandwich on my desk, and chuckles.

"Is this what having a day job feels like?" Tammy heads to her desk and flops in the chair. "A real one? Not like at Wendy's."

"Wendy's is a real job. It's just not a cushy one." I open my breakfast. "Office jobs are kinda nice."

"Yeah." Tammy leans back, puts her feet up on the desk. "I want to work office jobs from now on... you know, if I work."

I glance at her with a raised eyebrow. "If? Are you expecting to become independently wealthy somehow or marry a sugar daddy?"

She scrunches her nose. "Nah. Not gonna marry an old man for his money. That's kinda nasty. I mean, assuming I don't end up being a freelance artist or writer or something creative. If I gotta have a job, I deffo wanna do something like this instead of busting my ass all day long."

"Heh. Yeah. Kinda explains why I tolerated HUD so long. Wasn't really the adventure, excitement, and justice I'd been hoping for... but there is something to be said for the safety of a desk."

"Truth." She nods, then bites her sandwich.

While eating in between sips of coffee, I look over all the information and notes I have on the Stafford investigation. The omelet-on-a-roll is tasty but isn't going to sate my hunger. Fortunately, a reasonably regular trickle of pedestrians goes by outside. My office has a big front glass window area, so it's easy for me to siphon off a bit of psychic energy from people as they walk past. One or two yawn, but I'm not taking much. It's like going to one of those all-you-can-eat buffets and taking two or three bites of every individual item. This alone is a good reason for me to maintain an office space downtown. People don't generally walk past my house that much.

As far as the file goes, nothing's jumping out at me as to any potential motive to kill the man beyond the super long shot of Egypt being upset over the theft of artifacts. It still doesn't track well for me, though. Why would they only kill him and not the rich person who bought the items illegally? Then again, we're not talking state actors here, but a fringe group of

fanatics.

Hmm.

On a whim, I decide to call Chad Helling, my old partner from HUD. Maybe he can do me a favor and use his access to find something I can't. It's been a few months since we spoke, but we've kept in semi-regular contact. He hadn't seen me in person for years until we ran into each other at a Dunkin almost a year ago. I finally told him a little bit of the craziness. No way to avoid it really since he clearly recognized me and couldn't understand why I looked even younger than his memory of me. In truth, I didn't change. He misremembered me being 'fortyish,' so when he saw me, I seemed to have aged backward. Time, alas, has not decided to ignore him like it does me. I'd been surprised to learn he's not with HUD anymore, having transferred over to the FBI. He's also not a field agent. Age is a bitch. Chad flies a desk now as a supervisory agent overseeing a team of investigators, which isn't too much different from his time at HUD. The desk part, not the supervising.

No, I still look more or less 'a year or two shy of thirty' according to most men.

"Agent Helling," mutters Chad by way of answering the phone.

"How formal," I say, chuckling.

"Oh, hey, Sam. I didn't look at the ID before picking up. How's it going?"

"Not too bad."

"I sense you need a favor." Chad hums to himself. "Calling during office hours is a bit more urgent than social."

"Yep. Good instincts as usual." I wink, even though he can't see me, then give him an overview of the Vincent Stafford situation. "Hoping you can help me finally put my Egypt theory to rest."

"Hmm. Yeah, sounds iffy to me but I can check with a buddy in Langley for you."

I blink. "Whoa, like CIA Langley?"

At the word CIA, Tammy stares at me.

"I can neither confirm nor deny," says Chad, chuckling.

I laugh. "Thanks, partner. I appreciate it."

"You bet. Say, how you holding up?"

"Not bad."

"Still the ageless wonder?"

"But of course."

"Someday over drinks, you're going to have to tell me all about it."

"There's a lot to tell."

"I'll bring a six pack."

"Someday."

We say our farewells and get off the phone.

"Argh!" yells Tammy.

I look over at her. "What?"

"Just needed a stress breaker. These background checks are so dang tedious. No wonder you offloaded them onto me."

"Hah!" I grin. "Welcome to the working world, kiddo. Seniority has its perks."

She sticks her tongue out at me.

"You get used to it though, Tam Tam. Ninety-five percent of PI work is boring tedium."

Tammy holds her hands up. "Good. I don't want to be shot at."

The office phone rings.

“I got it since you’re so busy.” I grab the phone as she does a dramatic eye roll. “Moon Investigations, this is Sam.”

“Ms. Moon? It’s Dianne Stafford. I’d like to meet with you as soon as possible. It’s important.”

Seems the metaphorical Rube Goldberg machine, with all its balls, ramps and pulleys, is finally nearing the end. Has my patience paid off? We’ll see.

“All right. Be there soon as traffic allows.”

“Thank you,” she says, her voice shaky. “Can you meet me at the Starbucks on Yorba Linda Boulevard?”

Was that fear or grief I detected? Hard to tell over the phone. “Sure. On my way.”

“Good or bad news?” asks Tammy.

“Probably both.” I stand. “Need to run. Hold down the fort?”

Tammy sighs, staring at her screen. “Yep. I have enough to keep me busy all day.”

I head for the door. Come on, Dianne... have something good for me.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Deadly

I find Dianne Stafford at the Starbucks looking a complete mess.

Much to my total surprise, she's sitting with Gwen. From everything I've heard thus far, Vincent's widow and younger sister do not get along. Putting them in the same room results in icy silence at best or sarcastic sniping at the worst. No one mentioned any actual screaming arguments or physical violence—probably because Gwen doesn't have a personal problem with Dianne. No, she mostly felt the woman was incapable of taking care of her big brother with the same degree of care as she could. Assuming Dianne did *not* poison her husband, I've seen no evidence to imply her a bad caretaker. And again, Vincent wasn't in bad shape until his sudden downward spiral. He didn't need constant care. At least, not yet. He eventually would have when the MS progressed into the end stages.

Gwen sits beside Dianne on the same side of a small table in the back corner of the Starbucks. I wouldn't go so far as to say that Gwen seems 'happy,' but her demeanor is different from the last time we spoke. The insecurity is gone, as is that 'lost and don't know what to do with myself' thing.

As for Dianne, the woman's eyes are red. She's disheveled and appears as though she didn't sleep at all last night. Her present state is what I'd expect to see from a loving spouse upon their being told their better half was just killed unexpectedly. This degree of emotion might also come from a killer who's facing the inevitability of being caught. However, there is a slight but distinct difference in the two situations.

A killer worried about being caught will generally seem panicky. Their primary interest is self-preservation. In most cases, they're easy to rattle and confuse with tricky questions. Often, in fleeting moments when they are scared about going to prison for the rest of their lives (or facing the death penalty where applicable) they'll slip and let a bit of their true self show through.

Dianne, at the moment, has the downtrodden look of someone who's been hurt deeply and doesn't really care what happens to them. She's not fidgety, and she doesn't shy away from eye contact when I approach the little table at the back corner of the Starbucks. She also doesn't stand, which isn't a huge deal to me. Never been the super formal type.

I sit. "Good morning, ladies."

Dianne nods. "Thanks for meeting me—or us—on short notice."

"Yes, thank you," says Gwen in a voice not much louder than a whisper.

"I did what you suggested and had Vincent's body exhumed and examined. I told the police that a private investigator had reason to believe my husband's death might have been homicide."

Damn. Okay, color me impressed. She actually did it. Between her present mood and initiating the autopsy, she's officially off my suspect list. "They found evidence?"

"Yes." Dianne nods. "Vincent had a mercury level in his blood almost 5,000 times normal. The amount of mercury in his blood was only six percent of the total mercury in his system. Meaning, it mostly collected in his brain and spinal cord."

Gwen looks down. She seems almost contrite, not quite able to make eye contact with either one of us. Understandable. I think she'd convinced herself Dianne killed her brother and

now believes she was wrong. As far as I know, Gwen didn't ever accuse her openly of killing Vincent. Perhaps she wants to apologize for thinking it. In fact, she might have already done so. Their coffees are mostly gone.

"I'm just so... blown away that someone killed him." Dianne again makes a half-hearted attempt to pick up her coffee. This time, her hand actually touches the cup, but she doesn't lift it. "It was hard enough coping with his death, but knowing someone did it to him on purpose is... I just can't process it."

"You didn't seem too upset before," says Gwen in about as un-accusing a tone as those words could be put into.

"Vince had MS. I spent every day preparing myself for the inevitable. Even though the doctors said things wouldn't likely get noticeably bad until he was well into his sixties, not a day went by I didn't dread watching him suffer something I could do nothing to make better."

Gwen's eyes widen a little. "Wait. He expected to live into his sixties."

"In an ideal situation, yes." Dianne exhales. "Conditions like MS don't always follow the rules. But, dammit... I knew what happened to him was wrong. Too sudden and severe. I... I'm sorry, Gwen. I couldn't deal with the grief and just shut down. I stood there helpless watching it all happen and didn't say anything."

"To be fair," I say in a gentle voice. "You said the dose of mercury he received caused irreversible damage within minutes of exposure and nothing could've saved him... so there wasn't anything you could have done."

Gwen flinches at the phrase 'nothing could have saved him.'

"I could've told the police something was wrong. Insisted on an autopsy." Dianne makes an ill face and swallows.

"You did." I reach across the table and pat her hand.

"The police are involved now," says Gwen. "We think they're looking at Dianne even though she asked them to investigate. I don't believe she's involved anymore. But... I am still interested in hiring you to find the truth, only with a slightly different reason. If the police get lazy and try to pin it on Dianne just to clear the case off their system, I need you to find the real evidence to protect her. Averie and Parker need their mom."

Well, damn. Talk about a total 180.

Dianne breaks down at the mention of her kids. Yeah, I'm a mom. They pushed my button with that. I'd like to think Gwen's been watching too many movies and that the cops won't simply grab the most expedient suspect to pin a crime on. It's not like detectives get bounties anymore.

"I'm on it. Still am." I lean back. "Do you know exactly what killed him?"

"Given the extreme concentration in his system," says Dianne, "my best guess would be organic mercury. Or to be technical, dimethylmercury or H₃C-Hg-CH₃. It's *extremely* toxic, volatile, and reactive. The stuff is one of the most powerful neurotoxins out there. Two or three droplets making skin contact will kill the average person. It's readily absorbed through the skin and it can pass through a wide variety of materials—including lab gloves."

"Ouch," I mutter. "Does it have any recognizable odors? Fumes?"

"It supposedly has a slightly sweet aroma." Diane squirms. "But, from what I know... if you breathe in enough to be able to smell it, you've absorbed enough to kill you—or at least cause serious permanent damage."

I blink. "This stuff sounds horrible."

“It is.” Dianne shudders. “I refuse to work with it. Don’t care if they think I’m a chicken. There are just some risks I am not willing to take.”

Out comes my notepad. “All right. So, we’re talking about an extremely small quantity.”

“Two or three drops. Maybe four.” Dianne’s expression hardens in an attempt at anger. “An accidental exposure of two or three drops killed a chemist in 1997. No one back then really understood the true extent of the danger. She spilled some on her hand and didn’t think much of it because she had gloves on. Ten months later, she was dead.”

I jot down ‘ten months.’ “Do you think we’re looking at a similar time frame?”

“Well...” She leans her head side to side in thought for a few seconds. “We’re definitely not looking at an accident. Someone using it to kill on purpose would probably give the person a dose larger than two drops. It’s not a fast-acting toxin, but it’s effective... and cruel. Depending on exactly how much they gave him, it could have taken between eight and ten months.”

Which was about how long Vince’s sudden downturn had been.

Gwen takes Dianne’s hand. Oh wow. Fastest buried hatchet in the west right here. Then again, Gwen’s got that kind of personality. She needs to attach herself to someone and I think Dianne’s just been volunteered. Maybe I should convince her to get a dog? And no, the mood between them isn’t romantic... this is akin to sisters.

“The only way to expose someone is skin contact?” I ask.

“No.” Dianne closes her eyes, pausing a moment with a face like she’s about to throw up. “Ingestion would work the same, though it would likely absorb into the body before it made it to the stomach. A couple drops in his coffee or if someone tampered with his lunch. The vapors are toxic as well. Vapors would be extremely difficult to use in the open as they would disperse rapidly. It’s far more convenient to spill the liquid on him. Less risk of accidental contamination or leaving evidence behind on dishes.”

Wow. No wonder she’s worried about the police. I think she’s innocent, yet her talking about the best way to poison someone with this stuff is not exactly the sort of thing that defrays suspicion of guilt. She’s one of those people who is so damn smart their brain doesn’t have room for social skills. She likely doesn’t comprehend how she sounds to an investigator.

“Okay. Estimate about eight or ten months ago the exposure happened.” I write down ‘8-10 months’ and circle it. “You’re saying a few drops on the skin and a person’s doomed?”

“Yes. There’s no way to reverse it.” Dianne dabs a napkin at her tears. “Chelation therapy isn’t effective in this situation.”

I tilt my head. “Sorry. Never heard that before. Chelation?”

“It’s a therapeutic process to remove heavy metals from the body,” says Dianne. “Doctors use it to treat cases of acute poisoning from things like mercury, arsenic, lead, uranium, and so on. Chelating agents like DMPS, dimercaptosuccinic acid, and TTFD, thiamine tetrahydrofurfuryl disulfide, are given to the person. Those substances bind to the toxic metals in the body stopping them from binding to cellular structures. The bonded particles float around in the bloodstream and are eventually excreted.”

“It’s not a magic cure,” says Gwen, nodding toward her former sister-in-law. “And she told me it can destroy the kidneys.”

“Yes.” Dianne’s entire presence becomes ‘just shoot me now’ for a moment. “Given the level of mercury they found in Vincent’s body, it wouldn’t have mattered. Too much of it had already gotten into his brain by the time he started to show symptoms. Even if he knew what

happened the instant he was exposed and the doctors started him on DMPS right away, it would not have made much difference. At best, he might have survived in a permanent vegetative state.”

Dianne’s somewhat detached, clinical tone of voice hits Gwen hard. She leans forward and sobs. This, in turn, fractures Dianne’s composure and she cries as well.

I wait for them to gather themselves. Eventually, they stop actively weeping and stare at me with red-ringed eyes.

“Do you think there is any possibility he may have been accidentally exposed to this stuff at work?” I ask.

“Extremely unlikely,” says Dianne.

“Can you think of anything out of the ordinary he did around ten months ago? Like take an international trip? Somewhere he might have been attacked? Do you think anyone broke into your house at night and dribbled this stuff on him in bed?”

Gwen cringes. “That’s terrifying.”

“I don’t know...” Dianne stares into space. “We have an alarm system. I don’t recall anything that would’ve made me wonder if someone got into the house. And the dogs...”

“Oh, right.” I jot down ‘unlikely at home.’ “Your dogs would’ve gone nuts if someone broke in.”

Dianne smiles. “Yes, the poor guy who broke in would’ve been licked to death. My goldies are overly affectionate. They don’t care who you are, they want love.”

“They still would have made a lot of noise.” Gwen glances at her, then me. “Averie is also a really light sleeper.”

“Okay. So it didn’t happen at the house,” I say. “Is there any dimethylmercury at the place where you work?”

“Yes. They have some.” Dianne squirms. “I really dislike being in the same building as the stuff. However, it’s on the other side of the facility in secure storage. The most dangerous substances are kept there in a vault. Everyone, even the directors, has to go through a request and approval process to check materials out.”

We talk for a while longer as I try to get as much information as I can. We (including the police) now know for a fact Vincent Stafford’s death was homicide. There aren’t too many places around to obtain a chemical as dangerous as dimethylmercury. PEL Research, where Dianne works, has the necessary licenses and whatnot to keep some on site. There are likely other industrial sites with it nearby, too.

Dianne said it doesn’t have too many uses due to its extreme risks. It’s a ‘methylating agent’ whatever that means. Apparently, something called a Grignard reagent—as well as other much less toxic alternatives—have removed the need for anyone to use dimethylmercury.

Wonderful. I’m now conducting a concurrent investigation with the police. I’d normally consider my job done here as I fulfilled Gwen’s initial request. Even though I didn’t personally ‘find’ the proof that Vincent’s death occurred as a result of homicide, I played an instrumental role in that information coming to light. However, both Gwen and Dianne have more than enough money to where I don’t feel guilty working for some of it.

I look at Dianne. “Can you help me reconstruct Vincent’s movements and activity around the time of his likely exposure?”

She nods, appearing momentarily at a loss until something in her head clicks. “Offhand, I’m really not sure. But... I can let you borrow his laptop. It’s got his planner and itinerary on

it.”

“That works.” I nod.

“All right. Obviously, I don’t have it with me. If you want to follow us to the house, I can get it.”

“Sounds good.” I close my notepad. “Nothing else I can think of right now to ask.”

Gwen stands. “We really appreciate your help, Ms. Moon.”

I smile. “Call me Sam.”

Chapter Twenty-Six Little More than Intuition

After following the women back to Dianne's house and picking up the laptop, I return to the office.

I walk in on a conversation between Tammy and a lawyer named George who's trying to confirm whether or not we successfully served process documents to his client. As soon as I hear the name 'Billy Dunham' I remember the stunned look on the guy's face when he tried to dart into an elevator to get away from me but I managed to catch him in time thanks to my freaky reflexes. Despite my daughter showing him a cell phone video (she took) of me handing the guy the paperwork, George is attempting to claim we gave him something else.

My daughter isn't having it, nor does she give off any sense of being intimidated by this guy. She simply says, "We have the video. Request a hearing and let a judge make the call."

Her expression and body language yell, 'you've been served, bitch,' but she (thankfully) doesn't say that out loud. Or maybe I'm imagining it since the whole 'served' thing is older than her... it's more my generation.

George leaves in a huff, giving me a wary side eye as he scurries past me to the door. I feel like a lioness walking in to catch a fox teasing one of my cubs... though, Tammy held her own. Once the door closes behind the guy, we share a chuckle over his admittedly pathetic attempt to get my daughter to say we didn't successfully serve the papers. People do that crap all the time. Thankfully, cell phone video exists, which makes it much more difficult for anyone to claim they never got the papers.

It's almost lunch time, so we decide to head a few blocks east and grab something to eat. On the way, we debate between the Flame Broiler, Pizza Hut, or El Pollo Loco. By the time we reach Euclid Street, we've settled on Mexican food. For obvious reasons, I don't usually have a traditional lunch unless Tammy is with me. Though, I do kind of get a little cranky after a few days of only consuming psychic energy. Maybe my body *does* need real food to some small degree.

Whatever. I enjoy food, so it's no great burden on me.

We take our lunch back to the office, sit, and talk about the Stafford case as we eat, among other non-work-related subjects such as Tammy's friends, school, and new hamster.

Eventually, the time we spare for a lunch break ends and I dive back into trying to figure out what the heck happened to poor Vincent. I open his laptop. Conveniently, Dianne had put her husband's password on a Post-it note stuck to the screen. Going into someone else's computer always feels like a violation of privacy, even when I have permission. Never quite know what you're going to find on a computer. An instructor I had years ago when I was on my way to becoming a federal agent once joked that you can tell what kind of person an individual truly is by the type and quantity of porn on their computer. The implication there being that *everyone* has at least some. To this day, I'm not sure if he was being cynical or literal. There's none on my computer at home, and I'm pretty sure neither Mary Lou nor Allison have any. Maybe my instructor meant men only? Am I strange for not having it? Whatever.

I am grateful for never having worked for any law enforcement department required to look at the darker stuff found on a suspect's electronics. Ugh. I know I couldn't have handled seeing that crap all the time. No idea how they do it day in and day out and keep sane.

Bracing myself as though I'm about to tiptoe into a minefield, I dig into Vincent's personal property. Of course, I am not searching for image files, so even if he has questionable stuff on this computer, I'm content to leave it be. Considering Dianne had his password, it's possible he didn't put any adult content on this computer.

Calendar app. Mail. An entire folder named GGI (for Grand Galleon Imports). Vincent has all sorts of financial spreadsheets on here. Well, suffice to say, his company is doing well. Looks like ten to twenty million dollars' worth of merchandise moving through their system each month. It's not their profit or even what they charge... merely the value of the cargo they transport. So, yeah. GGI is not a tiny operation. It's not exactly massive, either, but it's respectable. Explains their beautiful home.

About forty minutes into this laptop, I open his calendar, looking for trips, meetings, or appointments in places he doesn't frequent. The oddest thing happens when I've scrolled all the way back through 2020 into 2019. As soon as my gaze focuses on a scheduled lunch meeting for November third, water drips on my head.

"Gah." I jump back and look up.

A heavy *thud* comes from Tammy's direction, soon followed by a stream of mild cursing. As in, she's swearing like a sailor but not quite using the bad words. I glance over at her. She's clutching her knee and glaring at me.

"You okay?" I ask.

"You startled me and I whacked my knee on the desk," mutters Tammy.

"Oops, sorry."

"Why the heck did you yell?" She rubs her knee, shoots a scowl at the metal desk, then sighs.

"Water landed on my head." Again, I peer straight up. "Might have a leak." I pat myself where the cold droplets landed. Weird. My hair is dry. "Guess I imagined it."

She looks at the drop ceiling. "I don't see any water. Which means I hit my knee for nothing."

"Sorry, sweetie."

I return my attention to the laptop screen. The instant I focus on that same lunch meeting, the water-on-the-head feeling happens again. I whip my hand up to swipe at the spot.

Dry again!

Oh, hang on a second. Holy crap... this might be some kind of psychic thing. Allison said something last month about sensing it in me, but it hasn't actually done anything yet. I'd been thinking she merely picked up on my need to consume mental energy, but perhaps not. Then again, it makes sense for a 'psychic vampire' to have some manner of psychic ability. And sure, the term is often used to describe people who are just fatiguing to be around even if they don't actually drain anyone's mental energy. In my case, it's more literal.

I again fixate on the calendar entry, but this time, I try to reach out mental feelers, asking for information. It doesn't startle me when the droplets hit again. Five of them, in fact. I feel the urge to demand a new table.

Table? There are only two *desks* in the office.

Demand? Demand to who?

Shaking my head, I click the calendar entry. It opens to the particulars of a lunch meeting at the Barstow Hotel in Los Angeles. It's one of those little-known-of but expensive places. If I remember correctly, the original Barstow Hotel belonged to some guy who got silly amounts of

rich during the Gold Rush out here in the late 1840s. They've upgraded and relocated since the old days. This one's a large, modern building... the sort of place that charges almost a normal person's monthly rent for a one-night stay. He was scheduled to meet a guy named Donald Maxton. The calendar entry contains a phone number as well as the notation 'India south.'

With my body tingling and the sensation of water dripping on my head, I call Allison.

"Ugh," she moans by way of answering. "Do you know what time it is?"

"12:57 p.m.," I reply.

"You woke me up."

"Why do you stay up so damn late?" I ask, totally unserious.

Tammy grins at my teasing.

"It's my job—oh, never mind. You're screwing with me." Allison yawns. "What's up?"

"Got a question for you..." I describe what happened, feeling the drops and having the urge to move to a new table.

