



Grave Secrets

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Category: Romance, Paranormal, Horror

Description: Two Disappearances, One Deadly Connection.

In Philadelphia, Gavin's sister Cate goes missing, and her disappearance is linked to an enigmatic sorority invite. Gavin's search for clues takes him to Ricketts Glen State Park, where Park Ranger Samantha is investigating her own family tragedy—the unsolved disappearance of her uncle. As they piece together a complex puzzle, they unearth connections that lead them to a shadowy society operating in the area. Together, along with Gavin's brother Grayson, they find themselves entangled in a web of deceit and danger.

As threats multiply, they're forced into a deadly showdown with a clandestine organization, willing to protect its secrets at any cost. In this landscape of breathtaking beauty, alliances are tested, bonds are formed, and justice is sought. "Grave Secrets" is a story of courage, love, and twisted minds, that'll keep you on the edge of your seat.

Total Pages (Source): 79

Chapter One

Vacation couldn't come soon enough. At four o'clock, Gavin would be free for two full weeks. He planned to visit a friend in Northeastern Pennsylvania before heading to Philadelphia to see his baby sister.

He lifted his mug to his lips and fought the urge to spit out the lukewarm coffee. He'd just finished his tenth phone call in less than an hour. It seemed every one of the bodyguards in his employ was having some kind of crisis. Grace's teenage charge, Victoria Mae, had slipped her security detail, and Brandon was dealing with a cantankerous old man who treated him like an errand boy. A frown formed as he mulled over his conversation with Kenneth. Gavin's sister Cate informed him that she'd call the police if he didn't stop following her around. The text she'd followed up with confirmed the threat though he doubted she'd follow through. He'd reassigned Kenneth to help Grace in her quest to locate her charge. Then he'd called Scott and assigned him to Cate instructing him to be discreet so she wouldn't know he was there.

Juggling personnel wasn't his favorite part of the job. He preferred to be hands on working in the field.

He spun his chair to look out over the city. If it had been up to him alone, he would've chosen to live somewhere less populated where the air was clean and the people friendlier, but Grayson chose New York City for their headquarters while Gavin had been serving overseas. Gavin took the path of least resistance and went along with his brother's plans. But there were days when he thought he'd go mad living a stuffy life in an office and spending his weeknights locked inside a penthouse

suite. Fresh air was non-existent in his so-called life of luxury.

On rare occasions, he took cases himself instead of assigning them to capable security agents simply to get out of the office. But most times the real reason he took on a job personally had more to do with a client request. And then there were friends or family members. He refused to entrust their security to anyone else. He'd learned the hard way what could happen when he made a poor choice. Not very long ago, he'd taken a job protecting his best friend's girlfriend, Emily. His gut clenched at the memory of the case where he'd failed Sandra.

His assistant's voice came through the intercom. "Cate's on line three."

"Thanks, Ben."

"Cate, to what do I owe the pleasure of a phone call?"

"You know why I'm calling. Is there a reason you're having me tailed by some goon?"

"Kenneth is not a goon."

"Any grown man who goes by Kenneth instead of Ken is a goon, but avoiding the question is not going to deter me"

"Just wanted to make sure you stayed safe. I know U of P is a great school, but it's a dangerous city. Kenneth was there to protect you."

"He was here to make sure I didn't go to parties or spend time with guys."

"That's not true, but you should be focusing on your studies anyway."

“I have a father. I don’t need my brother to act like him.”

“That’s not going to change, so deal with it.”

“Did you call him off?”

“I reassigned Kenneth.” He wouldn’t mention that Scott would be close if she needed him. It would just raise her ire. “I’m sure Grayson isn’t going to be thrilled to hear you’re refusing your security detail.”

“I should’ve known he was in on it.” She sighed. “I’ll stay safe.”

“Make sure you do.” Philadelphia was teeming with riots, and the anti law-enforcement sentiment was pervasive which made it harder for the cops to step in when called upon. Being the daughter of a billionaire put a target on her back, so it made zero sense that she’d refuse protection. “I’m going to stop to visit Wade and Emily before heading down to Philly to see you.”

“No mission trip?” she asked.

“Not this year.”

Sam adjusted the strap on her backpack and drew in a breath of crisp, cool air. The snow covered trees lining the road added a quiet beauty to the landscape. In another month, it would be bustling with tourists, and she’d be too busy to take the time to take in the beauty of her surroundings.

Her phone dinged with a text message.

Emily: You off tomorrow?

Sam: I am.

Emily: Hike at Hickory?

Sam: Sounds like a plan. Pick you up at your place?

Emily: Come to Wade's house. My mom is staying in his guest room.

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Sam: Shouldn't you be there with her?

Emily: I could use a break from wedding planning.

Sam: What time?

Emily: How's ten?

Sam: Kind of late in the day to start a hike.

Emily: I know, but I've got to make sure my mom is fed before I skip out on her.

Sam: 10:00 a.m. tomorrow at Wade's house. See you then.

Sam stuffed the phone back in her pocket and frowned. Emily was so busy with her wedding, she rarely had time for hikes anymore. When Emily reconnected with her high school sweetheart, it felt like Sam lost her best friend. Maybe after the wedding things would return to normal. Or better yet, she'd meet someone to share her own life. Doubtful, but hope was all she had.

Her radio crackled to life. Dispatch letting them know about another drone call near the northwestern corner of the park. The flying machines were a nuisance. Flown by visitors who either didn't know the rules prohibiting them or simply didn't care. She tossed her backpack on the passenger seat and set off down past the park office and out to Route 487. She parked along the side of the road and hiked down a little to investigate the reported disturbance. Twenty-five minutes later, she approached posted signs along the fence of a private property that bordered the park. The fence

had a few places that appeared to be in disrepair and on the verge of collapse. A person could kick it down, which meant a bear could easily tear through it. If she remembered correctly, it was the property that housed the Ricketts Estate. The building and property had a storied history. Much mystery and intrigue surrounded the place, but she dismissed it as nothing more than the unwarranted rumors that often surrounded historical buildings, but she would love to explore the place sometime.

She still hadn't encountered the expected drone, but voices carried on the wind.

"...too risky...has to be the last one."

"No choice... must protect..."

Sounded ominous, but it wasn't park business. She dug her binoculars from her bag and aimed them in the direction of the voices. On the wide front porch of the historic manor house stood a large man with his huge arms crossed over his chest staring at another guy leaning against the porch railing.

A buzzing overhead reminded her what she was there for. Work awaited. She focused on the drone and tried to make out any markings that might identify its owner. Nothing. The drone flew over the bordering estate. Could it belong to them or was spying on them? Her overactive imagination getting the better of her. It was off state property, so it wasn't her problem now.

