



# Collapse

**Author:** *G.K. Lund*

**Category:** Romance, Thriller, Action, Suspense

**Description:** Detective Nate Hansen is trapped in a living nightmare, and his only ally has been taken by their enemy. Dealing with people he didn't know existed, people affiliated with an otherworldly community is hard enough. But as Nate moves through Maggie's world the lines between his old life and the chaotic and messy new one begin to blur. Maggie Evans, Ashport's only, and overworked Mender, has one last job to do before she's forced out of town. She must find Andrea before the kidnapped woman's time runs out. But in Maggie's way stands people who've been hunting her for years. Her distrust of Nate, a cop, is not easily stilled, not even by their increasingly complicated and fiery entanglement. What they do have is a common goal of finding Andrea. But when their enemies zone in, and everything starts to unravel, can they put their suspicions aside to bring the kidnappers to justice? Collapse is the third novella in the Ashport Mender Series. If you like high stakes, hot romance, action and potty-mouthed attitude, then you'll love this fast-paced series.

**Total Pages (Source):** 30

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:31 am*

One

“Are you guy’s okay?”The unused and hoarse voice came from somewhere above.

I am not okay, I shouted at it. At least tried to. The words were in my head. On my tongue, too, in a way, but nothing came out. No muscles moved. No matter how much I tried forcing them to. I was merely there, staring at the ceiling.

I am not okay at all.

For one thing, I was not able to move my body. I was dead weight on the floor. The ceiling constituted most of my view. Off-white. That was all. The not talking part was what shook me to the core. Talking was an integral part of who I was. Not only as a normal human being; my job depended on me being able to talk to people. Get along with them. Get them to open up.

Panic started to set in then.Talking?My fucking body wasn’t moving. I might as well have been comatose. That would have been better than this. She had called it a prison, hadn’t she? That was true. I was shut in. Unable to do anything. Trapped in myself.

At least I hadn’t pissed myself. Small mercies, but by the faint smell of urine in the room, the poor doctor had had a full bladder when this happened.

I wanted to shout for help, but who would be able to do something? The doctor somewhere to my left? She was in the same situation. And this wasn’t really a medical problem, was it?

I had looked at him for only a second, and that was all it took. A second. I hadn't been thinking. I had slipped up. And then fallen down. It was the strangest sensation. Not unlike when Annalise threw me across her room. Like a light pressure had clung to me. If she hadn't kept me against the bookshelf with her...let's face it...her telekinesis, I probably wouldn't have noticed. When this had been done to me the pressure had been in my head. Very light, and then I was locked away.

My senses seemed to be working. I could smell the disinfectant, ever present in medical institutions, it seemed. Also, the dirt. It smelled dry and fresh. Had that really happened? The flowers had decomposed in the doctor's hands right in front of me. Had that really happened? I shook my head. No, I didn't. I thought I did a moment. The signals left my brain, but the muscles did not receive the message. I had to stop questioning these things. This world was...well, it was bat-shit crazy, but it was still happening.

It was happening.

She had gone with him. God damn it. Evans had gone with the bastard. Bargaining for our release.

I'd shouted at her not to trust him. Tried to, at least. And she had looked so worried when she'd held my face between her hands. That in itself had been cause for concern. She wasn't one to bother hiding what she felt in every moment; happiness, anger, exasperation, mischief, determination...but worry? I didn't think I had ever seen her like that.

She shouldn't have gone with Thomás. He was one of the kidnappers, for crying out loud. They were after her. How could she go with him? Now they would have both Andrea and her.

"Are you there? Dr. Morris?" the voice came again.

The doctor couldn't answer him any more than I could. The Phillipson boy. At least Thomás had forgotten to give him the same treatment all over again.

“Are you guys okay?”

The question made me cry out, try to shout my anger, straining every bit of willpower I had. Nothing.

My heartrate increased. At least that muscle kept on moving. Panic was setting in in full now. I was trapped, trapped, trapped. Could feel the water on the floor reaching my left arm, soaking my jacket. The water she had drowned him in. I'd tried to stop her. I regretted it now. She'd been right, hadn't she? Damn it. It went against everything I believed, but she had been right. Why had the doctor had to resuscitate him?

I needed out of here. I needed to move. I had to move.

Move!

Even my breathing was unchanging. Nothing but my heart moved faster.

Why had I looked at him?

No. I couldn't think like that. He'd done this to me and Dr. Morris, and it pissed me off. I clung to that. My heart slowing a bit as my anger calmed me down. It gave me focus.

I heard rustling from the bed. The kid moving around up there. I heard him muttering, pulling at the sheets and likely the tubes sticking out of him.

“Ouch. Shit.”

He had been on intravenous fluids since Thomás had trapped him. Like the other kids. How else could anyone survive this? By the sound of Michael, though, I figured he'd ripped the thing out.

Sure enough. It didn't take too long before I could see the top of his head far to my left. He was looking down at us from the foot of the bed.

"Oh my God," he shouted. Well, sort of. His voice didn't quite agree on the volume so it came out as a loud croak.

"Are you guys hurt?" he asked. Such a stupid question. He seemed to arrive at that conclusion himself as well. "You can't answer," he told himself. "Okay," he continued, trying for an assured voice, but failing. The scared teenager was fighting for control. "I'm gonna find someone to help, just give me a sec. Feels like a damn hangover."

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Then his head disappeared from my view. Didn't matter who he got. They would not be able to help.

I continued staring at the ceiling. What else was there to do? I wondered how much time had gone by. It couldn't be much. I knew that. The rational part of me knew it. Minutes at the most. But it felt like hours. That was the threatening panic's thoughts. Hours.

The bastard. Why was he going around doing this to people? It would be better to be killed outright. I'd thought that the first time Evans had brought me to this room, seeing Michael trapped like I was now. And now...despite being like this for only a little while, I was convinced. Doing this to people was only a way to kill them slowly. Probably turn them insane first. Whatever good Thomás thought he was doing by not killing his victims outright, he was wrong. I clenched my fists in anger. What kind of warped sense of justice was tumbling around inside Thomás' head? My nails dug into my palms, startling me.

What the hell?

I heard Dr. Morris gasp as I looked down at my hands. Moving my hands. My head.

I sat up so quick I heard Michael cry out in shock at the sudden movement in the room. I knew he was all right, though. I moved over to Dr. Morris instead, who was slowly sitting up.

"You all right, Doctor?" Nothing wrong with my voice, though I hadn't been out as long as any of the kids.

Dr. Morris nodded, then grabbed my arm. “You need to go after them,” she said, squeezing for emphasis.

“You got this?” I asked as I got to my feet. I barely looked around the messy room, saw her nod before I ran out the door and headed down the stairs.

Thomás had kept to his bargain with Evans, but she was still with him. He could do the same to her at any time. How close were they? Did he have to be close to let us go? He didn’t need eye contact to reverse the condition. That had not been the case when Evans drowned him, either. No, eye contact was only required when trapping people.

I barged through the last door, jumping down the few steps of the stairs, and to my amazement, saw Evans’ blue Beetle where she’d parked it earlier.

I stared at it a moment before I became aware of an engine. I ran past the Beetle and barely managed to get a glimpse of a clunker of a station wagon driving away from the hospice. That was them. I knew it as sure as I knew the sky was blue. Thomás had let us go, keeping to his agreement with her, but she was still trapped with him.

Two

“You should put your seatbelt on,” Thomás said. He spoke loudly to be heard over the rattling engine that made the whole car shake. I saw Hansen running past the Beetle before we drove around the large hospice building and turned onto the road.

They were free from Thomás’ bond.

I exhaled in relief and turned around in the seat. Seatbelt? Odd thing to tell your prisoner. Though I knew they wanted me alive. I wasn’t worth much dead. Couldn’t do anything for them. That was me. A damn tool.

Fuck the seatbelt, I thought as the wreck we were in shook violently, but kept going. Nope. Fuck that. I grabbed the seatbelt and fastened it.

“Should you even be driving?” I asked Thomás. He was still clutching at his chest. So far, he’d been beaten, drowned, and resuscitated all in a short time. A normal person would be lying down at this point.

“Since you’re the one who just drowned me,” he said, pausing to draw a deep breath, “I don’t really buy your concern for me.”

“I’m not concerned for you. I’m concerned about the people you trap with that nasty ability of yours.” The smell of old tobacco and the air freshener that hung from the rearview mirror was sickening. The little yellow tree dangled around, dancing to the car’s uneven movements.

“I kept up my end,” Thomás said. “I let them go.”

I knew that was true. I had, after all, seen Hansen on his feet. Thomás had waited until he’d hotwired the old rust bucket we were in now, before keeping up his end. Making sure Hansen couldn’t catch up.

I wasn’t even sure he would try to. He had not liked my actions in the hospice. I couldn’t get the look of pity out of my head. It would have been better if he’d yelled at me, at least looked a little angry. That, I would have understood. That, I could have argued against. But pity? That was worse. I watched the streets of Ashport pass by. This nice little town, so clean and tidy. A perfect little tourist place by the coast. I shook my head. I actually did like it when things weren’t as bad as this. Not like any other place was better or worse.

Thomás drove not only out of town, but in a northeastern direction. Nothing much out there except farmland and coastland. Was that where they kept Andrea? Or was he



tricking me? I would not have to wait long to find out. There were still a few houses around, though, as the grasslands and a few trees waited for us farther ahead. The car sputtered and protested against the speed Thomás was forcing on it. No wonder its owner had parked it behind the hospice. I wouldn't want to show off this thing, either.

"Why do you entrap people like that in the first place?" I asked him after a while. Too curious to keep quiet. There was something off about the whole thing. Yorov didn't operate like this. They simply got hold of those they wanted and let everyone else be. If someone posed a threat, they were outright killed. Entangling them in some elaborate physical trap? Not so much.

"Have you not been listening?" he barked back at me, coughing severely and then calming down. "They have horrible abilities. They are capable of such harm."

"So are you, you idiot," I protested, realizing immediately that calling my kidnapper an idiot might not be the best way to go.

"I don't cause harm, Ms. Evans, I stop it from happening," he said, making me stare at him in disbelief. Had he really said that?

"Those kids haven't done a thing. You tried to trap an eight-year-old girl." I was shouting at him. Couldn't help it.

"Sooner or later they will hurt someone," Thomás insisted. There came a loud scraping sound from the car, but he ignored it and pressed on.

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I shook my head. He couldn't know that for sure. And anyway, you couldn't punish people for something they might do. "You're doing this on your own, aren't you?" I asked. "I don't see how Yorov would condone or bother with this."

He smiled a little at that. "No," he agreed. "The problem with Yorov is they would likely make use of these people if they knew about them."

"You're doing this under their noses," I said. No need to ask. It was clear as day. "They don't know you have two abilities, do they?" That one I wasn't so sure about.

"More like three," he said. "I can sense people like you." He sounded like he didn't count himself as one of us. It was sad that he was wrong on that account. "And I am also drawn to those I sense if I'm close enough."

I nodded. It explained how he always found his victims. It also told me I was right about him working on his own. Maybe it was his way of working against Yorov, even. If he could sense these potentially dangerous affiliates, it was likely his way of stopping them from ending up in the hands of his employers. A twisted way of doing good considering all the shit I figured Yorov made him do.

That didn't excuse anything.

He might think it was a kindness not to kill them, but what he was doing was killing them in such a slow way that it was pure torture. I realized I shouldn't have let Dr. Morris bring him back. He might think he was doing the right thing, but the truth was that he was the danger he was trying to keep from Yorov. I was sure he'd already paved himself a nice-looking road to hell.

Oh, I was in so much trouble. I couldn't do a thing knowing what he would do to me. Hell, quickly throwing my car key so it landed right under the front of the Beetle had been all I'd been able to do without him controlling me. Would Hansen even find it? Would he care? Thomás hadn't wanted to go back inside the hospice to find the key he thought I had forgotten, so he'd settled for the run-down car we were driving. So old there were no computer components in it. It had been easy to break into and it had only taken him a few minutes to hot-wire the thing. What choice had I had but to go with him?

"Where are you taking me?" I asked, not expecting an answer, and not getting one. The car shook again, like a tire had burst, but then calmed down to a low uneven vibration.

"Can you at least tell me whether Andrea is okay?"

"She's fine," he said, voice brusque.

"And you'll let her go now that you have me?"

"Of course."

I had such a bad feeling about all of this. Andrea had likely seen too much. Letting her go might not be a good choice for the kidnappers. She could be useful to Yorov. Was that better than being killed? The fact that I wasn't sure was bad enough.

The only thing I could try to do was attempt to stay ahead of the situation. It might not help in the least, but I had to try. I locked on to him quick enough, seeing his eyes focused on the road ahead.

"Where are we going?" I asked. I needed to lead his thoughts where I wanted him to go. The problem was that he caught on. I could hear it as he at first began thinking

about our destination. His gaze went to me. Realizing that I was staring at him. Reading him. He knew what I could do. Not only because he'd been sent by Yorov to bring me in, but because he could sense it. Could he sense me using it on him as well?

“What the hell are you doing?” he shouted as the words rang inside his head simultaneously.

I must stop you.

I heard the words clear as day. Knew what he decided to do to me as he took his eyes off the road a moment to look at me. Stop me from invading his thoughts.

He was going to trap me.

I felt myself about to freeze as the threat became clear, but I had trained not to become pacified that way. I had trained to react. To fight. Not give in. To focus on what was in front of me and deal with it.

It all happened so fast.

I braced myself as I reached out and grabbed the steering wheel, yanking it toward me, a motion that made the car shake even more. It wasn't able to handle much anymore, and I felt us veering toward the side of the road. I remember seeing Thomás grabbing the wheel hard, trying to correct the damage I'd done. Remember the relief of him not looking at me. Remember holding on for dear life as he lost control of the skidding car. It kept going right, closer and closer to the side of the road, which revealed a steep decline. The vehicle sputtered and shook on its way, finally giving up its existence, as we went over the edge and the surge of gravity took hold. Greenery whirled in front of us as the car landed hard, rolling around. The tugs, shaking and blows felt off, like they didn't really happen. The colors of the outside

blended together with the loud screeching noises of crushing metal. I saw the sky a moment, clear blue and beautiful, a bright yellow flat tree intruding on this sight before it all vanished for me.

Three

“Detective Hansen, I heard you were first on the scene.” Mulligan’s voice came from behind me somewhere, but I stayed where I was, up on the side of the road, looking down at the car wreck. It was about thirty-five feet to the flat area below me, not a long drop and the slope leading down would help, but the car would have tipped around. Hell, I could see that on the dented and crushed metal. It was standing the right way now, but it had rolled around at least once. I was sure of that.

It was odd how nice it looked there. We were right outside town, a grassy landscape surrounding us, a few big trees, view to the sea straight ahead from where I was standing. The car wreck, uniforms, and the coroner ruined that, though.

“Are you all right?” Mulligan asked as she came to stand beside me.

I nodded. “What are you doing here, Chief?” It wasn’t unheard of that she attended crime scenes, but a car crash? That was a little mundane for her busy schedule.

“Considering your unusual case,” she said, pointedly not mentioning Evans’ name, “I decided to check it out when I heard you were the one who called this in.”

“Checking up on me?”

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“Hell yes,” she said. I knew she had been uncomfortable when she’d talked to me and Evans earlier that day. I suspected she might think that Evans read people all the time. So had I. Despite her assurances to the contrary, I still wasn’t sure how she could resist. It had to be tempting. Mulligan showing up like this meant she wanted to know what was happening, even though she thought she might bump into Evans.

“Care to fill me in?” she said, nodding at the scene in front of us.

I glanced at her sideways, not sure how much to say. She knew a lot, but not everything. I decided to stick to the basics first.

“Looks like an unfortunate accident, Chief. The car...if you can call it that... veered off the road right where we are standing, went down the slope, rolling around a few times before it landed there.”

“Cause?” Mulligan asked. She was standing with her arms crossed, bracing herself against the cold wind that came in from the sea.

“Driver fell asleep? Had a seizure? Intoxicated?” I shrugged. “Won’t know until later, but you can see the marks for yourself,” I said as I turned and pointed. Thomás had hit the brakes way too late to stop what had happened. He had lost control, and I could only guess why. He hadn’t fallen asleep, that was for sure. No, something must have happened between him and Evans. Something bad enough that they crashed like this.

“Okay,” Mulligan said as she turned back. “So why are you here? And where is Ms. Evans? Surely she is part of this? Why else would you be here now?”

I sighed. What was I supposed to say? That she had literally killed the driver of the car not long ago? That she'd probably done it twice in the same day? "Chief," I began as they started lifting Thomás' body out of the car. "What did Evans do for you when your son was kidnapped?" I had to know now. It was the only way to figure out how much I could tell her. It made me feel like a fraud. Hiding things. Sadly, there was some comfort in the fact that there might be two of us that would be doing that.

"Listen, Nate," she said softly, "I can't—"

"I need to know. We've come to the point now where you need to tell me because as insane as it sounds, that's the only way I can trust you."

She looked at me a while. I didn't care. Only waited while I watched Thomás being laid out on a stretcher. Limp and pale.