"Sounds like psychometry to me," says Allison.

"Psychometry?"

Tammy looks over. "Yeah, Ma. It's like from those movies where the psychic picks up the knife and they see the murder happen in their head like a dream."

"But I didn't see a vision."

"It's different for everyone," says Allison. "Also, it can change based on the strength of the emotion. Water dripping on your head is closer to being annoying than anything else."

"You think he felt water dripping on his head?"

"Maybe. Which would explain your need to move to another table. I bet the guy had the laptop with him."

"But..." I lean back in the chair, rubbing my forehead. "Drips on the head are such a minor thing. Why would it have even made an impression?"

"I dunno." Allison chuckles. "The person might have been seriously angry at the dripping. Maybe they were worried about something else and the dripping water enhanced the psychic imprint, somehow."

I brush a hand over the laptop. "Yeah, maybe. I'm not getting anything else. Just the drops and the urge to move—ah, hell."

"What?"

"I don't think it was water that hit him on the head."

"Oh?"

"No. The man who owned this laptop was murdered by an extremely toxic chemical. A couple drops on the skin—or scalp, I suppose—killed him."

"Well, there ya go. That's why it imprinted." Allison whistles. "Only a few drops? Wow. What is this stuff?"

"Dimethylmercury. Nasty crap."

"If it only takes a couple drops, it's surprising more people don't use it to kill." Allison makes a shuddering noise.

"Except it's really hard to find, plus incredibly dangerous to handle," I say. "Also... totally obvious. Coroners would detect it as easily as walking into a wall."

"They should use ricin. That's harder to detect," mutters Tammy.

I stare at her.

"What?" She smiles. "I read a lot."

I thank Allison and promise to get lunch with her soon. She makes me promise *again* before we hang up. Gah, so needy. But I love her.

Tammy grills me about the ‘psychic experience’ for a few minutes, fascinated. She’s not jealous or anything, but given our history, psychic phenomena have become something of an interest to her. She watches all sorts of YouTube videos about it, usually ending up laughing at the fake ones. There’s so much bogosity out there, the real events get dismissed as nonsense. To be fair, only one out of maybe twenty is genuine.

Anyway, I eventually go back to the laptop screen. It’s distracting to have liquid dribbling on my head (or at least the sensation of it) while reading, but I do my best to ignore it. I decide to call the phone number in the entry.

A woman answers in four rings with, “South India Delights.”

“Hi. Can I please speak with Donald Maxton?”

“Who’s calling?” asks the woman.

“My name is Samantha Moon. I’m investigating a suspicious death and I have reason to believe Mr. Maxton might have been a witness. I need only a few minutes to ask a question or two.”

“Wow, okay. Hold on,” says the woman in a worried tone.

Heh. When I say it like that, people often assume I’m a police detective. It’s not technically a crime to let people’s imagination run away.

About forty seconds later, the line clicks, and a smooth-voiced man says, “Hello? This is Donald.”

“Hi, Mr. Maxton. I’m hoping you might be able to help me out with an investigation.”

“I can’t recall witnessing anything suspicious. Is this a serious call or did Jimmy put you up to this?” He chuckles.

I smile to myself. This guy sounds friendly and a little on the older side. His voice has a calm, soothing quality reminiscent of a grandpa reading a bedtime story. “I’m afraid it’s completely serious. Do you remember having lunch with Vincent Stafford back in November of 2019 at the Barstow Hotel?”

“Oh, yes. Actually... I do remember that. Certainly, no one was killed there.”

“Did you notice anything unusual? For example, did Vincent act strange at all during your meeting?”

“Strange? No... not that I recall.”

“Did anything happen that you wouldn’t necessarily expect to happen in an expensive hotel restaurant?”

Donald ‘hms’ for a few seconds. “Now that you mention it, he complained about being dribbled on. Leak in the ceiling or something. A few drops of water hit him on the head. We told the management about it and they assured us they didn’t have any issues of the kind. It must have been a waiter or waitress going by with a glass and the condensation dribbled off it.”

Yeah, because people serving tables hold ice-cold drinks out at arms’ length over a balcony railing.

“Thanks, Mr. Maxton. There is a possibility the police may contact you. It would be helpful if you could tell them about the dripping incident.”

“You aren’t the police?”

“No. I used to be a federal agent, but I freelance now as a private investigator. A relative hired me to look into the circumstances surrounding Vincent’s death.”

Donald gasps. “He’s dead?”

“I am afraid so.”

“Damn. What a shame. He was such a nice guy. We spent most of the time over lunch talking about our kids and commiserating as fathers.”

“Yes. He definitely did not deserve what happened to him.”

“Can you... I mean, do you mind telling me how he died?” asks Donald.

“The droplets that landed on him weren’t water.” I probably shouldn’t give this information out, but... he was right there and might have been splattered. “Vincent was murdered by exposure to toxic liquid mercury. Have you experienced any strange symptoms like muscle weakness, memory loss, coordination problems?”

Donald is quiet for a moment, perhaps processing being told he sat right next to a murder. “No. I feel fine. Should I get checked out?”

“If you’d like the peace of mind, it wouldn’t be a bad idea.” I bite my lip. “Of course, I’m not a doctor... but if you were exposed to a dangerous amount of that stuff, you’d probably have noticed by now. You probably don’t need to panic but getting tested for mercury poisoning wouldn’t be an awful idea.”

“I will do that. Samantha Moon, you said? Can I have your contact information in case something happens?”

“Sure.” I give him my business phone number and email address.

After we’re off the phone, I stare at the ceiling for a few minutes. Bearing bad news is never fun. It’s much easier to tell someone like Donald—a work contact he saw once in his entire life—than a family member. Still, it’s emotionally draining. Some poor guy walking by my office pays the price as I ‘eat’ a little bit too much mental energy. He stumbles, almost dropping his coffee. He leans on my window to get his bearings again.

Oops. Sorry, pal.

I glare at the laptop screen. There’s no way any judge in the world is going to listen to me describe feeling liquid drop on me out of the blue while looking at Vincent’s laptop and take me seriously. I’m going to need more tangible proof.

That said, Donald Maxton’s testimony certainly fit the circumstantial evidence. I wouldn’t need to cite psychic powers at all. Knowing how long it would take between exposure to death, I simply looked at his calendar and started making phone calls.

Let me see if I can get any more concrete evidence. I once again leave Tammy to herself in the office, then take the forty-five-minute ride to the Barstow Hotel in Los Angeles.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The Barstow Hotel

Know how I said it's about a forty-five-minute ride for me to L.A.?

Yeah, well... traffic has other plans. An hour and ten minutes later, I'm walking into the lobby of the Barstow. Contrary to what my impression of the place's reputation is, I don't feel like a peasant sneaking into the royal palace. Don't get me wrong, the place is *nice*, but it doesn't give off an air that everyone wearing less than \$10,000 worth of designer duds is going to be turned away at the door.

The ground floor is vast and spacious, with lots of beige. Round columns trimmed in silver stand in three rows across a lobby big enough to film *Lord of the Rings* in. Four people behind a long reception desk watch me like they aren't quite sure how to react. My 'comfy top and jeans with sneakers' ensemble is a few notches shy in formality compared to everyone else here. Doesn't bother me at all. Not planning to get a room nor try to eat here.

An archway big enough for three cars to drive side-by-side connects the lobby to a restaurant area on the left. Bingo. The staff behind the desk shows little reaction to me beelining for the restaurant. They likely assume I'm here to meet someone who neglected to inform me of the dress code.

I sincerely doubt the place keeps records of who sat where. It would be a bookkeeping nightmare and really, a hotel has no reason to remember which tables a particular guest used. The seating area is arranged in two tiers, with a little more than half the room having a two-story-tall ceiling. At an eyeball guess, there are about a hundred tables arranged on the ground floor and maybe another forty or so on an elevated second-story loft that overhangs the innermost forty percent of the room. The only explanation I have for such a bizarre design is the *massive* chandelier hanging in the open space where the loft doesn't cover.

Seriously, if you have to remove half of a room's floor to fit your lamp, you probably got one a bit too big. It's gotta have 5,000 individual crystal bars dangling from these gold hooks. I mean, pretty and all but daaaamn. It's twice the size of my Momvan and probably consumes more electricity than a small village.

I guess the management isn't really worried about maximizing capacity for diners. To me, it would make more sense to have two full stories and not this fancy loft set up. But, hey. It looks cool.

The layout of the room makes it quite obvious to me Vincent must have been sitting at one of the tables lined up with the edge of the upper tier. At least, that's the most probable explanation to me. Sure, a person could've walked up behind him to do it, but it would have been the exact opposite of subtle. Vincent, and his prospective client, would clearly have seen the person responsible.

I stare up at the loft.

Someone could have leaned over the banister with an eye-dropper and... bombs away. To check that theory out, I head across the room and up one of two curved stairways against either side wall. They're abnormally long with shallow steps. The shape of the stairways gives the impression the loft is trying to 'hug' the lower floor. I really hate stairs like this. Each step is only about half the height of an ordinary stair and twice as deep from front edge to back. It would be tempting to take two steps per stride if they weren't so damn deep.

A handful of people eating a late lunch give me odd looks, but the oddest stare is coming from the hostess who appears highly frustrated. I disregard her existence and simply walk on my own into the seating area. Other than making 'hey, I'm right here' expressions at me, she doesn't say anything.

Once upstairs, I hook a right and follow the length of the banister, peering down at the ground floor. There are approximately nine tables positioned directly under the edge where it's easily possible to drop something on a person eating there. I walk the length of the railing, staring down. As soon as my gaze lands on the fourth table to line up with the balcony, I get the cold water drippy feeling again.

Aha. Gotcha.

Well, sorta. Police are kinda funny about accepting psychic evidence.

I lean a little over the railing to examine the table that's setting off my 'psychometry', as Allie called it. Two of four seats are easily in 'bombing range' from this position. While I can offer no solid evidence for it, I *know* this is where it happened. Vincent Stafford was killed right here, even though he didn't actually die for another ten months.

I take a napkin from the nearest table and put it on the banister, draping it such that it's visible from downstairs. Before any of the hotel restaurant staff can move it, I rush back to the lower level and use my napkin marker to make sure I approach the correct table on the ground floor. Since this whole 'psychometry' thing is pretty new to me, who knows what it'll give. Pretty sure it requires touch, so I rest a hand on each chair and the table. Alas, nothing really happens.

"Can I help you?" asks a man, who's walking up behind me.

He's early forties, neat hair, narrow face. This place is ritzy enough to where the people who work here do not wear nametags with their job title on them. The way the dude carries himself says manager. Most surprising of all, he's not giving me the 'what do you want, peasant' attitude.

"Maybe you can," I say. "Are you a manager?"

"I am." He nods once. "John Nolte."

"Great." I pull out my ID and show it to him, then introduce myself. In a lowered tone of voice, I say, "I'm investigating a murder that took place in your restaurant."

He blinks. "No one has been killed in here, miss."

"The victim was poisoned here, but it took him a long time to die after the exposure." I gesture up at the balcony above us. "I suspect the killer was up there, the victim sat at this table, and the poison was dropped onto the victim from above."

John looks around. "This is a prank show, correct?"

"I'm afraid not. No cameras." I raise an eyebrow. "Or do you have cameras in here?"

"We do."

Wow. "What are the chances you retain video back to November of 2019?" Long shot but I gotta ask. I'd be shocked to be able to get video that old two months into 2021.

"I couldn't say." He glances up, seems annoyed at the beige napkin draped over the railing, then lowers his gaze back to me. The concern seeping into his expression now appears to be worry about potential lawsuits or loss of reputation if word got out someone committed murder here.

"Would you mind if I spoke to your security people then? I really don't need anything else in here."

“Of course. Follow me.” He starts to walk away but pauses to add, “I would appreciate your discretion if at all possible.”

“Sure. The victim wasn’t famous or politically significant. I’ll do what I can.”

He seems to relax somewhat.

John Nolte leads me out of the restaurant into the lobby, then left down a hallway much less fancy than the rest of the place. It’s likely employees only in here. We eventually arrive at a modest sized office full of computer monitors. Each of the desks has an octopus monitor stand with nine flat-panel screens, each one displaying a video feed of various parts of the hotel. The men and women in security uniforms watching the screens vary from appearing terminally bored to overly eager to catch their first bad guy doing bad things.

Most of them glance up at us in passing as we go by to the manager’s office in the back.

John introduces me to a man named Adam Najjar, their chief of security... and promptly excuses himself after handing me off. Adam shoots him a ‘dammit, John’ type look for saddling him with the visitor and scooting away.

He is, however, pleasant enough to me. I explain the situation and the reason for my presence here. “... was wondering if you might have any video of the restaurant from November 2019.”

“Oof.” Adam winces. “I’m sorry. That’s like fourteen months ago. We only keep security video for five months unless a significant event occurs. Given all the cameras we have, the data storage requirements for retaining video data is huge.”

Ugh. I begrudgingly nod. “Yeah. Honestly, wasn’t expecting it.”

Adam scratches at his eyebrow. “True enough. The only places that keep video for over a year have cheap potato cameras. We are lucky enough to have upper management who doesn’t like to go cheap where it isn’t visible to the public. Our cameras are top-of-the-line. Could read a person’s credit card right off the table.”

“That’s not exactly reassuring from a fraud standpoint.” I snicker.

“I was being mildly hyperbolic about the camera resolution. I don’t believe any of them are angled properly to catch such information.” He chuckles again. “Too much liability that way.”

Time for another long shot. I don’t think the killer or even Vincent would have checked into the hotel. Only a complete idiot of an assassin would leave such a paper trail. “Any chance you could give me a list of names? Anyone who booked a room for one or two days tops last November, and possibly ate at the restaurant with a credit card? Just need names.”

“I’d be happy to,” says Adam.

I blink, stunned.

“As soon as you have a warrant or a police detective with you.” He gives me this ‘sorry, but I’m stuck’ smile.

Damn. “No problem. I get it. Doubtful the killer would have taken a room, anyway. Well, thank you for your time. Can’t think of anything else I could possibly find here.”

“Happy to sorta help.” He sighs apologetically. “Sorry the videos are gone.”

“Not your fault. Policy is policy after all. Trust me, I know the drill. Used to be a federal agent.”

“Wow, really?” He blinks. “You look so young. Did you quit after six months?”

My turn to laugh. “Few years. Wasn’t really by choice. Medical crap.”

“Sorry. That’s rough.”

“Thanks. It is what it is. No point complaining. Ahh well, I’ll get out of your hair now.

Suppose you need to escort me out, or at least back to the lobby?"

"I am supposed to, yes." He chuckles. "Policy and all."

I gesture in an 'after you' manner. "No need to bend the rules on my account."

Adam walks with me to the lobby. On the way, he asks about how someone could be poisoned in their hotel without anyone noticing food tampering. I explain the dimethylmercury drip from above. This seems to concern him greatly. By the time we reach the lobby, his easygoing humor is gone, replaced with nervousness.

"Is the table contaminated? Any residual traces that could pose a threat to anyone else eating there?" asks Adam.

"I'm not a chemist. From what I've learned so far, the stuff is insanely dangerous." I offer a clueless shrug. "As far as how long it remains in the environment after the bottle is opened, no idea. It's been fourteen months. Hate to say it, but if anyone else was going to suffer mercury poisoning from this incident, it would've happened already."

His expression turns grim. "Damn..."

"If I had to guess, I don't think the risk to others was *too* bad." I bite my lip. "This stuff is volatile so it shouldn't sit around long when exposed to air. Also, the killer dribbled it on his head from above. The victim's hair would have contained any splatter. Biggest risk is if the killer missed any drops. That, I can't tell."

"All right. It's something to keep in mind. Good luck with the investigation."

We shake hands.

"Thanks."

I sigh after he walks away. Good luck indeed. I'm going to need some.

Chapter Twenty-Eight Emotions... or Lack Thereof

I sit in the Momvan for a few minutes, thinking and looking over my notes.

November 3, 2019... Vincent Stafford is poisoned here at the Barstow Hotel. Sometime the following February, he stumbles while getting out of the bathtub. From there forward he suffers increasing issues with muscle coordination. April 2020, he's having vision and hearing problems. By June, he can't walk anymore or control his arms well enough to feed himself. He's blind and deaf in July, vegetative by August and dead in September.

Ten months between exposure and death. The medical examiner's report found a staggering quantity of mercury in his system. I now know *where* it happened, but have nothing whatsoever on the *who* or the *why*. Tammy thinks psychometry is associated to emotions. The more emotional an event, the stronger the imprint on various objects associated with the event. If I assume this to be true, it would make sense for the killer to have left something on the banister while knowingly taking an action that would end Vincent's life.

This wasn't a merciful process, either. Even if the killer didn't know how horrible a death he'd sentenced Vincent to, there should have been considerable emotions left behind. Anger, jealousy, *something*—even the Egypt artifact guardian theory of mine would've come with some manner of righteous indignation. Could be my newfound ability is seriously weak... but I did get the drips from touching the laptop. Vincent wouldn't have known what hit him. He'd only have been annoyed at a leak of what he thought to be water.

Indeed, I primarily felt his annoyance.

Yet felt nothing from the killer.

Which could mean the killer was emotionless.

If so, I think we're dealing with a contract killer, intelligence operative, or a simple sociopath. It's extremely unlikely for any national government to send a 007 type person to eliminate Vincent, so that leaves a hitman or sociopath as the most likely options. Ugh, people who can take life as casually as lugging trash outside for pickup scare the crap out of me. And I'm immortal.

I'm still drawing a damn blank on the motive. Vincent had money, yes, but not *that* much. To me, he was rich, but as rich people go, he's kind of at the bottom of the pyramid, the sort of rich guy actually rich people look down on as a poser. Guy still owned a normal car and a normal (if nice) house. We're not talking Ferraris-and-mansions rich here.

The life insurance motive doesn't pan out, either, mostly because I am convinced Dianne is not the killer; and even so, the amount of the policy is paltry compared to the money they already had. It makes no sense for a woman with access to three or four million in the bank to kill her husband for \$250,000.

I suppose she could have had a bigger interest in killing him to keep *all* the marital assets, rather than splitting them in a divorce. Alas, no one has said anything about trouble in the marriage, arguments, cheating, or affairs.

Affairs.

I can't help but think about those flowers on the porch. Dianne seemed more annoyed by them than anything. What's a more likely scenario: Egyptian radicals trying to avenge the theft of culturally significant artifacts or wife-stealing? The more I think about it, the weirder it is for

a guy to send flowers to a widow every week for five months. Dianne's so socially oblivious she probably wouldn't recognize a creeper the same way most people can. Either she'd entirely miss behavioral cues, mistake them for his being nice, or assume the awkwardness going on is coming from her and ignore it.

Hmm.

I flip through my notepad. Vincent co-owned the import company with Walton. As far as my information says, they were doing fairly well. There could be something going on outside public view, perhaps a lucrative deal Vincent was against but the other guy liked? Is it a stretch for a guy to kill his business partner purely out of a desire to steal his wife?

I dunno. People do weird things for love.

But if I'm being totally honest here, I can't see it. Dianne is not the type of woman men go to war over. A Helen of Troy, she is not. She's far from unpleasant to look at, but she's no supermodel. She's also not exactly 'fun.' Her idea of an exciting night is contemplating the excitability of rare molecules under varying levels of thermal stimulus. Unless Walton is, in fact, some evil mastermind secretly living on a private island trying to make a doomsday weapon and is in dire need of a chemist, why the fixation?

Again, love is weird sometimes. Especially unrequited love.

The thought Walton is involved is weak, but I got nothing else. Might as well do some sniffing around.

Chapter Twenty-Nine Grand Galleon

Since I am already in L.A., I pay a visit to Grand Galleon Imports.

I'm juggling two theories weaker than the third cup of tea made from the same bag. For purposes of this visit, I am investigating the possibility of foreign agents being responsible for Vincent's death. It's still a possibility, though incredibly remote. Greed and jealousy are more likely motives.

The Grand Galleon Imports company office is inauspiciously located in a professional building among eye doctors, accountants, small law firms, some counselors/therapists, and one OB-GYN. It's on the third floor halfway down the hall. Relatively small place considering the amount of money filtering through it. But honestly, the majority of their operation happens at warehouses and shipping centers. This building is somewhere to put the bean counters and phone-answerers. GGI's office is on the ground floor at least.

I spend about fifteen minutes talking to the receptionist, Marta. She's only a year or three older than Tammy and has a bit of an accent. I want to say it's either Czech or Russian. Her desk is littered with various tiny rabbit kitsch items. Two-inch ceramics, pink fuzzy bunnies, plastic windup toys no bigger than grapes, and so on. Glad whatever gene mutation compels some women to develop an irresistible urge to collect tiny cute stuff passed me by.

According to her, everyone liked Vincent and misses him. Our conversation is fairly banal and useless insofar as my investigation goes until she says something that stands out when I ask about how the company is getting by without him.

"Oh, it's been a little crazy with all the new contracts." Marta swipes her wavy brunette hair off her face. "But we're handling it. Makes the day go fast."

"New contracts?"

"Yeah." She nods. "It's a lot of stuff coming in from Indonesia, Vietnam, and Singapore. Nothing seriously valuable, but they have a lot of volume."

I raise an eyebrow. "Was Vincent opposed to working with those clients?"

She shrugs. "I have no idea. Those overseas manufacturers didn't reach out to us until after Vincent passed away as far as I know."

Damn. So much for thinking Walton and Vincent argued over a lucrative deal. Instead, it seems like the company landed a bunch of smaller deals.

Feeling slightly defeated, I ask Marta about the fallout over the Egyptian artifacts. She tells me the company got bombarded with emails and phone calls for a while, but almost all of it came from people in the USA who objected to 'corporate pillaging of underdeveloped countries.' Not sure Egypt counts as an 'underdeveloped country' anymore, but idealists are often unintentionally condescending. No useful information there.

Might as well move on to theory two.

"Is Walton here? I'd like to talk to him if possible," I ask.

"One sec." Marta picks up her desk phone and pushes a button. "Mr. Osborne? There's an investigator here who'd like to speak with you." She pauses to listen.

"Send her to accounting," replies a male voice in the phone.

Heh. Love my abnormally sensitive ears.

"No, it's not financial. She's asking about Mr. Stafford."

Walton—I assume—gives a weird laugh. The sound is similar to the squawk of an accidentally sat on pigeon. “All right. I’ll be right out.”

Marta hangs up, then smiles at me. “He’s on his way.”

“Thank you.”

Not a full minute later, a door on the left opens. A guy in his early fifties with salt-and-pepper hair walks in. He’s tall and thick in the chest, almost like a retired bodybuilder. Dude reminds me of an actor who recently aged out of being able to play James Bond. I’m not one of those women who has a thing for older men, but this guy... he looks like he could charm his way into a lady’s bed in thirty seconds if he wanted to.