Mason waved away the spicy aroma from the nearby food trucks. The very concept struck him as inherently plebeian. They required a certain entrepreneurial spirit which he could admire, but there could be no culinary significance in the fare produced in a mobile kitchen.

He turned his attention to the magnificent structure standing before him. It was an

impressive blend of Victorian and Gothic architecture that had captivated the imagination of students for more than one hundred and thirty years. He watched as Cate Garrison disappeared into the Fisher Fine Arts Library.

More than a decade earlier, he'd attempted to recruit her brother, Grayson, but he'd been skeptical and resistant. They hadn't bothered with Gavin. The boy seemed determined to get himself killed with the Army, so wooing him seemed a waste of time. He'd met Cate on several occasions. She was a good girl. Not hard-edged like her brothers. Perhaps a touch naive. He had no doubt that she'd recognize an exclusive opportunity when the offer came. A glance at his watch assured him that Miss Garrison would receive her invitation any minute now. If she had the sense of a fruit fly, she'd accept without hesitation, but he had a backup plan in place in case she failed to be intrigued.

His phone buzzed with confirmation. She'd received her letter. An invite to pledge the Zeta Gamma Xi sorority. Pledging a sorority was commonplace activity. It wouldn't raise any eyebrows. Yet, they were offering Cate the opportunity to make a real difference in the world. All of their members were wealthy and influential, but none compared to the wealth of the Garrison family. With access to their resources and connections, they'd be unstoppable.

Chapter Two

Gavin admired the snowdusted mountains as he cruised down the Pennsylvania Turnpike. The day before the mercury hit sixty-five in New York, but overnight the temperature had dipped into the low thirties. He took exit 95 and headed toward Lake Harmony. When he reached Lake Drive, he slowed his Range Rover and pulled into Wade's driveway, parked, and slipped from the vehicle. The wind whipped through his lightweight jacket, and he pulled his ball cap lower on his head to keep it secure. Before he could ring the bell, the door swung open to reveal Emily and Ruger. Gavin bent down to greet his former battle buddy. The German Shepherd nuzzled his neck

in return.

Emily smiled. “Wade’s in his man-cave. Sam and I are going hiking in a bit.”

“Thanks. I’ll head downstairs.”

Gavin descended the stairs into the newly renovated basement. He admired the understated elegance of Wade’s sanctuary. A large wooden desk stood in one corner. It held a laptop and stack of books, including Wade’s large study Bible which was lay open. The walls were a taupe color that complemented the dark wood of the floors. Just past Wade’s office area was a rec room of sorts with a pool table and a dart board.

“It’s about time you show up.” Wade handed him a pool cue.

“I’m right on time.”

“If you’re not early you’re late. I would think you’d have that down pat since it was drilled into us in boot camp.”

“I wasn’t expecting the snow.”

“Spring in the northern part of the Mid-Atlantic region. Predictably unpredictable.”

“Aren’t you just full of wisdom this morning?” Gavin’s voice dripped with sarcasm.

“Let’s play. I need a distraction.”

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“Why? What’s up?”

“Emily’s parents are staying in my guest room to help plan the wedding.”

“Oh.”

“Her mother has strong opinions that clash with what Emily wants. Her dad and I have been hiding down here most of the time.”

“Where is he now?”

“His wife drug him off to the country club where Ty and Jamie were married.” A stricken look crossed Wade’s face.

Gavin squeezed his shoulder. “I’m sorry. I imagine you’d prefer to get married anywhere else.”

“True, but my memories of Jamie’s wedding are good.”

“I’m sure you don’t want to remember everything that came afterward.”

“Right you are.”

“Where does Emily want to get married?”

“She wants to get married at our church.”

“I would’ve expected her to want an outdoor wedding.”

“I can see why. She’s definitely the outdoorsy type, but getting married in our church is important to her. I wish she’d tell her mother how she feels and stop letting her dictate everything. Somehow, she has it in her mind that to honor her father and mother means to follow their wishes for our wedding.”

“I’m sure you’ll get that straightened out.”

“Sure hope so.” Wade released a breath. “I don’t want to be selfish either, but our wedding day should be about us, not her parents.”

“I get that.” Gavin took his turn sinking several balls before missing a shot.

“What have you been up to?” Wade asked.

“Not much. Same old same.”

Gavin turned at the sound of footsteps on the stairs. Emily and her friend, Samantha, appeared.

“We’re getting ready to go for our hike and thought you two might want to join us.”

He raised an eyebrow at his friend. A hike might be nice. It was an excuse to get out in nature.

“Sure. Why not?” Wade said.

Samantha twirled a long strand of hair around her finger. She was beautiful, but he wasn’t quite sure what to make of her. When he’d met her the last time, he’d thought she was a shallow flirt, and he couldn’t stand women like that. Yet, she was a law-

enforcement park ranger, and enjoyed spending time outdoors even on her days off. It probably wouldn't hurt to get to know her better. While Wade took his turn shooting, Gavin wandered over to the bulletin board above Wade's desk. It was cluttered with newspaper clippings and sticky notes. "What have you got here?"

"Some interesting cold cases I've been working on."

"Woman missing from Sweet Valley," Gavin read. "Missing for twenty years?"

"No sign of her. Lots of speculation, but no concrete answers."

"Multi-millionaire missing near Ricketts Glen." Gavin quirked an eyebrow. "Didn't think there were too many multi-millionaires living out here in the boonies."

"There may be a few hiding in our midst."

"Some like to blend in." Gavin chuckled.

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Wade gestured to Sam. "I started looking into that case because it's Samantha's uncle."

"Is that so?"

She nodded. "He disappeared while arranging gas leases with property owners." A frown marred her normally smooth forehead. "I've looked into it myself, but I can't figure out what happened to him. He went to an appointment and was never seen again."

Interesting. Maybe he could enlist the help of his private investigator friend. Sometimes cops had their hands tied by rules, regulations, and procedures. His buddy worked in shades of gray that allowed him more freedom to get results.

The scent of damp earth filled her nostrils as Samantha bent to tighten her laces when they approached Hawk Falls on their way to Orchard Loop. The pounding of the water against the rocks below didn't put her at ease the way it usually did. Emily and Wade had hiked on when she stopped. Their laughter drifted on the wind. She was happy her friend had found happiness, but sometimes she struggled to understand why she couldn't do the same. As rewarding as her job was, it didn't keep her from going home every night to an empty house.

Gavin reached out a hand to help her rise, but she ignored it. He grinned and shook his head.

"Lovely day. Don't ya think?"