"Okay," she said finally. "Well, it happened before you started working here. Detective Flores was working on the case. Oscar..." her voice broke a little at the thought of her then three-year-old. "Oscar was taken from daycare." It had happened in an unattended moment only a few moments before Mulligan had come to pick him up. At first, it was thought that it was a coincidence. That was, until the chief and her husband had received a ransom note. Hastily scribbled on the back of a flyer, full of spelling mistakes and filth. The spelling hadn't been the biggest mistake, though. The chief's house had naturally been under surveillance and the messenger had been caught as she tried to leave. As it turned out later, she was the kidnapper's girlfriend, and like him, she was a known user, sometimes dealer. The chief had arrested the boyfriend before on a couple of occasions, and in his twisted head, he had figured she owed him for that. The natural solution in his drugged-out head was to take her child and demand payment for him.

"I've seen some crazy shit working this job, especially in Ashdale, but never have I been afraid like that," she said as we watched the black body bag being zipped over

Thomás' body. "The bastard was threatening someone more important to myself than me. Someone I can't always control, you know?"

I nodded. I didn't truly know, but I understood.

"Problem was, we didn't know who her boyfriend was, or where he was. She hadn't been part of his life when I'd dealt with him before. And she wasn't talking."

I was starting to see where this was going. The girlfriend had refused to say a word. Protecting her piece-of-shit boyfriend. Not realizing the danger the little boy was in with a drugged up and angry criminal who thought the chief, and probably the world, owed him something.

"I was at my wit's end," Mulligan continued, the cold wind all but forgotten now, though it tore at us where we stood. "Flores couldn't get a damn word out of her. She refused to talk to us. Refused food and drink even. She looked at us like we were the damn criminals."

"And then Evans turned up?"

Mulligan nodded. "At my house one night. She had one thing in common with our prisoner at the time. She didn't want to be there, either. Didn't want to talk to me at all." It had all happened fast. Evans had known that once she started saying she could help, Mulligan would call Flores, suspicious of this new person getting involved. She could have been involved in the kidnapping for all Mulligan knew. So, Evans had listened in on the chief's thoughts almost immediately, recounting what she heard. Karl, the chief's husband had come in and gotten the same treatment. It had left them stunned and confused until she had clarified how this could help them.

"Fucking hell, that was creepy," Mulligan said, visibly getting shivers at the memory. "Having someone hear your thoughts? Everything that is private to you?"



I only nodded again. I knew all too well how that felt.

“Anyway, I was shocked. Both from the kidnapping and from what she can so clearly do. It was Karl who demanded I make use of her since she was offering. It meant sneaking her into the station, but she seemed reluctant despite offering help. Karl was adamant, though. So, we did it.” They snuck her in late at night and had her talk to the girlfriend. She had been more talkative to someone who wasn’t a cop. And anyway, she didn’t need to be one, did she? Evans asked questions and always got answers whether people used their voice to answer or not.

“It’s like she asks the right question and you can’t help but think of the answer,” Mulligan said.

“Well, try not to think of an orange T-rex if I tell you to,” I said. It was impossible. It took a lot of concentration to keep your mind from wandering to places you didn’t want it to when someone was listening.

“Exactly,” the chief said. “Anyway. She got the answers. His name, location. The girlfriend seemed only sad. Like she knew it was all over by then.”

My guess, from what Mulligan told me, was that she was a member of this Community. Her aversion to cops for a boyfriend who had sent her right into trouble? No, that hate of the police screamed affiliate, didn’t it? It was likely how Evans had gotten wind of her being arrested as well. They all seemed protective of each other. But maybe she had been telling the truth when she said they would let their own be arrested if they did commit crimes? I hadn’t been sure since she wasn’t talking about Freddy Miller, but this was something else. Evans had made contact with Mulligan to try and make a serious wrong right.

“After that, we found Oscar quickly. I told Flores it was an anonymous tip. Not like I could tell him the truth, right?” He would have thought her insane. The child had

been kept in an abandoned house full of squatters. If not for the other addicts living there, it might actually have been a lot worse for the kid. They'd given him some food, while his actual kidnapper had barely been aware he was there.

"Thank God most people are kind," Mulligan said, a weak smile on her lips.

"And after that you got Evans working for the department?" I asked.

She nodded. "A few years later. Two? You were here by then. Bowman was stuck on a case...blackmail, I think. Anyway. I saw a solution. She never contacted me afterward. Didn't ask for anything. So I reached out, knowing she wasn't doing this for money or fame."

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“No blackmailing you,” I said.

“No. I know you suspected she was involved, but it was not in the way you thought.”

“Then why didn’t you say that?”

“Because the only thing she wanted was for me to keep her secret. She saved my kid for crying out loud. It was the least I could do. As it is... I guess you know it now.”

“Yeah...” I also knew the chief wasn’t going to want to arrest Evans for what had happened here. I shook my head at my own thoughts. I was starting to think like the Community members now. Distrusting the police. What the hell?

“What happened here?” Mulligan asked for the second time. She didn’t need to mention Evans to make it clear that was who she wanted to know about.

“The dead man’s name is Thomás. That’s all I know, really. Except that he’s one of Ms. Kirby’s kidnappers. He got Evans and forced her with him. I don’t know exactly what happened, but some sort of altercation occurred between them to cause this.” I had been at a loss as to what to do. Seeing the wreck of a car disappear from the hospice. Then it had dawned on me. Why had they not taken the Beetle? It was right there. She had the key. The only reason was she didn’t want him to. Didn’t want to help him. Hotwiring the thing would have taken ages. You didn’t do that to new cars unless you were an expert. No, the thirty-year-old station wagon was a better choice in that regard. It hadn’t taken me long to find the key. She’d chunked it right under the front of the Beetle. By that time, though, I’d had trouble finding Evans and Thomás. Luckily, the rusty and dented car they were in made enough noise to be

noticed. I'd asked a few pedestrians on my way who'd pointed me in the right direction. By the time I got outside town, it had been too late, though. They had already crashed.

"One of the kidnappers?" Mulligan repeated. She looked disappointed. With him being dead there was little he could tell us about Andrea. "So where is Ms. Evans?"

I shrugged. "Don't know. She was gone when I got here. Judging by her tracks she might have been somewhat unbalanced as she fled the scene."

"Shit," Mulligan said, drawing air in between her teeth. "Do you think she got some information from him?"

"I can only guess. I wouldn't be surprised if she tried."

"She might be in shock after this," Mulligan said waving her hand, indicating the car below.

She could be. I had been the first person to arrive. I had seen the passenger door open. Followed her tracks a little, seeing the unevenness at first before she had gotten her bearings and kept a steadier pace. Hopefully, she wasn't hurt. There was no blood in the car. At least not from her. Thomás had smashed his head on the steering wheel, blood seeping down onto his right knee. No airbags in the old car. And he had already been in a poor state, as he'd been beaten and drowned not long before this happened. I winced at the pain in my left side from the punches he'd dealt me as I'd gotten him away from Eloise. In the grand scheme of things, those bruises were not too bad.

"The problem right now is finding her," I said. "She could have gone anywhere."

"And she might be the only one who knows anything about where they're keeping Ms. Kirby." Mulligan folded her arms again. "Can this be traced to her in any way?"

she asked, looking sideways at me. I could hardly believe I heard her ask that. But I knew from what she'd told me about her kid and how Evans had helped, that she was dead serious.

I sighed. I had covered the tracks, wiped the car for prints on the passenger side before closing the door. Holy hell, this was becoming bad fast.

"I don't think so," I said finally, seeing my boss nod.

"Then you should try and find her. I'll take over here."

"Are you sure? The report might become...tricky on this one."

She smiled ruefully. "I'm sure we can manage."

"Okay," I simply said. I had been wrong. Hiding things like this was bad enough. Even if we were trying to help save someone. The fact that we were now two people doing this, did not make me feel any less like a fraud.

Four

Time became a confusing concept for me as I moved as fast as I could on my shaky legs. It got better with each step, like my body wanted to move to avoid stiffening. Still, I had no idea I'd walked down toward the water until I heard it lapping in over the beach. The smell of salt water and seaweed was the next clue.

I stopped then, standing unsteadily on the rocky beach, the cold wind making me shiver.

"Come on Margaret. Focus. Get it together."

I drew deep breaths for a while, getting my head back in the game. A head that hurt. Then I heard the sirens. Far behind me, it seemed.

Car crash. Dead guy. Cops. No thanks.

That got me going. I needed to get the hell away from there.

As I looked ahead, though, I could see the outskirts of Ashport. The way before me was unfortunately a rocky shoreline interspersed with a few cleared out beaches, ground covered in rocks.

Peachy.

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I knew I needed a break. Couldn't outrun anyone right now.

So, I sat down.

More sirens.

Shit.

Then I noticed something familiar out on the water. I squinted my eyes to see more clearly, but yeah, out there, bobbing up and down in the low waves, was what had to be Alan's little fishing boat. And the lanky silhouette in it had to be him.

"Damn..." I smiled as I fished my cell phone out of my pocket. I had to think a moment to remember his number. The sirens disturbed me and made me miss my own phone.

As I called I saw the silhouette bend down out there. That boded well.

"Hello?" I heard the mechanic's voice as he picked up.

"Alan?"

"Yeah?"

"It's Maggie. I—"

"Oh hey, Maggie. I didn't realize you had a new num—"

“Listen, Alan. I need help. Look toward the shore. Can you see me?” I got up slowly. My brain protested wildly by starting to thump inside my skull.

“Oh, yeah. That you?”

“Yeah. I need help, Alan. Please.”

“Sure thing. Hang on.”

And with that, he hung up. Slowly, I put the phone back in my pocket and sat down on the rocks again to wait. As I watched the little boat change course, I managed a little smile. Sometimes I fucking loved my Community.

Five

Finding Evans turned out not to be easy. I wasn't all that surprised. If she had been able to walk away from the car crash, she couldn't be too badly hurt. Maybe she'd been more prepared for the crash than Thomás? I had no idea. I left the scene of the crash and headed in the direction she'd gone. I ended up walking along a high edge that eventually sloped down to a stony beach. It headed straight for town, and with no sight of Evans, I had to double back and get the car. I had no doubt she had headed into Ashport, but exactly where was a tricky question. She hadn't gone home. This time, she wouldn't. I also doubted she would go to any of the places she kept clothes, or at Gerard's or Annalise's. I was aware I was getting to know her anew these days, and I knew enough to know that she would not want to risk anyone's safety. That was what she lived for, wasn't it? Helping others. I had been so blind. Of course, I hadn't known about the crazy world she lived in, but still. I had read her all wrong.

It was already dark outside by the time I stepped into Danny's, craving coffee. I had no idea what to do next. I would have to start knocking on doors despite not believing she would go to any of the places Yorov or Larkin might know about. Maybe they



had ideas about where she might hide out. Of course, there was also the possibility that she was lying hurt in an alley somewhere. I didn't think so, judging by how far she'd walked, but you never knew.

"Here's your coffee, Nate," Danny said putting a large cup in front of me, the smell itself waking me a little.

"Thanks."

"Anything else?" she asked.

I was about to say no but then looked closer at the old lady. She looked like a grandmother spat out of a fairytale book. Short, thin, and with white curly long hair and two sharp blue eyes that smiled at anyone she saw. I might as well start knocking on doors here.

"Do you know a Maggie Evans, Danny?" I asked her, taking a sip of the coffee.

"Maggie? Sure. She's in here now and then. Why?"

"I've never seen her here."

"Oh," Danny smiled and put a hand on her hip. "She usually comes in the late afternoon or evening."

I nodded while drinking. Of course she did. Cops flooded this place during the day, so naturally, she'd use the place in the evenings.

"Have you seen her today?"

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Danny shook her head. “No. She always says hello if she’s here. I would have remembered.”

I nodded and paid for my coffee before heading outside. Okay. There was nothing to it. I had to seek out the people of her Community. I decided to start with Gerard. I had no wish of being thrown through the air again, if I could help it. Annalise would be the second place to go to. I got the car key out of my pocket, looking at the blue Beetle. Driving it made me feel like I was sitting in the back seat, the thing was so tiny. It couldn’t be helped, though. I took another sip of the coffee and headed for the car as a sound stopped me. What was that? I turned around as a cat meowed a second time. It was hungry, no doubt. It sat on a short brick wall outside the diner entrance, looking inside. There was something about the animal though that made me stop in my tracks. It sat there all royally on its haunches, front paws primly placed in front of it. Black as night, though easy to see on account of the lights all around. And three white spots on its chest.

It clicked into place for me then. A bag thrown at me with food that didn’t come from only one dish. It was for two. A cat which didn’t act like it was supposed to in our normal world.

I shook my head at the insanity and smiled at the cat.

“Hello, Misty.”

Six

“There’s blood on the inside of your jacket.” Tegan lifted it from the back of one of

her chairs. “Are you hurt, Maggie?”

I looked up from where I was sitting on the couch, resting my forehead on my hands. I had to think about the question for a second.

“No,” I said, shaking my head, which I regretted immediately. “No more than you’ve already seen.” She’d checked me over when Alan had brought me to her door a couple of hours ago. Besides bruises, scrapes, and an exhausting headache, I wasn’t wounded.

“Let me have a look,” she commanded, completely disregarding what I had said. There really was nothing I was hiding, but before I could react she was already pulling my T-shirt up, exposing and checking my lower back. As I had tried telling her, there wasn’t a scratch.

“You scared me there for a second.” She let go of me.

“Well, I don’t know if this is any better, but that blood is not mine.”

“It’s marginally better.” Her bright red hair had fallen forward as she bent to check on me, and she pulled it back, fastening it with an elastic band. It was such a modern way to do your hair it looked almost wrong on her. She was missing a bow or something. Her clothes were simple as well. Jeans and a black T-shirt with a big ass skull and crossbones on it. I guessed there was no Instagramming today. She made some extra money that way. People liked her style.

“Listen,” she said. “I’ve checked you over. You don’t seem like you’re concussed, which is a good thing. I’d be happy if you went to see Dr. Morris, though.”

I didn’t want to bother Dr. Morris now. I was sure she had enough to deal with after this day. I had told Tegan about Thomás, but not about the part in the hospice.

“You have some scrapes and bruises, and I think you were knocked around a little bit. Seriously...when was the last time you slept?”

I had to think about that, too. The last time I'd slept? It had to have been almost a couple of days by now. No wonder I was feeling exhausted. And I had been knocked about. I'd been knocked out, even. Waking up in that wreck of a car. Staring right at a dead Thomás. Pale as they come, never waking up again, staring back at me with blank eyes. I had been shocked mostly, not quite myself. I didn't remember much of it. I had a vague picture in my head of getting out of the car. The beach, hailing Alan the mechanic, and that was about it.

“You're damn lucky Alan was there,” Tegan said when I finished telling her. “If he hadn't been out fishing, you would probably still be on that beach.”

I nodded, not willing to argue, especially since she was right. Alan had brought me into town in his boat and walked me to Tegan's from the harbor.

“Anyway, she added, “I'll get you something for the pain.”

I sat still waiting for her, listening to her rummaging for painkillers in her medicine cabinet in the bathroom. What the hell was I going to do now? With Thomás dead, how was I going to find Andrea? I knew I shouldn't have pulled at the steering wheel, but he had been about to trap me. In retrospect, I knew that it wouldn't have lasted forever. They needed me. I was, after all, the tool they wanted. But the thought of him trapping me like that had made my instincts take over. And so, I had pulled at the wheel. Despite knowing that was a bad idea. I looked down myself. Dressed in new jeans and a dark T-shirt now. I had been lucky getting out of that car with no more than a few scrapes. The bruises after my altercations with both Larkin and Thomás were visible under my clothes by this point, and my body felt stiff and tender. Still...why had Thomás been killed? We'd been in the same crash after all. Maybe he had been too weak to brace himself against the impact? He had been clutching at his

chest the whole way from the hospice.

It didn't take long before Tegan came back and handed me a couple of aspirin, and an even shorter time before she handed me a glass of water. I downed the pills quickly, hoping they would do something for my headache. I didn't feel particularly good, but at least I was conscious.

“Can you stand?” Tegan asked.

“Yeah, sure,” I said, not really wanting to. She led me over to the kitchen and made me sit down on one of the counter stools.

“I'd like to take your stitches out now.”

“What stitches?” I asked.

“Here,” she said and touched my right temple. It made me remember the day of Andrea's kidnapping. I had forgotten about the wound I had sustained right above my temple that day. Tegan had stitched me up afterward. It must have been a week now.

“Do you have to?” I asked, knowing I sounded like a child.

“Yes,” she said, inspecting the stitches, gently moving my hair so she could see. “It's healed nicely. It's time to take them out. And I want to do it before you disappear on me for a week or two.”

“Really?”

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“Yes, you wuss. Honestly, I’ve seen you with a stab wound, remember? And you're always so afraid of the stitches? It doesn't even hurt.”

“Man, when you're tugging at my skin like that, it makes...well, it makes my skin crawl.”

She scoffed at me and made me lean toward the kitchen counter as the lights under her cabinets were the brightest in the apartment. Tired as I was, it was quite comfortable sitting there, resting my head on my arms. I saw her put on latex gloves and find her equipment. Much as I hated getting the stitches removed, I had to admit that having a nurse as a friend was quite handy for someone like me. Still, I winced as she started cutting and pulling at the threads. It was something about how unnatural it was with the thread going through my skin and then being pulled out like that. Never liked it. It didn't take her long, though, and soon the little black pieces of thread lay in front of my eyes on a piece of paper.