It’s weird to think he’s not that much older than I am. I’ve been staring at my not-quite-thirty-looking face in the mirror (well, just after mirrors started working for me again) enough that I feel younger than I am. Talk about an odd disconnect from reality. Unless I stop to think about my true age, I relate to the world like I’m still thirty. A fiftyish dude still feels inappropriate to have romantic thoughts about despite our actual age gap being tiny.

Walton Osborne gives off an almost imperceptible flicker of surprise when he first sees me before the charming façade returns. I think he expected a police detective or at the very least, someone older. Not that I appear childish or even ‘rookie young.’ But, to someone his age, a woman who’s almost-thirty probably looks like a college student.

“Hello...?”

“Samantha Moon,” I say, while offering a hand to shake.

He grasps my hand firmly. “Walton Osborne, but I assume you knew that already. Please, join me in my office.”

We go through the door out of the reception area, down a hallway lined with small side offices and storage rooms. At the end, an actual water cooler stands against a blank wall. Two facing doors to the left and right bear the names Vincent Stafford and Walton Osborne. The door to Vincent’s old office on the right is still closed. Walton goes left.

The office is on the small side for a company owner; however, the furniture and various small art arranged around on shelving don’t look cheap. There’s an odd smell in the air I can’t quite place. It’s part wood, part herbal, part no damn idea—maybe damp dog. If I had to guess, I’d say it’s coming from a bunch of coconut-sized African tribal heads on a bookshelf. They appear to be made of wood and grass—not actual heads—sculpted into crude approximations of human faces. A few are full figure statues, but only about a foot tall. All but two have dozens of primitive nails hammered into them like quills of a porcupine. One of the head carvings with a big mane of grass ‘hair’ gives me the most eerie sense when I look at it, almost as if it’s sentient and staring back at me.

I can’t help but remember Max saying he heard ‘tribal drums’ when he attempted to use the crystal ball. Did he ‘tune into the wrong station’ briefly? Or, maybe, had that been a genuinely significant piece of information? Question is... was it a clue about Walton because he happens to have so much African native art in his office, or did Max pick up on the same eerie feeling I’m getting now?

Walton gestures at a client chair facing his desk. “Please, have a seat.”

One of these days, when someone says that to me, I’m going to say thank you, pick up the chair, and leave with it. For now, though, I content myself to sit down. Walton heads around behind the desk and sits in a far nicer, more expensive chair.

“Do you mind if I ask what agency you’re with?” Walton tilts his head.

"I'm not with the police, Mr. Osborn. I'm a private investigator."

He lifts both eyebrows. "Oh... those are really a thing."

"We are." I chuckle. "Sadly, it's nothing like the old movies make it out to be. Usually consists of tedious office work."

"You are investigating Vincent?" Walton leans back in his chair. "I always suspected he might have been having an affair. Did Dianne hire you?"

Hmm. He's trying to take control of this interview. Also, he seems overly interested in the investigation. "I'm sure you understand certain business obligations. For the sake of client confidentiality, I'm unable to reveal who hired me."

"It doesn't seem beneficial to try to find evidence of an affair *after* the poor man is dead." Walton glances up to the left.

Okay. I'm getting a dodgy feeling about this guy. Let me push a little and see where it goes. "You're right, which is why I'm not investigating an affair. If anyone had an affair, I suspect Dianne might have been cheating on Vincent." I let that sink in. "No, in fact, I'm investigating his death as a homicide."

He shifts his jaw slightly to one side, staring at me for a few seconds. "It's... hard to imagine Dianne killing Vincent. But... I suppose people in desperate situations can do desperate things. It must have been hard for her to live with a man who had a terminal illness. I can understand how someone in her position might have wanted to flee the responsibility it entailed and run off with another man, if what you say is true about her having had an affair."

I take my notepad out and do my best to paraphrase what he's saying. It's interesting he went straight to pointing a finger at Dianne. I've said nothing about who's a suspect yet. My gut's telling me he's trying to plant the seed of suspicion in my brain.

"Do you have any idea who she might have been involved with on the side?" I ask. "I hear you and Vincent knew each other fairly well for business partners."

He holds both hands up. "I'm afraid not. I didn't pay much attention to their lives outside of work and company events."

I finish scribbling a line, then make eye contact. "What would you know about flowers being sent to Dianne?"

"Flowers?" he asks.

"Yes. Once a week. Ever since Vincent's funeral."

"Interesting. Someone is sending her flowers once a week..."

A person who is trying to be disingenuous will often repeat questions. It's a tactic meant to buy them time to think of an answer. My cue to swerve before I attack. Throw some tangential information in there to confuse him even more, derail his attempt to come up with excuses. "I've found some information that suggests Vincent was killed by extremists from Egypt who are upset that your company transported precious cultural artifacts. There is some concern you might become a target as well."

Walton waves dismissively. "If they were going to come after me, they would've done it by now. Vincent was the one who put that deal together. I wasn't really involved."

Heh. I throw him some string and he pulls on it. "How would the Egyptians know that?"

He purses his lips. "Well, they are extremists, are they not? Perhaps even spies. I'm sure they had ways of getting into our systems and records. Hackers maybe."

"Back to the flowers. Why would they have your name on them?"

"Someone is obviously playing games," says Walton, answering fast and in an emotionless

tone. "I'm not involved with Dianne and I don't have any interest in her. She's not my type. Always came off a bit cold. She did not like being obligated to show up at social events."

"So you're not pursuing her now that Vincent is out of the way?"

Walton gives a little laugh, then goes serious. "No. I have zero romantic interest in Dianne. I'm not sure why she'd kill him. There are some rumors going around that she's been having an affair with an 'Italian-looking guy,' but I don't know any names."

"Mmm. As you may or may not know, we need to look at any possible angle." I stare at him the same way I would have stared at Anthony if he'd been the type of kid to swipe cookies before dinnertime and lie about it. "What, if anything, would you gain by Vincent's death?"

"You're accusing me of being involved? The man had MS," says Walton in a raised voice. His face reddens. "By all accounts he died naturally, if unexpectedly."

I offer a placid smile, not yet showing my hand; after all, I know the mercury was found in his system. The man had been murdered. "I am trying to eliminate possible suspects. If you had nothing to gain from his death, it makes you less likely a suspect."

He leans back again. "His passing is more a headache than anything for me, truth be known..."

For the next several minutes, he rambles on and on about how much more work he's had to do since the company now has a single owner-manager. He sounds like a person who's used to putting in three-hour days barely doing anything more involved than reading contracts and approving or rejecting them who is now facing an actual forty-hour week of real (albeit office) work. He says little about the emotional toll Vincent's loss took on him or anyone else here who helped build the company. He's entirely complaining about how inconvenient it has been for him.

Not proof of anything beyond Walton being a bit of a self-absorbed jerk, but it's also not exonerating. That, and I know he's lying about the flowers.

"All right," I say. "So, no big contracts, mergers, sell offers, or anything since his passing?"

"No." Walton shakes his head. "Business as usual. Neither I nor Vincent had any plans or even the inkling to seek a buyer for Golden Galleon. This is *our* baby. It's a shame he's not still here to enjoy it with us. I really do think you're chasing a wild goose, Ms. Moon. No one killed Vincent. He had a disease. Even if Dianne poisoned him, they would've discovered it."

"You're right about that. Well, I don't have any more questions for you unless there's anything else you think is important for me to know."

"If you find the Italian guy, you'll find your motive," says Walton.

I stand. "Thanks for the tip. Oh, I should mention... they *did* finally do an autopsy. The police are going to be investigating the death as a homicide as soon as the ink dries on the medical examiner's paperwork."

The muscles in his neck tense up but his facial expression remains suave and charming. Yay for my supernatural sense of sight. I thank him for his time and turn to leave. Once again, my gaze goes across those hairy (grassy) African heads on the shelf. The same one giving off the creepiness I noticed before stares into my soul.

"Walton?" I ask. "One more question."

"What is it?" His reply is a bit terse, like he's eager for me to leave.

I point at the head giving me the weirds. "What is that?"

"It is a nkondi."

"Never heard of it."

“They are statuettes made by the Kongo people.” His demeanor changes from impatience to interest, like a Harry Potter fan being asked a question about the minutiae of the world. Walton gets up and walks over to the shelf, pointing at the various statues. In addition to the coconut-sized heads, others look like wood-carved gremlins or caricatures of African warriors. “The nkondi statue, or ninkondi for plural, are believed to house powerful spirits. Villagers in the Congo would place them in a public location where anyone could visit them. Often, they’d swear oaths over them or invoke the spirit within to seek out and harm those they believed wronged them. When they made an oath or asked the spirit to hunt, they’d hammer a symbolic nail into the nkondi.”

“Are they dangerous?” I ask.

He laughs. “Only to the superstitious. However, the spirits they theoretically contained are supposedly highly aggressive.”

Again, I can’t help but look at the one particular wooden head... err, nkondi. White and red paint around the eyes give it a manic expression, like a warrior screaming before charging at his enemies. Feels like it wants to hurt me but can’t since it’s, you know, just a lump of wood and grass. This one has no nails hammered into it. It’s also the only one here giving me the heebies.

“Would you mind if I looked at Vincent’s office?” I ask. “I don’t need to rifle through anything, just peeking through the door is fine.”

“Of course.” He escorts me out into the hall.

The door to Vincent’s office is directly opposite his, past the water cooler. I open it and step inside, looking around. The décor here is more nautical. Feels as if I’ve poked my head through something of a time warp back to the days of the Dutch East India company. Parts of old sailing ships, a bell, paintings of galleons, a model or two of old-as-heck sailing ships and so forth. No vases or tribal mysticism in here.

Okay, so Vincent wouldn’t have been exposed to the negative spirit energy of that nkondi, but Walton is bathing in it every day. He doesn’t seem aware of it at all. That could mean he’s not sensitive, or he has been influenced and is protecting it.

Good grief, Sam. A case gets challenging and I start reaching for a supernatural explanation? I’m not going to ignore it, but for all I know it’s harmless... merely charged with energy I’m sensitive to.

I back out of the room and pull the door shut. Nothing in there gave off spirit vibes of any kind.

“Anything else?” asks Walton.

“Now that you mention it. I understand your company got into a new contract with a business in Indonesia. Was it particularly valuable?”

“That arrangement is high volume.” He nods. “It’s worth quite a bit of money.”

“Did Vincent know about it before his death?”

Walton shakes his head. “No. None of us did. They approached us in August of 2020. By that point, Vincent was unaware of the world around him. The Indonesian company contacted us well after my former partner had become too incapacitated to function.”

“I see. More routine questions. Did you and Vincent have any personal problems?”

He glances up and left for a second. “No, not really. We sometimes took a while to agree on the particulars of things, but our relationship was about as amicable as business partners can be with each other. They always say not to mix business with friendship.”

“You were friends?” I ask.

“Not really.” Walton gives a shallow laugh, then smiles. “That’s why we could work together.”

Wow, this guy’s a cynic. “Right. Well... that’s all I have to ask right now. Thank you for making time to see me.”

“You are most welcome, Ms. Moon.” He bows slightly and walks me to the door leading to the reception area.

However, he doesn’t wait for me to finish going out before he turns around and fast-walks back to his office, closing the door. Marta hasn’t noticed me yet, so I back up and hover by his office to listen, half expecting him to make a panic-dial phone call to whoever he got to help him kill Vincent.

Yeah, I’m only guessing here. But this guy rubbed me the wrong way. He’s definitely lying about something... and he certainly seemed seriously insistent on leading me down the path of blaming Dianne.

He does make a phone call, but it’s to one of the warehouse people to get confirmation about shipping schedules. It sounds perfectly mundane and ordinary, nothing like coded language for ‘we’re in trouble.’

Damn.

Not the slam dunk I’d hoped for, but I definitely have a new suspect. To be fair... at first, I was as convinced on an intellectual level Dianne did it as I am Walton is now. Information pointed right at her, but my gut disagreed. Now, both my brain and gut seem to be on the same page.

If Walton was somehow involved, my biggest problems are establishing the motive as well as how in the heck he got his hands on dimethylmercury. Then again, it may not be as difficult as I imagine for a man who owns an international import company. The USA has strict controls on toxic chemicals, but other countries don’t. It wouldn’t be impossible for him to have procured the stuff from a lab in, say, Vietnam, or Indonesia, or wherever, and slip it in concealed inside a precious art object.

Maybe that’s why the nkondi felt weird to me? More psychometry? The creepy vibe might not be coming from a spirit but rather it’s association with a murder plot.

I pause at the desk. “Marta?”

She peers up at me. “Oh, hi. Are you done?”

“Yep. Just about to leave, but one question?”

“Sure.”

“Those African statues in Walton’s office. Have they been there long?”

She shivers. “Years. Yeah. They give me the damn creeps. I hate being in there. Feels like they’re staring at me. I think on maybe the third day I worked here, someone sent me to Mr. Osborne’s office to give him something and I stood there staring at the weird things for over ten minutes. I must’ve blacked out because it didn’t seem like that long to me. Mr. Osborne was nice about it though. He could’ve fired me for just standing there so long doing nothing.”

I overact a cringe. “Yeah. They got me too. Very creepy.”

“Oh, thank you for not thinking I’m crazy.” She smiles. “Walton doesn’t believe in that stuff, but I think they’re legit evil. Or, maybe not evil but they’re angry about being in some guy’s office and not back where they belong.”

“Could be...” I smile, wave, and head out.

The whole time I walk down the hall to the elevator, I'm sighing.
Great. Just what I *didn't* need to add to this case: a possible angry spirit.

Chapter Thirty Official Murder

I really do have a bad feeling about Walton.

By the time I'm parking the Momvan in the closest open space to my office downtown, I am convinced he either killed Vincent, arranged for the death, or is potentially a victim influenced by the paranormal energies in that nkondi statue. Whoever dropped the poison on Vincent had zero emotional investment in the task. So, mercenary doing it for the money, sociopath... or someone possessed.

Perhaps the possessed-by-an-evil-spirit angle is wrong, because I would have picked up the spirit's anger. I need to call Allison and get her opinion on that.

My office is quiet and ordinary. I walk in to find Tammy sitting at her desk seemingly working. It's kinda hard to tell from the front if she's doing real work or browsing Facebook. Her focused expression makes it fairly obvious she's working... or reading a post that's making her annoyed. She doesn't jump, twitch, or scramble when she notices me. Proof she's working. Then again, Tammy is honest with me. If she was goofing off, she'd totally admit it.

"Hey, Ma. How'd it go?"

"New suspect." I flop in my chair and explain the meeting with Walton.

Tammy's fascinated by the nkondi giving me the creeps. "Oh, I almost forgot. The police called to talk to you." She hands me a Post-it note bearing the name 'Detective Corey Washington' and a phone number.

"A detective? Any idea what he wanted?"

"Yeah. He said he's investigating the Vincent Stafford case and has learned you are, too." Tammy stretches. "I think he's just looking to compare notes."

"Sounds good. Hey, do me a favor?"

"Is this a mom favor or a boss favor?" She grins.

"Boss favor. Could you call Dianne and see if she can give you the name or phone number of the florist?"

"What florist?" asks Tammy.

"Someone claiming to be Walton keeps sending her flowers." I stick the Post-it to my computer screen. "The man denied it to my face, but I'd like to ask the florist shop who's paying for it. I think he's lying."

"Okay. On it. Do you have Dianne's number in the case file?"

"Yeah. It's in the file titled 'Widow'."

"Cool. Found it."

We both place phone calls at roughly the same time. Me to Detective Washington, Tammy to Dianne.

"Detective Washington," says a deep-ish male voice, part James Earl Jones, part Denzel.

I introduce myself.

"Ah, yes." A harsh chair creak gives me the mental image of him sitting straight up and scrambling to grab something to write on. "I understand you were hired to find evidence Mr. Stafford did not die of natural causes as initially determined?"

"That's correct. His sister Gwen always suspected foul play."

"Mind if I ask what you've discovered so far?"

“Don’t mind at all. I’m happy to help as much as I can.” I go into a thorough explanation of everything I’ve seen and suspected up to this point with the exception of the creepy nkondi statuette. There’s no need to make the man think I’m unreliable and/or crazy. “I know on a circumstantial level, it appears that Dianne might be involved. I thought so, too, at first, but I truly believe she had nothing to do with it.”

Detective Washington emits this quiet little noise that tells me he’s finishing writing a sentence before talking. “I must say the evidence implicating her is difficult to ignore.”

“Yes. I understand that. She’s a chemist who works in a place with access to the substance used.” I exhale. “But... what’s the motive? Also, when I mentioned to her that I’d come to believe her husband was murdered and suggested the way to know for sure would be to exhume the body and have him tested... she did it. If she’s responsible for killing him, she’d have fought any autopsy requests as hard as possible.”

“Unless she wanted to seem innocent. Fighting the autopsy is a red flag.”

“Yes. True. But, this woman doesn’t have nerve like that. She wouldn’t taunt the police and then try to play innocent.” I talk for a bit about Dianne’s social difficulties. They’re pronounced enough to be diagnosable. As what, exactly, I’m not sure, but they’re more severe than simple introversion.

Detective Washington hmms through my explanation of why I don’t think Dianne did it. It’s hard to get a read on a faceless voice humming in my ear, but it does kinda sound like he’s taking me seriously.

“I know where the poison was administered but I can’t prove anything,” I say.

“Wow. Mind sharing with me?”

“Not at all. The event happened at the Barstow Hotel in Los Angeles. November 3rd, 2019. Vincent met a prospective client at the hotel restaurant for lunch. They sat at a table directly beneath the edge of a second-story loft. Whoever killed him was on that loft and dripped the dimethylmercury onto Vincent’s head from above. He was meeting a man named Donald Maxton to discuss a business contract. I spoke with Donald by phone and he confirmed ‘water’ had dribbled on Vincent’s head during their lunch.”

“Donald... Maxton...,” says Detective Washington in a drawn-out way as if he’s writing it down.

“Yes.” I spell the name and give him the phone number from the contact list, then explain that Dianne gave me Vincent’s laptop in hopes it would help me find evidence.

“I may need to ask you for that laptop.”

“Sure. I’m done with it. Would you like me to run it over to Yorba Linda, or do you want to stop by here?”

“Wouldn’t mind if you dropped it off. Appreciate it.” He pauses. “One investigator to another, who do you think did it?”

Moment of truth time. I exhale. “I have a suspicion but nothing to back it up with yet. My gut’s pointing me at the business partner, Walton Osborn. I interviewed him not an hour ago and he didn’t seem genuine. Spent too much effort trying to tell me Dianne killed him. Got defensive pretty quick, too.” I elaborate on the flowers.

Tammy, hearing me talk about it, cuts in. “Mom. The flowers came from a place called Mindy’s Rosery, like rose (the flower) e-r-y. Girl on the phone said the name on the credit card is Grand Galleon Imports. Last four digits is 1188.”

I relay that to the detective. “If I had to guess, it’s a company card with no person’s name

on it for plausible deniability. Walton's attitude when I asked him about it told me it's him sending the flowers. He immediately started talking badly about Dianne, saying why he wouldn't be interested in her."

"Yeah, that's something," says Detective Washington.

"It's not much, though. I have no solid motive or any evidence tying him to the killing." I share my thoughts he might've sourced the mercury compound from an international lab, smuggling it into the country. "I'm still trying to piece together motive and means."

"Let me know if you get anywhere. I'm going to tell you there's now an official investigation opened into the death of Vincent Stafford. The medical examiner's office ruled it a homicide due to the victim having no plausible explanation for how he came into contact with toxic heavy metal."

"I agree. Someone definitely killed him on purpose," I say. "It's unfortunate that the hospital assumed the death to be a result of advanced MS even though he hadn't been expected to suffer decline until his late sixties."

"Yes. The killer got lucky. He would have gotten away with it, if not for the autopsy."

"His sister suspected foul play."

"Her instincts were right."

"True. And, don't forget Dianne requested the autopsy. She could have left her husband—and the truth—buried. She chose not to."

"Noted," says Detective Washington. "If you happen to find anything else, please call me right away." He gives me his cell phone number.

Ooh, nice. Good sign. Means he trusts me. Whenever a cop, especially a detective, *doesn't* talk down to me after finding out I'm a PI, it tells me they've already looked into my record and know I'm a retired federal agent. To be fair, there are an alarming number of bad PIs out there. Having the credentials I do lends respectability.

"You got it. As soon as I know something, you will, too."

"Thanks, Ms. Moon. I may be in touch with you again if any more questions come up."

"Sounds good." I give him my personal cell as a reciprocation of good will.

Once we're off the phone, I start using the internet to hunt around the area for potential sources of dimethylmercury. There are apparently five chemical producers listing the substance for sale. However, they all require various licensing and certifications before accepting the orders for that particular substance, and even with that, they'll only ship to locations that have been properly certified for the storage of extremely toxic materials. No off-the-street civilian could get their hands on it through legal means.

PEL Research is one of the companies that produces it. That's interesting... I'd been thinking they simply had some on hand for whatever testing or experiments they do there. Seems my understanding of the company is slightly off. Yes, they are a testing lab but *also* a manufacturer of rare chemicals. They don't produce industrial quantities of nasty stuff, mostly small batch runs that only ever see use inside of university labs or highly specialized studies. If big chemical companies equated to Budweiser, PEL Research is that hipster neighbor with a microbrewery in their garage who gives craft beer to his friends on holidays.

Still, I can't ignore the connection of Dianne's employer being a producer of the very substance that killed Vincent. There goes my gut again. Got the strangest feeling the liquid dropped on his head came from Dianne's lab. It's... almost like someone *really* wants us to think Dianne did it.

Guess I'm going to PEL next. I need to know if they're missing any deadly liquids.

Chapter Thirty-One The Source

PEL Research is located in the City of Commerce, California.

It's not quite as long a ride as it took me to get to the Barstow Hotel, but it's also not a particularly quick trip. From the outside, the building offers no clue as to what sort of facility it might be. It's plain white, has few windows, and, as far as external signage, only sports the street number above the front entrance. The only clue this is something other than a warehouse are a bunch of liquid/gas tanks in a lot adjacent to the building. They vary from extremely tall and thin (about the size of a city bus stood up on one end), to Jacuzzi-sized spherical tanks, to the smaller gas canisters one might see in a hospital. Quite a few of them have danger or hazard signs.

According to my GPS, I'm in the right place, so I park in what appears to be an employee lot and make my way to the entrance. Only after grasping the handle do I finally notice tiny lettering on the glass of the door reading 'PEL Research'. Okay then. Here we are.

The door, surprisingly, opens. I half expected to be admitted by armed security.

I step into a small foyer containing six uncomfortable looking chairs arranged around a coffee table of magazines. An issue of TIME on top of the pile has George W. Bush's face on it. Oof. Those magazines have been sitting there a while. Guess they don't get too many visitors here.

A youngish woman who could totally play Velma from Scooby Doo in a live-action movie sits behind a desk at the back end of the room, quite obviously playing a video game on the computer. I say obviously because she has the sound on. It's gotta be something cutesy like Animal Farm or one of those types of games. Her being so obvious about goofing off on the job tells me that her bosses know this is a slow-as-hell job and they're letting her play it to keep her sanity. Few things are as cruel as a business owner who forces their employee to sit there doing absolutely nothing for eight hours... especially if no one walks in the door.