“It is.” She didn’t plan to let him off the hook that easily. When he’d been Emily’s bodyguard, she’d made her interest clear, and he hadn’t discouraged her, but then she never heard from him again. Best to keep him at a safe distance.

“You’re quiet today.”

“Am I?”

“I suppose nature has a way of making people reflective.”

“Or maybe it’s the company.” She hadn’t meant to say the words out loud, and she cringed at the sharpness in her tone.

“Ouch.” He cocked his head to the side. “Did I do something wrong?”

“Forget it.”

“Okaaay.”

Silence grew between them as they walked—the air thick with tension.

“I was sorry to hear about your uncle.”

“It was a long time ago.”

“You didn’t get closure. That must be hard.”

“Not everyone gets that luxury.”

He reached out and pulled a bunch of needles from a white pine and broke it into bits releasing the fragrance into the air. “I know Wade is looking into his disappearance,

but did you ever consider doing so yourself?”

“Years ago. I went through the motions. Followed his last steps. Nothing panned out.”

“So you gave up?”

She stopped and crossed her arms over her chest. “Are you always so argumentative?”

His smile was slow and brought on unwelcome butterflies. “You started it.”

She averted her eyes and readjusted her ponytail. “Beg to differ.”

“How, pray tell did I start it?”

“Forget it. It’s not important.”

He opened his mouth but closed it again. Apparently, deciding to let it drop. Which was a good thing since she didn’t want to come right out and tell him that she’d been hoping for a call from him that never came. He’d think she was some kind of desperate woman who couldn’t get a date. There might be some truth to that, but she didn’t need to be that vulnerable with a relative stranger.

“You’re different.”

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“As in weird?”

He chuckled. “Not weird. Prickly.”

MasonKennedysatathis massive cherry desk and stared at Vanessa, the incompetent young woman sitting across from him. She’d been unable to convince the Garrison girl to pledge, so now they had to move on to plan B. He didn’t like bringing in girls without proper pedigree, but it was a means to an end however distasteful.

“Cate has a roommate. Brittany Boyer. She’s a scholarship student.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Offer her the option to pledge. When she accepts spring it on her that Cate must join her or we’ll rescind the invitation.”

“What if she doesn’t accept?”

He stood and made his way around his desk to take her hands in his own. “Look at me, love.”

She lifted her chin, and her eyes met his. Fear. Good. “Don’t give her a choice. Be creative.”

Chapter Three

Afewdayslater,Gavin awakened to the sound of a jackhammer.

So much for a relaxing vacation in the woods. With Emily’s parents staying at Wade’s place, he figured he’d head to Philly early to see his sister. His suite was

above reproach as usual, but the sounds of the city grated on his nerves after a few days of peace and quiet.

After a quick bite to eat, he hit the speed dial for Scott. “Is Cate around? I’m in town and thought I’d stop by to see her.”

“You know, you could’ve called her directly?”

“I’m paying your salary, aren’t I?”

His buddy chuckled. “It might be best if you call her.”

“Okaaaay.” Gavin frowned. “Is she with a guy or something?”

“Just call your sister.”

“What aren’t you telling me?” Gavin was met with silence. Scott must’ve hung up. He shoved his phone in his back pocket and paced his hotel room. There was no good reason why Cate’s bodyguard shouldn’t be able to tell him where she was. He fished out his phone and dialed her.

“Hey.” Her voice was too quiet, like she was trying to keep it down.

“You in the library or something?”

“Something like that.”

“Where are you? I’m in town and was going to stop to see you.”

“This isn’t a good time.”

“When will be?”

“Tonight. Seven o’clock?”

He heaved out a sigh. “Sure. Chart House?”

“Perfect.”

“See you then.” He shook off the unease settling in his gut. Everything was fine. His paranoia was in overdrive. He decided to take the walking tour through Old Philadelphia. It took him to the Liberty Bell, Independence Hall, and even Betsy Ross’ house. After that, he wandered the art museum then met Guy and Rita Branson for lunch. Guy was a boarding school buddy, and Rita knew them both from the country club where they’d spent the better part of their teen years. They were restoring a 19th Century Church to its former glory, and happily chatted about the details of the project, but Gavin had trouble concentrating. A niggling feeling in the back of his mind wouldn’t let him enjoy the downtime with his friends.

He chalked it up to difficulty turning off his work brain and switching to relaxation mode. Most of his time off was spent in developing countries helping his father with various projects or on mission trips where he could use his skills to assist others in need. Taking a vacation without an agenda wasn’t the norm for him. Maybe he would’ve been better off going away since it would’ve kept him from worrying so much about his sister.

He headed back to the hotel to take a quick shower. When he showed up at Cate’s apartment, he rang the bell.

Cate buzzed him in.

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“You ready?”

She glanced down at her attire. “Don’t I look ready?”

“You look fine.”

When they reached his car, he asked, “What was so all encompassing that you couldn’t meet me earlier?”

“I had a sorority thing.”

“Sorority? I didn’t think you were into that stuff.”

“I wasn’t. I’m not. Not really, but my roommate, Brittany, is. She asked me to pledge with her.”

“I knew this whole roommate business was a terrible idea. It’s not like you need someone to pay half the rent.”

“But I’d like to have friends at school, and they can be kind of hard to meet.”

“Haven’t you met other kids in your classes?”

Cate rolled her eyes. “You’re such a doofus.”

He’d never understand his sister. Her thought process made no sense to him. When he’d returned from the Army and enrolled in school he’d met plenty of people

through his classes and had never felt the need to join a fraternity.

When they arrived at the Chart House, they were shown to a table with a great view of the Delaware River. “What is this sorority your pledging?”

“Zeta Gamma Xi.”

“And what crazy stunts do they have you performing for pledge week?”

“Nothing too wild.”

“Details please.”

“We had a midnight meeting, and they asked two pledges to deliver packages while two other pledges slipped into a secure area to steal something from a professor. I think the prof is in on it though. Everyone else is supposed to help plan an event.”

None of that sounded innocent to him. “What makes you think the professors were in on it?”

“Come on. They have to be. They’re not going to have us do anything illegal or immoral.”

He glanced out the window at the Benjamin Franklin Bridge lit up against the waning light from sunset. Cate’s naiveté was downright scary, but he hated to be the one to shatter her illusions. “So this whole thing was Brittany’s idea?”

“Yes and no.”

He lifted an eyebrow.

“They reached out to me first, but when I declined, they talked to Brittany and told her they’d accept her but only if I joined with her.”

The hair on the back of his neck stood on end. That wasn’t what he wanted to hear. They’d specifically targeted Cate for membership, and that meant they knew perfectly well who she was and what kind of influence her father had. “What’s this event your planning?”