“There,” she said, sounding satisfied. “Good as new. Well, from your last injury, at least.”

“Come on, Tegan. Don't be so hard on me. I was kidnapped after all,” I said going for pouty lips. It didn’t work.

“Yeah, you were. That's the only reason I’m not being hard on you. Do you know what could have happened if Yorov had gotten a hold of you?” Her voice held despair. Touching, really. But I absolutely knew what that would mean. She didn't know about that part of my past. But I knew what would have happened, all right.

“Maggie?” a familiar voice came from somewhere behind me. I turned around so quickly I actually got a little dizzy from the sudden movement.

“Maggie, what are you doing? Take it easy,” Tegan said as she tried to support me so I wouldn't fall off the counter stool. Then, she also noticed the third person in the room.

Andrea.

She looked awful. Her clothes were filthy, her hair in disarray. She'd lost her elastic band at some point. She looked so pale, with dark circles under her eyes. So thin as well. She was naturally slim, but the way she looked now—either they weren't feeding her, or she wasn't eating.

“Andrea, are you okay?” I asked knowing that the answer to that was no. But what the hell else were you supposed to ask people in this situation?

“Maggie? Something's wrong.”

“I know something's wrong,” I said, “but I am trying to fix it.”

“No, I mean something is off about the...men.”

“What do you mean off?”

“They seem worried. I don't know why. I can't understand them.”

Oh, I had an inkling about what was worrying them. One of them was late in coming back to wherever the hell they were keeping her. This time, though, I wasn't going to waste any of the time Andrea could give me.

“Listen, Andrea, can you tell me anything about where you are?”

She looked so scared standing there by Tegan’s coffee table. Like a small child. She had no control of herself or where she was, or what the men would do. The last time she had shown herself to me, I’d been made to understand that they hadn’t raped her. Thank God for that, but one of them was violent toward her. I so badly wanted her out of there.

“I don’t know,” she said. “The basement, it’s dark and cold.”

“Okay,” I said and nodded with encouragement. “Do you see anything special in that basement?”

“What do you mean?”

“Is anything being stored in there?”

She actually seemed to look around at this question. As far as I understood her mental projection, she could see what her physical body was seeing as well as be somewhere else as she projected her image. The limitation was that she needed something to lock on to. Something she was familiar with. Like her locket which was currently in my purse.

“Some old furniture in one corner,” she answered me. “But that’s it. There’s a sink on one wall, but it’s too far for me to reach.”

“Okay,” I said. “That’s good. That means you’re likely in a house.”

“Does that help?” she asked.

“Yes, of course it does,” I said, lying through my teeth. I still had no idea where they



were keeping her. So, whether it was a house, a garage, a warehouse, a fucking boathouse? I had no idea.

I glanced over at Tegan, who was staying silent for this. She knew how important it was. Knew that this was the woman who was kidnapped. The one I was looking for. This was the reason I'd been in a car crash. That was the good thing about affiliates. They didn't make a fuss when things like this happened.

“What can you tell me about what you hear?” I continued.

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“What I hear?” Her brows creased at the question.

“When they're moving around upstairs. Scraping of chairs? Do you hear them driving a lot? Do you hear the weather? Do you hear the ocean?”

“Yes,” she said. She looked relieved that she could give me any kind of information, which made my heart ache. “I do hear the ocean. That is to say...I hear seagulls.”

“Good, Andrea,” I said, squinting a little at the pain in my head. “Very good. Now, what about the kidnappers? Have they ever spoken to you in English?”

She looked so much better at this point than when she first appeared, that when her tired and gaunt face turned into a mask of horror it physically pained me to see it. She turned around, evidently saw someone and disappeared.

“Oh shit, Maggie,” Tegan said, both hands in front of her mouth, eyes wide. “That poor woman.”

I nodded in silent agreement. That was supposed to be me.

“She looks horrible,” Tegan continued and her voice shook as she spoke. “They must be treating her badly.”

I swallowed hard. “Yes, I believe they are. Oh God, I fucked up. Thomás shouldn't have been killed. If he was alive, I could have made him tell me, I could have gone with him. That was what I was doing anyway,” I said. I was so tired of this.

“Don't you dare blame yourself,” Tegan said, the shock of seeing Andrea like that completely erased now as she looked at me, her face hard, her voice as well. “This is not your fault. That guy was insane and dangerous to a fault. He would have hurt you. He would have trapped you. You know that. How could you have helped Andrea anyway if you had been trapped like that inside your own body? What he could do was awful. The fact that he did it was worse.”

I knew she was trying to comfort me, and maybe, on any other day it would have worked, but not now. Not after seeing how they treated Andrea. She was terrified, fatigue written all over her, and here I sat complaining about being exhausted and beaten? That was nothing compared to what had happened—washappening—to her. She was tough considering what was going on, but she lived a normal life. She wasn't prepared for things like this. I knew in my gut I would have fared better than her if it had been me. Which is why it should have been me.

“Listen,” I said, shoving thoughts like that away. “I need to try and figure out where they're keeping her.”

“Didn't you say you tried to read Thomás' mind?”

“Yes, but it all happened so fast. It was all jumbled. And then he tried to trap me, and I barely remember anything after that. It's all a freaking chaos in my head.”

“Okay,” she said. “I'm going to make you some food because you need some, you look like it. And we're going to go through this step by step together, so you can remember exactly what was in his head. Do you hear me?”

I simply nodded. This was Nurse Tegan talking, stern and strict, knowing exactly what was needed. There was no point in arguing because this time she was right. All that was left now, was what I had gleaned from Thomás, and as far as I could remember, that was not a lot. I sat back up as Tegan removed the latex gloves she'd

forgotten about until now. She packed up her equipment in silence, as I tried to think back on the accident when I heard a knock on the door.

“Oh, God damn it, that's probably Withers again with his stupid missing cat,” Tegan snarled as she went to the door and opened it. Her anger soon turned to restrained politeness as a familiar voice for some reason lifted my spirits a little.

Seven

“Mr. Withers, I don't know where your cat is,” Ms. Byers said as she swung the door open. Apparently, her neighbor had been on her about the animal again. She gave a puzzled look when she noticed I was not the old man next door and simply said, “Oh.” I heard Mr. Withers close his door somewhere behind me. He was curious but didn't want to suffer this woman's wrath.

“I remember you,” she said to me, her brows creasing a bit, trying to recollect where she had seen me. “Detective McAlley, was it?”

“McAllen,” I corrected her, “though that's my partner. I'm Detective Hansen.”

“Okay. What can I help you with, Detective?” she asked, looking like she wanted to shut the door in my face. Preferably with it hitting me square on the nose. Not like everybody in the world likes cops. You get used to it. But I was beginning to recognize this particular dislike. “If it's about that damn cat again, I have no idea where it is.”

I smiled wide to annoy her. “Who, Misty? She's fine. She's home with Mr. Withers now.”

“Then wha—”

“Oh, just let him in,” came Evans’ voice from somewhere to the right inside the apartment.

I’d been right. It made perfect sense. Ms. Byers was even a nurse, if I remembered the information she’d given us correctly. It was obvious this was where Evans would go in a crisis.

“What? Why?” Ms. Byers asked as she looked to her left, not even trying to sound polite now.

“Just do it, Tegan,” Evans said. She sounded tired and not willing to argue. That was weird. “He’s been working on the same case.”

Ms. Byers looked at me with unhidden skepticism, but stepped aside and let me in. Her apartment did not reflect her personal style, though that was toned down at the moment. I looked to the right and saw Evans dragging herself up from the kitchen counter, trying to sit up properly on a high counter stool. She didn’t seem hurt. Fatigue, maybe?

“How the hell did you find me?” she asked, sounding like her usual pleasant self now.

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“Nice to see you, too,” I said and sat down at the kitchen table without being invited to. I was tired and didn’t care. The coffee had helped a little, but by this point, it wouldn’t last long. “I’ve been dealing with the aftermath of a car crash. Care to fill me in on that?”

When she had to think about that a moment, I knew she had gone into lockdown mode. She didn’t need her friend’s subtle shake of the head to guide her there, either. It was generally difficult to get answers out of her, despite Gerard telling her to. This reminded me of my questions regarding Freddy Miller. She had gone quiet on the subject at once, refusing to say anything on the matter.

“I don’t think there’s anything to say,” she began, and I stopped her by raising a hand. She narrowed her eyes at the gesture but did stop talking.

“Listen,” I said, “I saw you kill Thomás a few hours ago. Do you really think a car accident’s what’s going to get you in trouble?”

Apparently, she had to think about that, too. It seemed she fell back into her community’s way of thinking about the police every time we were separated for two seconds.

“How did you find me?” she asked instead of answering me.

“That’s not rel—”

“If you answer that, I’ll tell you.”

“Oh my God,” Ms. Byers said and rolled her eyes at this back and forth.

“Fine,” I said, hoping Evans would keep to her word. It had been easy once I could connect the dots through the knowledge of their world. According to Evans, there weren’t that many of them in town. She had been buying food for two and heading in the direction of Ms. Byers’ place the day after the shooting. And Mr. Withers had been speaking the truth, hadn’t he?

“No offense,” Evans said when I finished speaking, “but you would make a hell of a stalker.”

I looked at her a moment. “How am I not supposed to be offended by that?”

“I only tell that damn cat of his to piss off,” Ms. Byers said. “It keeps following me.”

“What?” I said.

“Tegan’s not...fond of animals,” Evans explained. “But they’re drawn to her.”

I blinked. “Wait, so the cat loves you even though you tell it to go away?”

Ms. Byers still looked at me with skepticism in her eyes. She glanced at Evans a moment, looking for confirmation that I knew about everything, before answering.

“Something like that,” she said.

“Seems her ability to control them turns the animals somewhat masochistic in nature,” Evans added. “The cat keeps coming back after all.”

I shook my head and closed my eyes a moment. So many weird things were happening. I needed to focus on what was most important at the moment.

The kidnapping.

“What happened in the car?”

She looked down a moment. “Okay. I know I fucked up, all right? But he looked at me. I heard him—”

“Maggie,” Ms. Byers exclaimed, shocked that I knew about her thought-reading thing.

“You heard what?” I pressed, getting Evans to continue.

“You know,” she said. “He was going to trap me. So I...just reacted. I grabbed at the wheel. I didn’t mean for the car to crash. I wanted to distract him. I only wanted to stop him from doing that to me.”

Her face was a blank mask now, but I believed her. I had seen her after she had drowned the bastard at the hospice. She had looked upset about her actions, and nervously at me. Not only because I worked for the police. She didn’t want to be judged for that. When Michael had been freed from his entrapment, I had understood why she’d done it. She had looked so relieved at the sight of the kid moving. After being trapped like that myself, I knew all too well what Thomás’ victims had been through. I couldn’t judge her for making that choice. I still felt bad for her, though.

“Okay,” I said. “I get it.”

She raised an eyebrow at that, looking at me like she didn’t believe me.

“You did what you had to do,” I added and gave a slight shrug.



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“But he’s dead,” Evans said. “He was our best lead.”

“Our?” Ms. Byers broke in. “Are you seriously working with a cop? What would Gerard say?”

“Gerard is the one who told me to answer all of his damn questions,” Evans told her.

“Oh...so he’s tame then,” Ms. Byers said, looking hopeful.

“You know,” I said as Evans shook her head in answer to her friend’s question. “I really don’t like that term.” Tame? They all asked that like I was some mutt who had wandered in on their territory. I decided to ignore the comments, though. “Thomás is dead,” I said, continuing with what was important. “Did you hear anything before the crash?”

“I’m not sure,” she said. She did look confused and I didn’t suspect her of trying to keep secrets this time.

“Is she hurt?” I asked Ms. Byers. I assumed she had checked considering her occupation.

“Scrapes and bruises,” she said. “She seems to have passed out as the crash itself happened. She was a bit confused afterward, might have taken a bump on the head, but probably no concussion.”

“I’m right here, you know,” Evans said, voice with an indignant tone.

“Lack of food and sleep doesn’t help,” Ms. Byers went on, ignoring Evans. “Neither does her insistence that everything is fine.” She gave Evans a hard stare and then began looking through her fridge to find some food. “If you ask me,” she said, talking into the fridge, “working with the police is madness, but since you are...you should tell him about Andrea.”

“Did you see her again?” I asked, getting my hopes up as Evans nodded. At least she was alive. I listened to Evans’ recount of the meeting, which had happened shortly before I arrived. Andrea was drawn to her locket. What had her parents called it? A focus object? Something that held deep meaning for her. It had been her grandmother’s, something that could draw her to it. I felt insane for thinking these things. That wasn’t important now, though, and I forced myself to stay in the situation. Wondering about it happening at all was a waste of time now. Evans kept talking, her voice steady, but she looked worried. Something about Andrea had been off. She had seemed to be in a worse state than the first time we saw her. I was not surprised. She had been in captivity for a week now, and from what we understood, she was being drugged most of the time. Probably a measure by the kidnappers to keep her docile. The fewer problems she caused for them, the easier it was. In addition, they could keep her from doing...whatever it was called when she showed up other places. No wonder they kept her in a basement. She couldn’t give any proper information if she managed to contact anyone.

“A house by a beach somewhere?” I asked as Evans finished.

“That’s all I found out from her,” she said as Ms. Byers placed some reheated pizza slices on the table. I was starting to realize that Evans’ life mostly consisted of other people’s leftovers. No wonder she kept buying exactly what she wanted when she made the decisions herself.

“What about the dead guy’s thoughts?” Ms. Byers asked as she grabbed a slice and sat down across the table from me.

“I’m not sure,” Evans said. She made a frown as she thought about it and then shook her head. “No. Nothing helpful.” She got off the counter stool, drawn to the smell of the pizza.

“Are you sure?” I said, noting that she seemed to walk normal. No noticeable injury.

She nodded as she bit into the slice.

“What exactly did you hear?” I pressed.

She sighed and lowered the slice. “There was so much going on. I didn’t get a chance to listen properly.”

“But what did you hear?” I repeated.

“Every detail may help,” Ms. Byers joined in, much to my surprise. “You said so yourself to Andrea.”

“Fine,” Evans said, forgetting her food a moment. “It was something about rent.”

“Rent?” I asked.

She nodded and closed her eyes a moment, trying to recall whatever she had heard inside Thomás’ mind. She looked oddly peaceful like that. “Something about the landlady hopefully not being there, even though they had paid their rent.”

“They’re renting the place where they are keeping the woman they kidnapped?” Ms. Byers asked. “That’s risky.”

“Not necessarily,” I said. “Do you rent this place?”

Ms. Byers nodded.

“And how often is your landlord here?”

She shrugged. “Never. I pay my rent. Why would he come by?”

“Exactly, but there are landlords that provide a more hands-on service. Especially if their short-term tenants are considered guests. Do you have a computer?”

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“What for?” she asked, looking at me like I was an idiot. It didn’t seem like she was afraid of me snooping around on it. She didn’t see the use for it.

“To see if we can figure this out,” I began to clarify.

“Why don’t you just go see...” she broke herself off and looked at Evans. She might have meant to say Rob’s name or someone else with similar abilities. At least that was my guess.

“Why spend time on that if we can figure this out ourselves?” I said.

Evans waved her hand in a gesture of concession. “He likes the internet,” she said and continued eating her food. She must have been starving. I hadn’t even noticed her begin on a new slice.

Shortly after that, Ms. Byers found me a laptop so I could begin my search. If I was right, there were ways of eliminating possible places they could be keeping Andrea.

“What are you looking for?” Evans asked, a mild interest in her tone, but I knew better by now. Finding Andrea was all that mattered to her at this point. It wasn’t only guilt riding her. She might have been the intended target, but even if that had not been the case, it was her job to get Andrea back. Twisted as that was, seen from my side of things, it was how it was.

“There are sites for anything now,” I said, finding the website I was looking for. People rented homes for shorter stays, didn’t they? And this was a nice little tourist town during the summer. Several people in Ashport had joined such sites, but I had

never heard of any trouble with them.

“So how do you find the one house we’re looking for?” Evans asked as she came around the table to look at the screen.

“By searching for a place outside Ashport that’s available later in the fall. That way I can see the calendars for the places that are taken now. Then we can see the homes available on the map. See?”

“Okay,” she said and pointed at the large area northeast of Ashport. “Thomás was headed this way,” she said. “How many homes for rent there?”

I narrowed in on the area, finding five houses for rent. No point in checking out apartments and rented rooms in people’s homes. The kidnappers needed space to hide both themselves and Andrea. It was actually not a bad idea. Staying at the Kreutz farm had left them open to being noticed easily. There weren’t supposed to be people there. But a rented home? The landlord would know, the neighbors as well. And so, they would likely not bat an eyelid at there being people in the house.

Evans listened carefully as I relayed this theory. She nodded, for once a bit more cooperative. It had been useful looking at the map after Rob indicated Andrea’s whereabouts at the farm as well. Evans was more patient this time around.

“So, we have five places that are rented out,” she said. “We need to eliminate the right ones somehow.”

“We need to look at them,” I said and clicked on each one. Three of them were small one-story, one bedroom cabins by the coast. Excellent for vacationing couples. Hardly suitable for four kidnappers and their prisoner.