I approach the desk and wait.

The girl's eyes widen with the excitement of a real human being. She pauses her game and smiles at me brightly. "Hi."

"Hi."

The girl sits up a little higher in her chair to look me over. "Umm, are you sure you're in the right place? We don't usually have people walk in out of the blue."

"I think so. This is PEL Research, correct?"

"Correct." She nods eagerly, making her bob haircut ruffle around like a cheerleader's skirt.

"Then I am in the right place." I pull out my ID and show it to her. "I'm investigating a murder case and I was wondering if there's someone I could talk to about the security of the more dangerous substances kept on the premises here."

'Velma' leans back with an 'eek' face. "Wow. Umm. Hold on a sec?"

"Sure." I smile at her. This girl is literally that. A girl. I don't think she's eighteen yet, but couldn't be too far away from it. Probably the daughter of someone who works here. She might not even be a real receptionist, merely someone's teenager hanging out at the office for the day. That, too, would explain why she's so obvious about playing video games.

She picks up the desk phone, pushes a button, waits a moment. “There’s an investigator here who needs to talk to someone about, um, a murder.”

Oy. I almost laugh, but manage to contain myself to merely smiling wider.

“Okay. Thanks!” The girl hangs up. “Jake will be right out.”

“Thank you,” I say.

Rather than go back to her game with me standing there, the girl—who I learn is named Carrie—decides to chatter away and ask about my investigation. I humor her but don’t give away any vital or private information, merely telling her that someone was killed using a rare chemical substance and I’m going around to every place where said substance might be sourced from.

Eventually, a man in his later twenties emerges from a hallway on the right. He’s in a nice but not overly expensive bluish suit. His blond hair is in that weird sort of millennial style that looks like someone used a bricklayer’s trowel to create a dollop of putty on top of his head with a peak. Other than the somewhat silly hairstyle, he’s really cute—if I ignore the fact I’m not too far away from being old enough to be his mother.

He approaches, offers a hand. “Hi. I’m Jake Vanderhaal, PEL public relations.”

Aha. This explains his charm. No one hires Quasimodo to speak to the public. After shaking his hand, I offer him my business card. “Says Samantha Moon on the card, but you can call me Sam. I’m investigating a murder committed using a rare and extremely deadly chemical. I understand the chemical is present at this facility. I’m visiting everywhere within a reasonable distance to try and determine the source of the toxin.”

“My God, how terrible.” He shakes his head, pockets my card. “What chemical are you talking about here?”

“Dimethylmercury.”

Jake’s expression doesn’t change, which suggests he has no idea what I just said. You’d think a guy working for a chemical company might be more familiar with it, but he is in PR.

“That is some dangerous stuff,” says Jake, his voice concerned. “I believe we do have it on site but there have been no leaks or accidental exposure.”

Or I could be wrong. Maybe he *does* know what the stuff is and is a master at keeping cool. “I’m not talking about a leak. Someone got their hands on this stuff and used it on purpose to kill.”

“Whoever did that is clearly not educated on the toxicity.” His expression shifts regretful as he gives a slight head shake. “It’s extremely dangerous to handle even with the proper safety precautions. I would imagine your killer also suffered some degree of exposure unless they had several pairs of protective gloves and a facemask on.”

Except it would be pretty difficult to be inconspicuous inside the Barstow Hotel restaurant in a chemical worker clean suit. Jake here could be right, and there could be a bit of karmic justice already out there. Meaning, the killer might have suffered, too. Not going to keep my fingers crossed on that, though.

“Is there someone in security I could speak with to confirm that you aren’t missing any dimethylmercury?”

“Of course.” Jake puts on a smile that could sell a jalopy without an inspection. “If you’d follow me?”

“Lead on.”

We go back down the hall he came from, past a few tiny offices, through an employee

break room that's basically a spot where the corridor gets really wide for about thirty feet, out the other end, around a corner and to a door marked with the name 'Luis Sandoval, Director – Facilities.'

Jake knocks then opens the door before any response comes from within. "Luis, got a second?"

A late-forties Hispanic man seated at a desk raises a 'stop' hand at us and continues talking to someone on the phone about a scheduled 'nitrogen flush' of one of the pipe systems. He changes 'stop hand' to 'one moment' finger.

"Be just a moment," whispers Jake to me.

We stand there for a few minutes while Luis finalizes an arrangement with what sounds like an external contractor to come in and do some work on one of the internal piping systems that carries chemicals from the tanks outside to the various labs in the building. Once he hangs up, Luis waves us in.

"What's up?" asks Luis.

"Got an investigator here asking about dimethylmercury," says Jake.

Luis cringes. "Oof. That's some nasty stuff."

"Indeed..." I say and give him a basic explanation of my purpose here. "At this point, I'd just appreciate it if you could confirm that you haven't 'misplaced' any. I'm sure you keep strict track of chemicals like it."

"Absolutely." Luis smiles. "Multiple layers of security. Door locks, barcode scans, and a tiered-approval process. The more dangerous a substance is, the more—and higher level—people need to approve the request to use some. Dimethylmercury is a class four."

Jake leans toward me. "That's our own internal risk scale. Class four is the most dangerous."

"I see. Sounds good. If you can just let me know if any dimethylmercury—any amount at all—walked away, that would be awesome."

"One moment." Luis picks up his phone again, dials an extension. "Yeah, Marie... Luis here. I need you to do me a quick favor on the urgent side. Can you pull the inventory audit on..." He taps on his computer, clicks the mouse a few times. "A03793. Yep. Thanks."

"A03793?" I ask.

"It's an internal asset number." Luis gestures at his monitor. "Some of the chemicals here have massive long names. It's just easier for us to refer to them by number. Helps the non-scientists keep everything straight. Marie's checking the systems and should get back to me soon. Coffee?"

I smile. Never say no to coffee... unless it's from a backwater gas station at two in the morning. Even then... *maybe*. "Sure, thank you."

"On it." Jake zooms out the door.

Luis invites me to sit in one of the three chairs not behind the desk. His office is pretty small for a security director, barely fourteen square feet. We chat and I again run with the story about canvassing all possible sources for organic mercury in the area. In truth, I'm here because of the connection to Dianne.

Jake returns soon with three plain white coffee mugs marked with 'PEL' in black letters. The coffee smells vaguely of hazelnut. He sets a small bowl of creamers and sugar packets on the desk by me. Luis adds two creams and a sugar. I add one of each. It's gotta be a Keurig machine; the coffee's not bad.

“Mind if I ask what PEL means?”

“The initials of the three scientists who established the company in 1984,” says Jake. “Paul Betances, Eliška Štěpánek, and Leon Olkhovsky.”

I nod, then sip coffee, listening to Jake fill time by giving me a well-rehearsed spiel about the company’s origins and goals. It’s probably the same introductory thing he uses every time he’s asked to talk about the place to new clients or the press. ‘Chasing innovation’ is their motto.

Eventually, the phone rings.

Luis answers. His smile rapidly dies. “Are you sure?”

The woman on the other end says something like ‘quite sure’ followed by ‘I didn’t believe it at first’ or something along those lines. Yes, my ears are sharper than a mortal’s, but Marie is basically whispering.

“I’ll be there right away,” says Luis before hanging up. He makes a face at me like he’s momentarily irritated that a non-employee happened to bear witness to the call, but evidently it’s too late for ‘take backsies,’ so he merely sighs. “You may as well come with us. Jake, you’ll need to come up with a public statement.”

“For?” Jake raises an eyebrow.

“Marie just told me a quantity of dimethylmercury is unaccounted for.” Louis is understandably looking a little ill.

“How much is ‘a quantity’?” I ask.

“One bottle. Thirty ml.”

“Umm. What’s that in non-scientist?” I manage a weak smile.

“Roughly an ounce,” says Jake.

“A thousand or so drops. Excuse me.” Luis walks around the desk with a mission in his stride and goes out the door.

I hurry after him, Jake trailing behind me. Crap. A thousand drops? That’s enough to kill almost 300 people. The only reason I’m not totally freaking out at the moment is the killer only wanted to hurt Vincent and chose dimethylmercury for the similarity between its symptoms and that of MS. A doctor who had no reason to believe he’d come into contact with toxic heavy metals could—and did—blame the disease. The odds of the killer using the rest of the chemical to harm others on purpose is low, but... who knows what they did with it or how they disposed of it.

The three of us leave the ‘office’ part of the building and enter a hallway of larger labs. An indescribable stink hangs in the air. It’s a chimeric awfulness that changes with every breath. One moment it smells like cleaning solution times a million, the next, it’s stinky feet. Then something faintly fruity before an ammonia like burn scorches my nose. I know I’m getting traces from all the different labs and it isn’t one crazy chemical with an ever-changing smell. Still, my eyes are watering by the time we reach the end of the big hallway and what appears to be a cross between a pharmacy desk and a security checkpoint.

A black woman in her late thirties in a lab coat peers at us from inside a secure office. There’s something of a desk, but it’s really a hole in the wall similar to a drive-through window at a fast-food place. She looks worried and upset.

“Marie just called,” says the woman in a near panic. “I have no idea how this happened.”

Luis badges open a door to the right of the counter and enters the space behind it, standing next to the woman. The two of them look over a computer screen for a few minutes,

exchanging disbelieving and alarmed glances. I edge a little closer and note the ID badge on the woman's labcoat: Cynthia Watts.

After they verify one unit of mercury is, in fact, missing, I wait for a break in the heated conversation and ask, "Is it possible to tell me if Dianne Stafford ever had access to dimethylmercury?"

Cynthia looks at Luis. Surprisingly, he nods, so she does something on the computer, reads a moment, then says, "No. It doesn't look like she's ever worked with it."

"If I understand correctly, the only way to get a chemical out of whatever vault you keep it in is to go through this request process, right?"

Cynthia and Luis both nod.

"Who requested the missing mercury?"

She clicks the mouse a couple times. "I'm not seeing any requests for that chemical in a while. Last one came from Roger Schnabel eighteen months ago."

"You're saying there was no request for the missing sample?" I ask.

Cynthia nods. "And that's a problem. It wasn't requested."

"Which means..." Jake begins but can't seem to finish the thought.

"It was stolen." I take out my notepad and start writing. "How possible is it that Dianne—or anyone else—could've snuck into the storage area and taken it?"

"Unlikely," says Cynthia. "Mrs. Stafford's badge does not have access to the storage rooms. Almost none of the research teams do, only the department heads. And they only have access to the first two levels. Chemicals as volatile as this one must go through a formal request process. Even the big three can't just walk in and grab it without a record."

"The big three?" I ask.

"The PEL in PEL," says Jake, chuckling weakly. "They still sometimes show up here, but they don't usually do research anymore themselves, mostly retired and enjoying the perks of ownership."

Luis and Cynthia go over the computer, grumbling about there being no requests for dimethylmercury since Roger's, and his check-out and check-in of the chemical appear above board.

"Not to be obtuse here," I say, "but if there is missing inventory and no request, how did it get out?"

They stare at me. Seems they have no good answer and don't want to say the wrong thing to a non-employee, especially an investigator.

"Based on my investigation thus far, I believe the theft would have occurred shortly before November 3, 2019." I let out a long, hopefully reassuring, sigh. "It seems likely to me that the dimethylmercury stolen from your company was used to murder Vincent Stafford. For the record, I do not suspect Dianne."

"Now I understand why you asked about her specifically," says Luis.

"I think someone is trying to make her look guilty." I tap my pen on my notepad, thinking. Yeah, my job did a complete reversal. I started off trying to prove she did it... now look at me.

Cynthia nods at me and digs into the computer again. After a few minutes, both her eyebrows go up. "Got something."

Luis leans closer. "What's this?"

"Security logs from Vault 3." She points at the screen. "The system recorded an 'open event' at 2:31 a.m. on November 1st 2019. As there should not be anyone in the building other

than the security guards at that hour... it's suspicious."

"Just a little," I say.

"Yes." Luis scowls. "Did it record the badge identification of who opened it?"

"No." Cynthia shakes her head. "The door simply opened. Whoever did it must have had a way to bypass the security and manipulate the lock directly. I can't explain that."

Luis pats the counter. "Damn. Please write this up as an incident report."

"Absolutely," says Cynthia.

Luis exits the booth and again waves for me to follow. "Going to talk to the security director."

I'm a little stunned at being invited along since I have no legal authority and don't work here. Wonder if they think being nice to me will encourage me to keep my mouth closed and not make the company look bad?

We head back to the office area away from the labs. Luis enters a fairly large room where two guys and a woman all in white polo shirts and black pants sit at desks. I hang back and spectate as Luis talks to the oldest looking of the two men, a man who appears to be the person in charge of the security team. They go over some stuff on the computer and come to the determination that no one filed any manner of incident report at the time of the unexplained 'open event' at the dangerous materials vault.

Suspiciously, the building's security system does not show any faults from the exterior doors or windows. This means whoever stole the mercury either worked here and had access or bribed someone who did. Luis and Andy (the older gentleman in charge of security) discuss the mechanism at the hazard vault. Andy says something to the effect that a person could theoretically get past the badge scan lock by disassembling the panel and creating a direct circuit in the right place. The system reads a scan, sends it over the network to a computer database to reference the employee ID of the badge with a list of approved access. If the ID number has access, the system then energizes a circuit to disengage the electromagnetic lock. Someone who knew electronic security systems could take the panel apart and essentially skip the computer part by bridging a physical connection between two contacts to turn off the magnet.

"That doesn't sound very secure," mutters Luis.

"It is in normal situations." Andy scratches idly at his chin. I note the sweat on his brow. Missing mercury is bad for business. "Opening the panel up requires specialized tools and maybe an hour of sitting there without anyone bothering you."

"Video?" asks Luis. "If the thief had to sit there working for over an hour, they should definitely be on camera."

I know exactly what Andy's going to say: they don't keep video that long.

"From two years ago?" Andy almost laughs. "You're kidding, right?"

Luis looks ready to slam his head into the wall a few times. He starts rambling at no one in particular how someone could've gotten into the building without setting off any of the alarms, sat there for an hour or so to obviously hack into the wall panel, and got out without anyone noticing. Andy thinks the computer messed up and recorded an open door event in the log when nothing really happened. Luis counters by telling him that if the log glitched, there wouldn't be a bottle of dimethylmercury missing.

Andy sets his hands on his hips. His expression is the perfect picture of 'well, shit...'

Given my history, I'm starting to think paranormal stuff happened. However, for every

hundred unexplainable things out there, one or *maybe* two are caused by the weird stuff. Odds favor a mundane—if unlikely—explanation.

“If something unusual happened that night, the security team might remember something,” I say. “Would you mind if I spoke to whoever was on shift at the time the door showed the open event?”

Luis glances at me. “You said you’re a private investigator, correct?”

“Correct.”

For the first time in twenty minutes, he smiles. “Excellent. Let’s head back to my office and talk.”

Chapter Thirty-Two Sleeping on the Job

I've taken another case in the middle of a case.

PEL Research has officially hired me to determine who stole dimethylmercury from their facility. With me on paper as a 'consultant,' Luis felt comfortable sharing information. Of course, they baked an NDA agreement into our contract. If I talk to anyone about the information I uncover during the course of my investigation that paints PEL Research in a bad or negligent light, they don't pay me... and I owe them a bunch of money. I insisted on a subpoena exception, which they put in. So, if the police want my info about PEL Research, they can get it. I got the feeling Luis isn't as worried about the police as me possibly selling a sensational story to tabloids or something to that effect.

My 'errand' to go visit the lab has extended. I send a text to Mary Lou asking her to pick Paxton up from school today, then another to Paxton letting her know to expect Mary Lou instead of me due to work. I do hope she's doing all right in school. She's been so terrified of being herself in public it's gotta be extremely strange for her to be out. The girl's so... girly on the outside I bet some of her classmates think she was kidding about being gay. Honestly, my biggest concern about that is the boy who asked her out.

There are a few reasons he worries me. One, he didn't so much ask her out as tell her they were going to date. As she explained it to me that night, he didn't really phrase things in a way that left her the opportunity to make a choice. Guys who think girls are there to be taken usually don't handle rejection well. If she had tried to tell him she had no interest in a date because she liked girls, he might take it as a lie and a personal insult. Even if he *did* believe her, he might have tried to damage her as much as possible by telling everyone her secret.

So, she took back power over her life by coming out before he could expose her in revenge. I hate that she ended up in a position where she had no real choice to come out. No matter how gently and ego-soothing she had told him she doesn't want to date him, he could still be a problem. I can't help but think about news stories of a rejected high school boy getting a gun and coming back to shoot the girl who said no.

The instant I get any whiff of danger, I'm going to put the fear of Sam in him. Hopefully, it won't come to that.

Meanwhile, Luis gave me the info on the security guard who had been working the night the mercury went for a walk. I park by the apartment complex where one Martin Rivera lives, head up to his door, and knock.

Shouting and gunfire inside—obviously a movie—stops. A moment later, a man opens the door. He matches the ID photo they showed me of Martin. He's youngish and handsome despite already starting to develop a beer baby. The man seems to have recently gotten out of bed. He smells like sleep, eggs, and sweat. Gee, thanks, hyper-nose.

"Mr. Rivera?" I ask.

"Yeah. Do I know you? If you're selling something, I'm not inter—"

"No. Not selling anything." I introduce myself, explain the situation at PEL, then add, "Between you and me, I get the feeling management there is looking for a scapegoat if things go bad. They can't explain what happened, so they're going to hang it all on the security guard they can easily replace."

“That’s bullshit.”

“I agree. Their goal isn’t my goal. I want the truth and I won’t help them lay everything—or anything, if that’s the case—on you.”

Martin shifts his weight onto one leg. “What do you want me to do?”

“Do? Nothing. Just talk. Do you remember anything weird happening on the night of November 1st, back in 2019, when someone broke into PEL and stole some dangerous chemicals?”

His mouth drops open. “Stole? Someone broke in?”

“Yeah. Looks that way... only they didn’t *break* in.” I explain the log of the ‘open door’ event but no alarms.

He stares at me in disbelief.

“No one even noticed anything happened until I showed up there today asking them to check their dimethylmercury. Someone took a small bottle of it and used it to murder a man. I don’t want to scare you, but if the police get frustrated enough and they find out the chemical went missing on your shift, there’s a really remote chance they might consider you an accessory to murder if you can’t explain how the chemical walked out the door.”

Martin paces in a circle, cursing under his breath in Spanish. He seems worried but not freaked out. Interesting.

“What happened that night, Martin?”

“It’s just...” He runs both hands up over his short, black hair. “I could get fired... but I can’t explain it.”

I shift to comforting mom demeanor. “If it’s not anything illegal on your part, I don’t need to remember hearing you tell me about it.”

“Okay.” He exhales hard. “I had a strange experience that night.”

“Must have been very strange if you can remember the date fourteen months after the fact.”

“Yeah...” He scratches the side of his head, looking away and down. “I’m a night person, okay? Even before I took this job, I couldn’t sleep at night.”

“Good for a night watchman.”

“Right.”

“Let me guess... you fell asleep at work.”

He sighs. “Only that one night. It’s weird for me to even be tired until six in the morning. But I just got so damned tired that night.”

He goes on to tell me he doesn’t remember lying down, but one minute he’s doing a patrol tour and yawning, and the next he’s waking up from a deep sleep on a couch in the lounge.

I narrow my eyes. “Patrol tour... did you happen to be outside at the time?”

“Yeah, I was in the tank yard.” He rubs his eyes. “Sometimes, we get idiots climbing the fence and trying to mess with the tanks.”

“What kind of moron would tamper with giant tanks marked hazardous?”

“Morons.” He laughs. “People get high enough they think we’re keeping good drugs or something in them. Or maybe they think they can steal some of the chemicals and magically find some place to sell them for a lot of money.”

“Where exactly would a person sell stolen liquid chemicals?” I ask.

“They don’t think that far ahead.” Martin fidgets. “So, are you gonna tell the bosses?”

“I have to tell them something, but not necessarily that you fell asleep.”

He fidgets.

“You were outside, then on a couch.”

“Yes.”

“I think you may have been ambushed and knocked out.”

Martin blinks a few times. “I think I’d remember that.”

“Chloroform can often cause short term memory loss. If whoever did it used it on you, the memory of your being grabbed from behind is probably gone. I’m guessing someone did that, dragged you inside, and left you on the couch. It explains why the security system wouldn’t show any tampering on the outside. If they used your badge, it would look like you coming back in from a patrol.”

“Umm... that’s kinda hard to believe.”

“When you woke up, you said you were groggy. Did you have a headache?”

He starts to nod, then makes an ‘oh shit’ face. “Damn, you could be right.”

“Any chance you can show me the route you walked?” I ask.

“At the site?”

“Yes.”

“Umm. Sure. You think they’re going to fire me?”

“For being chloroformed? If they do, you should sue the crap out of them.” I set my hands on my hips. “Definitely not your fault.”

He glances down at himself, finally noticing he’s only wearing a tank top and baggy boxer briefs. “Umm. Mind if I get cleaned up first?”

“No problem.”

Martin lets me wait in his living room while he runs down the hall to take a shower and change. His apartment is incredibly neat for a single guy living alone. I notice a bunch of Army memorabilia lying around. It’s kinda common for guys in security to be military fanboys. Get the feeling this guy takes his security job seriously. No wonder he neglected to mention the event to Andy. As far as Martin could tell, he’d crashed for a catnap. Who would really have believed a late night guard claiming to have been attacked and knocked out when nothing had apparently been damaged or stolen? The company wouldn’t have noticed the missing dimethylmercury until or unless someone requested it for use in an experiment and they came up short—or did a full inventory.

If Walton really is behind this murder, he’s got some incredible luck. The PEL people just decided not to do an inventory count for a year, or simply missed it? The eerie feeling in his office haunts me again. Maybe there really is something of a Pharaoh’s curse going on here, bending the rules of probability.

Martin follows me back to the PEL Research building.

He’s not scheduled to start work until 10:00 p.m., so he’ll likely be going home after he shows me around. He did, however, put on his uniform for the time being. We head in the main entrance, wave hello to Carrie at the desk, and continue into the hallway. Martin stops in at the security office to let Andy know I’ve asked him to show me the tour he walked that night.

This invariably leads to a conversation where I bring up my suspicion that someone attacked Martin. I blame the knockout chemical for leaving him in a semi-delirious state after he woke up that contributed to him not knowing for sure if anything happened. Andy seems to

be open to the idea Martin's mental state wasn't his fault and his bewilderment came from a result of the substance used to render him unconscious. Rather than yell at him for falling asleep on the job, he asks after Martin's health.

With his job not presently being threatened, Martin's mood improves noticeably, as does his memory. He tells us that he did, in fact, have a rather wicked headache when he woke up that persisted for a few hours, and also claims to have smelled something like 'burning electronics' in the hall by the chemical storage vault, but blamed it on his dizziness since nothing looked damaged.