“A rally. I don’t know what it’s for yet.”

“As soon as you find out, let me know.”

“Why?”

“I want to stay on top of what’s going on with you. How can I support your efforts if you don’t share?” Telling her he thought her new friends might be using her would raise her hackles. While he didn’t want her to learn lessons the hard way, he knew she wouldn’t listen if he shared his suspicions without anything to back them up. Better to play the wait and see game for a bit.

Samanthastoodwithherhand on the knob of the master bedroom. She’d only been in the room a handful of times since her uncle’s disappearance. It was past time for her to empty the room and get on with her life, but she couldn’t make herself do it. She turned away and headed downstairs then continued on to the basement. In the unfinished area of the cellar there were shelves for extra storage, and that was where she kept ‘the box.’ It contained the old wounds she preferred to keep hidden away. She lifted it from its place and carried it into the finished area, closing the door behind her.

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She stifled a sneeze as she set the box on the coffee table and brushed the dust off the top. The cardboard was damp. Years had passed since she'd last opened it. Her stomach roiled at the thought of reopening it. She blamed Gavin for the impulse to dig into Uncle Richard's life once more. His questioning why she wasn't do more to find her uncle had rankled.

When she lifted the top off, she was assaulted by the scent of mildew. Setting the lid aside, she peered into the jumbled mass of papers. She extracted the first article on the top of the pile "Local business man missing. Foul play suspected." Holding back tears, she read over the news story again.

His disappearance hadn't made sense to her then, and it didn't make any more sense now. The gas leases he offered residents had the potential to change their lives for the better. Why anyone would want to hurt him was a mystery, but she was convinced he wouldn't have walked away from his life. From her. She'd needed him. Still did.

In a manila folder there was a stack of printouts from websites. Theories abounded, but none of them fit. Some thought he'd been abducted by environmental terrorists who would do anything to stop the drilling. Others thought he'd met a woman and run away with her. Even more spouted crazy conspiracies about a society similar to The Illuminati or the Freemasons, but she'd dismissed them as rubbish.

His car had never been found, and she'd avoided his bedroom, but the items he'd left out on his desk, she'd tossed into the box with the newspaper clippings and police reports. Out of sight. Out of mind. Her fingers curled around a small metal pin in the shape of an intricate symbol formed from the initials "C" and "A." The same symbol was found on his pen and his gold business card case. She opened the case and took

out a card. The C could be for his last name, Cleveland, but the A was a complete mystery. The company he worked for was called NovaFuel, so it wasn't that. She grabbed a sticky note from her junk drawer and sketched out the symbol. Maybe she'd do a reverse image search and see what came of it. And it might not hurt to share it with Wade.

Her phone buzzed. A reminder from Ranger William 'Billy' Stone about their plans for the night. She smiled. Billy was an older gentleman who took his job as a ranger seriously, always had time for questions from visitors, and refused to accept nonsense from anyone. He was one of her favorite people. She wouldn't keep him waiting, so there was no time left to dwell on Uncle Richard's disappearance.

She needed a bite to eat before she headed out. Time had flown by as she perused the contents of the box, and they had a stakeout planned this evening. It was an attempt to catch a poacher who'd been joy killing deer and leaving them to rot. They were going to setup a decoy and hope the guy took a potshot at it.

Chapter Four

Samantha pushed her chair back from her desk. Her eyes burned from hours of staring at paperwork. The faint scent of skunk lingered in the air despite attempts to cover it up with Lysol spray.

Intermittent updates crackled over the radio as other park rangers went about the business of keeping both visitors and wildlife safe.

An email notification dinged on her cell, but before she could swipe to open it, her phone buzzed.

"Hey, Wade. How's it going?"

“You have a minute to chat?”

“Sure. What’s up?” She stood and wandered over to the windows overlooking the parking lot. It was a beautiful day despite the chill in the air. The sunshine brought the public out in full force to enjoy an early spring hike or to sit on picnic tables by the lake.

“Checked out that symbol you sketched. Found some old records that trace it to the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.”

“Interesting. How so?”

“Some old documents have the same or a similar symbol. I’d like to ask Gavin to look into it since he’s in Philly and has the resources to do a deep dive, but I wanted to check with you before bringing him in.”

Working with Gavin was a complication she didn’t need. Her prior interactions with him were awkward and uncomfortable, but this was about Uncle Richard, not her own bruised ego. “You can ask him if he wants to look into it, but don’t pressure him. I don’t want him to feel obligated.”

“He seemed interested in the case, so I think he’ll jump at the chance to explore it further.”

“Maybe.” Unless he recognized that getting involved would mean being forced to talk to her. He probably wanted no parts of that.

“I’ll let you know when I have something.”

“Thanks for checking into this, Wade.”

“Don’t thank me yet. Let’s see if we make any progress first. While I have you on the phone, Emily said to make sure you put the cake tasting on your calendar. She was also wondering if you could join them tomorrow for wedding dress shopping? Then she scheduled in bridesmaid shopping the following Friday.”

“I’m working tomorrow, but I can see if Billy can switch with me. Tell her I’ll text her tonight.”

Late that evening, Gavin pulled up everything he could find on Zeta Gamma Xi. It didn’t amount to much. He dialed the private investigator his firm kept on retainer, Pierce Bryson.

“What’s up?”

“I’m searching for information on a sorority, but I’m hitting a brick wall.” He gave Pierce the details and disconnected the call.

He flipped through the channels, but couldn’t find anything worth watching, so he grabbed his laptop to see if he could log into a streaming service and get lost in a movie. His mouse hovered over the login for the server at work. This was his vacation, but he wondered what he might’ve missed since he’d been out of the office. Grayson could handle things. There was no reason for him to fret. But it wouldn’t hurt to have a peek. It wasn’t like he had anything better to do.

He picked up his phone and called Scott. “What’s up, boss?”

“Cate tucked in safe and sound?”

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“She’s at the sorority house again. They’re having some sort of soiree tonight with a bunch of frat boys.”

His jaw tightened, and he wanted to punch something. Cate could take care of herself, but these late night excursions weren’t smart. “Make sure she doesn’t get herself into trouble.”

“You know I’ll take care of her.”

He did. Scott was a great guy. One of their best. Of course, they only hired the best so all their bodyguards were top-notch, but among them he wouldn’t ask anyone other than those he’d trust with his own life to watch over Cate.

He glanced at his watch. Only eleven. Grace would be up. She picked up on the first ring. “How’s everything going with Victoria Mae?”

“Don’t ask.”

He frowned. “Too late. I already did.”

“I caught her sneaking out of her bedroom window an hour ago.”