Evans was standing so close I could smell her perfume. Seemed she had not only

clothes but that stashed around town as well. I had begun to see why. Just today she'd been in a fight, drowned a man, and been in a car crash. Her life wasn't ordinary in the least. Yet, she seemed to do her best to enjoy it between all the shit that happened around her. That was perhaps not fair. It didn't happen solely around her, but around all the people like her. And she was the one dealing with it. It dawned on me that it had to have been a blow to lose Freddy Miller, the only other person like her.

"I think we can eliminate that one as well," she said as we looked at a sizeable house on the laptop.

"Why?"

"It's too far from the water. The owner might claim it's a two-minute walk to the beach, but my guess is ten minutes."

"Ah, the seagulls."

"Yeah, not impossible to hear the little flying bastards, but I would bet on the other house. It was right on the water."

I clicked back to the page we'd looked at before the last one. A large two-story house. A mix of brick and wooden walls. Plenty of rooms for the kidnappers, and likely a crappy basement for Andrea.

"It's rented out for another week," I said as I nodded my agreement. "They didn't know how long they would be here after they botched their attempt at kidnapping you."

"Lucky me," Evans said, her voice almost a whisper.

"Anyway," I continued, not wanting to talk about the day of the shooting of my

partner. “We have to go check this out.”

“We?” she asked as she looked down at me.

“Sure,” I said, not really managing a comforting smile. “Bill’s in the hospital, and no one at work is going to help me with this, or believe any of it.”

She pressed her lips together a moment at that but then nodded. “Okay,” she said.

“Oh, for crying out loud,” Ms. Byers blurted on the other side of the table. “Seriously, Maggie? You’re sleeping with this guy?”

I noticed a pressure leaving my shoulder as Evans let go and moved aside one step. I hadn’t even realized she had been that close.



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“Oh, come on, Tegan,” she said. “I was in a car crash, remember? It gave me all kinds of passes a moment ago.”

“That was then,” Ms. Byers said as if she was talking about something that had happened ten years ago. “Nothing that irritated me then involved the police.”

“How does everyone notice?” I asked, my voice low. Not expecting an answer.

Ms. Byers scoffed at me. “Easy. You keep checking each other out all the time. The little show you just pulled in front of the laptop confirmed it.” She sat with her arms folded as she looked at us. If she hadn’t been so outraged she might have looked like a sleuth revealing her theory of a crime to her audience.

At this point, though, I realized one thing. I was done being ashamed of that part of my time with Evans. And I really had been. Ashamed and angry. She had managed to get me to give that up, hadn’t she? She could have dropped the cuffs, though. I hadn’t liked that part. But there was no point in being angry because I found her attractive. And let’s face it, I did. Trusting her, though, that was a whole other issue.

“Regardless,” I broke into the discussion between the two women. “We have more pressing matters, yes?”

Ms. Byers stared silently at me through eyes narrowed to slits before she looked at her friend again. “I’m just saying that you know better, Maggie. They always turn on us.”

“I can’t deal with this now, Tegan,” she said. “He’s right. We need to see if Andrea is

being kept out by...what was it called again?" she directed the question to me.

"Steep Rock," I said, studying the map. The house was mounted on a rise in the terrain, cliffs rising from a sandy beach.

"They really put their imagination into it, didn't they?" Evans said as she spread out her hands in an attempt to do something about the gesture. Ms. Byers kept her arms crossed but nodded. Even if she had not been there to see Andrea, she understood what was at stake.

Evans found a khaki-green jacket to replace the one that had been soaked in Thomás' blood. I saw that hanging over one of Ms. Byers' living room chairs.

"In case you don't hear from me," Evans said to Ms. Byers as she headed for the door.

"I know. Twenty-four hours and I call Gerard," she said, unfolding her arms now. She might be pissed about something that was not her, or anyone else's, business, but she was also worried about her friend. "Just be careful, okay, Maggie?"

Evans simply nodded and opened the door, almost stepping on Misty, who apparently sat there waiting for Ms. Byers.

"You weren't kidding about the animals, were you?" I asked as I managed to close the door without the cat getting in. Somehow, I didn't think it was in Misty's best interest to be commanded again by the now furious thought-controller in the apartment behind me.

Eight

"Stop the car." Hansen sat up and placed a hand on the dashboard, straining to see

what was ahead of us. It was a car, visible in the darkness because the emergency blinkers were on. The front door on the driver's side was open, while something lay on the road in front of the car.

Odd.

“What are you doing?” Hansen asked. “Slow down.”

I did and stopped the Beetle behind the other car. Nothing moved ahead of us. No cars coming, no one moving around on foot. Granted, it was late and the middle of a work week, but still.

I turned toward Hansen. “Listen, this—”

He was already on his way out of the car. I rolled my eyes and opened the car door. “Don't you think it's odd?” I told him. “Two car accidents on the same road...on the same day?”

He halted a moment and looked at me with surprise. “Not like the first one was a normal accident.”

He had me there, and I watched him walk around the front of the Beetle and further along the car in front of us checking the driver's side. It was a blue Ford. I couldn't see the driver anywhere, and I doubted he was the figure on the ground in front of the car. All I saw from where I stood, leaning one elbow on the car door, and the other on the Beetle's roof, was a pair of feet. Was it a hit and run? Such things did happen, of course, but usually, the driver would take off in the car, not on foot. I scanned the nearby area, but there was nothing to see. Only the road, trees to each side, the smell of exhaust, black sky above.

Hansen stopped by the front of the Ford and stared at the body on the ground. I

sighed. If he wasn't leaping into action, there was likely nothing to be done for the person. It had to look bad I guessed, for him to see that the person was dead without needing to check.

Hansen turned back toward me. "Can you kill the engines?" he shouted.

I nodded, sat back in and turned off the Beetle's engine. The only sound left was the Ford. A steady low rumble.

I got out and headed for the other car. The blinking emergency-lights lit up the area in sharp bursts. An odd thing to remember to use in a panic. Hansen seemed fairly calm, though, and I sat in the car and reached around the wheel to turn the key. With the door not obstructing my view, I saw that Hansen had drawn his gun.

I froze.

No gun needed for a dead body.

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And he wasn't looking at the body.

He was carefully looking in all directions.

As it was, I never got to turn the engine—that was masking any other sounds—off.

As I scrambled to get out of the car, I saw something dark whiz past me and hit Hansen. I heard him grunt in pain and barely saw him stagger as the car door slammed into me so hard I was pushed back into the car, my head hitting the steering wheel. I fought against confusion. Registered that someone ran past the door, that was now in front of me, and seemingly high up. I heard fighting. Shoes scuffing the asphalt, something or someone slammed into the car. Metal hitting the ground. The gun?

I forced myself up, grabbing onto the wheel and seat...and saw nothing.

What the hell?

I pushed the door open and got out. No one there. I shut the door to make sure the thing wouldn't be used against me again. Behind me, the Beetle stood untouched. Whoever the attacker was, and I had an idea, he'd come up from behind when Hansen had been looking in the other direction. Carefully, I made my way to the front of the Ford, looking around to be sure.

The sight that met me was not what I expected. Hansen on the ground. He lay on his stomach, feet near me, head nearest the side of the road. One arm pointing forward, the other straight to the side like he was making some weird attempt at semaphore

signing. There was a small trickle of blood from behind his right ear. And next to him—the victim of a supposed car accident. Lifeless, sprawled on the ground. Nice looking jeans and shirt, purple sneakers, pale slick “skin”. I understood why Hansen had become suspicious. Dead wasn’t exactly the word for an unliving thing. But it had done the trick. A mannequin placed in front of the Ford to fool us. Not for long—just enough.

Damn.

“Where are you, you nasty piece of suit?” I mumbled as I looked around. No way was I going to let him sneak up on me now. Slow, and without lowering my eyes, I bent down to check Hansen’s pulse. At least he had one. Steady and strong. That was good. Then I noticed something sticking out from under his right shoulder. Cylindric, dark. I grabbed it and pulled it free from under him. Fairly heavy considering it was half an inch thick and about eight inches long. It was clad in soft rubber, but I was sure there was metal inside. A nifty club for throwing and knocking someone out, or at least inhibit them. Hansen had been hit, but not knocked out from the thing.

I forced myself to draw breath. Where was the damn agent? I was halfway crouching but had a clear view all around. He had no advantage now. No element of surprise. I’d fought him before. He was good. Strong and quick. I didn’t want to deal with him now. We were sure we knew where Andrea was. We needed to get to her. The problem was getting Hansen into the Beetle. That would take some effort on my part now, and as soon as I took my attention away from my surroundings, the suit would attack.

I realized then that the damn engine was still running. I couldn’t hear any approaching car. Couldn’t see any headlights, either. Could only rely on seeing the bastard approach.

Rabbits will stop and listen when they sense a predator is near. Their sense of hearing

such a handy tool. The lucky little things even have eyes on the side of their heads. Something I could have used at that point. I knew very well who was the rabbit and who was the fox in this game.

I was so screwed.

I clenched my hand around the club. This wouldn't do. Andrea needed me. I could wait there in the dark for the suit. Likely, he expected that. Or I could do what he didn't expect.

Run.

Leave the road and see if he could be lured out that way. I glanced down at Hansen. Larkin didn't seem like the murderous type. And anyway, I wasn't running away. Only off the road. No time to hesitate.

One step—I saw Hansen twitch and bend his elbow.

Second step—that was as far as I got.

My foot wouldn't move, caught on to something, and the rest of me kept moving forward. The asphalt kiss knocked the air out of me as I hit the ground, not managing to break the fall in any way. I turned over on my back more by instinct than strength. Panic threatened to set in when I realized I didn't have any control. My breathing came back when I focused on not losing my senses, though my head didn't cooperate. It hurt. A movement to my left, the pressure on my foot disappeared. And there, under the car—two big eyes locked on me. Yellow as they appeared only when the emergency blinker made them visible.

“No,” I mumbled, the words leaving me in a slow haze. “No...don't do this. She needs me. Andrea needs help...”

The eyes came closer and closer, the sight bizarre and dooming. I turned my head and saw Hansen's eyelids flutter before they opened. Lifeless confusion met me as I headed into the darkness he was leaving.

What followed was blurry and heartbreaking. I remember opening my eyes and staring into the face of the mannequin. Her basic features were there, but the lack of eyes and mouth had me baffled as to what creature this could be. I knew I was supposed to be looking at another face. I couldn't remember which one at that point. I heard noises. Car doors slamming. An engine being turned on. The blinking lights vanished.

Hands on me. Hard. Unyielding. Dragging me a little, turning me. My hands pulled behind me. The club taken from my hand.

Dark.

Then halfway lifted as well as dragged. My legs were not responding. My shoes scraped against the road.

Dark.

Hitting something soft startled me. I blinked hard. Car seats in front of me. A door slamming close by. Words were spoken over again. No, not words. A word, a name. Mine.

"Evans."

"Hhemehhh..." I uttered. It took me a moment to realize it didn't sound anything like "yes".



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Then there was movement. I realized then the car was moving.

Wake up, you idiot.

I forced myself to sit up. I was in the backseat of the Ford, my upper body tipped over, head in the middle seat. I managed to get myself into a seated position and saw Hansen seated next to me, hands behind his back. So were mine. Held together with a plastic strip. Right in front of me, I saw the back of Agent Larkin's head. He drove fast, with no regard for us. There was a reason for that, of course. I sat right behind him and considered an attack. I couldn't use my hands, but I could do enough with a leg to stop the man. Hansen must have realized what I was thinking. I saw him give a slight shake of his head. We were going too fast. This wasn't the rust bucket Thomás had driven. If we crashed at this speed, we were likely not going to make it out alive. That was probably Larkin's plan.

A sharp right turn made me slam into the door and sent Hansen sliding into my other side. The car skidded as Larkin forced it onto a narrow gravel road. It would take us back to town faster, though this shortcut wreaked havoc on any car at this speed. I knew now how the agent had managed to stop us on our way to Steep Rock. He could not have known in advance where we were going. That thought worried me a great deal. Did the man memorize maps? He'd used a shortcut to intercept us when he attacked on Highfield Ridge as well. Anticipation had to be his specialty.

"Where are you taking us?" I asked the Agent as Hansen moved back to the other side. The car kept bouncing on the uneven road and made it hard to sit still. Larkin didn't answer me, but I met his eyes in the rearview mirror. A completely bland expression. I sat back a little. I knew this guy wasn't messing around. It was one

thing that he had managed to get me, but he'd also kidnapped a cop. The other ones wouldn't take kindly to that.

I sat as still as I could in the car as it leaped over the bumps in the road. At least that was what it felt like. Around us was nothing but darkness and the looming shadows of trees. Only in front of the car was there any light and it revealed nothing but the uneven dirt road and at one point, a fleeing fox. It didn't take long before we saw the lights from Ashport. He wasn't taking us there. I knew that for certain.

I looked at Hansen again. He sat still, eyes on the agent the whole time, but he didn't say anything. He looked angry, though. I knew that look. Was used to being on the other side of it, though usually he would speak his mind to me. The fact that he was so quiet and patient now, meant he was on another level than usual. And anyway, I didn't judge the situation the same way. I needed to see if there was some sense in the agent.

"Come on, Larkin. We've been doing your job. We found out—"

A sharp turn to the left had me sliding along the fake synthetic leather seats. I tried stopping myself with my legs, but ended up sideways, my knees hitting Hansen's thigh. He'd been the one to be slammed into the door this time. It took me a moment to realize that we'd left the dirt road. The ride became less bumpy instantly. I turned around in the middle seat and leaned forward.

"You don't understand where we were going," I tried again. I was rewarded with a hand to my chest, shoving me back into the seat.

"Stay back there, Ms. Evans, and don't try anything."

Seldom have I wanted to kill someone so badly. Instead, all I could do was sit up properly. I felt the warmth of Hansen's arm against mine but moved over to sit

behind the agent. Any murderous thoughts evaporated fast as I thought about Andrea. I'd promised her we'd come. That we would find her. Hell, we knew where they were likely holding her. We didn't have time for this.

And that was when she decided to show up. Her mental projection that was.

For a while, there was nothing but the steady sound of the car engine, as Larkin drove quickly along the almost deserted roads outside Ashport. The next moment, she was sitting there, next to him in the passenger seat. She gave him a confused look, as he in return yelped and the car lurched to the left. It took him several tries to maneuver the car back on track. At the same time, Hansen and I were sent back and forth along the backseat, crashing into each other and the doors. I wished terribly for the seatbelt. At least it would have kept us in place. I glanced ahead at Andrea, and though she sat in the seat, following its movements forward, she didn't seem to be shaken as Larkin got back control. He hit the brakes hard, sending me and Hansen forward. If not for the fact that we had been expecting everything by this point, we would have crashed into the car seats faces first. As it was, we both braced ourselves with our legs.

"Andrea," I gasped, not waiting for Larkin to catch his bearings.

"What's going on?" she said, looking as worn down as she had in Tegan's kitchen.

"Listen." I eased myself forward again. This time the suit didn't push me back. He was in too much of a shock, I guessed. "We think we know where you are," I continued. Andrea looked back at me and Hansen, and as our hands were tied behind our backs it was clear something was wrong. Her eyes went to Agent Larkin, and they were fearful and wearisome. She didn't trust anyone but me.

She disappeared again. Even I had to blink hard at that.

"You see?" I yelled at Larkin, straining to get my hands free from the damn strips.

The plastic gnawed into my wrists.

“Evans,” Hansen uttered beside me, his voice calm, probably trying to get me to be the same way.

Larkin gave us both a look of anger. Now that he was not seeing someone who was not supposed to be there, he seemed more himself again.

“Come on.” I glared at him. “You just saw her. You need to he—”

A gun appeared in his hand, but it was not pointed at me.

“Sit back and shut up, Ms. Evans...or I shoot him.” A clear and simple threat. The detective himself stared down the barrel with no apparent surprise. He was assessing and waiting.

I inhaled air so quickly it stung, and only now did I realize my head still hurt. I slowly sat back as Larkin drove on in the opposite direction of Steep Rock, away from Ashport.

Nine

“Got any painkillers?” Evans asked Larkin as he tightened the plastic strip around her ankles. We sat with our hands tied behind us around cold metal pipes. He had made her fasten the zip cords on me first before doing it to her himself. He straightened up and holstered his gun now that he was certain we weren’t a threat.

“Come on,” Evans pressed. “I’ve got a blinding headache and I’m sure your boss wants my brain working.”

The agent looked at her a moment before vanishing into the neighboring room. I

figured it would be an office space since the top half of the walls were windows. We heard him rummaging through drawers in there before he came back, a couple of pills in his hand and a bottle of water. Evans didn't seem to care what they were. She swallowed them with the water as he held the bottle for her. She downed the whole thing and then sat back looking a little better simply from the water.

Larkin threw the bottle into the nearest corner before retreating to the office, calling someone on his cell. My guess was his boss.

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“Can you...hear what they’re talking about?” I asked Evans.

“Not unless I can see him clearly. And anyway, I would only be able to hear him.”

So much for that then. It probably wouldn’t help us anyway. We were still unable to get out of this. Knowing what Larkin said on the phone was not going to improve our situation.

“We don’t have time for this. We need to get to Andrea,” Evans said. She moved around as much as she could, trying to twist out of the zip ties.

“Unless you can magic us out of this, we’re stuck,” I said. The plastic strip around my wrists was tight with just enough slack to not stop the blood flow.