Finally, we get to the tour. It's a routine walk around the facility, checking to make sure the doors that should be locked *are* locked and no one's there. Seven minutes after leaving the security office, we go out through a steel door into the tank yard, an area roughly twenty by thirty yards square, surrounded by a tall chain-link fence with barbed wire. The wire's a good deterrent for the casual vandal or thief. It's not so effective on desperate junkies or a professional. A thick leather jacket draped over the fence is often enough to get over it. Hell, I could jump the fence, but I doubt the person who stole the mercury is an immortal.

At least, I don't *think* they are.

No obvious damage to the fence or the barbed wire is visible. The stink of chemicals out here is almost enough to knock *me* out. I do my best to hold my breath, which I can do for a *really* long time. Yes, it's good to be me sometimes.

Martin demonstrates the way he usually walks around the tanks, checking valve seals for signs of tampering or the usual hiding places the miscreants like to duck into under the nest of pipes. This long after the event, there's zero chance of finding any useful evidence of where the attacker hid in wait. I spot at least three places while watching Martin walk around where someone could have been hiding to ambush him.

When I point the spots out, Martin is doubtful. He claims he'd have seen someone there.

"Up for an experiment?" I ask.

"Sure," says Andy.

Martin shrugs. "Yeah, okay."

I point at the door back into the building. "Go inside, shut the door, count to five and walk out here like you're doing the tour. I'm going to be hiding to pretend ambush you. If you spot me, just point and you win."

"Okay." Martin jogs over to the door.

"What are you going to do?" asks Andy.

"Pretend to be a thief." I wink, then hurry over to the—in my opinion—most visually obscured hiding place close to his route, crawling in behind a veritable wall of pipes as thick as my wrists.

Soon, Martin emerges from the door. I can't see him from here, but the squeak of the hinges is obvious. So, too, is the crunching of his rubber-soled security sneakers on the dirty pavement. Working by sound only, I track his progress around the tank farm, making sure to hold perfectly still as he gets close to my position. He's two steps past me before it's possible to see him through the metal tubes. As fast and quiet as I can make myself be, I emerge from my hiding place, rise to stand up, and rush him from behind. He doesn't seem to even notice me coming until I grab him and simulate holding a rag over his face.

"Gah!" yells Martin.

I am plenty strong enough to hold him down until my 'chloroform' takes effect, but there's

no reason to freak the guy out. When he reflexively tries to throw me off, I let him. We stare at each other for a moment before he blinks in disbelief and looks back.

“Where the heck did you come from? I didn’t see a damn thing.”

Andy’s got a hand over half his face, eyes bugged wide.

I lead Martin back to where I hid and point it out. The pipes block all sight coming from the direction he walked. If he’d been going the other way around counterclockwise, he’d have looked straight at me.

“Someone ambushed you,” I say. “Someone big enough to hold you down until the knockout agent worked.”

Martin goes pale. “I could’ve been killed.”

“In theory, possibly, but not likely. Whoever did it wanted to set up a specific set of circumstances to deflect blame on another party. A dead security guard would have made the break-in obvious. They *couldn’t* hurt you—or anyone else here—without ruining their attempted misdirection.”

This seems to relax the men.

I head to the door. “All of this was likely captured on the video surveillance. At this point, it’s impossible to say if the person deleted it or it simply went unnoticed until the system overwrote old recordings.”

Andy starts to grumble about someone named Dan—I assume Martin’s night shift partner—for not noticing anything on the screens. Again, it’s almost like supernatural luck was on the side of the killer.

Speaking of supernatural... the instant I grab the knob to go back into the building, the name ‘Turnbull’ leaps into my brain simultaneously with a horrid chemical smell/taste crashing into my sinuses. Thinking about the name feels masculine. I smack my lips a few times, analyzing the chemical trace lingering in my sensorium. Yeah. Definitely chloroform. Thankfully, experiencing it via psychometric vision does not knock me out. (Though I don’t think the stuff would work on me anymore).

It seems I might’ve been wrong about exactly how the ambush went down. Turnbull probably hid in the same spot, but he didn’t grab Martin until the moment the security guard opened the door. The imprint on the doorknob tells me the poor guy had been holding it when he lost consciousness.

Hand still on the knob, I turn to look at the guys. “Do you know a man named Turnbull?”

Both shake their heads.

“Where’d that come from?” asks Andy.

“Out of the blue.” I shift my jaw side to side. Can’t tell them without the risk of being thought nuts, but, yeah... I’m beginning to believe the man who broke into this place is named Turnbull. Some might call this download of information convenient. And I would agree. However, I had to grasp this knob to receive the information. Had I not asked Martin to walk me through his security rounds, I might never have received the name.

“Reminds me of my brother.” Andy smiles. “He randomly gets thoughts and feelings that sometimes turn out to be true.”

“Some people have a gift of intuition.” I open the door and head inside.

Not three steps into the hallway, an overwhelming feeling of urgency that Tammy is in serious danger hits me so hard my legs almost give out and dump me to the floor. I barely hold it together despite feeling like mere seconds separate my daughter being killed and surviving. I

hastily pretend to look at my phone.

“Sorry. I have to go right now. Daughter needs help.”

Without waiting for the men to answer, I run back to the Momvan.

Chapter Thirty-Three Mama Bear

I also no longer have the ability to mind control a cop into letting me get away with speeding.

Fortunately, it's not something I need to worry about. This is a serious damn emergency. I swerve into the parking lot of the first shopping center I see, cut the engine and dive into the back of the van. My ability to teleport survived Elizabeth's death. Right now, I don't really care if it's tiring. My adrenaline is off the charts.

One of the few mental abilities that still seems to work for me is a deep link to my kids. If they're in serious trouble, I know. No idea how, but whatever warning system this is, it goes off *before* they are in trouble. For example, if someone pulled a gun on Tammy intending to shoot her, I'd freak out like this sufficiently in advance to get to her and—hopefully—stop the guy in time.

One major problem, however, is this feeling doesn't tell me anything about *where* Tammy, Anthony, and—I hope—Paxton are. I sincerely hope this ability is based on protective desire and love and not biology, so it extends to my youngest daughter. Unfortunately, unless I already know where to go, I can waste precious time searching. This is the main reason I now insist the kids tell me where they are at all times. And yes, they know my reasons. I didn't want them thinking it's a case of me not trusting them. It's just me wanting to be able to help if the giant turd hits the celestial fan in the sky, so to speak.

And right now, that alarm is blaring in my ears. Not quite the same internal alarm that warns *me* of impending trouble... but pretty darn close.

Wow. I dunno if guardian angels are a real thing anymore, but I have doubts. Yes, an entity did once appear to me and claim to be mine. However, he didn't stop me from being attacked. Of all the things to think about while Tammy is in danger, I ponder why some people get guardian angels and some don't. If everyone got them, how could anyone suffer bad circumstances? Tammy once made the argument that the guardians function to ensure everyone makes it to their destiny. In that case, they aren't protecting us as much as they're protecting some great cosmic machinery. We're just products going down a conveyor belt they don't want falling off early.

Doesn't sound quite so noble that way.

Argh.

If I teleport to the office and she's not there, I'm going to be stranded without a ride. Screw it. I have wings and a dragon. That solves many problems.

Eyes closed, I call for the dancing flame, and focus on my office. The tiny candle fire grows into a roaring inferno. A hole appears at its center, widening into a portal. I think about stepping through it and my surroundings shift. I'm no longer in my van. I'm standing just outside the door of my office.

Fatigue crashes over me but I ignore it.

The front door is locked. Through the glass, I spot Tammy on the floor between our desks, hogtied with packing tape over her mouth. She's struggling furiously to get loose, seeming equal parts terrified and furious. As soon as she sees me at the door, her mood shifts to ninety percent fury and a warning look. As soon as I see her alive, all my fear implodes into relief—

and as I process someone tied her up, that relief continues to compress down until it's rage.

As fast as my supernatural reflexes allow, I pull my keys out, unlock the door, and yank it open.

The odor of gasoline saturates my senses.

Oh, shit... what the hell.

I rush to my daughter. She tries to shout something past the tape over her mouth. I don't realize what she's trying to say until a dude grabs me from behind and clamps a chemical-soaked rag over my face. Aha. Tammy tried to yell 'look out.' Damn rookie move, Sam. Fixating on the hostage and ignoring your environment.

Fortunately, chloroform doesn't work on me.

I ram my elbow back into his chest. A satisfying muted *crack* confirms a broken rib or maybe his sternum. He emits a startled grunt of pain. In the few seconds he's caught off guard by my strength, I grab the arm he's put around my chest and spin into a jiu-jitsu flip, hammering him into the floor. The guy's wearing a heavy black coat, some kind of armored tactical face shield, heavy boots... and I think a Kevlar vest under the coat. Wow, he came ready to rumble.

From the smell of him, I'm pretty sure Tammy hosed him down with that pepper spray I got for the office, but it hasn't seemed to do much to him—probably because of the full armored face mask.

Rage gets the better of me that this piece of shit would attack my daughter. Before I know it, I've punched him seven or eight times without really aiming or thinking about where my fist comes down. He flails his arms in a feeble attempt to defend himself. While the guy isn't 'feeble' per se—he appears to know how to fight—his strength is insufficient to deflect my attacks. The eyes under the clear visor on his tactical mask get wider and wider as he learns the difference between fear and terror.

Fear is having a person pull out a weapon and try to kill you.

Terror is that person's eyes glowing red right before they come after you.

No, my eyes aren't glowing or red... but this guy has done the math and knows a woman my size has no right being as strong as a forklift. It's unnatural. For her part, Tammy lays there watching this pummeling with her hands tied to her ankles behind her back. She's stopped fighting to escape and—except for being tied up—looks pretty much like Anthony and his friends watching wrestling on TV. She's totally giving me the 'kick his ass, Ma' stare.

Once the overwhelming fury passes enough for me to regain the ability to think, I grab his face covering and tear it away. The guy seems to be a large, military type with a crew cut and square jaw. I don't recognize him.

As easily as lifting a Styrofoam mannequin, I drag the guy to his feet, holding him by two fistfuls of his coat. He's almost a full head taller than me. Swear, if I still had fangs or the ability to make my eyes glow, he'd be getting the proverbial full Monty right now. He tried to kill my daughter... or threatened her. I'd make him spend the rest of his life in a psychiatric ward drooling on himself if I could.

"Who are you?" I growl while shaking him.

He panic-punches me in the face.

Doesn't hurt... much. Unfortunately for me, being strong doesn't make me weigh any more than a normal woman my size. The punch sends me stumbling back two steps, now holding two torn scraps of coat fabric. I drop them and lunge in to punch him in the sternum

faster than he can react.

Thud.

Yeah, he's definitely got a vest on.

Still, my punch throws the guy off his feet, flipping him head over heels. He lands on his chest sliding backward into one of my file cabinets. I storm after, reaching to grab him as he struggles upright. I just about get my hands on his shoulders when a gun goes off between us.

Dammit. There I go getting irrationally angry again and not paying attention. As the burning bite of a bullet to the chest begins to reach my awareness, I lash out with a kick at the man's leg. My foot connects near the middle of his left thigh, about eight inches above the knee. A painfully loud *crack* tells me his femur just broke. My kick sweeps his legs out from under him, throwing him into a hard midair cartwheel powerful enough to make the gun go flying from his hand. He comes down hard on his side—the same side with broken ribs—and lets out an anguished scream.

I want to stomp his face into tomato sauce, but my body is already shutting down from taking a bullet in the heart. It's only sheer mom-rage keeping me upright at the moment. I don't know where his gun went. All I can do is stand there menacingly as he drags himself away from me. He heads for the back door out to the trash dumpsters behind the building.

No amount of wanting to go after him can overpower the physical damage I've sustained. Dammit. A few seconds after the rear door slams closed, I stagger back and collapse on the floor right next to Tammy. I've just about got enough strength left in me to reach over and peel the tape off her face.

"Ow," mutters Tammy, opening and closing her mouth as if to ease the sting from the adhesive.

"Yeah. Ow indeed," I rasp.

"Just an ordinary day at the office, right?" deadpans Tammy.

It makes me feel much better she's taking this in stride. Hopefully, she's not in shock. Of course, after the crazy stuff we lived through, this wouldn't bother her much.

"You okay, Ma?"

"Just shot in the heart again." I glance over at her. She's not tied with rope, rather black plastic riot cuffs. Heavy duty stuff. The bastard even took her boots off so he could tighten them around her bare ankles. Damn. She's not going to be able to get out of those by herself. "I'll be fine in a while."

Tammy tugs at the zip tie linking her wrists to her ankles. "I can't get these damn things off. Stupid zip ties. Can you cut me loose before you rest?"

"Not resting. Paralyzed." I exhale. "Stay calm."

"I am calm," mutters Tammy. "I'm not screaming, am I? Just lying here hogtied and smelling gasoline. What do I have to panic about?"

"Why are we smelling gasoline?" I ask.

"The creep has two big cans of it. I think he was expecting to kill us both and then torch the place," says Tammy.

"Yeah." I grunt in pain, fighting to stay conscious. "I think you're right."

"What if the creep comes back?" Tammy twists to peer toward the back door. "The gas cans are still here. We're both kinda stuck."

"He won't come back. I broke his leg really bad. If he lights a fire in here, he won't be able to get out fast enough not to die along with us. He also saw me take a bullet and not die. He's

probably crapping his pants.”

Tammy inchworms closer to me and rests her head on my shoulder. “Can you move enough to cut me loose?”

“With what?” I ask.

“Claws... oh.” She sighs. “Never mind. They’re gone.”

“They’ve been gone for a long time, Tam Tam.” I manage a weak smile at the ceiling. The claws disappeared when the Red Rider thing happened and I changed from an undead vampire to a psychic one. “I’m a normal mom now.”

“Hardly.”

“Well, much closer than before.” I manage to find enough power to tilt my head against hers. “Liz giveth and she taketh away... or something.”

Tammy groans. “Can we not talk about her like ever again?”

“Sure.”

Tammy squirms. “What are we going to do now? Can’t call the police and tell them you got shot and didn’t die.”

“Nope. That won’t end well. We need to handle this in-house.” I try again, without any success, to move. The bullet hole is burning like a damn charcoal grill ember in my chest. Electrical pain shoots down the nerves in my arms and legs. Even trying to move one finger raises the ouch factor to intolerable. When Nasir’s guys shot me, I went out in an instant. This agony is a new experience due to me fighting to stay awake. Had to protect Tammy. I do not regret it. Bring on the pain.

“This is so bad,” mutters Tammy. “The door is unlocked. Anyone could walk in and find us.”

“If they do...” My rapidly deteriorating ability to think makes coming up with a way to handle a random passerby finding me ‘dead’ impossible. “Ugh... here it comes.”

“What?” asks Tammy.

“Gonna black out now. Don’t panic. Not dead.”

“How long until you wake up?”

My eyes close against my will. “Hour or two...”

Chapter Thirty-Four Psychometry

I wake to the sound of my daughter crying.

Good: she's alive.

Bad: she's crying.

Another good: those sound like anger tears. Other than a lingering ache in my chest, I feel okay. I sit up. We're partially behind Tammy's desk. She's on her side, still zip-hogtied.

"How much time passed?" I ask.

"It's almost five."

Ugh. So, I was out for closer to three hours. I still smell gasoline, but we're not on fire... so the guy never came back. I pull myself up to stand then grab a knife from the table by the coffee machine. It's a standard table knife, but with my strength, it's plenty sharp enough to get through zip tie plastic. Plus, it's got the little serrations on it.

As soon as I've cut Tammy loose, she springs up and clamp-hugs me. *Now* she starts to have a mild freakout. I hold her until she stops shaking... which takes about ten minutes.

"The guy came rushing in the door dressed like that. I hit him with that spray but it didn't help." Tammy points at two metal barbs and thin wires stuck to her chest. "He shot me with a taser thing. Holy sweet mama that hurt so much. Think I fainted. Woke up tied on the floor, smelling gasoline."

I gingerly remove the barbs from her skin. She squeezes her fingers into me, squirming up onto her toes, but doesn't pull away. After a few agonizing minutes, I get the barbs loose.

"Sorry," I whisper.

"This isn't your fault." She stares at me, incredulous.

"It's gotta be someone pissed off at something I did. It certainly isn't *your* fault."

Tammy smirks. "Yeah... that jackass at school who said crap about Paxton wouldn't really hire a mercenary to kick my ass."

I chuckle—which makes the bullet wound hurt. "Hey, Tam Tam. If this is too much for you... if you want to stop working here, it's fine."

She hugs me tighter. "No way. I'm good. Watching you beat that guy senseless made me feel a lot better. This kinda thing can't happen all the time, right?"

"Hope not."

Tammy grumbles. "That self-defense spray you got didn't work too well on him. Stupid mask."

We stand there holding each other for a few more minutes to process what happened and let the adrenalin settle. Eventually, we check around the office. Nothing appears to be broken into or vandalized. There's a 9mm Beretta92 on the floor under my desk as well as two five-gallon gasoline cans sitting just inside the back door.

We relocate the gasoline to the alley behind the building for the time being. Think I've got a funnel in the van. The safest thing I can think to do with the gas is put it in the tank. It's not stealing. Dude brought us free gasoline.

Thinking about him fills me with anger all over again.

"You all right, Mom?" asks Tammy, rubbing a hand up and down my back.

"Yeah. Just furious."

She knows exactly what pissed me off the most here: her life being threatened. Thanks to the telepathy—and our crazy life in general—I don't think there are too many moms out there with eighteen-year-old daughters as close as we have become.

"Two cases in a row now where you've been shot," says Tammy. "Maybe you should get a vest, too."

"Hah." I let my head hang and sigh. "This job isn't supposed to be *this* dangerous. Even SWAT cops don't get shot at twice in two weeks... well, usually. Maybe the guys in L.A. do."

Tammy makes a face at me like she can't tell if I'm making a morbid joke or being serious.

I'm glad the idiot didn't dump gasoline all around the office yet. That would've been a real pain to clean up. We pick up the mess created by the fight, just stuff knocked over really. I put his gun on my desk. Tammy wanders over holding his armored facemask. It's like something straight out of *Soldier of Fortune* magazine ads or a science fiction movie.

"This thing is kinda heavy." Tammy hefts the mask before offering it to me in a 'feel this' way.

I take it. To me, it doesn't seem heavy at all... but I can appreciate it's a lot meatier than, say, a hockey mask. "It's bullet resistant. And I'm pretty sure we just met Mr. Turnbull."

"You know that guy?"

"No. I'm guessing here." I tilt the mask back and forth, watching the gleam of my ceiling lights shift across the visor. "Either the man who attacked us is an Egyptian spy or just a hitman-slash-assassin. Considering he didn't look Middle Eastern, I'm leaning toward hitman. Also, no one in the ministry of Egyptian Cultural Artifacts is aware I'm trying to solve the murder of Vincent Stafford."

"Makes sense." Tammy nods.

I concentrate on the mask, trying to ask it who it belonged to. A name crawls across the surface of my brain. "Hello, Garrett Turnbull."

"Nice," whispers Tammy. "You get that from psychometry?"

"Gotta be." I frown at the mask. "He looked pretty damn scared when he realized how strong I was. Good chance it left an emotional imprint on this mask."

Tammy raises both eyebrows. "Maybe you should, like, start doing tarot readings instead of being a PI."

I laugh. "My luck? That would end up being *more* dangerous."

She leans into me, also laughing. "I just had an image of the Death card coming to life."

"Creepy, but yeah, something like that."

Three hours ago, I took a bullet in the heart. Now I'm laughing. My life, right?

"Anyway, I think Walton is pretty pissed off."

"That's the business partner, right?" Tammy brushes carpet lint off her sweater. "Oh, Ma, your shirt's a mess. Lemme run home and get you something to change into."

"All right." I flop in my chair, staring at the armored facemask. "I'll see what I can find about this piece of shit. Pardon my French. Maybe Sherbet can run his name."

My daughter takes a step toward the door, but stops, then walks up to me. "Or maybe you could try reading the mask a little more. Or maybe the gun. If he left a strong enough imprint on them, they could lead you to him somehow?"

"Damn. You make sense sometimes." I sigh at the ceiling. Sure, Sherbet could run his name as a favor. But no way can I ask Fullerton PD to pick this guy up for breaking into PEL Research because I 'got a psychic hit' on his name. Also, I can't tell them about the attack here

or I'd be stuck scrambling for an excuse as to how I survived being shot without so much as a red mark. Again, Sherbet would understand. The others... not so much.

"Well?" asks Tammy. "Are you making faces like that because you're concentrating and getting nothing or are you just frustrated?"

"Frustrated." I stare at the mask. "Worth a shot."

I concentrate on the mask similar to how mind reading used to work. It's obviously not alive, though. Nothing happens at first, but my thoughts kinda shift around. Once I start trying to picture how to 'go home,' I get some fleeting images. Street signs, landmarks and such appear in my head and vanish.

"Something's happening," whispers Tammy.

"You can tell?"

"No, it's the *ooh* expression on your face." She smiles.

I stand. "One second."

Tammy waits while I take my bloody shirt off, head to our bathroom to clean up, and put on a fresh—if plain—T-shirt from my desk drawer.

"Whoa." She blinks at me. "You keep spare shirts in your desk?"

"I do. Mostly for coffee spills, though." I smirk. "Okay. Let's go. You drive."

No, I'm not leaving her here alone right now. Besides, my van's like thirty miles away.

Chapter Thirty-Five Masked Intention

Not sure if it's wise or foolish, but I decide to bring Turnbull's Beretta with me.

Some PIs carry a gun as a matter of routine. I'm not one of them, mostly because I don't really need it thanks to being a bit more than normal. It's also asking for problems. I've got nothing to prove and no fantasies about pretending to be a cop or a hero in an action movie. But this guy tried to kill my daughter, and at the moment, I have no solid evidence tying him to anything.

Just might be easier for all parties if I finished him off. As repugnant as the idea of hunting a man down and killing him is to me, the bastard *did* try to kill Tammy. And in the worst way possible. Remember the gasoline cans? Anyway, if there's anything that'll get me into a murderous rage, it's someone threatening my kids.

Still, I am going to *try* to do things the right way before going full vigilante.

We ride around in Tammy's Prius, following whatever urges I get to turn here and there. Once I realize we're going to the airport, it hits me that 'home' is probably not even in California for this guy. I change my focus on the facemask for something more recent. Where does he consider safe and close? Scenery changes. I get a mental image of a small hotel... Best Western. Cheap. Anonymous.

I direct Tammy where to turn based on whatever feels right.

Lo and behold, twenty-ish minutes later, we pull into the lot of a Best Western.

My daughter stops in a parking space. "I'll wait in the car."

"Damn right."

She eyes me. "Can I keep the gun or will you need it?"

"You're not keeping the gun."

"No, not permanently. Just right now in case the guy comes after me."