“Sneaking out to see a boy?”

“Claims that’s not the case. Said her sister needed her. Asked her to come a week ago, but she hasn’t been able to make it to Philadelphia without getting caught.”

“At least we’re doing something right. Don’t let that girl out of your sight.” Emmaline was in the accelerated masters program for psychology at U of P. He couldn’t imagine why she’d ask her little sister to sneak out of the house. The explanation had to be bogus. Made up on the spot by a spoiled teenager. “Did she say why her sister wanted her to come?”

“She wasn’t sure, but said Emmaline sounded frightened. She asked her to bring some book from her father’s desk.”

He walked to the windows and stared out over the city. “I’m in Philadelphia. I’ll check in on Emmaline.”

“Thanks. I’m going to have to let Judge Swisher know what’s going on when he arrives tomorrow, but it’ll be far better if you can confirm that his eldest daughter is safe first.”

“Stay alert. I’ll get back in touch before I call it a night.”

Technically, they weren’t providing security for Emmaline, but George was a regular client, and a friend of Gavin’s father, so taking a few minutes to confirm his daughter’s safety was the least he could do. The only problem was he had no idea where she was supposed to be staying, but he was sure Cate would. He called Scott back. “Cate still at that fraternity thing or did she head back to her apartment?”

“Actually...”

“Actually what?”

“She’s sneaking around inside one of the faculty offices as we speak.”

“She’s doing what? Why didn’t you stop her?”

“I’m supposed to be invisible unless she is in physical danger, or did you forget that part?”

“Text me the location. I’m on my way.”

His phone alerted him to an incoming call as he approached the building. Pierce.
“What’s up?”

“I have some preliminary information on that sorority.”

“Shoot.”

“They’re lined to the fraternity, Xi Zeta Gamma. A few minor scandals, but nothing unusual for a sorority.”

“Thanks. Keep digging. I want anything you find on either group. They must be into something, and I want to know what it is.”

Chapter Five

Cate glared at Gavin from her seat across the table at the fifties style diner. Few patrons were out this late, so they practically had the place to themselves. He sipped his coffee. Not bad for diner coffee. Surprisingly robust.

“I told you that I don’t need a babysitter”

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“That’s funny. Seems to me you must. Otherwise, you’d be keeping your nose clean.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and stuck her lip out like a petulant child.

“What were you doing in the dean’s office?”

“Nothing you need to concern yourself with.” He drew in a sharp breath and switched tactics. “Are you still friends with Emmaline?”

“I guess.” She chewed on a fingernail. “Why?”

His cases required confidentiality, but he needed information, and if he didn’t give her something, Cate wouldn’t share what she knew. “Her sister claims she’s in some kind of trouble.”

“I haven’t seen her at all this week.”

“Is that unusual?”

“Her apartment is only a few doors down from ours. I run into her every couple of days.”

“Should I be concerned?”

“She’s been dating this guy, Carter. Maybe she ran off with him.”

“Tell me about Carter.”

“Scratch that. She couldn’t be with him. I saw him tonight.”

“Tonight?” He had to play it cool and act like he didn’t know about the party, but his sister was no dummy. She would’ve realized when he showed up at the school and dragged her out that he had someone keeping an eye on her.

“There was a party at the sorority. He was there.”

“I’m going to need more information about this guy.”

“He’s a senior. I don’t know any more than that.”

“No?”

“He asked me out.”

“What did you say?”

“Told him Emmaline was my friend.”

“Did that dissuade him?”

“Not really. He’s a creep.”

“Do you happen to know his last name?”

“No.”

He’d have to call his PI first thing in the morning and get him investigating the guy and looking into Emmaline’s disappearance. In the meantime, he needed to text Grace with an update. Emmaline’s father wouldn’t be happy.

Mason paced the length of his study. The fragrance of Cuban cigars permeated the opulent space. It was lined with cherry bookshelves filled to the brim with educational tomes, classic literature and a few contemporary literary favorites. His gaze took in the large oil painting over the crackling fire that depicted a gathering of men in 18th century attire. The Continental Alliance had understood their calling then, and it was no less clear today. And he refused to let it falter under his watch.

A text message seemed to argue the point.

Vanessa: Cate's brother pulled her from tonight's event.

Gavin. No doubt. A little birdie had told him about the man's visit to Philadelphia. Hopefully, he'd go back to the big apple before he stirred up more trouble. They needed to get Cate to commit to the cause. In order to do that, she needed to be invested. The sense of camaraderie that sororities and fraternities had usually gave them the edge they needed to sneak past the defenses of the younger generation. By the time they understood what they were fighting for, they were too far in to back out. Not that anyone in their right mind wouldn't want to be part of their venerable organization, but sometimes societies like theirs got bad press and made the youth question their validity.

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He wandered over to the grandfather clock on the mantel. More time was needed, but in order to get that, Gavin needed to be out of the picture. What might it take to distract him?

Ignoring Vanessa's text, he shoved the phone in his top drawer. It would give her time to stew about what her punishment might be for failing him. Maybe she'd spend a few nights scrubbing floors with her toothbrush. If that didn't put the proper amount of fear in her, he'd find something more creative. And if Gavin wanted to push, maybe Cate would be next to join Emmaline at their serene estate in the mountains. She wouldn't get much fresh air once she arrived in the beautiful countryside, but she would learn a thing or two about obedience. He knew how to force compliance from less than willing participants. A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. Capitulation was nice, but sometimes he appreciated the challenge of a worthy adversary. Whether or not the Garrisons would provide that remained to be seen.

Late Monday morning, Samantha pulled her Park Ranger SUV into the upper parking lot and angled the vehicle so she would have a panoramic view of Lake Jean. The radio chatter was minimal. It had been a quiet morning.

Clearing her head was becoming increasingly difficult the more she dug into the past. She'd gone wedding dress shopping with Emily and her mother, but even time with her best friend hadn't dimmed the fog of depression threatening to close in.

A buzzing distracted her from her thoughts. A text from Gavin. Odd. She'd expected him to use Wade as a go-between so he could avoid her. Heaven knew she hadn't made it easy for him the last time he'd tried to converse.

Gavin: Call when you have a minute to chat.

She dialed him, and he picked up on the first ring.

“That was fast.” She smiled at the sound of his voice. Not good at all.

“What’s up?”

“Wade emailed me that symbol you drew. Where did you get it? He said it had some kind of connection to your uncle.”

“Uncle Richard had a few things with the symbol on it. Why?”

“I came across it in another investigation. It’s beyond odd.”

“How so?”

“That investigation is linked to a sorority, and I doubt your Uncle Richard would’ve been connected with one.”