“Yeah, I think you’ve seriously misconstrued what I can do,” she said and stopped fighting the plastic. “What the hell is wrong with that guy? He’s supposed to be here to investigate Andrea’s kidnapping.”

“That’s a cover. I think he’s more hitman than investigator.”

“He must have joined the Bureau for a reason, though,” she argued. She did not seem to believe her own words.

“It doesn’t matter. We’re not leaving this place until he lets us.” That was a devastating truth. We could try something when he moved us to the car. Or in the car. But now? Like this? We didn’t have a chance, and by Evans’ exasperated sigh it was clear she knew that. Plus, the way he drove, trying something in the car was a risky

move. There was also little chance of being found by anyone. I was certain we were in an old auto shop, but someone had at one point started remodeling the inside of the building. There were fresh-painted white walls, a couple of open walls with wires and pipes exposed. No furniture except some shelves, no equipment—it all spoke of a new use for the place. The dust and cobwebs told me the remodeling was put on hold, though. There was also a lack of smell of fresh paint. No, no one would be coming in here in the morning. I wanted to shout at Larkin, get him to see what was at stake. The agent was so blind. Instead, I breathed out and moved a little to my right so I could lean against the wall instead of the pipe.

“Why are you so damn calm?” Evans looked at me through narrowed eyes.

I shrugged. I didn’t feel calm in the least. She was right about us not having the time for this. Andrea didn’t have the time. She’d been in the car only a few seconds, but from what I saw, she needed help badly.

“I’m just waiting for the right time,” I said, lowering my voice in case Larkin was listening. He’d gone silent in the office, and the door was open.

Evans said nothing for a moment but then nodded. “You know we need to do something when he moves us?”

“Best chance is between here and the car,” I agreed. Once inside the vehicle, I suspected we’d be subjected to the same drive as before, or he’d drug us to keep us docile for a while. We were not far from Ashport at the moment, but closer to Ashdale. For some reason, the Agent had decided not to drive further tonight. Whatever plans he was laying, he was making them here.

“He will not be taking us both out there at the same time,” I continued. That would mean less control on his part.

“I’ll do it,” Evans said. “He needs to cut the strips around our ankles unless he wants to carry us.”

“You’ll do what exactly?”

She shrugged and drew her knees up a little. “It might end with his neck breaking,” she added as if that was nothing, yet she didn’t look at me.

“Or yours, if he reacts fast enough. And he might. You know that.” She’d been in a fight with him after all, and from what I had seen of that, he was fast as well as resilient when it came to pain.

“Then your life will become quieter,” she said, the damn smirk back.

“We don’t know who he’ll take outside first,” I said, ignoring it. “Whichever of us that is, has to create some sort of distraction when he comes out the second time.”

She pursed her lips sideways as she considered this. At least it removed the smirk. “Like an escape attempt?”

“Preferably, but honking the horn or something would be enough. All that’s needed is a second of him being distracted.”

“Hmm...” she dipped her chin quickly. “Okay then. If we separate him from his gun, then we’ve come a long way.”

“I don’t think he’ll shoot you,” I said and glanced toward the office. All I could see of the agent was the top of his head through the glass wall.

“Maybe not to kill.” She scoffed. “Haven’t you noticed? Cops tend not to like me when they know about me.” The smirk came back again.



I drew breath instead of replying. The remodeled garage smelled dusty and shut in. “Do you think Andrea can hold on until tomorrow?” I asked. I didn’t even know what time it was. Late? Sure. But did we have to wait three hours? Five? What if our plan didn’t pan out?

“I hope so.” Something in Evans’ voice made me look at her. She was genuinely worried. She turned her head and looked back at me. “We can’t fail.”

\* \* \*

I must have fallen asleep at some point during the long hours as the ringing of Agent Larkin’s cell startled me. I heard him answer it and then keep talking. Couldn’t decipher his words, though. There was a numb pain behind my right ear, but my head felt fine. That was something. I realized that Evans had moved over as she leaned against my right side, head resting against my shoulder. Funny how the world changes sometimes. A week ago, I would have pushed her away without thinking about it.

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“So...about Freddy,” she said softly, knowing I was awake now. “You want to know what happened to him?”

“Yes,” I said tentatively.

“Fine,” she said, surprising me. I sat perfectly still, trying not to say or do anything to change her mind. “He hadn’t done anything wrong. You all thought so, and I get it. He was caught in the house with the woman. He didn’t know a neighbor had called you guys because of the noise. He came to help her boyfriend, but he was too late. And then the police showed up. Conclusions were drawn.”

I knew that was why her Community didn’t like the police, but had we drawn conclusions? He hadn’t said a word to explain himself. Not even his name. Some of the officers knew him, though. In retrospect, that was not a surprise. I hadn’t asked around, but I would bet that was the case with Evans as well. She would show up in odd places, wouldn’t she?

“Then what?” I asked.

“We decided to get him out. I’m not going to tell you any names,” she added.

“Fair enough.”

“We waited for the car transporting him to Ashdale. Forced them to stop and broke him out. We didn’t hurt the driver or the guard. We got Freddy and took him away. New name, new place. Good luck trying to find him.”

I smiled at that. Not that she could see it. There had been five masked people stopping that vehicle, and the guards thought one or two had been women.

“The doors of that car were opened with force. Part of the metal was bent. And the guys in the truck reported that they couldn’t get out of it. The doors were stuck.”

“Sounds about right.”

“So...my guess is, that was Annalise’s doing. Not that you are naming names.” I could feel her tense a moment at that, but she let it go. Sank back against me.

“Good luck trying to get her, too.”

“I’m not trying to get anyone,” I said. “I didn’t know any of this at the time. And anyway, why didn’t he say why he was in the house? Why didn’t he name the boyfriend?”

“Would you have believed him? And even if you had...her boyfriend was not in a good place. He needed help, and not the kind of help any outsider in a correctional facility could provide.”

“So, Miller took the blame?”

“Just so.”

That was messed up. Kind, but messed up. The man’s life had become completely uprooted because of something he himself had not done. And yes, I believed her. How could I not by this point?

“Is that all you have to expect as well?” I asked her. “That sooner or later something bad will happen and you will take the blame?” She didn’t say anything. “Or has that

already taken place? Is that why you came here five years ago?"

"No, that was not the same," she said, surprising me again. "Someone in the FBI had discovered what I could do. They hounded me. It put others at risk of being found out as well. I couldn't do my job...so I had to leave."

"And this was in Seattle?" It was the only information I had obtained about her past before this. It had, of course, come from our friend, Larkin.

She nodded in response.

"So, it is expected of you to give up your lives like that?"

"Not really, but it happens."

"That is messed up."

"The names are the worst," she said, closing her eyes a moment.

"What do you mean? Names?"

"Getting used to new names every time."

I drew breath a moment. This was what I had suspected all along. That there were identity switches involved.

"The names are reminders of what you've left behind, you know?" she said and opened her eyes again.

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“Whatisyour name?” She wasn’t telling me things because her boss had told her to now. Nor did I think it was completely due to our dire situation. It was because she had been keeping it to herself for so long. She even smiled as she looked straight ahead at nothing in particular.

“It’s Maggie now,” she said, “before that, it was Peggy.” She turned her head a little so she could look up at me. “And before that,” she continued, “it was Margaret.” Her smile weakened but didn’t falter. “I hated changing it. I let it slide on the surnames. Alder, Evans. They’re not mine, they never have been, and I didn’t care. But my given name? That’s all I have.”

So, she had refused to give it up. Kept to variations of it. A way to claim her own self despite the bad things that had happened to her. And to think that a week ago, I would have relished in getting this information. Now? I cared, but not the same way. Now, I felt sorry for her. Not pity. It was sad what a bad hand she’d been dealt on account of her ability.

“Anyway,” she continued and looked down again. “I would've had a new name soon.”

That took me aback. “Why?” I asked. She seemed so calm about it despite what she’d told me. She sat relaxed against my side, her cheek resting on my upper arm. The garage was cool, and the warmth from her felt oddly comforting.

“Yorov...FBI...haven’t you been paying attention?” She didn’t sound annoyed. Only tired.

“Won’t they just find you again?”

“Not if—” She stopped herself a moment. “Not if we can figure out how they found me. Then we won’t make the same mistake twice.”

She had been about to say Eddie. I was sure of it. There was no one else in Ashport with that kind of reputation for dealing with identity fraud. Apparently, he dealt in more than what we suspected him of.

“Anyway,” she continued. “That won’t matter unless we can get out of this.”

“Yeah, well...the when is up to him.” I glanced toward the office again. He was still on the phone, his voice a low undecipherable rumble. The call lasted ten more minutes before he hung up and came into the garage carrying a chair. He placed it about six or seven feet from us and sat down, bending forward and leaning his arms on his thighs. His dark suit was stained from his attack on us earlier—light dusty patches he hadn’t bothered to brush off. That showed how much he cared about the expensive suit.

“Here’s what’s going to happen,” he began and looked at us with a blank expression. “Preparations are being made for your transport to my boss’s office. In a couple of hours, we’ll continue driving to the nearest field office. From there, you’ll be taken by car and plane. For our short drive, you’ll be sedated, as I don’t trust you.” He actually threw in the smallest of smiles at the last part. Still, transport by plane? We weren’t being sent on a short trip. And his boss, whoever that was, had some serious authority within their organization to pull this off. There were no warrants out on us. We hadn’t even been arrested.

“You do realize you’ve kidnapped a cop?” I said. “What do you think will happen when my colleagues realize I’m nowhere to be found?”

The agent did not seem the least bit concerned about this. “We have ways of calming such situations down—besides Detective, you’ve been mixed up in a lot of non-legal happenings in the last few days, haven’t you? If need be, I’m sure we can rustle up some charges.”

“Why did you bring him anyway?” Evans asked. “Are you enjoying the kidnapping thing so much you just added more people to your plan?”

Even with my mind tumbling from the implied blackmail, I saw she had a point. Larkin could simply have left me on the roadside and only taken Evans.

“Seems these days that wherever I find you, Ms. Evans, I also find Detective Hansen. I figured the best way to keep you in a cooperative mood was to bring your boyfriend along as well.”

“That’s what you think?” she asked and sat up straight, leaning on the metal pipe again. “You’ve misunderstood this whole—”

“You misbehave and make my job difficult—he pays,” Larkin broke her off.

“But—”

“Did I speak in a language you don’t understand?” He stood up, making it clear this conversation was over. Evans opened her mouth to say something but kept quiet. The look on the agent’s face did not speak of false threats. As he grabbed the chair to take it with him I noticed movement in the office. I leaned to my left to see better and inhaled sharply.

“Andrea.”

“What?” Evans said beside me.

“Andrea,” I repeated and raised my voice to make her hear me. She stood inside the office, though I could only see her from her shoulders up. She looked around in confusion until my shout got her attention. If she came where her focus object was, I figured Evans’ purse with Andrea’s locket was in the office. Larkin must have taken our stuff with him.

She turned and saw us, and then ran through the door. I had, after all, seen Evans’ hand pass right through her when she first appeared at Rob’s house.

“Oh, Andrea,” Evans said, relief on her face.

Larkin, on the other hand, drew his gun and aimed it at her, telling her to stop. She did. Even attempted to raise her hands, and then seemed to remember his gun couldn’t hurt her. She ran past him, toward us. The look on his face as his arm passed through her when he attempted to hold her back was likely what mine must have been the first time I saw it. He seemed utterly shocked. Odd, considering he knew about Evans and Yorov. Maybe he didn’t know much about the rest of them. Or care.

“Maggie. They’re leaving,” Andrea said as she stopped in front of us. “Something bad is happening.” Then she actually looked at us and realized we were tied up. She glanced back at Agent Larkin. “What’s going on? What kind of trouble are you in?”

“Listen, Andrea,” Evans said, her voice calm and as comforting as she could muster. “One of your kidnappers is dead. That’s what has them all riled up. I don’t know if they know, but him being missing must have them in a panic by now. It’s the guy with the tawny hair. I killed him.”

Andrea looked shocked at this blunt admission of such an action but nodded her understanding of the situation. It probably explained a few things for her. She looked ragged and tired in addition to being panicked.



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“What’s going on here?” she looked between the three of us, not comprehending fully.

“That’s the guy who’s supposed to be investigating your kidnapping,” I said, venom in my voice despite trying to control myself. “He’s kidnapped us instead.”

“What?” she said and looked at Larkin who still seemed to be in shock at this apparition.

“Andrea,” Evans drew her attention back with a command in her voice that was not to be overlooked. “You need to hang on, okay? You have to—”

“Oh God,” Andrea mumbled as her attention was drawn to something we couldn’t see. “No. Go away.” She backed up a couple of steps but then didn’t seem to be able to move anymore. There had to be a wall behind her on her end. With us, she had nothing but empty space.

“Go away,” she screamed as she ducked her head and seemed to hit at someone. “Stop it. Stop. No—”

Her head whipped toward us, her eyes on me, utterly surprised, before she vanished.

“No,” Evans shouted. Fury rode her now as she managed to get herself in a standing position despite her restraints. “Fuck you, Larkin. This is your fault. You have to let us go get her.”

Her sudden shimmying up along the pipe seemed to bring the agent back to the

situation. He raised his gun again, aimed at Evans. When he realized she wasn't loose, but still tied securely to the pipe, he lowered it somewhat.

"Sit down, Ms. Evans."

"Sit down? Are you insane? Did you not see her? She needs us. You're supposed to investigate her kidnapping, you ass."

"Did you not hear what I said earlier?" he simply replied and aimed the gun at me instead. It barely registered in my mind. Andrea's face. Shocked. Eyes wide with surprise and fear.

"It's your job to investigate her kidnapping and here you are committing one yourself." My voice was strangely calm. Maybe I was in some form of shock myself. What was wrong with this guy?

"Will you two—"

"If you help me with this, I will go willingly," Evans said, making me look at her, gun forgotten. "You won't need Hansen as leverage. I won't give you any trouble. I'll come along and I'll work for you. Just let me help her."

"Evans, no," I heard myself say. She was pleading with the agent, her face dead serious. This was bad. She had not gone willingly before. She would do it under duress now. She would never be free if she did this. They would never trust her.

"Please do your job, let me do mine one last time, and I swear I'll go with you," she went on, ignoring my protests. "I won't cause any trouble."

Larkin looked thoughtfully at her. He was actually considering it. It would make transporting her easier for sure, but...I eyed him closely. Had Andrea's appearance

affected him? He really was considering it.

“Evans, you don’t want to do this,” I warned her. She would end up a caged lab rat if she went along with it.

“Yes, I do. Yorov has Andrea. I can’t let them take her with them.”

I had a bad feeling about this. The attack on Andrea replaying in my mind. Bad, bad, awful.

“Agent Larkin, listen to what I am offering you.”

“How do I know he won’t cause trouble afterward?” he asked and indicated me with a nod.

“What?” I blurted, shocked that the agent had bit on to her hook.

“You said it yourself. He’s been involved in all kinds of crazy shit these last few days. If he keeps quiet, so will you.”

“This is a bad idea, Evans. Don’t do it.”

“Fine,” Larkin said, producing a sigh of relief from Evans who sank down along the pipe until she was slumped on the floor.

“Seriously? You don’t trust her, do you?” I said and hoped he wouldn’t take the deal.

“Difficult to see when she’s lying,” Larkin said. “But I see you believe she’ll do it.”

Crap.

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I should have kept my mouth shut. I did believe she'd stick by her word. She was crazy enough to go with him.

"Whatever," she said and looked at him with determination. "If you're to hold up your end of the bargain, we need to move now."

Larkin looked thoughtfully at us a moment and then nodded. He sat down on the chair again and holstered his weapon. "All right. But first...I have some ground rules."

Ten

The boat made great speed in the darkness, and it surprised me that I didn't care whether or not the kidnappers heard us approaching. The fact that it was the middle of the night had surprised me a little, though. I felt like we'd been stuck in that auto shop for an eternity. The darkness was fading a little now and dawn would come soon. I glanced over at Hansen, who had said very little since Agent Larkin had agreed to my offer. He was not happy about this. He wasn't an idiot. He knew, as I did, that I would be under constant surveillance when agreeing to work for whoever was running the show within the FBI. I would always be a flight risk. And that was the thing. I knew how much Andrea would need to flee once she was locked inside Yorov's grasp. I knew what it meant to be their tool. To be used.

I shivered, both from the wind and the thoughts of past predicaments. The speedboat cut through the water at high speed, bringing us closer to Steep Rock, faster than we would have traveled by car. No twists and turns on the water. I glanced back at Larkin, who was steering the boat. He'd been true to his word. Not unaffected by

Andrea's appearance. Maybe he was human in there somewhere. Mostly, I figured he saw the benefit of me cooperating. Nevertheless, he'd made one phone call, and then waited five minutes. When his contact rang back, the boat had been settled. It had been at a nearby dock, keys in the ignition. If the FBI didn't have the resources themselves, they sure did seem to know who to turn to.

As we rounded an islet where a few trees grew, Steep Rock came into view. We were so far northeast of Ashport now that I could see the lights of Charlotte Bay further on in that direction. Steep Rock drew my attention, though. The house lay on top of a cliff, a sandy beach below. There were lights on in the house that made it visible in the semi-darkness. The kidnappers were there, and they were awake. It wasn't even a thought in my head that we could be in the wrong place.