I really don't like the idea of my kid handling a firearm, but she *is* eighteen after all. A few years ago, she didn't seem at all responsible enough to be trusted with a gun... but now? Yeah, I have to admit she's got herself sorted out pretty well.

"Okay. I'll leave it in the car. Don't touch it unless you need it."

"I'm not five, Ma."

"I know. I'm thinking of fingerprints. We can't keep the gun. I'm going to give it to Sherbet once this is over." He knows about me, of course. I can tell him the truth of where it came from and let him figure out how to deal with filling out the paperwork for the gun.

She nods.

I set the Beretta on the seat between us, then get out, still holding onto the mask for guidance. Tammy shrinks in her seat, trying to hide. Good plan. Turnbull can't attack her if he doesn't see her. Of course, with a smashed femur and broken ribs... he's probably not going to be too much of a threat to anyone for at least a few months.

My psychic connection to the mask leads me across the parking lot to Room 11. Since I hadn't planned on needing to break into a place, I left my tools at home. Yes, the federal government taught me how to pick locks. I do miss the automatic lockpick. Pity they don't really let civilians have them.

A moment of standing close to the door convinces me there's no one here. Or, if he is in

there, he's passed out. After a quick look in both directions to make sure no one is around, I grab the doorknob and literally break in. If anyone—or any cameras—happen to be watching me, it would look like I merely opened the door. The implausibility of my strength gives me the ability to lie and claim the door was already broken. It doesn't *look* like I exerted enough force to break it in.

The room is, in fact, empty. No Turnbull.

I search. A long case under the bed contains a sniper rifle, two more handguns, and several plastic boxes worth of ammo. There's also a light bullet-resistant vest and a Target shopping bag with three burner phones. I gather everything on top of the bed, trying to figure out what to do with it. Leaving this stuff here is out of the question. Turnbull might come back or with the now-busted door, some rando could happen on this armory's worth of firepower and use it to hurt people.

Best idea is probably to call 911 from the room phone and let the cops 'discover' this stash. I'll just wipe down my prints off the doorknob and—

One of the burner phones rings.

Ooh. Lucky.

I yank my iPhone off my belt, set it to record, then hold it close to the burner phone while hitting the answer button and doing my best approximation of a male grunt.

"Where the hell are you?" barks a voice I recognize as Walton. "I don't see any fire on the news? Is our Moon problem dealt with or not?"

Smiling, I pick up the burner phone, holding both it and my phone close to my face. "Hi, Walton. I think your 'Moon problem' just got a whole lot bigger. Your guy tried to kill my daughter. Pray the cops find you before I do."

He hangs up.

I stop recording. Damn. A lawyer could argue I threatened him, but as long as I don't actually kick his ass or kill him, it's not going to matter much. Of course, now I *will* have to tell the police about the attack at my office. They can't know Turnbull shot me. Shot *at* me, yes.

After dialing 911 from the room's landline phone and leaving it off the hook, I snag the bag of burner phones and rush out. Wheels in my brain turn, formulating a way to make everything seem plausible without having to tell anyone about supernatural or psychic stuff. I jog down the sidewalk in front of the rooms to the motel office and grab a business card off the desk. On the back, I write the phone number of the burner phone that rang, stash it in my pocket, and hurry back to Tammy's Prius.

"Drive, my dear," I say.

"Thank you for using Johnnycab," says Tammy. "Where would you like to go?"

I want to chuckle for her quoting *Total Recall* but we don't have time. "No time to mess around. Back to the office before the cops get here."

She gives me this 'what the heck did you do' stare, but turns the car on and pulls out of the parking space.

"Nothing. He wasn't there. Found a small armory under the bed." I explain calling 911 from the room so the cops find the weapons before anyone else does.

"Oh. Nice." She smiles and accelerates onto the road.

Baby Driver my daughter is not. A Prius only has so much power... but it's enough to get us out of here.

Chapter Thirty-Six Handoff

It's almost seven in the evening when Detective Washington arrives at my downtown office.

Mary Lou is at my house, keeping Paxton and Anthony company. Ant made dinner for them. My daughter and I have worked out a sanitized version of a story that leaves out the unexplainable supernatural stuff. I've relocated the Momvan here after teleporting back to it and also brought one of Anthony's old aluminum baseball bats here from home—it's been sitting in the garage since he was twelve—to explain the broken leg.

Detective Washington sniffs as he enters, frowns, then gives me a concerned eyebrow raise. "What happened in here?"

"Walton Osborne hired a guy named Garrett Turnbull to kill Vincent Stafford. He also hired him to get rid of me."

"All right, I'm listening, but that doesn't exactly explain why I smell gunpowder or gasoline here."

"I was at PEL Research interviewing one of the security guards. Seems Turnbull ambushed him, knocked him out with chloroform, and used his security access to go into the building and steal a bottle of dimethylmercury at around three in the morning, November 1st, 2019. I came back here to find Tammy zip-tied on the floor. When I ran to her, Turnbull jumped on me from behind." I explain fighting him off, claiming to have received hand-to-hand training at Quantico while in the process of becoming a federal agent. "... grabbed the bat I keep for bad situations, and cracked him on the leg. Pretty sure I broke his femur."

"Wow." He looks me up and down. "Hell of a swing for, no offense, a little woman."

Hey, I'm not *that* little. So, I'm a bit on the short side, but whatever. To a guy like him, I'm 'small.' And I suppose it does seem a bit questionable for me to break a man's leg, even with a bat. "He was going to kill my daughter. I don't know what came over me."

"He also shot at you," says Tammy, before pointing at the spent brass on her desk.

Detective Washington looks around. "Where'd the bullet go?"

"It must've gone out the door." Tammy points. "Ma left it open when she ran in."

"Turnbull was on the ground when he shot at me. Bullet probably went over the building across the street." I cringe. "Hope it didn't hit anyone."

"Federal agent." He whistles. "You don't really look old enough to have been a Fed... at least not more than a rookie."

You might think it would annoy me to hear that all the time. It doesn't. Telling a woman she looks young *never* gets tiring. "I have some really amazing skin cream." I wink. "I'm older than I look."

We go over the attack. I mention having torn two scraps off his coat, then hand the detective the burner phone and the motel business card. "He dropped these in the scuffle, as well as..." I point at the Beretta on my desk. "That's his. Please collect it."

He nods once.

"And... just so happens..." I pull out my phone. "Not long after the guy ran off—"

"Er, dragged himself out," says Tammy.

"Dragged, yeah." I rub my forehead as if I'm still a bit dazed from a knockout punch.

“Anyway, the phone rang and...”

I play the recording for him.

Detective Washington’s eyebrows notch upward.

“That’s Walton Osborne calling his hired gun to complain that my office isn’t on fire yet.” I point at the back. “Two gas cans, right there.”

Tammy lifts the cut zip ties out of the wastebasket. “Not sure if you need these...”

My bloody shirt is stuffed in a plastic bag in the back cargo pocket of the Momvan.

“If you pull the phone records for Walton’s office or home, you’ll find a call to this burner phone, proving the connection.”

Detective Washington leans close, staring into my eyes. No, it’s not creepy. He’s doing the paramedic thing. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah. I’ve been attacked by scarier demons than him.” I smile.

“All right,” says the detective. “I’ll take it from here. Going to need to declare your office a crime scene for a bit.”

“Yeah. I know the drill. Do what you need to.” I shrug. “I’m happy to testify if it goes to trial, assuming the guy doesn’t plea or flee the country.”

He nods, thanks me, then calls back to the station to request some uniforms and a crime scene crew. Oof. I’m really glad my body doesn’t bleed much. If there is any blood on my carpet, it’s from Turnbull’s face.

Nothing to do now but wait and hope... and call home to tell everyone we’re going to be late.

Chapter Thirty-Seven Relaxation

Ahh. So nice.

Finally relaxing. I'm stretched out in my bathtub, soaking in hot water and a lavender bath bomb. Got some herbal tea as well. Long soaks aren't usually my thing, but I really needed it. The exhaustion and fatigue of both cases melt out of me into the water. Idle fantasies of Kingsley walking in to find me naked in the bathtub, then carrying me to the bedroom occupy my mind.

Unfortunately, my house only has a single bathroom. One of my kids is going to need to use it sooner or later, even at this hour. It's after eleven at night, two days after Turnbull showed up at my office. Detective Washington hasn't called me back about anything yet, so it seems he's handling the case favorably enough for me—and Dianne. I started off being hired to find evidence to implicate Dianne, then changed to being hired to find evidence to exonerate her. Also picked up a side contract to solve the theft of chemicals from PEL.

Two missions accomplished.

Yesterday, I met with Luis and Andy at PEL Research to give them my findings. Unfortunately, I didn't discover anything in the motel room that absolutely tied Turnbull to the stolen dimethylmercury other than his association to Walton. It will need to come out in the police investigation that he did it before PEL is confident enough to pay me. I'm not worried. I know he did it, and the guy will probably take a plea deal in exchange for testimony and a lighter sentence. Just a matter of waiting for the paperwork.

Something tickles the toes on my right foot.

One of the reasons I don't make a habit of soaking in the tub is my tub lacks the room for me to fully immerse without practicing yoga. Unless I twist myself into a human pretzel, either my toes, knees, or half my butt is exposed to the air. I've always wanted to have the bathroom renovated and a larger tub installed... but I never had the money for it before. Now... I just keep forgetting or not bothering. Seems kinda frivolous, to be honest. But hey, it's good to treat oneself now and then and a new bathtub is hardly bank breaking. Not like I'd be buying a midlife crisis Ferrari.

I open my eyes to find a brown-and-white hamster sniffing my toes.

"Hello there, Ted."

The hamster looks at me.

Yeah, the kids at Anthony's school named a teddy bear hamster 'Ted.'

The little furball flings himself into the water and swims over to my face. I can't say the sensation of having a wet rodent climb on my bare skin is comfortable, but I don't squeal or freak out. Ted is being affectionate. *Too* affectionate for a hamster. They don't usually do that. I wonder if I've become some manner of animal whisperer.

I cradle the hamster in my hand to ensure he doesn't drown. Really ought to take him back to his habitat in my son's room but I can't do that naked and wet. Even if my boy's asleep, I am *not* walking around the house like this unless I'm the only one here. So, I am going to hold a drenched hamster until the need to put him away overpowers my lack of desire to get out of this lovely warm bath.

Ted appears content to sleep in my palm.

This is not how I envisioned my relaxing evening going. If I'm going to share a tub with a guy, it's gonna be Kingsley. Though, I suppose they're both furry. That counts for something, right? Now Kingsley's place sports a giant bathtub. I can relax fully in it. Both of us can. Mmm. I close my eyes and daydream about being with him in the tub.

My phone rings.

Dammit. There goes my romantic visions. I snatch the phone from the counter above my head and glance at the screen. I don't recognize the phone number. There's no name given with the caller ID. That's usually a sign of scammers or telemarketers. For some odd reason, though, I decide to pick up this time.

"Hello?" I ask, expecting to hear the long silence that precedes an automatic computer dialer connecting me to a professional phone harassment agent. My brain is ready to confirm the autodialer and hang up before anyone is on the line—but a woman is there.

"Ms. Moon?" asks a youngish female voice with a mild Eastern European accent. "I really need to talk to you. Not sure who else to call."

I recognize the voice but can't place a name to it. Whoever she is, she sounds frightened and upset. "Yes? I'm sorry, I kinda remember you but not exactly."

"It's Marta. You visited where I work the other day. Grand Galleon Imports?"

"Oh!" I sit up, alert. Crap. Did Walton do something to her? She's just the receptionist. "Yes. I remember."

Ted rolls over in my hand, yawning while unashamedly showing off his hamster bits. Little hedonist.

"Sorry for calling you so late," says Marta. "I just had the most awful dream... and it feels like not a dream, you know?"

"Tell me about it."

"In the dream, I was in the office at night when something big, invisible, and evil appeared behind me. I ran and it chased me." She exhales a shuddering breath as if she'd been crying. "Sorry, I've been on edge ever since the police showed up. They arrested Mr. Osborne today, you know."

"That upset you?"

"Only because of what he did when the police arrived. Mr. Osborne lost his mind and tried to kill them. He was not himself, Ms. Moon. He started shouting in some strange language, African I believe."

I blink. "African is not a language."

"Right, of course. Sorry, I'm not thinking straight." She pauses and seems to collect herself. "This is going to seem bizarre, but..."

Already does, but I don't say that to her.

"In my dream, I ended up running into Mr. Osborne's office. You remember that creepy thing on his shelf? Well, it started talking to me. It wanted me to steal it and bring it home."

I slump back against the wall, sinking into the water up to my chin. Ugh. Crap. This is bad. "Don't. Whatever you do, do *not* take the nkondi home. Stay away from it."

Marta heaves a heavy, relieved breath. "So you don't think I'm crazy?"

"No. I don't." Water sloshes around me as I sit forward.

"What do you think it means?" she whispers.

"I think there's a spirit in one of those statues and it's reaching out to you. It was influencing Walton Osborne, but with him incarcerated, he's unable to do its bidding anymore

so it needs a new victim to influence. That dream you had was it trying to talk to you. It must have established some connection to you the day you got stuck staring at it for ten minutes.”

“Are we both crazy or is this real?” She emits a faint whimper. “I called you because you believed me when I said the statue was creepy. Now I’m wondering if we’re both nuts.”

I shrug. “Fair odds of either being the case, but I’d like to think I’m sane.”

“What do I do?”

“I’ll deal with it,” I say. “The only thing you need to do is stay away from the office for a day or two.”

“All right. I…” She swallows hard. “I… almost went to the office to go get it. I called you instead. But I want to get it really, really bad.”

“That’s the spirit’s influence.” Crap. I stare at the comfortably sleeping hamster in my palm. Sorry, Ted. I have to disturb you. This girl isn’t going to last long. If she doesn’t handcuff herself to her bed, she’s going to end up losing the battle of willpower, going to the office, and becoming a tool of an evil spirit. “Try to resist. I’m going to go right now and take care of it.”

“Really? How?”

“Let me worry about that, okay? You just focus on *not* leaving your home.”

She’s quiet for a moment. “I can do that. I think if I don’t go to sleep I will be able to control myself.”

“Good. Give me a couple hours.” I stand.

“Thank you so much.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll call you back soon.”

She thanks me yet again before we hang up.

I sigh at the bathtub. Oh, lavender bath bomb, I hardly knew ye. Well, I guess getting a half hour out of it isn’t *too* bad. Ted yawns again. I hold him up to eye level. “Sorry, bud. You need to get back to your little house.”

Chapter Thirty-Eight Instigator

It's been a long time since I dressed up like a ninja.

Not literally a ninja—just black everything. You'd think, given everything to happen in my life up to this point, I'd be long over the worry about breaking mortal laws. Extricating myself from legal complications has once again become a serious challenge. Can't just hammer some cop over the head with mind control and make him forget seeing me. At least flying there at night doesn't risk anyone seeing the Momvan in the area, or it showing up on CCTV.

I also can't call Detective Washington and ask him to let me into the Grand Galleon Imports office at almost midnight because I believe there's an evil spirit that presents a danger to any hapless person to stumble across it. Suppose I could bother Dianne. She might have one of Vincent's keys. However, that would involve waking her up in the middle of the night as well as taking too long. Something tells me Marta is not going to be able to resist for long. She'd been getting the creeps from the nkondi for a long time already. It's probably established some manner of foothold in her psyche. I wouldn't be shocked if it already used her to do some things. Why else would it have reached out to her with a dream?

One of the instructors I had years ago said there isn't much difference between cops and robbers except for the uniform. He didn't mean it in a bad way, merely saying cops have a lot of the same skills. One needs to be a thief to catch a thief, so to speak. Doesn't mean cops steal. Just means we know how to break into places. I say 'we' even though I was never really a police officer. Federal agent isn't too far off.

Using the toolkit I've had in a closet for almost a decade now, I make short work of a back door and let myself into the professional building and down the hall to the Grand Galleon Imports office. Picking the lock on the outer office door is even easier than the building's exterior door.

I've gone the whole nine yards. Black long-sleeved shirt, black gloves, pants, shoes, and even a 'ninja mask' hastily made from a black pillowcase. I'm like a superhero in an indie movie with no budget left over for the costume.

The place has a security system, but there isn't anything in this building worth a lot of money, so it's not an incredibly sensitive mechanism—nor the type to go directly to the police. More like a security command center. I figure I have about nine minutes to get in and out before an investigating officer sees a black-clad figure run off into the night many times faster than a human should be capable of. Usually, I try to hide the crazy stuff... but in some cases, letting people see the supernatural helps me out. The cop wouldn't want to talk about what they saw for fear of being thought a liar, on drugs, or drunk.

Since I spent a fair amount of time roaming around this place talking to employees about who might want to hurt Vincent, I make my way to Walton's office as readily as any worker. The odd energy coming from the nkondi is even stronger now. I can sense it in the hallway thirty feet away from the door. Can't tell if it's simply due to the place being tomb silent in the middle of the night or the thing has become stronger in its anger. And yeah, this is anger I'm feeling.

I pause. Crap. What the heck am I planning to do here? How do I fight an evil spirit in a statue? The angel's sword is gone, back to its rightful owner. I have no claws. No fangs. Not

even a gun on me. Screw it. I'll do what I always do: improvise.

Jaw clenched, I hurry the rest of the way down the hall and barge into Walton's office. The desk is messed up, some of the shelves and file cabinets appear tossed—no doubt the work of the police. Unsurprisingly, they didn't touch any of the art objects or nkondi statues.

The one that stands out, a head with dried grass for hair, red and white paint on its face, and a carved toothy grimace, seems to be glaring at me. Unlike Marta, I don't hear it speaking in a real voice. The mood it's giving off is unabashedly hostile.

"Sorry, dude. Did I get your 'agent of destruction' arrested?" I ask. "Are you having trouble causing chaos?"

Anger in the air intensifies. A mild headache begins to spread over my brain. Got a feeling this guy is trying to possess or influence me, but can't because of what I am. Would smashing the statue work? I could probably steal it and light a bonfire out in the desert somewhere. Maybe bury it so no one ever finds it?

My headache worsens, almost like an icepick forcing its way under my left eye.

Ouch. Bitch.

Hmm. Idea.

What is a spirit but *mental* energy?

I latch onto its presence and try to feed. The same way I consume the mental energy of the living, I draw at the nkondi. Some manner of tangible power flows from it into me. Can't say it tastes good... this stuff doesn't really have a flavor per se. It's more a tingling in my brain than any sensation my tongue can register. The rage in the air falters to panic. I keep pulling, blaming this thing for trying to kill Tammy. Mom-fury rises. My moral conflict regarding hunting down and killing Turnbull does not apply to a paranormal entity. It's not a human life. It's not alive. No physical body.

Every bit of wrath I'd felt toward Turnbull for attacking Tammy gets focused into hate for this thing. I snarl. My heart races as I keep drawing hard on the energy link until our mental connection breaks with enough force to knock me on my backside.

The nkondi shudders, then explodes into a shower of wood chunks and fluttering bits of dried grass.

"Whoa..."

I stare into space. My hands are shaking like I've just chugged an entire pot of espresso and then snorted a massive line of cocaine—not that I know what snorting coke is like, just saying based on movies. What's a mama bear do when something threatens her cubs? She freakin' eats it.

There is no way I am sleeping tonight. Hell, I might be awake for the next three days. Holy cow. Feels like I could run ten Boston Marathons in a row.

When my head stops spinning, I stand and look around at the wood bits everywhere. The strange energy is gone. Walton's former office is now no creepier than any other office at this hour of night. The remaining nkondi on the shelf look menacing, yes, but none of them have even the slightest trace of a consciousness.

Good.

As they say, 'my work here is done.'

I run out of the room and down the hall. After a quick peek past the door to make sure no police are pulling up yet, I sprint around the building into the same dark alcove of trash dumpsters where I landed. No sirens yet, which is a good sign. Then again, cops would

probably roll in quiet on a silent alarm.

Wings out, I leap into the sky, and start heading home. Once high enough up into the night sky to where no one on the ground has any real chance of seeing me, I remove my pillowcase mask and gloves.

Hmm. The flight gives me time to think bad thoughts. Like... exactly how responsible is Walton for everything? Would he have poisoned Vincent and set Dianne up to take the fall for it if not for the influence of the spirit in the nkondi? How did he even get it? Maybe he pissed someone off and they sent him the statue as a spiritual 'bomb,' trying to ruin his life. Nah. He probably just took it as a souvenir or bought it from a collector.

Alas, there's not much I can do for him. Suppose it's possible for me to visit him in jail and tell him about the spirit. Might give him an insanity defense, but really? Ending up committed to a secure mental hospital is *worse* than prison. People think they're getting one over on the system by escaping jail with an insanity defense. The reality of our world is quite different. Mental hospitals, especially the ones where they lock people up, are hell on earth. He might be totally sane now, but he wouldn't be when/if he got out.

It's less cruel to let him face ordinary prison.

No way to know how much of what he did came from his mind versus the spirit. He might've been jealous of Dianne or greedy enough to want the whole company for himself but never acted on it. People have dark thoughts all the time, but we don't follow through. It's human to do that. It's not evil to daydream about beating up the guy who cut you off in traffic. It's wrong to actually beat him up. Perhaps this spirit only removed the inhibitions that keeps us civilized.

Ultimately, I decide not to do anything. I'll leave Walton's fate up to the universe.

Since I'm absolutely going to be awake all night, might as well use the time to catch up around the house...

Chapter Thirty-Nine So Much for Secrets

Sure enough, I did not sleep.

Consuming the evil spirit's energy has amped me up big time. Not talking any more powerful, just... I won't need to feed or sleep for a few days. It's a little after ten in the morning the day after I blew up the nkondi. Tammy's in school right now, so she doesn't accompany me to Dianne's house.

I like to end cases with a face-to-face whenever possible. That said, I'm not surprised to see Gwen here after Dianne invites me in. The women are almost interacting like sisters. Looking at them now, I'd never believe they once could chill a room to silence simply by being together in it.

We have coffee and cookies in the living room while I explain to them everything that happened—leaving out the evil spirit stuff. Walton Osborne, for reasons that appear to be money-related, decided to kill Vincent and do so in a way that implicated Dianne. His choice of dimethylmercury offered two plausible ways to escape punishment for his crime. Doctors might have blamed the death on the MS, but if that failed, the most likely suspect would be his PhD chemist wife who worked in a facility where she theoretically had access to the substance. Also, with the actual organic mercury being stolen from her workplace, it would have been damning to her if not for me uncovering the ambush of Martin Rivera.

I also tell her that I've been in contact with Detective Washington and it's *extremely* unlikely she'll be in any legal trouble. Of course, Walton's defense team might attempt to cast blame her way, but it's feeble at best... especially considering he snapped and went crazy, trying to kill the arresting officers with a sword he yanked off his office wall.

Gwen sighs. "Wow... I can't believe that man would kill Vince just to get the company to himself."