She chuckled. “Maybe the symbols aren’t as similar as you think. I drew the image I sent Wade, so it might not be completely accurate.”

“Can I see the actual items?”

“I could take pictures and send them to you.”

“That’d be great.”

“There is some paperwork, too. Too much for me to scan, but maybe I can mail it to you.”

“Would you mind if I had someone pick it up?”

“No. I guess not.”

He sighed. “You know what, I’m not getting anywhere down here. How about I drive up there, and we can go through the box together?”

Her heart raced. Did she really want to spend time alone with Gavin Garrison. He made her wish for things she’d never be able to have. After his rejection, she’d given it a go and gone a couple of dates with Austin, but that had been an epic fail. Despite how utterly adorable he was, they’re relationship had felt more like brother and sister instead of boyfriend and girlfriend. They were now firmly in the friend zone. But she needed to stop daydreaming about having more with Gavin. He wasn’t interested. Though she wasn’t getting any younger, she wouldn’t throw herself at anyone. Besides he was a New Yorker. And she wanted no parts of the city.

“Sam? You there?”

“Sorry. Lost in thought.” She rolled the tension out of her shoulders. “Sure. Come on up, and we’ll go through it all.”

“Great. I can be there in three hours.”

“Make it five. I need to finish my shift here and get home in time to shower before you arrive.” She closed her eyes annoyed with herself for giving him the impression that she felt the need to look good for him. Maybe she should hang a sign around her head that said ‘biological clock ticking—must find man quick.’

Chapter Six

Gavin pulled into the drive of the old two story farmhouse that Samantha called home.

The setting sun cast long shadows as he approached her door. It was a professional visit. No reason to get worked up about seeing her. She didn't even like him, so there was no way she'd want to spend time alone with him if it wasn't strictly work related. Sam pulled the door open before he could knock. She was the epitome of effortless beauty. The fit of her jeans was flattering and she'd paired it with a long-sleeve tee. The look was casual. Like she didn't want him to think she was trying too hard. Her face was devoid of makeup, and her long dark hair remained damp from the shower. She stepped aside to let him pass, and as he did, he caught a whiff of a subtle floral fragrance he assumed came from her shampoo.

“How was the drive?”

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“Long.” He grinned and shuffled his feet. The warmth of the woodstove in the corner of the living room warded off the chilly evening air. “Mind if I use your restroom?”

She gestured toward the wide staircase to his right. “Upstairs. On your left.”

Taking a minute as he washed his hands, he prepared himself mentally for the task to come. He was here to do a job, not to flirt with Emily’s friend.

Once back downstairs, he found Sam in the kitchen heating up a cast iron skillet.

Turning to him, she asked. “Want a grilled cheese and tomato sandwich?”

“You don’t have to cook for me. I’ll grab something after.”

“If you don’t mind the simple meal, I’m happy to make it. I’m cooking for myself, anyway.”

“In that case, Sure.” He smiled.

A few minutes later, she served up the meal on paper plates and filled tall glasses with a gallon jug of spring water. She grabbed a bag of chips from the pantry and set it on the table between them before sinking into her chair.

“Smells good. Mind if I say grace?”

“No. Go ahead.”

He bowed his head and thanked the Lord for the meal. “How’d work go today?”

“Uneventful for the most part.”

“The most part?”

“We’ve been having some strange drone activity lately. It’s odd given how early in the year it is.”

“It hasn’t been too cold.”

“Midday temps are tolerable, but it gets down right bitter overnight.”

“I’m sure you’re used to it.”

She nodded.

The tension that had remained between them throughout their hike the week before had dissipated, and a comfortable silence settled over them as they ate.

Sam stood when she’d finished eating. After tossing their trash in the garbage can, she turned to him. “Ready to get started?”

“Yep.” He followed her as she led the way down a dimly lit staircase into a finished basement.

She took a seat on the couch in front of a coffee table strewn with documents. “Apologies for the musty papers. I must’ve had water down here at some point.” She gestured to the box beside the table. “The good news is there doesn’t seem to be any mold on the box.”

“That is good, but we could’ve taken them to Staples to make fresh copies if we’d needed to.”

“That might not be a bad idea.”

“Let’s see what we have first.”

He opened the folder he’d brought with him. Handing the top page to her, he said, “This is what my investigator found.”

Sam reached into the box and lifted out the pin. It definitely looks like a match. She handed it to him and grabbed the other items for him to inspect.

“I think this is more than a coincidence. Somehow I doubt there is more than one organization using this same unique blend of letters and design.”

“Unless it was intentionally copied.”

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“Yes, that is a distinct possibility, but for now I think it’s safe to proceed under the assumption that these two cases are somehow connected.”

“Can you tell me anything about your case?”

“Only if I hire you.”

She shook her head. “I’m content in my current line of work.”

“Confidentiality agreements prohibit me from sharing data with outsiders. He whipped out another page. But... if you sign this contract, you’ll be a temporary employee contracted to work on this case.”

“That’s ridiculous. I can sign a contract as a client.”

“Won’t work. I can’t share this case with you if you do that.” He grinned. “Besides, you can’t afford us.”

“So what, I’m supposed to share all the details about Uncle Richard with you, and you don’t have to give me any information?”

“Just sign the piece of paper, Samantha.”

“No.”

“What’s the hesitation? You’ll get paid for your time, and you’ll get access to my case files. There is no downside for you.”

“I’m not comfortable owing you. If you I take you up on your offer. I’ll be indebted to you, and that doesn’t work for me.”

“You will not owe me a thing.”

“Why should I take you at your word?”

“Call Wade and ask him. I’ll wait.”

“I already know what he’ll say.”

“Then ask Emily.”

“Ditto.”

He let a slow smile build. “Then maybe you can give me a chance here to prove myself before you assume I have some nefarious purpose.”

Her laugh filled the space. “How about we start with what we can share without my signing my life away?”

“Suit yourself.” He shrugged. Her reluctance to sign made no sense to him. Most people appreciated having a few extra dollars to help them out. But until she decided to trust him, he could tell her about Cate’s sorority’s connection without revealing anything about Judge Swisher and his missing daughter, Emmaline. Even though his conversation with George hadn’t gone as expected, he felt responsible for making sure his progeny was safe. His client had it in his head that his daughter was rebelling. Cate had suggested the same. Gavin didn’t buy it. She might have a wild streak, but Emmaline had a good head on her shoulders. He squared his shoulders and shared what he felt he could without breaching confidentiality. “My sister is going to school at the University of Pennsylvania. Recently she pledged—”

“Wait. Your sister is your client?”

“No. I’m not going to share about that case. I can, however, tell you what’s going on with Cate.”