Larkin cut the engine when we were close enough, and as we reached the shore, I got up and jumped into the shallow water. The cold water soaked through my shoes and jeans below my knees at once, the smell of saltwater even more dominant. Hansen did the same on the other side, and we grabbed hold and pulled the boat until it stuck in the sand. After that, we waited until Larkin came ashore—dry feet, the lucky bastard—and secured the boat by tying a rope from it to a heavy rock that protruded enough for the purpose. Hansen and I stood in silence watching him. This was the moment. Larkin's rules were no weapons unless needed. He'd only cut us loose because we needed to move, but he always kept behind us as well. Gun at the ready.

"I'm trusting you to keep to your word, Ms. Evans," he said as he approached us, handing me my purse. Except the metal lining, it wasn't much of a weapon. It still felt comfortable to have it on me, though. I always wore it hanging by my hip. When I needed to move fast, all I had to do was pull at the strap and it would be out of my way against my back.

"And," the agent continued, "I'm trusting you to let her make her own bargains."

He handed Hansen his stuff, including his gun. He didn't look happy. Actually, that is an understatement. He looked like he wanted to shoot Larkin in the face, but he reined himself in and eyed the cliff instead. From where we stood, we couldn't see the house. At least we all agreed we had something more important to attend to right now.

"Let's get up there." I grabbed an elastic band from my purse and fastened my hair with it as we started walking. I had no wish to have my vision impaired by getting hair in my eyes.

"There's a path over there," Hansen pointed out. It was a narrow path carved into the cliff that wound its way back and forth to the top. A rickety railing of wood and rope was what kept people from falling. "Wouldn't want to meet any of them there, though," he added.

"I say we walk around," Larkin chimed in. "It's longer, but safer."

I wanted to protest. Wanted to run up the steep incline of the cliff. But they were unfortunately right. The cliff itself was about a hundred feet high. More than enough to kill you if one of the kidnappers came down and pushed. They had the high ground after all. The cliff itself wasn't really a dominating feature in the landscape. It rose behind the beach, its top protruding at its highest about where we knew the house stood. We ran toward its northeastern side to find our way up from there. The sand made our run slower than it had to be, the tiny grains clinging to Hansen's and my wet shoes. As we reached the grass and hard dirt of the cliffside, I slowed my pace and settled for the run upward. It was a steep incline here as well, though not as bad as the pathway. Still, being exhausted when we reached the top would be foolish. I glanced at my side and saw Hansen keeping up. No surprise there. Then I noticed we'd lost the agent.

I turned around, my steps faltering a little as I saw him further down, gun flying out

of his hand as a man came running straight for him. The levitating gun caught the agent completely off guard. I had fought him myself, and I knew nothing else explained why he let the man pummel him to the ground like that.

One of the kidnappers. It had to be. I didn't recognize him. But I didn't have to, either. Who else would attack people like that?

Well...fuck that. Let the Suit fend for himself, I thought and turned to continue toward the house again. I got ten steps in before I noticed I was alone. Where the hell was Hansen? It took me second to realize before I turned around again. Sure enough, there he was, sprinting down toward the two fighting men. I could see the kidnapper on top of Agent Larkin, though it seemed they both got in a few punches. No doubt Larkin was the more experienced fighter of the two, but the kidnapper had caught him by surprise.

Hansen drew his gun as he ran, nearing the two fighters. I shook my head at this. Had he not seen what the kidnapper could do? If he had, he was denying it to himself. He stopped beside them, gun aimed and steady. The two men stopped fighting a moment, the kidnapper focused on the weapon directed at him. I couldn't hear what Hansen said, but I could guess. The kidnapper didn't listen. Instead, he raised an arm and the gun flew out of Hansen's hands and hit him smack in the head, sending him backward on his ass. If it wasn't for the dire circumstances, I would have laughed at that spectacle. As it was, I ran back down. Saw the kidnapper assess his surroundings as he got up. Both Hansen and Larkin were about to get on their feet, a double threat to the man. He only had one chance, and he took it. He crouched and focused on Larkin's gun, which lay closest. The thing flew into his hand as if it were drawn like a magnet. I didn't think that was what it was, though. No, his telekinesis was weak. Otherwise, he would have sent both men flying toward the rocks near the cliff. He aimed the weapon toward them in triumph, his back to me.

Sometimes you do get lucky, even in a shit storm.

Hansen and Larkin saw me coming, and they did the most sensible thing they could. They got up, distracting the kidnapper. I was close enough to hear him telling them to get down again, broken English and all. Not until I was three steps away from him did he hear me and start to turn around.

Adrenaline pumping, breath fast but steady, I focused on nothing but him. Small build, muscled. Bigger than me, but not by much. I launched a kick that hit his elbow hard enough to startle him and make him lose his grip on the gun. After that, I used the downward slope and gravity to my advantage. Without pause I threw myself up, one leg going around his neck as my upper body swung around him. My other leg connected the grip around his neck in the same fluent movement, and as my body fell down, he was whipped into the air, swinging over me by his neck. Confusion was all I glimpsed of his face before I heard the loud snap and felt the tremors on the ground as he hit.

Then I realized I had fallen on the ground myself, back first, and it hurt. I groaned as I twisted, sucking in air and getting to my knees. My hands hurt from landing on them and I flexed my fingers on the ground, dirt coloring them. The pain was a dull ache, though. Not the sharp bolts of pain from anything broken.

“Broken necks, huh?” Hansen commented nearby. I didn’t realize he’d come that close. I nodded and looked over at the dead body. He lay sprawled below me, eyes open in shock. It happened so fast. No time for him to make a counter move. Too bad for him, I thought, and then realized there was a cop trying to help me get up. I waved him off and got upright on my own.

“Just get your gun, Detective. And try to hold onto it next time,” I snarled. I wanted to shout at him for going back for Larkin, but the Agent was right there. I didn’t need him to change his mind about this now. But I was pissed off, adrenaline and pain not helping. Old bruises were throbbing in tandem with what would certainly become new ones.



“Where did he come from, anyway?” I asked Larkin, who had walked past me to pick up his own weapon.

“Must have hidden among the rocks by the cliff.” He holstered the gun with remarkable ease. Didn’t seem to be hurting much from the punches he had taken mere moments ago. I didn’t like the man, but I sure envied his way of pushing pain aside.

“He must have seen the boat come in, or heard it,” Larkin continued. “Came down to check, I guess.”

I glanced up toward the house again. I could see the top of it from where we stood now. The lights in the rooms still had a golden tint to them, though darkness was fading fast at this point.

“If he had told the others they would have been here by now,” Hansen said and then looked thoughtfully down at the dead kidnapper. “Must have been the driver,” he mumbled, more to himself than us.

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I drew a couple of deep breaths and started running again. We needed to get to Andrea. One of them had attacked her earlier. She needed out now.

Our running soon turned to steady jogging, but as we neared the house we had to keep low. There wasn't much in terms of anything to hide behind. The top of the cliff was a windy place and nothing much but grass grew there.

We were about a-hundred-and-fifty feet away from the building when Hansen stopped me by putting a hand on my shoulder. We all knelt down, but all it would take was one glance out the right window and we would be spotted.

"What?" I hissed, still angry about his move back near the beach, and pissed because I knew he'd technically done the right thing.

"She's in a basement, right?" he asked and pointed to the side of the large stone house. On one side, there was a wooden door to a storm cellar.

"We have to go in there," I said, no doubt in my mind about that.

"I'll have a look around outside," Larkin said. Much as I didn't trust him, I did regarding this. He wanted me alive, and if any of the kidnappers came when we were inside? Well, we'd have a hell of a time getting out again. I simply nodded my agreement, and we moved at once. Running in silence and as fast as possible. Eyes on the windows the whole time. Not a face to be seen.

Hansen and I stopped by the cellar entrance and pressed ourselves against the wall of the house, hoping not to be spotted. Larkin disappeared around the corner of the

building.

“It’s locked,” Hansen whispered, nodding toward the two hatches. A chain with a padlock kept the handles together.

“We break it and they’ll hear,” I whispered back.

“Okay then. This will take a little longer, but it’s quiet at least.” He glanced up at the windows on that side of the house again and then went to work on the padlock with his lock picks. Part of the stuff Larkin had returned to him. I had forgotten to ask him about that skill. Now was not the time, though.

He made quick use of the lock and opened the hatch carefully. No one shot at us, so we went inside.

“Shit,” I heard him hiss as he was about to lower the hatch over us. I climbed back up the stairs to peer out beside him. Far out toward the cliff, a dark-haired man walked down a pathway.

“I recognize him from the farm,” I said.

Hansen nodded beside me, and turned his face toward me, though his eyes remained on the second kidnapper. “That’s the guy that shot McAllen.”

His breath tickled my neck in the closed space we were in, and I suddenly had to swallow hard to focus. What was wrong with me? “He’s going to find his friend down there soon. His dead friend.” I quickly closed the hatch completely, seeing Hansen’s narrowed and angry eyes looking toward the man out there. He didn’t argue, though. We turned to a dimly lit stairwell. The air was raw and cool, and we hurried down the steps as silently as possible. There were no other sounds.

“Andrea?” I shout-whispered. As we came into a small room crammed with old and dusty equipment. There was a moldy smell that no doubt came from the neglected papers and fabrics stuffed in unsealed boxes.

“Evans,” Hansen’s voice came behind me. “This might...” he trailed off, a half warning not spoken.

I pressed on.

“Andrea.”

I stepped into the adjoining room, a larger space, dingy, lit from another lamp hanging from the ceiling. Some stuff stashed in the far corner. Nothing else, except Andrea in the middle of the floor. The lamplight shone down on her as if she were the star of a play on stage and in center.

Except she wasn’t moving. She lay on her stomach, one arm bent underneath her, the other straight out to the side. Her dark hair lay all around her head as if the wind had taken hold and played with it.

I drew breath and walked closer. Knew what I was seeing. Didn’t want to. I crouched down beside her, saw her face between the dark strands halfway covering it. Pale, unmoving, eyes wide open in shock and fear. I looked down her limp body. Saw the shackles fastened around her ankles. She had been chained to the damn wall. A sink she couldn’t reach. A bucket she could. And that was it. They hadn’t even given her a blanket.

I pressed my lips together in determination and reached out to her. Knew it was folly now, but searched for her pulse nonetheless. She was cold to the touch, the cool basement probably sped up the loss of body temperature. I stopped searching. Had seen the angle of her neck the moment I saw her.

“The fucking bastards,” I whispered and felt a hand on my shoulder. I twisted to get away from it and stood up. “Did you know?” I asked as I turned and faced Hansen.

He didn’t look like he wanted to answer me, but he did. “I suspected. I think she died when we last saw her.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I tried to prevent you from making that deal with Larkin...” He stopped himself and shrugged. “I still needed to come here. In case there was a chance.”

I nodded. He should have told me. I hadn’t seen it the way he had. Hadn’t wanted to. But I understood that he’d had to at least try. Just in case.

I looked down at her still body again, and drew in a lung-full of moldy air before I looked back at him.

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“I am going to kill them for this,” I said, not breaking eye contact. I knew he didn’t like it. Didn’t have to see the sadness in his eyes to know that. Didn’t need any judgment. They were going to pay for this. Andrea had done nothing to deserve this. Nothing. “Well?” I prompted.

He opened his mouth to speak as a crash of something breaking interrupted us from above. We heard scuffling and muffled shouts as something else was smashed to pieces up there.

“Fucking Larkin,” I said and ran past Hansen toward the stairs. I heard him follow me as I ran up the steps three at a time before heading out and around the house to find an open front door. The agent must have ventured inside to make an arrest. I ran in through a small hallway where I had to jump over the kidnappers’ luggage to get to a small den straight ahead.

What I saw in there made me halt my steps. Unfortunately, it was too late. The big-ass bald guy from the farm shoved Larkin so hard he crashed into a cabinet full of china, everything crashing on to the floor with him. The bald man instantly turned at my arrival and swung a hand toward me. He managed to grab me by the scruff of my jacket and fling me to the side. Luckily, I crashed into an old orange couch. I heard more noises behind me and turned to see Hansen land a punch into the big man’s gut, but he only got a worse one in return. He staggered backward a few steps before drawing his gun. This time, I figured it was a good idea. I did not want to get too near this guy and with good reason. He was big, strong, and fast. If you counted his ability, it took a lot to hurt him. The bruised nose in his small yet flabby face had only been given to him because I had found a weapon that worked against him. As I looked around the room, though, I sadly saw no quarterstaff substitutes.

“Stop,” Hansen yelled at the bald man, who laughed in response. Quick as a damn hummingbird, he raised his hand and sent the little lightning bolts toward the detective. They hit his arm, making him lose his grip on the gun. I stared in disbelief. Had he not learned from the last time they met? He actually still thought he’d been tasered?

I didn’t think any more of it. I grabbed the nearest thing, which turned out to be a nice flowery guest book, and hurled it at the kidnapper. It distracted him enough for Hansen to attack, gun forgotten on the floor. At least he didn’t waste time on it. Instead, he jumped up via the coffee table, grabbed hold of the man’s head and neck, and shoved his knee into the big guy’s chest. Not something I’d seen him do before. He was rewarded with another electric charge, this time in his leg. It knocked him back, falling halfway on the coffee table before rolling onto the floor.

The bald guy turned toward me and smiled. A leering smile. Threatening in every way. Yeah, I remembered him smacking my ass with the broken rake. One thing I knew, this was not the guy that had killed Andrea. He would have done other things to her given the chance. As he stepped to get around the table and toward me, Hansen’s hand shot out and grabbed his ankle. It didn’t help.

I braced myself. Grabbed a candlestick and saw a shadow pop up behind the giant.

A shot reverberated through the little room.

For a moment, I didn’t think it would deter him.

Then the bald man coughed, and drops of blood came out of his mouth and decorated his chin. His white sweater seemed untouched. The giant looked at me with confusion first, like this wasn’t happening to him. Then he seemed to decide that it was, before turning to face Larkin.

A large red and glistening patch of blood ran down the bald man's back, the wound a little dark opening at the top of this mess.

It did not hinder him. He stalked toward Larkin, whose eyes widened in surprise as he fired again, straight into the man's chest. It stopped him short a moment as he bent a little and grunted in pain.

Then he walked on.

Larkin shot a third bullet into the guy and he kept coming. Blind fury and a storm of adrenaline steering him now. I realized I still had the candlestick in my hand. I leapt forward and hurled the thing at the bald head, as the kidnapper grabbed a stunned Larkin by the throat and pushed him against the wall. The china broke under their shoes as they moved. The candlestick might as well have been a dandle-lion seed hitting the kidnapper. I ran toward them as he grabbed Larkin's gun, turned it toward him, and fired it. The shock in the agent's eyes as he realized the pain was his own, was the last I saw of him alive as the bald man shot his hand out and flicked me away like he was swatting a fly. I fell back on a small yellow couch next to them and then rolled to the floor, landing on Hansen's legs. He'd been trying to get up, and this did not help. I tried getting up fast, didn't dare to not have my eyes on the bald man. Could smell burning fabric and saw the five small burn marks on Hansen's jeans, just below his right knee. The same kind of marks he had on the left side of his torso.

I turned around in time to see the top of Larkin's head vanish behind the yellow couch as he slid down the wall. The bald man turned toward us with the gun still in hand and smiled. This time the smile was void of anything. It was simply there. He sneered and looked down himself. His sweater only white on the sleeves. Two wounds bled profusely from his chest. Only now did it seem to dawn on him what had happened to him.

The gun fell to the floor, a clackity sound as it landed. The kidnapper looked down at



us as if we had any solutions where we lay on the floor. Then he went down on his knees, before he fell forward. His left side hit the coffee table and whipped it up, sending outdated magazines flying over him in a final salute.

There was silence. A moment of disbelief and realization.

“You okay?” Hansen asked me, while still wincing from his own pain.

“Takes more than a giant hitting me to hurt me, Detective.” I got up on my knees, straightening my back. I couldn’t see anything but Larkin’s legs protruding from behind the yellow couch, but the amount of blood seeping around the broken china on the floor by his legs told me what I needed to know.

The bastard had saved our lives.

“Larkin’s dead,” I simply said and stood up.

“What?” Hansen scrambled to his feet, the electric attack making him a bit unsteady. He looked down at the slumped form of Agent Larkin. Unlike Andrea, his eyes were closed. The detective’s glance moved to the bald man. I could see him shake his head in disbelief.

“The man shot lightning from his hands,” he muttered.

“Some people can charge electric currents like that. I thought you knew,” I added and touched his left side. Then I remembered his view on that and let go.

“Five marks,” Hansen said, too overwhelmed to notice my mistake. He kept staring at the dead kidnapper. Then his head snapped around, facing me. “The third guy.”

“Damn it.” I looked down at Larkin but didn’t have the time to sift through all the

blood and broken china to find his gun. I headed back to the orange couch where I'd seen another candlestick standing by the wall. About twenty inches long and made of tin. It would have to do. "Best to head outside and lie in wait. He can't be far."

I saw Hansen nod his agreement before bending to pick up his gun. When I saw his face freeze by something out in the hallway, I knew we were too late. The third kidnapper must have run like hell back to the house when he discovered his friend's broken neck down near the beach.