"It's a bit deeper," I say. "The police found some forensic accounting evidence that Walton was in contact with two or three overseas businesses sniffing around for an arrangement, but he didn't say anything or act on it until after Vincent's death and after Dianne sold off her share of the company to him. Once Walton had sole ownership of the company, he entered into those business arrangements."

The women shake their heads.

"Evidence of withholding that information from you prior to negotiating your sale of Vincent's fifty percent stake in the company might allow you to sue to nullify that deal. And with Walton soon to be in prison, you might end up running the import company."

Dianne squirms. "I wouldn't have the first idea how." She eyes Gwen. "She might, though."

Gwen makes a, 'yeah I probably could' face. "We could go into it together if it works out."

"Sure. I really don't know the first thing about importing, but I could be a silent partner." Dianne's face does something that might be an attempt at an awkward smile.

She's not used to having a friend, much less being friendly with the woman she thought hated her for so long. But... whatever animosity existed between them is long gone.

"Was he serious about wanting Dianne?" asks Gwen.

"I don't think so." I shake my head. "Depending on how things played out, I believe he was

planning to claim an affair to make it seem like she killed Vincent to be free to marry him.”

Both women emit disgusted ‘ugh’ sounds.

Detective Washington also told me based on his interviewing of Walton that he suspects the man was jealous of how everyone always seemed to love Vincent, yet regard him as the elitist jerk. Well, shoe fits and all, right? Vincent knew he had a ticking clock waiting for him so he treated people well, never rushed or valued money over people. Really is a damn shame he died.

Though, I suppose Vincent’s final act in this world was getting his sister and wife to be close friends after years of them not getting along.

The thought warms my heart.

My phone rings. I check the ID, intending to ignore it, but it’s Detective Washington. “Ack. Sorry. This is important. It’s the detective working on Vince’s case.”

The women nod at me, not minding the interruption.

“Just calling with a heads up,” says the detective when I answer the call. “We picked Turnbull up at the hospital. He’s got a rather wild story.”

I chuckle. Oh crap. Here we go. “Oh? What did he blame the broken leg on?”

“Not that. He actually admitted to attacking you, but... says he shot you point blank in the chest and you didn’t die.”

It’s tempting to quip ‘guess he didn’t realize I had a vest on,’ but my vest is at home and definitely un-shot. If the detective wanted to examine it, he could tell it’s never taken a hit.

“Wow, that must have hurt. Oh, and I would probably be dead. I bet he also told you I broke his leg with my bare hands instead of a metal bat.”

He laughs. “Actually, he said you kicked him.”

My laugh isn’t too fake. “Wow. Really? Did you see the size of that guy? Even if I’d studied kickboxing for ten years, I don’t think I could crack his femur with a kick.”

“Yeah, the guy’s a headcase for sure,” says Detective Washington. “Just wanted to let you know we got him. He won’t be showing up at your doorstep any time soon. Also...”

“Hmm?”

“I wanted to get your input on possibly offering the guy a plea deal if he flips on Walton.”

It takes me a moment to suppress the vengefulness I have toward a guy who almost killed my daughter. He hadn’t intended to kill Tammy on purpose, granted. She just happened to be in the office when he showed up. If she’d been at school, he would’ve simply hid and waited for me. If I’d hired some random person as an office assistant, it would’ve been them I found on the floor. Concentrating on the idea that he simply wanted to remove a witness and didn’t actively target my kid allows me to calm down enough to think logically. It’s more important for Walton to face consequences here... and I’m not worried about potential revenge. If Turnbull gets out of jail in five to ten years and comes looking for payback, he’s going to get a nasty surprise. Honestly? I doubt he’d dare. The way he looked at me before he crawled off, he’d wet his pants and run away if he ever saw me face to face again.

Supernatural terror has that effect.

“It’s fine. I don’t object. If he’s willing to testify against Walton, that works for me. But don’t forget Turnbull’s the one who stole the mercury and used it on Vincent. That was a really, really shitty way to die, though it had undoubtedly been Walton’s idea. Still, Turnbull carried it out.”

“Nope. Not forgetting that part,” says the detective, a smile clear in his voice. “No idea

what happened to this guy, but something scared the bejeezus out of him. He's quite talkative."

I examine my fingernails. "Wow. Strange, but good for you."

"Indeed. Hope you're still willing to testify. Got a feeling Walton Osborne's going to go to court."

"Happy to. I will need a subpoena to talk about anything involving PEL Research." I explain them hiring me to investigate the theft and inserting that subpoena clause into an NDA. "It's not because I'm trying to be difficult."

"I understand. Judges are usually happy to sign off on subpoenas when they know the recipient wants it." He laughs.

"Great. See you in court."

"In six months." He laughs. "Stay safe, Ms. Moon."

"Thanks. You, too."

I hang up.

"That sounded like good news," says Dianne.

"It was."

We sit and talk for a bit more about the case. Eventually, Gwen asks me to mail her my invoice and she'll get it taken care of right away. We all shake hands, and I head home to relax. Got another bath bomb and a few hours before the kids are out of school.

Chapter Forty

Alive

It's 4:33 p.m.

I'm on the sofa sorta-watching a movie, *The Prom*. Paxton and Renae chose the film. It's a musical about a girl who isn't allowed to take her girlfriend to the prom. Tammy's curled up next to me like a ten-year-old who just had a nightmare. She's not upset, just being clingy and happy we're both still alive. Similar to how I feed on mental energy, she's become a love sponge. We're both taking the day off from work.

Two other girls from their seventh-grade class, Alyssa and Naomi, are here. They're not gay but totally accepting of Paxton and Renae being an item.

I also have a large, warm, hairy body pillow on my other side: Kingsley. He came straight here from the airport after returning from a business trip to London. He's expanding his law firm to England and went over there to oversee the setup of a new office. Tonight, as they say, is going to be a good night. Kingsley and I will likely relocate to his place so we don't wake up the kids—or the neighbors.

The front door opens. Anthony walks in. A shadow behind him makes me expect to see his friends—but to my surprise the person following him inside is a girl. She's about his age. Pale, red-haired, blue eyes, wearing a pink navel-baring top, jeans, and white sneakers. The girl seems a little hesitant, but it's gotta be shyness at meeting new people.

My son thinks he's going to simply walk by us with this girl as casually as if he's got his guy friends over.

I think not.

Tammy sits straight up, looking at the girl. "And who's this?"

His cheeks redden. "This is Katilyn."

Seeing my son comfortable enough with where our lives are now to open himself to a relationship is almost enough to make me cry tears of happiness. Whatever path he's on toward an angelic future is not something destined to happen any time soon. I adore seeing him take steps toward being happy.

"Hi," says Katilyn.

The four thirteen-year-olds wave in greeting without much looking at her, since they're absorbed in the movie.

Anthony walks up to the sofa. "Kait, this is my mother, and sister, Tammy, and my other sister, Paxton."

I stand and shake the girl's hand. "Hi there."

"Hey." Paxton waves.

"What's the plan, you two?" I ask. "Wanna watch a movie with us? We can make room."

"Naw," says Anthony, reddening some more. "We're just gonna, you know, hang out. Do some homework, maybe game a little."

Tammy's expression tells me she's tempted to make a joke about that being code for 'making out,' but she doesn't. My son looks so awkward at the moment, she can't do it to him. Ant's not embarrassed. He's trying not to embarrass Katilyn.

"Sounds good," I say. "You guys are cute together. Have fun. But not..."

"I know, Ma. Not too much fun."

I think Katilyn might have blacked out a little from embarrassment. Poor thing. I guess she's just gonna have to get used to our humor.

Anthony and his new girlfriend head down the hall to his bedroom. I can practically hear Danny—and his parents—losing their minds at the idea of the boy taking a girl to his bedroom. Unlike his grandparents, I trust my son. He would never do anything inappropriate. If anything more than homework or video games happens in there, I would be surprised.

Wow, when did I get so naive?

Well, no matter what, there's no way in Hades they're going to do more than kiss. Anthony could never handle the awkward factor of getting romantic with a girl while his *entire* family is in the house. He's probably not even going to be able to kiss her with us all here.

Fine by me.

And wow. Our entire family under one roof—plus a few special friends.

This is nice.

I lean back into the sofa, one arm around Kingsley's shoulders, one around Tammy's.

This is the family I always wanted. For the first time in I don't know how long, I feel happy.

Damn happy.

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Finally, if you enjoyed *Wicked Moon*, please help me spread the word by leaving a review.  
Thank you!

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The Beast of Devil's Creek
Zeb Clemens #1
J.R. Rain and Matthew S. Cox

(read for a sample)

Chapter One
A String of Second Chances

Unfinished business had a habit of making souls restless, though as far as Zebadiah Clemens could tell, he hadn't become a ghost.

A scattering of dust motes swirled in the space between his eyes and the muted blue-grey of the ceiling. The plainness of it and the strange smell confirmed he'd come to in the doctor's house. Time held no meaning or context. For the span of three breaths, he drew a complete blank, unable to remember what year it was, the time of day, or even his own name. The fourth time he filled his lungs with the odd chemical cocktail hanging in the air—formaldehyde the doc used to preserve samples, years of burned lamp oil soaked into the walls, and a note of sterilizing alcohol—his thoughts gathered themselves back to rights.

He still didn't quite know what time it was, or even the exact day. Unless something truly bizarre had occurred, it ought to still be 1866 and he ought to still be in the town of Silver Mesa.

Zeb took a few moments to let consciousness fully return, then sat up. His bare chest appeared intact, save for three red spots similar to angry welts from a wasp.

The basic examination table beneath him occupied the center of a room far more ordinary than what one might expect for medical attention. It had likely been intended for something far more mundane, like a pack of women sitting to sip tea and gossip or a young wife chasing toddlers around. The décor remained like that of a private home, though the more pleasant bits of furniture had been removed to make way for cabinets of medical items, the examination table, and a few uncomfortable chairs.

He figured all the craziness that occurred after he'd stumbled into a sudden shootout at the train station in Oxley Junction to be the product of brain damage or even a coma dream. A bullet ricocheting off an iron lamp post into his forehead had knocked him senseless. The voice of the other doctor back then telling him how the slug used up most of its power hitting the lamp so it didn't have enough strength to get through his skull made him the luckiest man in the state of Texas.

Truth be told, he didn't remember too much between recovering and continuing west into the New Mexico Territory, hoping for more opportunity and cheaper land. The end of the war resulted in a surge of westward migration as men took their families and fled the swath of destruction or simply chased the ideal of new opportunities.

Zeb had a somewhat different opinion on 'being lucky.'

A guy stepping off a train only to catch a stray bullet from a shootout forty feet away didn't count as 'good' luck in his book. On one hand, it only knocked him out. However, he'd

apparently suffered some kind of bonk to the noggin severe enough that he'd started hallucinating all sorts of impossible happenings... such as getting back up after a less-than-perfect gunfight.

A creak from the table Zeb sat on drew the attention of the doctor, Ambrose Thatch, who entered the room from the hallway. The relatively well-dressed (for Silver Mesa) fortyish man sported a huge handlebar mustache joined to a fluffy mutton chop beard. The light glimmering off the silver watch chain at his vest competed with the glare atop the man's bald head for brightness.

"Welcome back." The warm but dry voice of Doctor Ambrose Thatch broke the silence. "Or should I say good afternoon?"

Zeb glanced over at the only person who knew his secret. "How long was I out this time?"

"Couple hours." The doc gave him a cursory look.

"Was it bad?" Zeb rubbed a sore spot on his chest.

Doc Thatch pursed his lips. "Those other boys were in worse shape."

Zeb laughed. "Worse?"

"Indeed. They aren't sitting back up. All three of 'em are over at Darrow's."

Knowing he was responsible for three men getting fitted for pine boxes at the undertaker's didn't bother Zeb as much as he would've thought prior to coming out West. It also didn't feel like anything to be proud of, either. Though he had fired on Confederate positions during his time in the Army, he couldn't say for certain if any of his shots hit a person. The whole thing had been a chaotic mess best put behind him and not thought of. Musket balls at a hundred yards offered a sense of detachment a six-gun at ten paces did not. Now, he had definitely killed three men. Granted, they killed him too, so he considered it somewhat even.

"Yeah, well..." Zeb swung his legs off the side of the table. "Them boys ain't gonna kill no one else."

Doc Thatch tilted his head, seeming both curious and perplexed. "You never did tell me how it is you recover from wounds that would be mortal to anyone else."

"Truth is..." Zeb shoved himself off the table to his feet. "I don't rightly know how I'm still above snakes. Reckon The Lady isn't ready to take me yet."

"Lady?"

Zeb discovered a clean, new shirt on a nearby counter and picked it up, certain the doctor had left it there for him... as he'd done the last two times before this one. The shirt he'd been wearing would no longer be fit for going out in public, being a bloody mess. "Not a damn clue, doc. For all I know it's in my head." He pulled the shirt on. "Heck, you might be a figment, too."

"Well, I certainly am a rather complex figment." Doc smiled. "Care to talk more on it?"

"I dunno, doc. You're going to think I'm off my nut."

Ambrose folded his arms. "Well now, Zeb... I saw what you looked like three hours ago. And the times before that. Heck, the first time you showed up here, I's ready to send you to Victor. Would have, too, if not for being called to attend an injury at the Grand Hall."

Zeb chuckled. "What happened there? Someone prick their finger on an expensive glass?"

"Heh, no. Merely a case of fever mistaken for consumption." Doc gripped his lapels. "I get back here and there you are sitting up. Like I said, that was the first time. Been twice more since. If you're off your nut, I'm right there with you."

"Well..." Zeb rubbed his forehead above the left eye. "Ever since that lead plumb whacked

me in the bean, sometimes I see this lady. She ain't never given me no name or anything ta call her by, so it's just 'The Lady' as far as I reckon to call her."

"Hmm." Doc Thatch rubbed his chin. "Has this lady said anything, or does she simply appear and stare at you? Is it someone you recognize?"

Zeb buttoned the shirt. "Don't know her from Adam. She hasn't said much other than not to worry and do the right thing. It's all kinda hard to describe. Never expected things to happen the way they did. Came out this way planning to establish a ranch, have a nice quiet life. Didn't quite work out."

"Rather an abrupt change from raising cows to being a lawman." Doc chuckled.

"Well." Zeb transferred his badge from the bloody rag to his new shirt. "Can't explain what's going on, but figured I might as well put it to good use."

"I can't think of many men who'd sign up to be a US Marshal casually."

"I ain't no marshal. I'm a deputy marshal." Zeb swiped his thumb over the badge to remove some dried blood. "But you're right on that point, doc. Last thing I expected."

"At risk of sounding like a preacher, a man doesn't always know what his calling is until he finds himself doing it." Doc smiled.

Zeb whistled. "Well, whatever's goin' on, be it wild dream or wilder reality... seems the other side ain't quite ready for me. This lady wants me to stick around."

"Lucky you."

"There's that word again, lucky... still ain't sure it's a fair approximation of things." Zeb stretched. "Thanks again for patching me up."

"Happy to oblige." Doc Thatch raised an eyebrow. "Want the bullets?"

"Naw. Seems kinda morbid."

"All right then. Try to duck next time." The doc patted him on the shoulder.

Zeb glanced sideways at him. "I ain't *trying* to get hit. Three on one, kind of bound ta happen."

"Only a fool starts a gunfight with those odds." Doc sighed. "You're lucky you walked away."

"Heh." Zeb rubbed at the sore spot on his chest. "I didn't. Reckon I got carried away."

"Try to be more careful, friend. People won't take too kindly to unnatural things they don't have a mind to understand—like surviving three shots to the chest."

Zeb picked his hat up. "Don't I know it."

After shaking the doc's hand, he made his way out of the quaint little house.

Dr. Ambrose Thatch lived relatively close to the downtown part of Silver Mesa toward the 'respectable' side. For a town with origins in the silver boom, the place had grown with a rapidity that seemed to defy the near certainty with which such settlements would retreat back into the dust from whence they'd come as soon as the ore dried up. It had the good fortune of not only being near a successful mine but also at a central location to a myriad of other, smaller towns.

Silver Mesa offered two hotels (one quite swanky), four saloons, a bank, even a fancy tailor's shop and milliner. After living here for six months and a few weeks, it started to feel like home, even with the inexplicable Lady and all the other 'not dying' nonsense going on.

Zeb paused to let a group of playing children run by, watching them weave around the usual assortment of locals, cowboys, homesteaders come to town for supplies, wagons, coaches, and horses. If any of the kids knew about the events of earlier that morning, it didn't

show on their faces. Several adults gave him odd looks, depending on how bad the gossip mill wound itself up. A man carried to the doctor's house after being shot three times ought not to be walking around just fine hours later.

He couldn't help but chuckle at the words of his older brother, Zeke, who had told him the West would kill him.

Little did Zeke know just how right he was.

Three times and counting...

Chapter Two Heath

Of the four saloons in Silver Mesa, Zeb preferred going to The Silver Cup.

The Royal Flush was more of a gambling house than a saloon, with weak whiskey and even weaker coffee. All the gambling there had a rather bad habit of leading to altercations. The fights were the only reason Zeb ever set foot in the place—though the sheriff and his deputies usually took care of those.

As far as the Grand Hall was concerned, Zeb avoided it for a simple reason: money. He left the fancy saloon to the fancy people with more dollars than sense. A benzinery like the Woodbarrel Saloon attracted the opposite end of the social spectrum, mostly down-on-their-luck sorts or drifters with pennies to spend and no care for how the path to oblivion tasted. It also hosted a fair number of soiled doves eager to take whatever money the miners didn't drink.

This left The Silver Cup as the most reasonable saloon for a man like him. By all accounts, it ended up somewhat in the middle between a respectable establishment and a dive. Most of the local men who worked in the mines favored the place. It didn't see much in the way of gambling or prostitution, being chiefly a hangout for the working types to drink until they ended up face down on the floor.

It also served the best coffee in town.

Zeb evaded a group of small boys heedlessly zooming down the street after a cat and stepped up onto the porch. The Silver Cup stood on the corner, two streets away from the 'seedy' side of town but not quite in it. Morton Criss, owner and bartender, kept the decoration simple. A plain black-painted silhouette of a tin cup hung on the wall by the front door bearing the words 'The Silver Cup.'

Miners often teased him that 'black ain't silver,' but it didn't bother the man.

At roughly an hour past noon, the place didn't have much of a crowd yet. Once the sun set, a man would have trouble taking two steps across the room without bumping into someone. This early, the people here either came in for a quick lunch or happened to be older men with nothing better to do than sit around talking all day.

Zeb approached the bar, surprised to see a woman behind it instead of Morton. He knew *of* her more than knew her: Laura McCormick, a somewhat recent arrival to Silver Mesa, having been here only a few months longer than him. She'd hired on here as something of a cook and waitress, had a young son but no husband, and tended to keep to herself. He figured her a few years younger than himself, around thirty or close to it. At first, he hadn't thought much of her long, thick brown hair and fashion sense of someone from the northeast. Lately, though, he found himself keen on visiting The Silver Cup for more than just the coffee. Even without whiskey, she'd started to seem prettier and prettier each time he looked at her. Maybe he imagined it, but she also seemed to sneak glances at him when he didn't appear to be paying attention to her. It had been easy to dismiss before, given a widow with a small boy would likely be trying to do whatever she could to find a man... but she did not appear to pay any other man such attention.

"Afternoon, Mr. Clemens," said Laura with a genuine, if somewhat tired, smile. "You here on business or pleasure?"

"Both." He put a penny on the bar. "I'm in dire need of a cup of Arbuckle's."

She smiled. "I see. Well, I can certainly assist you in that regard."

"Much obliged."

Laura kept looking at him for a long moment before taking the coin.

"Somethin' on my shirt?" he asked.

"No... they're sayin' you got ambushed this morning is all." She put the coin in the cash drawer, then got started preparing a cup of coffee for him.

"Don't listen to everything ya hear. Wasn't as bad as it looked. Doc Thatch stitched it right up." Zeb leaned on the bar. "Also, wasn't rightly an ambush unless ya figure it was me ambushin' the Deming brothers, plus one."

"Is there a bounty on them?" asked Laura, not looking back at him.

"Likely, yeah."

"You don't know?"

"Depends on if word made it back to civilization yet. Them boys killed six women. Had ta be done."

She peered over her left shoulder. "They were working girls."

"Still women. Don't matter what a lady does to get by. They don't deserve ta end up in a ditch out in no man's land."

A hint of blush reddened her cheeks; she looked back at her task. "Didn't figure you the type to associate with painted ladies."

Zeb grinned. "I'm not gonna claim to be free of vice, but that ain't one of 'em. It ain't necessary ta partake of their services to feel they ought not be killed."

She set the mug on the bar in front of him. "Here you are, marshal. Is that a new shirt? I don't recall ever seeing you wear white."

I ought'a wear red or black. Be more convenient.

"It is new." Zeb picked up the mug, took a deep breath of the wonderful aroma—the vapors alone washed over his brain with a touch of alertness. "Ahh. Ambrosia of the desert. Thank ya kindly."

"Of course." She leaned a hip against the counter, watching him drink half the cup in one breath. "My word, marshal. You must have been tired."

Zeb savored the strong coffee settling around his tongue for a few seconds more, then lowered the half-full mug away from his lips. "Had a hell of a nap earlier. Left me more tired than before."

"Oh, I hate that." She resumed tidying up behind the bar. "Defeats the entire purpose of taking a nap." Laura paused to look at him. "I didn't think men took naps... at least not until old age."

He raised the cup in a toasting gesture. "Spur of the moment thing."

"Right..."

A little boy with wild, frizzy blond hair raced in from the back room and darted behind the bar. "Mom! Mom! Look what I found!" He held up a stick shaped remarkably like a pistol.

"Oh, my. Be careful with that." Laura fussed at him.

"Aww, Mom. It's just a stick. It can't hurt nobody." The child, Heath, who might've been about seven years old, peered up at Zeb, starry-eyed. "Hi, marshal! Are you here to catch some bad guys?"

Zeb took another swig of coffee. "I'm here ta catch some of this fine coffee your mamma makes."

The boy stuck out his tongue. “Bleh. That stuff tastes horrible.”

Zeb, Laura, and a few others in earshot chuckled.

“Soon as you’re old enough ta shave, you’ll realize what you’re missing.” Zeb winked at the boy, then finished off the rest of the coffee. “Thank ya kindly, ma’am.”

She nodded.

“I’m gonna go get the bad guys, too!” Heath said, grinning, then darted off toward the door.

“You be back here by dinnertime!” called Lauren before sighing.

“Boy’s a handful, isn’t he?” Zeb set the mug down.

“Lord’s honest truth.” She shook her head, then looked up at him, smiling. “You keep yourself safe out there, Zebadiah.”

He tipped his hat. “As best I can.”

The city of Silver Mesa had three keepers of the peace: Ervin Clayton, who most people considered a sheriff of sorts, and his deputies, Jim Carberry, and Conley Meade.