“How is a sorority going to help us?”

He sighed deeply and tried to keep his composure. “The page I showed you earlier is connected to her sorority and a fraternity on campus. I’m not sure how the pieces connect yet, but I believe they do.”

“My uncle was a middle-aged business man, what would he have to do with fraternities and sororities?”

“That’s what we need to figure out. Unlikely connections can lead to revealing truths.”

Samantha fished around in the box until she located the binder where she’d kept all the papers related to the police investigation. The papers inside it were protected by plastic, allowing them to escape the moisture damage the newspapers and printouts had sustained. Her statement to the police was included. If he read it, Gavin would learn that she wasn’t the doting niece he assumed she was. Blowing out a puff of air, she passed it to Gavin. “Let’s get you up to speed on Uncle Richard’s case.”

“Nice organizational skills.” He thumbed through the tabs separating the sections.

“Wade got me the file, but I needed to find a way to make sense of it.”

“This is great.”

She chewed on her cuticles while he looked through the file. It was a nervous habit she thought she'd kicked, but Gavin's presence in her home brought it back. Gavin turned his attention back to her, and she felt warmth rise to her cheeks. If he could read her thoughts, she'd be in trouble.

“Tell me about the day he went missing.”

“He went to visit the Clayburn's farm out on Camp Lavigne Road. The folks out there were reluctant to sign a gas lease, but he hoped to convince them it'd be in their best interest.”

“And this was five years ago?”

She leaned her head back on the sofa. “No sign of him since.”

“No activity on his credit cards, bank accounts, investments?”

“Nothing.” She frowned. “He vanished. Not a single trace.”

“I see they talked to the family he visited last. Any reason to suspect their involvement?”

“None. I went to school with their son, Jeremy, Jr. and their daughter, Jillian. They were both in 4H with me. Uncle Richard had known them since my parents died, and he moved here, so I wouldn't have to move to Texas.”

“That must’ve been tough for a man in the gas business.”

“Not really. Their deaths coincided with the sudden increase in drilling in the area, so he was never short on work.”

“Interesting.” He rubbed his chin. “Could he have attracted interest from eco-terrorists? People out to protect the environment at any cost?”

“Anything is possible. The company he worked for, NovaFuel, garnered plenty of attention, but Uncle Richard didn’t mention being targeted.”

“We can explore that angle, but I’m not sure we can dismiss his last appointment so easily either.”

“Why not? He was offering them a contract that had the potential to make them quite a bit of money. They wouldn’t have had a reason to hurt him.”

“Maybe if he pushed them, and they didn’t want to sign.”

She chuckled. “I didn’t make you disappear when you pushed me to sign your contract.”

His slow grin tugged at something deep inside. “Not yet, anyway. The night’s young.”

Chapter Seven

Gavin was getting bleary-eyed from staring at case material from Richard Cleveland’s disappearance. There was nothing there. Not really. A missing persons report filed by Samantha, interviews, and statements. Just as Sam had told him, there was no activity on his credit cards or cell phone, but that didn’t mean someone hadn’t helped him

create a new identity for himself. It happened all the time. People decided to leave their lives and start fresh elsewhere. From the looks of it, Cleveland had the financial means to have been stowing away a nest egg for just such an occasion.

Samantha stood and stretched. “I need coffee. Want some?”

“It’ll probably keep me up all night, but sure. If you don’t mind.”

A few minutes later, Sam returned and handed him a steaming mug before settling back onto the couch with her own.

He took a sip of the rich brew and set it down, then pulled out the employment contract again.

“We’ve been over this, Gavin.”

“Hear me out?”

Her eyes bored into his.

“Please?”

She gestured for him to proceed.

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“My client’s daughter is missing.”

“And? What does that have to do with me signing that piece of paper.”

“The last ping on her cell phone happened right near here.”

“You’re certain it was this Benton and not Benton on the other side of the state?”

“Yes. It was here. A tiny map dot near Ricketts Glen State Park.”

“That’s the real reason you were coming up here.”

He sighed. “That and because of the symbol. There is a connection between that symbol and my case. Since it’s connected to your uncle’s disappearance as well, I thought we could help each other. But you know the situation. I can’t give you the details of the case if you won’t agree to work for me. At least on paper.”

“I get that, but I can probably find out the details by checking into the missing persons database and going through official channels at work.”

“She hasn’t been officially reported missing. The press that would bring her family is too great. I’m trying to find her without the need to alert the authorities. Her dad is convinced she’s doing what young adults often do. That’s she’s out carousing and carrying on and showing complete lack of regard for the classes she is missing in the meantime.”

“But you think something terrible has happened?”

“I don’t know what to think, but the connection is undeniable. God brought your uncle’s case to my attention just last week. Now we find this same symbol in both cases. There has to be more to this.”

“Maybe.”

“Coincidences are God's breadcrumbs. He's leading us somewhere, but it's up to us to follow the trail.”

“If you say so.”

“Will you sign?”

“I’ll sign, but if it turns out your client’s kid is involved in illegal or illicit activities up here, you need to waive any conflict of interest. I’m arresting her regardless of whether or not I work for you.”

As Samantha was preparing for bed, her cell chirped. Glancing at the screen, she saw Gavin’s face in the little circle. It was too small to see the cute little indent in his chin, but she could picture it nonetheless.

Gavin: You up?

Sam: Do you always text people this late if you’re not sure.

Gavin: Used to working with bodyguards. They work unusual hours.

Sam: Miss me already?

Gavin: What’s it been an hour?

Sam: Not even. What's up?

Gavin: Found something interesting. Can I call?

Sam: Call my house. I don't get great reception on my cell.

Before she could make it downstairs to grab the cordless phone from her bedroom that she'd left on the kitchen table, her house phone rang. "I didn't give you my number yet."

"I'm a resourceful guy."

"You got it from Wade when you got my cell number."

"Close. Got it from Emily last year."

"Yet you never used it until now."

“Maybe we should talk about that.”

“Another time, perhaps.” She descended another flight of stairs back into her finished basement. There she stared at a topographic map of Ricketts she’d had framed and mounted. “I need to get to bed soon. Tomorrow is an early shift for me.”

“Oh. Sorry. I should’ve thought of that.”

“It’s fine. I was still up. What do you have?”

“About the reason I asked you to sign that contract...”

“Your client’s confidentiality. I get it let’s move on.”

“I’m trying to. The client is a federal judge. George Swisher. His daughter Emmaline is the one who went missing.”

“Where did you say that last ping was, Benton?”

“Sort of. The cell tower is technically in Sweet Valley, but it’s right off 118 not far from Ricketts Glen.”