The smart thing to do would be for the man to turn and run. The only running he did, though, was toward the den. I heard his footsteps come closer, trying to distract Hansen from reaching his weapon and firing it. I took three steps to the door, and when I heard the guy leap over the luggage like we had, I swung the candlestick into the body that came racing through the doorway. I heard him cry out in pain, but he didn't stop. His body wrenched the candlestick out of my hands making it go with him as he rammed into Hansen. I only slowed the guy down enough for them to fall right where Hansen stood. The bald guy's blood lay in a dark pool mere inches away from their heads.

The kidnapper was better prepared for it all. A forceful punch to Hansen's side made him cry out in pain. It was where everyone seemed to hit him these days. I ran forward and kicked the man, missing his ribs as he moved, and hitting his hip instead. It sent him shoulder first into the yellow couch where he turned quickly, dark eyes fastened on me. His face looked like a red and blue abstract painting from the last time he'd bumped into Hansen. The guy's hand went to his back, and before I could do anything he pulled out a gun and pointed it at me.

Shit.

I stepped back automatically. Knew this man wouldn't hesitate to shoot if he had to.

A smile formed on his lips at the sight of me.

It was quiet a moment as we all took in the situation, only our heightened breathing breaking the silence.

Then he moved. Got up on his feet and walked toward me. A sheen of sweat covered his tan skin. He'd been running hard up the hill. The look he gave me indicated this could all still be salvaged. Everyone might be dead, but if he could bring me into his employers, all might be forgiven. I could see it in the relief mixed in with his triumphant face. Even despite the bruises. He raised his hand to hit me with the gun, and I braced myself instantly.

"Stop," Hansen shouted.

The kidnapper froze and turned around as Hansen fired his gun. The kidnapper had made the mistake of forgetting him. The sound of the gun startled me at such close range—more than the other ones had. The bullet hit the kidnapper between his shoulder and chest, making his hand go limp, his gun falling to the floor before him. The last thing he did was cling to my leg while bleeding out.

Hansen and I stood in silence watching him for several minutes after it was over. I realized after a while I was drawing deep breaths automatically. The adrenaline leaving my body, I was coming down to a troublesome reality.

So was Hansen, by the look of him. He gazed around the small and trashed den. A once quaint and seventies-looking room with its brown, yellow, and orange colors. Of course, now, red was the dominant color. Hansen stood there, gun still in his hand. Two dead kidnappers and an FBI agent. The smell of gunpowder, blood, and burned clothes encompassing the room. He turned to me with an unusual bland look in his eyes.

“We are so screwed.”

Eleven

“Here,” came Evans’ voice behind me as she handed me a beer and sat down beside me on the stone steps by the front door of the Steep Rock house. I took it and drank automatically while staring at the little worn-down shed across the dirt road that led to the house and ended in front of us.

“I honestly need a stiffer drink than this,” she said, “but it’s all they had.”

I only nodded and took another swig. It didn’t taste half bad. Some imported brand I’d never even heard of. Too bad that would be the last beer to drink in a long while. On this side of the house, the wind we had run through on our way up, wasn’t too bad. It was a slight breeze that felt good after all that had transpired since we came ashore in this damn place. It was turning out to be a nice day. The sun was up. It seemed a peaceful place, really. Until you looked inside the house, that was.

Evans cleared her throat beside me, obviously preparing herself to say something. It was so unlike her it almost made me smile. Almost.

“Have you ever shot anyone before?”

I nodded. “This is the first one that died, though.”

I could see out the corner of my eye that she nodded quickly. “I’m not sorry he died,” she said, “but I am sorry about that...you know?”

“Yeah, I know.”

We sat there a while, drinking our beers, waiting for the inevitable. Having a beer with Evans. After all the weird things that had happened lately, this seemed the most ludicrous. And in a way, perfectly normal.

Normal.

I let go of the unhelpful shed with my eyes and turned a little toward her. “I have a question for you.”

She swallowed a mouthful of beer, “shoot,” then seemed to wince at her poor choice of words.

I didn’t care. “That guy by the beach...the one you...”

“I broke his neck.”

I nodded. With quite an amazing move as well. He might not have died, though, but the downward slope had given her a lot of momentum. He hadn’t had a chance down there.

“That move. That’s something you’ve practiced?”

“Again and again.” She took another swig from the bottle.

“You had your hands behind your back. Not out to the side for balance like you’d expect.”

She shrugged at this. She knew what I was getting at. She had her hands behind her because she practiced it like that. Something to get her out of a tight spot if she was tied up. That was how her life was. As batshit crazy and far from normal as you could get. And her reward? Exile, or prison, most likely. She didn't deserve that for trying to help someone. But still...here we were. No point in postponing it. I finished the beer and put the bottle down with a clink as it hit the stone step. Larkin had returned all my things when he'd decided to help—the poor bastard—and I fished the disassembled cell phone out of my pocket. The pieces had survived through the violence.

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“Mmm,” Evans managed while swallowing the last of her beer. “What are you doing?”

“Calling it in.”

“Why?”

“Why? Because we have five dead bodies here, four which are our responsibility.”

“They had it coming,” she growled, her eyes seemed even darker than usual.

“I’m not arguing with you on that point.” I meant it. I wasn’t even that surprised by it. I felt no sorrow for those men’s deaths.

“Good. Then stop talking gibberish and put the phone down.”

“You know I can’t do that.”

“Oh my God, you’re impossible.” She put down her empty bottle as well and snatched the battery out of my hand, before stuffing it into her jean pocket.

“Damn it, Evans. If you think I won’t...” My voice trailed off as I leaned toward her to take the battery back, and then noticed the bright yellow dishwasher gloves lying next to her. “What are those for?”

“You need to listen to me,” she said, giving me a stern look. “I’ve already called the right people. Help is coming.”

“With what phone? If we’re not using cell phones, that is.”

“The landline, smartass. To a burner phone that’s already been disposed of.”

“Wait...what?” Her words were suddenly starting to get through to me. Was she insane?

She grabbed the gloves and got up. “Just don’t do anything stupid.”

I sat in stunned disbelief as I watched her go inside, pulling the gloves on. This was so beyond my life it took me a few moments to realize what was going on. The right kind of help?

Shit.

I scrambled to my feet and went inside as Evans came back out from the kitchen and headed into the den. She had a few knives, scissors, and a pair of kitchen tongs with her. She pointedly didn’t look at me as she passed me and knelt down beside the kidnapper I had shot.

As she began cutting the man’s t-shirt I knew what she was up to. I wanted to ask her anyway, probably because that’s what you do, but I didn’t. Only watched as she cut open enough of the fabric for it to reveal the bullet wound. This little gaping, dark wound. Darker than the surrounding blood that had poured out of him.

After that, she grabbed a big sharp-looking knife, and then simply sat there. It took me a moment to realize she didn’t want to do this. The woman who’d thrown herself through the air with no hesitation, legs wrapped around a man’s neck so it broke. She was controlling her breathing now. Psyching herself up. Then she nodded decisively to herself, inhaled deeply, and made the first cut. She was going to get that bullet out, despite her aversion to what she was doing.



I felt numb. Stopped thinking about how we'd had different outcomes in sight for this mess. I walked into the kitchen with calm steps, found an unopened packet with a pair of dishwasher gloves by the sink, and grabbed them. Then I walked back and knelt down on the other side of the body as I pulled the gloves on. She looked at me with surprise, but it didn't last long. Instead, she kept at it, as I helped, trying to give her room to get the bullet. At least it made it easier for her than using the kitchen tongs. She tried to cut her way straight in at first, but the bullet had entered at an angle lodging itself under the clavicle bone. It must have nicked an artery at some point. He'd died fast as blood gushed out of him.

At some point during this horror, I heard cars approaching. As this didn't seem to bother Evans, I remained where I was.

"Pull this aside," she said, her voice low, unusually weak.

I did not want to know what I was pulling aside, but as I did it I saw the damn bullet in there, wrapped in blood and tissue.

Voices interrupted the silence of the house. I saw several people enter the hallway, the large frame of Gerard first. So, she'd called her Community. I could see Rob following him, as well as Gary from the auto shop and his mechanic Alan. Two other men and two women I had not seen before also followed in behind the big man. They all stared at us a moment—me, for the most part, I guess. When they realized what we were doing, they didn't seem to care.

Evans was concentrating on getting the bullet out, the gloves a couple of sizes too big for her. There was no point in us switching, though. My hands were too big to twist under the bone and into the little opening.

"Okay, guys. Spread out," Gerard began. "Which rooms, Maggie?" he added, though sounding like he didn't want to disturb her.

“Mostly here and the hallway, barely in the kitchen and the basement. Entrance outside,” she managed, breathing hard.

I hardly noticed as they dispersed, getting equipment from their cars and coming back in.

“I got it,” Evans finally said. “Wait...something else.” She strained her arm and then exhaled as she pulled out her hand, the once yellow glove, bright red up to the wrist now. She looked at the bullet and then sighed. “That was lucky.”

“What was?”

She handed me the bloody piece of metal, and as I looked, it turned out there were two pieces. A small fragment had been knocked off, probably from hitting bone. I looked at it in silence a moment. This was a fucking nightmare. Yet, I glanced up and saw her dark eyes watching me, and simply said, “thank you.”

How on earth were we going to explain this? I watched in numb silence as Gerard and his people went to work on the place. Wiping every surface we had been in contact with, removing every object we had touched that could be removed. Other than answering their questions when asked about this, I said nothing. Too stunned by it all. The efficiency shocked me. They had done this before, but it couldn't be often. I had never come across a crime scene where parts of it was wiped down like this. They left the bodies undisturbed, minus mine and Evans' little operation of course. Since Larkin and the bald man had shot each other, there seemed no point in hiding it. They were thorough and efficient. Still, I began worrying about the landlord. This was a short-term lease, after all. They could show up any time simply to be social.

“We've got it handled,” Gerard said when I asked. “It's Mrs. Latimer, out by Greenoak, who owns this place. She's got two flats today, and someone is watching her place.”

So, the woman wouldn't be able to drive anywhere. Too far to walk here from Greenoak.

“Yeah, she called me a couple of hours ago,” Gary chipped in from wiping the kitchen sink with bleach. “Said I'd send someone over soon as I've got time.” He

snickered at this as he kept on with his task.

“Listen,” Gerard said, taking pity on me. “We can finish up here. As soon as Maggie gets back, I think you should leave.” He led me out of the house while saying this. “You can take Alan’s car, and he’ll take the boat back.”

I found myself nodding silently as the car key was put in my hand.

Gerard went back inside and left me alone. I didn’t have to wait long before I saw Evans and Rob emerge over by the cliff. They must have left the other two guys I didn’t know down by the kidnapper with the broken neck. Evans and Rob stopped a moment and embraced each other for a long time. She would never have done that in the house, not in front of the others. This had to have taken its toll on her as well. And yet, as I stood there feeling completely lost in a madness I had never experienced before, I found myself wanting nothing more than to trade places with the guy. I sighed, and went and sat down on the steps again, waiting for them. I noticed the beer bottles were gone now. I felt no worry for a future blackmail incident. It was clear to me this was an ‘all-guilty’ kind of operation. They were all committing a crime together and keeping each other safe that way. Still, I had learned by now that the real reason was to help each other when things got out of hand. When those in the dark didn’t understand.

So screwed.

I sighed and shook my head, before looking up and seeing Evans and Rob rounding the corner of the house.

“Everything all right?” I noticed Rob’s wary eyes on me, and realized the last time he’d seen me was when I had tried to arrest him. Shit. I didn’t have the energy to deal with that now.

“They’ll take care of it,” Evans said, and somehow, I didn’t doubt it.

She didn’t argue when I told her Gerard had said we should leave. She looked tired and ready to be anywhere else. We had failed Andrea. This place was not a good place to be. In that, we agreed fully.

“Do you want me to go with you?” Rob asked her, but she shook her head and squeezed his arm gently.

“I am starving, and there’s nothing I want more than that shrimp and pasta thing you make, but there’s someone Detective Hansen and I need to talk to right away.”

I was about to blurt out “who?” but luckily refrained from it. I knew after a moment’s thought, as Rob asked her—the other people we had let down.

Andrea’s parents.

Twelve

As Hansen unlocked the door, Kona came with a joyous greeting. This time I was expecting it. My frame of mind calmed her down instantly as she knew something was wrong. The smell of blood on our clothes made her shy away a moment before she changed her mind and came back. Like last time, I simply sat down in front of her and this time I hugged her. Hugged the dog like a sad sack. Which is exactly what I was. I heard Hansen sit down on the floor behind me. He was in no better shape. The meeting with Mr. and Mrs. Kirby had been gut-wrenching. They had confirmation their daughter was dead. They blamed Yorov. Not us. That had almost been the worst. Thanking us for trying.

Trying wasn’t good enough.

Kona whimpered by my ear, making me release her. “I’m sorry, girl. You’re picking up on our bad moods, aren’t you?” As I switched to scratching her behind her ears, her tail started wagging back and forth on the floor like a fan. I glanced back at Hansen, who sat leaning on the door, eyes raised to the ceiling. Seemed he was looking to see if something helpful was written there. By the look of him, there wasn’t. Disheveled and tired was a kind description. Our clothes needed to be burned, and soon. The bloodstains alone would tie us to Steep Rock. He also had five burn marks on his jeans, and five on his right jacket sleeve. At least the bald man hadn’t incapacitated him this time around.

“I hated that.” Hansen’s voice jolted me back, but of course, he could see me even if he wasn’t looking right at me. “They thanked us.”

“I know.”

“Thanked us for doing nothing...”

“I know.”

“Damn it.” He shook his head, got up, and headed for the kitchen.

I looked at Kona, whose big eyes stared back at me. No judgment there. Her owner being pissed off and feeling awful about the Kirbys’ way of understanding what had happened, was one thing. His calmness about how Gerard and the others had stepped in to handle Steep Rock, was another. He seemed onboard. But he had also seemed somewhat shocked. Understandable, of course. Gerard had likely picked up on all of this, but he hadn’t said anything. He didn’t have to, did he? I knew Hansen well enough by now to know he still might tell the other cops everything. That was why I was still here and not back to help Gerard and the others. I needed to make sure.

I mentally shook away the image of the Kirbys sitting on their pristine couch, crying

in each other's arms, Mrs. Kirby holding her daughter's locket.

I did as Hansen and got up. Kona sniffed at my feet and then walked ahead of me into the kitchen. I still had sand in my shoes from earlier that morning. Walking into the kitchen I felt like a hundred years. I ached all over but knew I was fine, considering. My headache had vanished with Larkin's painkillers, but exhaustion was beginning to set in now. With no immediate threat, that was usually how it went.

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Hansen was rummaging through cabinets, gathering things. I sat on one of the counter stools and grabbed a napkin before taking the nearest apple that lay in a bowl on the kitchen island. Didn't even care that I was being rude.

"What are you doing?" I asked after a little while.

"Making something to eat. You said you were starving."

I swallowed the piece of apple in my mouth and put the rest of it down already half eaten. I was starving. One beer and half of Alan's energy bar hadn't done much for me.

"When they're done, they'll make an anonymous call to the police," I said, watching him carefully. I couldn't see his face as his back was turned to me, but I could see the slightest tension in his shoulders.

"I know."

"The Kirbys will handle it on their end."

"I know."

"And we need to burn these clothes."

He stopped what he was doing and sighed before moving over to the refrigerator. There was an ocean of vegetables on the counter making me wonder what else he needed. He glanced at me as he found some beef, and he didn't look particularly



happy with me. That wasn't new, though.

"What is it you want, Evans?"

I got as far as opening my mouth to say something, but he wasn't finished.

"Because I think digging bullets out of dead bodies to avoid ballistics and otherwise cleaning up a crime scene should just about cover my silence, don't you?"

"I just—"

"Need to read my mind to be certain?"

Get the fuck out of my head. I flinched at the memory. Apparently, it didn't go by unnoticed.

"Sorry." His voice managed to sound both contrite and pissed off at the same time.

I didn't respond. Merely watched him open the packet, his movements quick and angry. That I couldn't begrudge him. He was entitled to that anger and frustration. His life had been turned upside-down quickly. This wasn't how he did things. I had to remember that. Yet he had helped—and it seemed he was going to keep his mouth shut.

I pursed my lips. "Do you need any help?"

"You don't cook."

I rolled my eyes and got off the counter stool. "Doesn't mean I can't." That was a lie, and he seemed to know it by the look of his doubtful eyes as I came around the island.

“What?” I said as I stubbornly washed my hands of dirt in the kitchen sink. I didn’t even flinch at having held the apple with only a napkin before. I was too hungry.

“Fine.” He gave in as I stretched my clean hands toward him. “Can you chop an onion?” He held a large yellow specimen out at me, knife in the other hand.

I narrowed my eyes at him, but took the proffered food and tool and brought it over to the island where I found a wooden cutting board.

“Of course I can,” I said. “You may think I’m a fool, but I’m not an idiot.”

I heard him stop whatever he was doing behind me. “I don’t think I’ve ever called you a fool.” He sounded a little astounded.

I gave a snort of derision and cut the onion in two, one half flopping sideways next to my hand. The strong sharp smell of it instantly wafted up. “Listen, I know you’ve hated me a while, and today hasn’t exactly improved your view, but don’t take it out on the Community just because I piss you off.” I didn’t really know why this was coming out of me now, but it had been a long time coming. The potential problems he could cause only to spite me were substantial.