None of the men obtained their position through election or appointment. Ervin had been a deputy sheriff in Texas before arriving here when the town consisted of little more than a miner’s camp. Being a lawman apparently required less work than digging in the mines, so he’d gone back to what he knew, essentially appointing himself sheriff. Jim and Conley added on as the town expanded.

Happy to have warm coffee in his belly, Zeb headed downtown to the jailhouse, which sat between Abernathy’s dry goods store and the courthouse. The gazes of three ‘high society’ women lounging on the shaded porch of the Grand Hall Saloon, a distance to the right down the street, carried enough intensity to make him look back at them. He knew they disliked having their favored social spot within sight of the town’s jail and had previously tried to convince Mayor Varner to have the entire building moved, so they didn’t have to suffer the sight of it. Mercifully, the mayor declined.

Still, Zeb sensed an unusual weight in the women’s stare, beyond simple discontent at the jail being where they didn’t like it. No doubt they’d heard of the shooting—and that he’d been carried to Doc Thatch’s place.

Not a blessed thing happens around here those women don’t see or gossip about.

Shaking his head, he went into the office.

The town lawmen did what they usually did: relaxed at their desks, Jim and Ervin with their feet up. Conley, being the youngest at twenty-four, still took his responsibilities seriously enough to believe ‘appearing lazy’ to be a bad thing. He sat up diligently in the chair behind his desk. For a town the size of Silver Mesa, things tended to be reasonably quiet. The nearby mine produced an astonishing amount of silver, attracting money from the east and with it, powerful business people with political connections.

Any town with miners was bound to have problems, and Silver Mesa did not escape the laws of vice and greed. Disagreements over smaller claims, faro games gone bad, poker hands, and other quarrels resulted in a fair number of fights, shootings, and even killings.

All three men looked up at him as he walked into the small office, in varying degrees of shock.

“Marshal Clemens?” asked Conley, barely over a whisper. “Heard you bit the ground this

morning.”

“Nah. The damned Demings just winged me.” Zeb thudded across the room to the desk he used. “Bunch of blood, not much to fuss over.”

They sat in silence while he rummaged around the desk for a scrap of paper, then got started on composing a telegraph to inquire in regard to any bounties posted on the Deming brothers as well as their associate—a formerly imposing man who went by the sarcastic nickname ‘Math’, owing to a rather profound case of stupidity. Assuming a bounty had been posted on the trio responsible for the murders of multiple prostitutes, simple death certificates from Virgil Darrow, the town’s undertaker, would be sufficient to claim the money. A few people Zeb spoke with when tracking the men down claimed Math had been a rebel soldier who’d fought for the former Confederate Territory of Arizona.

War’s only been over a year. Poor bastards don’t know what to do with themselves now.

“I saw you take one straight in the chest,” said Ervin, his mouth still hanging open.

“Ya obviously saw wrong.” Jim chuckled next to him. “Or Zeb wouldn’t be sitting here.”

Zeb paused and looked up. “Doc Thatch said it’s a freak bit of luck. Bullet hit the sternum but didn’t go through it. The whack stopped my heart for a moment but it decided to keep going.”

“Well, I’ll be damned.” Conley whistled. “Lucky man.”

Zeb grinned. “People keep calling me that. Reckon’ they don’t really understand the word’s meaning.”

“Had three men draw on ya, and yer not in a pine box.” Ervin spat into the brass pot beside his desk. “That’s lucky.”

“Crazy you went after them alone,” said Conley. “Why’d ya not ask for some help?”

“Because I still would’ve gone after them alone even if I’d asked,” deadpanned Zeb. The meaning was clear: even if Zeb had asked, most of the others in the room wouldn’t have helped him.

Ervin and Jim frowned at him, clearly not liking the implication.

“You really wouldn’t have gone to help?” Conley blinked at the other two.

“Our responsibilities end at the city limits,” said Ervin. “Anything past that ain’t our business.”

Jim nodded. “Not to mention, we ain’t got no authority outside the town.”

“You mean jurisdiction.” Zeb set his fountain pen down, then held the paper up to examine his attempt at composing a telegraph. Sheen disappeared from the ink as it dried. “But it don’t really matter out here. If Silver Mesa’s a speck in the distance, you boys can claim authority. Ain’t like the Deming brothers are gonna roll in with a fancy lawyer.”

Jim and Ervin rolled their eyes.

“Not when they’re dead,” muttered Conley.

The door swung open to reveal a sylph of a young lady, twelve or thirteen years of age, in a dress neither expensive nor cheap. She appeared clean, her long light brown hair tidy, no dirt on her or severe excitement to her mood, suggesting she’d come as an errand rather than to report an offense against her person. Zeb recognized her in the sense of having seen her around town before, but couldn’t recall her name or where she’d been.

“Mr. Clayton,” said the girl, slightly out of breath, before rushing over to Ervin’s desk. “Pa sent me to tell you the coach is late. They should have been here three hours ago.”

Zeb smiled as memory clicked into place. Rowena Paine: the daughter of the man who

operated the stagecoach office.

“Anything might’ve happened out there.” Ervin finally swung his boots off his desk and sat up. “What’s Hilmer expecting us to do?”

Rowena, evidently unprepared for such a show of ‘not my problem,’ stared helplessly at him. “Umm. I... My father said I should tell you... I mean report it missing. There are four passengers and a driver.”

“All right.” Ervin jotted something down. “Noted.”

The young lady stood there, her expression asking, ‘aren’t you going to do anything more than write?’ but didn’t give voice to the question all over her face.

Zeb folded the message he’d composed and tucked it into his shirt pocket. “Might as well take a ride out along the path, see what I can find.”

Rowena shifted her gaze to him, her eyes widening in hope.

“Great idea.” Jim smiled. “You’re the marshal. Your authority’s all over the country.”

“Deputy marshal.” Zeb stood. “The actual marshal’s a politician. They don’t do any real work.”

“Thank you for helping us.” Rowena opened the door for him. “There’s s’posed to be a new schoolteacher on the coach. Oh, I hope nothing bad’s happened to her. Pa says her husband’s a dentist. From the east, some fancy town by the ocean where everyone has expensive hats.”

Zeb chuckled. “Where’s this one coming from? Do you know the route?”

“Yes, sir. From Starr Springs. The coach should have arrived an hour before noon.”

Zeb narrowed his eyes to the east. “Curious they didn’t take the train.”

Rowena raised her arms in a halfhearted shrug, then let them flop against her sides. “Train doesn’t come through but once a week. The coach is every other day.”

Why is a dentist with a schoolteacher wife in a hurry? “All right. Go on and tell your pa I’m on the way out to look.”

“I will. Thank you, Marshall Clemens.” Rowena curtsied before racing off at a pace halfway between childish and ladylike.

Zeb turned left toward the stable where he kept his horse—only to have little Heath rush up to him. Tears wet the boy’s cheeks, though he seemed more frustrated and angry than sad or scared.

“Marshal!” yelled the boy, half out of breath. “Some men are bein’ mean to my ma. I tol’ ’em ta leave her alone, but they won’t listen. Tried ta pull one off her and he pushed me hard.”

“All right.” Zeb hurried down the street in the direction of The Silver Cup Saloon. “Who are these men?”

“I dunno.” Heath needed to run to keep up with him. “Never saw ’em before. They kept grabbin’ on her and sayin’ bad stuff. Mr. Criss tried to get ’em to leave her alone an’ they hit him, too.”

From the outside two blocks away, the saloon appeared quiet and calm. Upon entering, Zeb could tell right away *something* happened. Everyone seemed overly subdued, the normal din and bustle of the place replaced with an almost library solemnness.

Laura McCormick stood behind the bar next to Morton Criss, who despite not yet being fifty looked old enough to be her grandfather. His hair had gone prematurely grey and years’ worth of whiskey gave his face the texture of a saddlebag. The man also showed off the beginnings of a black eye. Laura didn’t have any visible injuries, though her dress looked

disheveled as though she'd been pawed at or manhandled.

At the thump of Zeb's boots on the floorboards, everyone looked at the door—a few people started to duck under their tables, though relaxed upon noticing *who* had walked in.

“Ma!” shouted Heath as he ran to her.

A second after the boy disappeared behind the bar, Laura wobbled sideways from the impact of a small child crashing into her.

Zeb walked over, eyeballing the room as he crossed it, but finding no sign of whoever caused the disturbance. “You folks all right?”

“I'm fine, marshal.” Laura waved dismissively at him as if shooing away an over attentive mother worrying about a bit of lint on her sleeve.

He reached over and flicked at a scrap of torn cloth on her shoulder. “What happened?”

“Nothing I can't handle.” She attempted to neaten her dress.

“Oh?” Zeb raised an eyebrow.

“They're gone, no one's shot, and I'm fine.” She tugged at her dress collar, then re-buttoned it.

Zeb looked around again. Most of the patrons no longer stared at him, having gone back to whatever conversations or food they'd been paying attention to when he arrived. “Who tore your clothing?”

Laura sighed, glanced down at the boy, then made eye contact with Zeb. “A couple of prospectors, I think. They hadn't been around here before. Walked in like they owned the place. Kept saying rude things to the other ladies. I went over to ask them what they wanted to eat or drink and they got handsy. Mr. Criss was kind enough to help.”

“I may be old, but I'll be damned if I'm gonna let a pack of ruffians accost a lady in *my* establishment.” Morton scowled at nothing in particular.

“You're not old.” Laura smiled at him.

“I'm forty-nine, my dear.” Morton wagged his bushy grey eyebrows at her. “Out here, that's old.”

Zeb whistled. “Ya might be forty-nine, but the whiskey stole twenty years.”

“Them's the years I don't want, anyway.” As if inspired, Morton turned to pour himself a shot. “Can't stand up on your own, can't hardly walk, everything starts fallin' ta pieces. Just as soon take a dirt nap before I'm a helpless ol' relic.”

Heath climbed up to sit on the bar top. “They wasn't prospectors, ma. Those men are outlaws. If the marshal makes me a deputy, too, I could stop 'em.”

Most of the patrons chuckled.

“Not everyone who's rude is an outlaw, ya know.” Zeb winked.

Heath shook his head back and forth, making his hair fluff out like a white dandelion. “These men *were* bad. Not prospectors. They didn't have no tools nor pans on their horses, an' they had outlaw rags on.”

“He means bandanas.” Laura attempted to neaten her son's hair. “Heath sees a guy wearing a bandana around his neck and he's either a cowboy or an outlaw depending on how he acts.”

“They pull 'em up to hide their faces when they do bad things.” Heath demonstrated by pulling his shirt up over half his face. “Like this. An' they both had the same kinda bam-dama on. Black wit' red diamonds. Cowboys don' wear same stuff like that.”

Zeb tightened his jaw. Word had come in by telegraph months ago concerning a group of outlaws known as the Diamonds Gang. They got their name from the signature bandanas, not

actual diamonds. It hadn't sounded likely they'd go this far west, favoring Texas around El Paso. However, a seven-year-old wouldn't have any way to know about the patterned bandanas unless he'd seen one. Of course, two men wearing bandanas hardly amounted to proof they belonged to any specific gang or that the gang came to the area.

Still, he wanted to stay vigilant. Though the boy had a vivid imagination, he didn't strike Zeb as the type to make up accusations like calling someone an outlaw. It didn't feel like a little boy playing imaginary games, either. Silver Mesa's larger size made it less vulnerable than some smaller nearby towns an outlaw group like that could literally take over. It didn't mean they couldn't ride into town, and cause a bunch of trouble, then disappear.

"I want to be a marshal someday." Heath puffed out his chest. "I want to arrest bad people who break the law."

"Admirable goals there, boy." Zeb ruffled the kid's wild blond hair, which drew a smiling sigh from Laura; after all, she'd just patted it into place. "Best thing you can do right now is stay with your ma and keep her safe."

"I will." Heath beamed, as excited as if he'd been given a new horse or a rifle for Christmas.

Zeb glanced at Laura. "Got an overdue coach to check on. Should be gone a couple hours. I'll swing by to check up on the place once I'm back."

Laura gave a coy smile. "We'll be here."

Zeb decided he liked her smile. "Take care of yourself, Ms. McCormick. Got some lost stagecoach people ta track down." He tipped his hat to her and headed for the door.

Chapter Three A Rough Welcome

Zeb followed the road out of Silver Mesa, heading generally east and a little north.

Calling it a 'road' gave dirt a lot more credit than due. Close to town, the frequent passage of coaches, wagons, horses, and boots wore a recognizable trail into the desert. The farther one went, the more the road became a matter of guesswork.

His horse, Jasper, seemed to enjoy getting out of the stable, walking at a pace of barely contained enthusiasm. Thinking about the horse being in a hurry to get nowhere, in particular, made Zeb smile. The animal always did come off as a little simple, but good natured, more a dog than a horse.

He's all eagerness but little thought. Bit too much like his master.

The town receded into the desert behind him over the course of the next hour or so, until he reached an area where the terrain shifted from open desert to a series of gullies that weaved among hills and mesas. Here, the road became rather obvious due to the narrow, winding passageway following the ravine.

"They probably busted a wheel in the canyon." Zeb glanced back over his shoulder to estimate his distance from town. As expected, he could no longer see Silver Mesa.

He eased Jasper to a stop and studied the terrain. He didn't notice any tracks from a recent stagecoach, nor any signs of violence. Only the most foolish of outlaws would attack a coach in the open desert between the hills and what civilization Silver Mesa offered. Miles of country surrounded him, only the dark line of railroad tracks cutting across the ground a mile or so to the north gave any indication humanity had touched the land here.

At a sudden, small motion in the scrub, Zeb decided to continue moving. A scorpion, snake, or perhaps something less deadly meant to investigate his presence, and he didn't feel like sticking around to shake hands with it. Even if something kept his soul rooted in this world, coming close to death still hurt. Fortunately, being shot only hurt for a fraction of a second. A scorpion sting or snake bite would likely be worse.

And, of course, he wanted nothing to happen to Jasper.

Not waiting around to see what intended to crawl out from the cluster of small green bushes, Zeb steered the horse down the trail into the ravine. It didn't take long for the canyon walls to rise too high to see over. Things had been fairly quiet here in terms of attacks on coaches... at least in comparison to some places in the territory. The railroad took over transporting the most valuable cargo and carried the majority of passengers going into or out of Silver Mesa. Stagecoaches tended to transport people in too much of a hurry for a train schedule, those who didn't trust the new technology, or people who couldn't afford the price of a ticket.

However, up until perhaps this afternoon, the Diamonds Gang hadn't been in the area. If something worse than a simple accident occurred, the ravines here made for the most likely ambush point.

Zeb glanced up to either side every so often, scanning the ridge overhead for signs of lookouts. Odds favored outlaws to be long gone by now if they had indeed attacked the coach, but it never hurt to be careful. The deeper he rode into the canyon, the more he started to expect foul play.

His suspicions grew upon hearing two voices up ahead. A man and woman argued over the decision to take the coach rather than wait five days for the train. She did most of the scolding in the form of 'I told you this was a bad idea' while he attempted to defend the choice of stagecoach due to not having the funds to sit idle doing nothing for most of a week.

"... well, Travis, we are sitting idle now, unless you've managed to work yourself free," said the woman.

"Not yet, dear."

"Ooh." The woman fumed. "Why did they have to leave us here like this with two dead men? Did they intend for us to starve?"

"Someone will be along to find us eventually," replied the man.

"You don't know that." Wooden creaking accompanied a woman's strained grunts. "Oh, blast."

Zeb urged Jasper up to a trot.

He soon rounded a bend in the canyon and came upon the site of an obvious attack. The missing stagecoach had come to rest against one side of the canyon, intact though horseless. One man in his later thirties sat slumped over in the driver's bench, shot dead. An older-looking man in the rough clothing of a weather-worn prospector lay face down near the back of the coach, possibly dead. A woman and a younger man, both in their early twenties and dressed in nice but not extravagant clothing, had been tied to the two facing wheels, their wrists out to either side like a pair of targets for a carnival knife thrower.

"Here's someone now, Anna." The man waved, despite his hand being tied to the wheel. "Good day, sir. Might we ask of you a modicum of assistance?"

"We have no idea who he is," whispered Anna. "He might do anything he pleases while we are unable to move."

Zeb jumped down from his horse and pulled his knife.

The young couple went still, staring at him.

As soon as Anna noticed the US Marshal's badge on his chest, she slumped forward in relief. "Oh, thank God. He's a lawman."

"Zebadiah Clemens." He sliced at the rope binding the woman's right wrist to the wheel. "Most folks just call me Zeb."

The man did his best to bow in greeting with his hands tied to the outer rim of the other stagecoach wheel. "Since we're getting the introductions out of the way, I'm Travis Breem. This is my wife, Anna."

Zeb cut Anna's other hand loose. "What happened here?"

"We were attacked by a group of men." She rubbed the red marks on her wrists. "They robbed us, killed the driver, shot Mr. Ludlow when he went for his gun, and stole the horses."

"I'm not dead," moaned the prospector. "Just shot."

"Ruffians, the lot." Travis exhaled hard. "Four men on horses rushed out of a passage behind us, overtook the coach, and ordered the driver to stop at gunpoint."

"Can you describe them?" Zeb cut Travis loose.

"Not well." Anna stood. "They all wore rags over their faces. Men, not too old, not too young. Not Indians. Not Mexicans."

Zeb sheathed the knife. "These rags... black, with red diamonds?"

The couple stared at him, aghast.

"How did you know that?" asked Anna barely over a whisper.

Damn. They're here. Officially.

Zeb sighed. "A couple of them boys showed their faces in town. Caused a spot of trouble. Are you all right, ma'am?"

"Yes. They were unpleasant but respectful to me." She brushed dust from her dress.

"You know of these men?" Travis hurried over to the prospector, rolled him onto his back, and began examining his wound.

Zeb, confident the woman didn't appear to be injured or too upset to leave to her own devices for the moment, followed him. The older man appeared to have suffered a single bullet wound near the base of the ribs on the left side. "Are you a doctor?"

"Dentist." Travis pulled the man's shirt open. "Though I'd wager I'm closer to being a doctor than anyone else nearby."

The wounded man gazed up at the sky, not seeming to care much about the qualifications of the person attempting to help him. His face had become unusually pale, suggesting he'd lost a worrisome amount of blood. Scruffy black hair stuck to his face, matted against his cheek in a glue of sweat, drool, and dirt. He looked—and smelled—like a loner accustomed to spending most of his time in a small tent by whatever hole he dug in search of gold. Some of his pockets had been ripped open, his belongings rifled in a manner similar to hastily checking a corpse for valuables.

"He gonna make it?" asked Zeb.

Travis indicated the bullet hole, possibly too high to hit entrails or stomach. "He may. His chances would improve vastly if not for those men taking my supplies."

Zeb glanced at the wagon—where Anna paced in worried annoyance—then at the ridge. "Why ya reckon they grabbed your doctor bag?"

"I believe they assumed the contents valuable." Travis improvised a bandage on Mr. Ludlow's chest. "Dental tools were not inexpensive, but I doubt they'd be able to get much for them."

"They took our wedding rings," called Anna. "And my gran's necklace. And my earrings. All our money."

"They even took my old bag." Mr. Ludlow laughed, then grimaced in pain. "What they get openin' it is punishment enough. Ain't nothin' in there but my unmentionables, what're in dire need of a wash. Whoever had the misfortune of openin' my bag likely passed clear on out."

Travis flinched. Anna gasped, fanning herself.

"Toes are tingling, doc," said Mr. Ludlow. "That a good or a bad sign?"

"Likely good." Travis gave Zeb a clueless look. "We'll need to get him to a genuine doctor as soon as possible. How far are we from Silver Mesa?"

"'Bout six miles." Zeb approached the stagecoach and looked it over. It didn't appear to be overburdened with luggage. "He can't ride in that shape. Jasper can probably pull this thing back to town. Take a couple hours though. Think you can keep him with us?"

Travis cinched the bandage in place. "I can damn sure try my best."

"All right. Help me get him inside." Zeb opened the coach door and looked at Anna. "If you don't fancy the sight of blood, you can sit on the driver's bench."

Anna shook her head. "I'm perfectly capable of walking, not some delicate little creature. Bad enough you're going to ask this one poor horse to pull the entire wagon."

Zeb pondered, glancing back and forth from the coach to Jasper. "Travis... you reckon he can handle being on a horse?"

“It definitely wouldn’t help him. Might not make it worse, though.”

Mr. Ludlow groaned. “Whatever is faster.”

“All right. Horse it is...” Zeb walked over to the injured prospector. “Help me get him up.”

Zeb walked alongside Jasper, leading the horse across the desert.

Due to the need to get Mr. Ludlow to a doctor as quickly as possible, they made the unfortunate decision to leave the deceased driver behind for the time being. Abandoning the coach in place didn’t bother anyone, even though it still contained all of the couple’s remaining worldly possessions the outlaws didn’t steal, which consisted generally of Anna’s clothing. Hilmer Paine could send someone out here to collect the coach company’s wagon. If he didn’t do so right away, Zeb would come back to collect the remains of the driver so he could have a proper burial in town.

“Not exactly the friendliest welcome,” said Anna after almost an hour of complete silence.

“Here we go again.” Travis sighed. “We did not have the finances to spend another five days in that hotel waiting for the train.”

Anna gazed straight up. “Must we repeat this?”

Zeb chuckled.

“Consider yourself fortunate.” Mr. Ludlow grunted to Zeb. “You didn’t have to lie there with a mouthful of dirt and a bullet in your belly listening to these two go at it all afternoon.”

Anna bit back whatever she almost said, took a breath, then exhaled hard. “You’ll forgive me for being upset. I had no idea if anyone would find us before we starved to death.”

“It’s a fairly traveled route,” said Zeb. “At worst, you might’ve had to wait a day or two. Proper bit of unpleasant, but it wouldn’t have meant starvation.”

No one spoke for a few minutes... then Travis began grumbling to himself about not being able to earn a living without his dentist’s tools. Anna hoped to find work as a schoolteacher, figuring a town the size of Silver Mesa would have more than enough children in need of educating. The Breems didn’t exactly *argue*, though the tone of their back and forth would have fooled anyone who couldn’t see their facial expressions.

Mr. Ludlow, for the most part, stayed out of the conversation.

The Beast of Devil’s Creek

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About the Author:

J.R. Rain is the international bestselling author of over ninety novels, including his popular Samantha Moon and Jim Knighthorse series. His books are published in five languages in twelve countries, and he has sold more than 3 million copies worldwide.

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Originally from South Amboy NJ, **Matthew S. Cox** has been creating science fiction and fantasy worlds for most of his reasoning life. Since 1996, he has developed the “Divergent Fates” world, in which Division Zero, Virtual Immortality, The Awakened Series, The Harmony Paradox, and the Daughter of Mars series take place.

Matthew is an avid gamer, a recovered WoW addict, Gamemaster for two custom systems, and a fan of anime, British humour, and intellectual science fiction that questions the nature of reality, life, and what happens after it.

He is also fond of cats.

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