He didn’t answer me. Instead, he remained quiet a while.

“Is that what you think?”

I heard him put something down on the counter next to the fridge before he walked over and stood right behind me. He placed his hands on the counter top on either side of me. Suddenly, my heart was beating faster. I resolutely chopped the ends off one of the onion halves, peeling the outer layers off.

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“I never hated you,” he said, his voice relaxed, a little surprised maybe. I felt a shiver as he touched my hair, brushing it behind my ear. “I’ll admit I didn’t like you much. I knew something was up. I suspected you of lies, crimes...” He spoke next to my ear, his voice soft. I had to blink hard, and not because of the onion. This had shifted fast. Seemed he was tired of arguing. When his lips lightly brushed my neck, I gasped, almost quietly.

“I’m man enough to admit when I’m wrong,” he said, moving on to kisses now, “of course, I wasn’t completely, though, was I?”

“No,” I agreed. But I hadn’t done anything wrong for the reasons he’d thought. “You weren’t completely wrong.” I noticed I had started chopping the onion, looking at it from an odd angle as I arched my neck for his kisses, half-closing my eyes. “But you were wrong,” I added, feeling his breath on my neck as he chuckled at my comment. He moved to the back of my neck, giving me a gentle nip that shocked me into a soft whimper. Damn it. That wasn’t like me at all. I decided to put down the knife before cutting off a finger. I grabbed the edge of the island myself as he moved on to my left side, his hand brushing aside my hair again, finding the right spot behind my ear. His lips were warm, the kiss teasing and tickling, giving me shivers, as he moved on to my earlobe. I could feel my breathing intensify without my control, my body starting to move back toward him without my say-so.

“Actually,” I said, struggling a little to keep my voice steady. “You’ve been doing some wrong things yourself lately.”

“That’s what happens when you keep bad company,” he said, working his way down the side of my neck. He let go of the island, pushing up against me, keeping me stuck

between him and it. “And, apparently,” he continued, “I’m very impressionable.” He put his right arm around my waist, holding me tight. His other hand moved up, cupping, caressing gently, slowly.

I gave a moan then, not even caring anymore as I leaned my head back against him. He kept me pinned to the island by way of his large, hard body.

“How is it we seem to end up like this every time we’re alone?” I whispered. It took less effort than using my voice at this point.

“People aren’t that complicated,” he said. I could feel him shrug at the answer. “Boy pulling girl’s braid.”

I thought about our first night together, a surge of anticipation running through me. If that had been his subconscious telling us both he was interested, then I wouldn’t mind him yanking the braid to make his point.

I let go of the island-edge, taking hold of his right hand as he simultaneously released me, leading me to the bedroom. The room was halfway draped in shadows as the thick curtains were drawn and light only came in via the door. He put a hand on my back, pulling me closer, kissing me, both of us sinking into it.

“You know we’re filthy, bloody, and have sand in our shoes?” I murmured onto his lips.

“That, we can fix,” he said and led me into the adjacent bathroom. The light was brighter in there, but as he turned on the shower, I found I didn’t care. At this point, we both looked like crap, and we both knew why. Instead, I quickly returned to his arms as he came back, finding his lips again.

We stood like that, undressing each other slowly, no ferocity in our movements. The

desperate intensity fueled with pride and anger we'd shared before, not there this time. It was different, and the unfamiliarity of it exciting. Our filthy and incriminating clothes fell on the floor, our bruised and battered bodies emerging. I ran my hand over his left ribs, not able to trace the five burn marks anymore as the area was covered in bruises. The burn marks were, however, present on his right arm and calf. I raised my hand and ran my fingers through his hair, it took me one attempt to find the cut he'd gotten from the gun that had smacked into him.

I didn't look any better—my shins were covered in bruises, my shoulders and back as well. He pulled me closer, his hands brushing over my back, a light, gentle touch. We were a fine mess, the both of us. We also needed to not be alone. To comfort each other, forget what had happened for a little while.

The warm water felt soothing on our sore and tired bodies as we stepped into the shower. The calm that had befallen us remained. The kisses soft, the light touches to avoid hurting each other. We simply lathered each other in soap and shampoo, exploring like we had not before, not even when I'd had him at my mercy. We even managed to get out of the shower, despite how ready we both were by that point. Soft towels felt comfortable against my skin, but I quickly shucked it. Grabbing hold of him and pumping him as he was busy drying water out of my hair. He groaned at my touch, a deep husky sound, dropped the towel, and grabbed my wet hair, pulling me in for a kiss. Deeper and more intense now, his tongue parting my lips, a teasing slide.

"It's the bed or this floor," I gasped into his mouth. He glanced down at our discarded clothes and thought better of it. Instead, he began leading me toward the door and lifted me by taking hold of my thighs, and carried me like that into the bedroom.

As he lay me down on the bed, the cool sheets welcoming me, I felt less in control than the other times with him, but no less wanted. I caught him looking up at me as he caused the familiar and aching shivers that made my body impossible to keep still.

When he finally placed his weight over me, it was a relief as I locked my legs around him, keeping him close, always moving with him.

Afterwards, as we lay entwined, able to feel each other's rumbling pulses, I thought I heard him say: "I never hated you," still with a touch of surprise at the thought in his voice.

\* \* \*

I awoke slowly, taking my time emerging from sleep. I gave a deep sigh of contentment and became aware that he was stroking my hair. Slow and light motions, brushing it back from my face. We lay on our sides, face to face, or rather, me, face to his chest, close together. Comfortable.

Bright daylight seeping past the curtains told me it had to be morning, and what little I could see except him told me I was in a white room. Not many colors here, unlike the rest of his place. I didn't want to move to check it out. Instead, I ran my hand from his hip up to his shoulder, a light touch over his bruises, feeling the relaxed body next to me.

"Morning," he said as he realized I was properly awake.

I smiled lazily. "I could do with waking up like this more often."

"Hungry?" he asked. "We never got to dinner."

"Mmhmm," I said, moving my hand down under the covers, finding him well on his way already as I took hold of him. "Very hungry," I teased, leaning forward and kissing his chest as I felt him move in my hand. I really was, though, but luckily my stomach did not choose that moment to start growling.

His hand dug into my hair as he audibly drew breath at my caresses.

“Nate? Are you still here? Oh dear Lord!” an unfamiliar voice rudely interrupted.

I looked back toward the door then, and saw a middle-aged, lean and still pretty-looking woman, standing next to Kona. She was staring at us in what looked like shock. Shock is also what seemed to be running through the now tense body next to me.

“Mrs. Gaines?” he blurted.

“I...I came to get Kona,” she said. “I wasn’t aware you’d be home...this late.”

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We might have been covered from the waist down, but it was pretty clear where my hand was placed. All three of us stared a moment, everyone trying to catch up with the situation. I noticed his arm twitching as if to cover my breasts but then he stopped himself. It was likely worse to touch them in front of her. “I saw the food in the kitchen,” the woman continued. “Kona seems to have eaten some meat...”

So, we would be having vegetarian dinner for breakfast then I guessed. Then I realized the woman also saw our bruises. What kind of activities she thought we were up to in bed had to confuse the hell out of her. I had to bite my cheek not to laugh.

“Nice to meet you, Mrs. Gaines,” I said smiling, not letting go under the covers despite his subtle efforts to pull back.

“Yes,” she answered, looking with uncertainty at me. Honestly, if she was a Mrs., she shouldn’t be this shocked. “Nice to meet you, too. Perhaps we can meet at a more...clothed time,” she said, looking at the dog and getting the hell out of there, Kona in tow.

“Oh, for crying out loud,” he exclaimed sinking back down on the bed, looking at the ceiling with despair in his eyes. Then he eased up on an elbow. “I should go after her and apologize.”

“Really?” I gave a gentle squeeze, making his eyes widen before pulling me closer, any thoughts of apologies already forgotten. “Anyway,” I added, “you can blame it on Kona. She really is a bad watchdog.”



“Don’t worry about it,” Evans said as we exited Alan’s car, the only vehicle we had at our disposal.

I groaned at the memory, which only made her smile wider. “She looked like a deer caught in headlights.”

“Well, she’s the one who wandered into someone else’s bedroom.” Evans walked quickly between the cars in the parking garage, heading for the door to lead us out of there and up to the hospital. Actually, that was understandable. My kitchen was never that messy, and I was rarely at home at nine AM. Mrs. Gaines had access to my apartment on account of Kona, but still...it was so embarrassing. Not to Evans, of course. She had laughed it off. She’d done the same when we’d realized she didn’t have any clothes as well. She’d looked hilarious in oversized sweats, with a belt, and a shirt. After having swung by her place, though, she looked herself again—black pants and a woman’s blazer, a black shirt with a floral pattern...deep red lipstick. I didn’t know what came over me the night before, but now I couldn’t quite keep from stealing glances at her.

“Is meeting Mulligan really necessary?” Evans asked for the umpteenth time that morning as a pair of elevator doors opened for us. She stepped in beside me, and in the cramped space, I could smell my shampoo on her hair. Weird, yet oddly intoxicating.

“Yes,” I simply said, not bothering to explain any further. She was repeating the question hoping for a different answer. Mulligan had called while we ate breakfast—wolfed it down, actually—telling me McAllen was awake, and that they had found Andrea. At that point, I had been glad she couldn’t see my face. I realized from our brief conversation that she had no inkling we had been at Steep Rock, but Andrea being found also meant something else. My leeway was no more. There was no point in investigating Evans. Mulligan still wanted a debrief, though. Evans, of course, didn’t want to go to the police station. I didn’t think that had anything to do with

Steep Rock. That was just Evans.

“Let’s stick to what we agreed,” I told her as the doors opened again, releasing us from the awful music that was supposed to be calming.

“Fine,” she said, not for the first time, either. She rounded the nearest corner and walked straight into Detective Kaye, almost making her drop her notepad.

“Oh, hi, Maggie,” she managed despite being startled. I noticed her eyes briefly fly between us and immediately knew Maureen had not kept her mouth shut. I would likely take some jabs for this later—I had been vocal about not liking Evans very much—but I didn’t have the time now.

“You seen Bill yet?” I asked Kaye.

“Yeah, just finished.”

“How is he?”

“Not too bad, considering,” Kaye said as she shut the notepad and put it in her jacket pocket. “He confirmed everything you said, Nate.”

“Yeah, well...”

“At least you can go visit him with no issues now.”

I nodded.

“Anyway, I’m on my way out. We found Andrea Kirby yesterday.”

“Really?”

“That case has been all over the papers,” Evans broke in. “Is she okay?”

As Kaye turned to look at her, I did the same. Evans looked mildly interested. A natural question to ask.

Kaye shook her head. “Kidnappers killed her, unfortunately. I’m amazed they kept her alive the whole week. Dr. Ellis says there’s no sign of sexual assault.” She shook her head, clearly at a loss as to what the kidnappers had been after. “Anyway, it’s totally messed up.”

“What?” I managed.

Kaye looked at Evans and pursed her lips in thought. The issue wasn’t lost on the latter, though. Kaye couldn’t share all the information with a civilian.

“I’ll get some lovely hospital coffee, shall I? Talking to the both of you at once makes me feel like a munchkin anyway.”

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“From up here you look more like a flying monkey,” Kaye teased, making her laugh as she left us alone and disappeared between busy nurses and doctors.

“You know,” Kaye began with a smile, “I heard—”

“Yeah, yeah, mock me later, Mel. What couldn’t you say in front of her?” I was curious about their progress at Steep Rock at the same time as not wanting to hear a damn word about it. That wasn’t an option, though. It wouldn’t be like me not to be interested. It all made me feel like shit.

“It’s weird. I’ve never seen anything like it.” She placed her hands on her hips and waited until a nurse close by had passed us. “We got an anonymous call about a house out past Finley Hill. A place called Steep Rock. Nobody lives there on a permanent basis. Turns out the kidnappers had rented it. Can you believe that?”

“Didn’t they break into the Kreutz farm?”

“They did.”

“Why didn’t they leave the county?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” she waved her hand to the side before placing it on her hip again.

That statement was so wrong I didn’t know what to say.

“Anyway. They were all dead when we got there, but that’s not even the weird part.”

I raised an eyebrow at that.

“That uptight FBI agent? You didn’t see much of him, I guess. Well, he was there, too. Dead.”

“A dead FBI agent? This place will be swarming with them soon then.”

“Don’t think so. We notified them. They’re sending someone, but didn’t seem all that interested.” That meant Evans had to stay hidden from whoever the Bureau sent.

“And,” Kaye pressed on before I could say anything. “The scene has been tampered with.”

“How?”

“Parts of it are cleaned thoroughly. So far, no prints or anything. I think Larkin brought someone with him. There’s even a bullet that’s missing from one of the bodies. Someone went to great trouble to make sure we can’t trace them.”

“Seems like it, yeah.” I was suddenly grateful neither I nor Evans had any visible marks on us while clothed. I had some scrapes on my right knuckles after the last week, but kept the cuff of my jacket over them.

“Whatever happened out there seems awfully shady. We’re still at it, though. Rick’s there now, I only came in to talk to Bill.”

“Well, I shouldn’t keep you.”

“Yeah,” she tried hard not to smile, “you should get back to—”

“Later, Mel.”

I heard her snicker behind me as she got on the elevator. I headed for McAllen's room, trying not to think about what Kaye had told me. Trying not to feel relief because Gerard and his companions' work seemed to pan out.

As for McAllen, I was lucky. As I was allowed in by a nurse and rounded the last corner, I saw both the Gomez clan and the McAllen offspring head down the hallway. Time for food, likely. With my mood as it was, I was glad not to have to deal with too many people. As I entered the room with a quick knock on the open door, I was greeted with smiles by both Rosita and her now awake husband. He looked awful, but still much better than the last time I'd seen him. Rosita looked exhausted but radiant. It must have been a relief to finally have him wake up.

"If you need a break, I can sit a while," I told her and indicated the direction of the rest of her family with my head. "They haven't gotten far."

At her husband's insistence, she got up to leave and find some food. "I heard they found the kidnapped woman dead," she said to me as she reached the door.

I nodded as she placed a supporting hand on my shoulder.

"I'm so sorry, Nate."

I walked over and sat in one of the chairs, facing the door. "Way to scare the crap out of people, Bill."

He tried raising his shoulders but winced in pain instead. "If you had crapped your pants in that alley, that's the first thing Mel would have said when she came in here earlier."

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“True. What are the doctors saying?”

“They expect a full recovery. I should be up and taking complaints about cats in no time.”

That actually made me laugh, remembering Mr. Withers and his cat. The fact that what he had claimed was actually true, was just too much. “I’m sorry,” I said and waved my hand in front of my face as a nurse in flowery scrubs came in to check on the machinery still hooked up to McAllen.

“You in a fight or something?” he asked, looking at my hand.

“This? It’s nothing. First on scene after a car crash a couple of days ago. Scraped my hand going down a slope.” I was surprised at how quick that lie came.

“Huh. Well, I heard a lot of things have been going on while I’ve been here.”

“Yeah. I just talked to Mel—”

“Hey,” Evans’ voice interrupted as she appeared in the doorway, two cups of coffee in her hands.

“That’s what I heard about,” McAllen said, smiling knowingly.

Damn Mel.

“Coffee for me?” McAllen asked Evans.

“Anything you want,” she said, flashing him a big smile. “Can he have coffee?” she added to the nurse who passed her in the doorway. She shook her head silently, turned and gave McAllen a stern look to make this clear, and left.

“Oh well,” Evans said. “Maybe this once, Mr. Grouchy can have it instead.”

Fourteen

“Okay then. Thanks, Gus,” Hansen said and ended the call as he got into the driver’s seat of Alan’s car.

I had to think a moment before I realized who he was talking to. “Officer Routledge?”

Hansen nodded as he started the car. “Needed some information. We’re going to see someone.”

“Mulligan?”

“Afterwards.”

I huffed and sank down in the seat. There had been too many close calls with the police lately. I didn’t want to talk to any of them in a while. I glanced at Hansen and decided that didn’t pertain to all of them. By my estimation we’d slept for ten or eleven hours last night, going to bed in the late afternoon, but as we drove through Ashport, I half-dozed off anyway.

As the car stopped, I jerked awake, looking around in confusion. “The harbor? Why are we here?”

“Because, according to Gus, this is where we’re most likely to find your friend Eddie Hays.”



“What?” I sat up properly at that comment. Was he after Eddie now? Then I noticed that Hansen actually looked...well, nice. No suspicious face. His light blue eyes mild as he watched me.

“After something like this, my guess is Yorov and that little corner of the FBI that’s after you, think you’ve left Ashport,” he said. At the same time, Eddie made himself known by exiting the Harbor Grill and Bar. He looked shabby as ever, walking in the opposite direction of where we were, but so slow it wouldn’t be a hassle to catch up.

I suddenly felt nervous. I had forgotten about the new identity. Had pushed the thought away the moment Larkin had agreed to help—when I thought I’d have to go with him.

I didn’t want to leave Ashport. I was so tired of leaving.

I looked over at Hansen in utter bewilderment. Was he still that keen to get rid of me? Boy, had I misjudged things. Silly me.

“No one in their right mind will believe you’ve stayed,” he clarified.

“Oh,” was all I could manage as the realization hit me. I couldn’t help but smile at him.

“So,” he continued, a smile breaking out on his lips as well. “What name do you want to use now?”