She studied the map before her and considered the trails near the last known location of Emmaline’s cell phone. “You aren’t expecting to find this girl alive, are you?”

His silence answered her question. “This is a lot to digest. I didn’t know I was signing up for the search and recovery of a federal judge’s daughter. And if you think her

case is connected to Uncle Richard's, I shouldn't get my hopes up about finding him alive either."

"I wish I could've told you more from the jump, but you know how it goes."

Chapter Eight

Gavin sipped his first cup of coffee and watched the sunrise over the horse pastures. A herd of deer milled about enjoying an early breakfast. He watched as another tucked itself under the fence to join its friends. Chuckling to himself he stretched out his legs and let the tranquility of his surroundings seep into his bones. It would do him good to spend more time in nature and less breathing in the city air. Yet, while nature whispered peaceful breezes, a storm was brewing elsewhere, and he was certain his sister was in its path.

He'd scheduled a meeting with Scott to see how things were going with Cate. If all was well with her, he'd have the bodyguard conduct a few interviews for him. If not, he'd get Kenneth back to take care of it. He wasn't ready to head back into the thick of things quite yet. Someone needed to be here in this mountain wilderness attempting to track down Emmaline.

After chowing down on the omelet and home fries he'd prepared in the lodge's well-appointed kitchen, he moved into the great room and settled into a plush leather armchair where he logged into his secure video call software. While he waited for Scott to appear on the screen, he scrolled through Emmaline's Facebook feed hoping to find a clue as to what she'd been doing in Columbia County. He checked out the profile page of each person who liked her latest posts. Then he hit on one. A young man named, Ted Roberts. A shiver crawled down his spine as he looked at the guy's page. Something wasn't right. His pictures seemed staged. He needed more information on Ted Roberts. He'd get his PI to hack into Emmaline's page to see if she'd been communicating privately with him. If so, he'd have him dig further.

Scott's face appeared on the screen.

"How are things in Philly?"

"Mostly quiet."

"What's going on with Cate?"

"Sticking to her routine."

"Good. Glad to hear it. On another matter, can I trust you to delegate some tasks to Kenneth?"

"Of course."

"I want him to conduct interviews with Emmaline's inner circle. Then have him talk to Carter. He was dating Emmaline when she disappeared according to Cate. If those talks don't yield any leads, he can widen the net to anyone she had regular contact with."

"Sure thing, boss."

"He can report to you, but keep me in the loop."

"Aren't you supposed to be on vacation?"

"You said everything is good with Cate, right?"

"As good as can be expected. She's a college kid."

"Meaning?"

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“She stays out too late. Participates in sorority and fraternity stuff. Nothing you weren’t already aware was happening.”

“Then why did you tell me she was sticking to her schedule?”

“All that stuff is part of her routine. Nothing has changed. I’m staying close. No need for alarm bells quite yet.”

“There better not be.”

“She’s no longer a pledge. They inducted the pledges shortly after you hightailed it out of here. Things should calm down now that she’s moved into the sorority house.”

“She what!?”

“Oh. I thought she told you that was her plan.”

“She did not.” He blew a piece of hair out of his eyes. “One last thing. I had Pierce email you a symbol. It’s connected to that sorority Cate joined. Look into any other instances you can find on campus. It’s a priority.”

“You need to let Cate live her life, dude. I can’t believe you’re investigating her sorority.”

“It’s for her own good.” He ended the call and closed his screen. His never ending to-do list included calling Dad, Grayson and Cate. This might be a busier vacation than his working ones.

Samantha tightened the laces on her hiking boots. Her fellow rangers knew she was headed down to Adams Falls, but she hadn't shared her suspicions. Couldn't without informing them about George Swisher's missing daughter. She was an adult who hadn't been reported missing. The fact that Gavin's people had been able to grab locations from her cell was a bit disturbing, but also helpful. When going through legal means, it could be painfully slow get providers to release information. Even when they had hikers lost in the woods without food and water or even proper attire. While she couldn't go outside of official channels as a law enforcement ranger, she could certainly use the information already obtained to search for Emmaline.

She grabbed her backpack from the passenger seat of her Explorer and slung it over her shoulder. Stepping onto the first set of stairs leading down to the falls, she paused. Having patrolled this trail countless times before, it was familiar, but this time a sense of dread filled her as she took that first step down. When she reached the landing to the natural stone steps that would take her to the best viewing point for the waterfall, she considered how easy it would be to roll a body down the slippery stairs. The falls would do the rest, pushing the body down and carrying it away on the current.

Descending the steps carefully, her gaze darted toward the surrounding forest. Stopping for a moment, she admired the beauty of the raging water. This was one of her favorite places in the park. It wasn't hard to get to, but it was often deserted. Many hikers started Falls trail on the other side of Route 118, not realizing that there was a waterfall on the other side of the highway. There loss was a gain for the locals who often had it to themselves.

Biting the inside of her cheek, she squinted down the stream. Even if the creek washed the body onto shore somewhere down the trail, it could be sometime before it was found. The killer could've attached a weight to keep the body submerged in one of the deeper pools, or he could've pulled his victim out and drug her into the woods, perhaps hidden her body under dead leaves and twigs.

What she struggled to understand was the randomness of it all. Young woman. Middle-aged man. Nothing connected the two but location and a strange symbol. She peered into the water. It held secrets that much she knew, but were any of them connected to Emmaline Swisher or Uncle Richard's disappearance?

Chapter Nine

Gavin stared at the fence surrounding the cell tower. There was no reason to be here. Not really. Nothing much could be gained from visiting the structure, but he'd felt the need to come. Emmaline was close, he felt it down deep in his bones. But exactly where she could be with the maze of trails inside Ricketts Glen and the surrounding state game lands was beyond him. State Game Lands Thirteen alone had nearly fifty thousand acres of wild undeveloped land. That meant a lot of places to toss a cell phone or hide a body.

His phone buzzed with an update from Scott. Cate was at another sorority event. It wasn't the worst news, but he would've preferred to hear she was in the library studying or at home reading a book.

A distraction would be helpful about now. His stomach growled reminding him he hadn't eaten. He could ask Sam to join him for dinner. Not a date. She wouldn't want that even if she weren't his employee, but food and conversation were okay.

Gavin: I'm at the cell tower, but was going to grab dinner at Trail's End. Join me to talk about the case?"

Sam: What time?

Gavin: Are you free now?

Sam: Give me twenty minutes. I'll meet you there.

He tucked his phone back into his pocket and drove over to Trail's End. His laptop was in the car, so he could catch up on his emails and, perhaps, do a bit of research while he waited for Sam to arrive.

Setting up in a booth, he stared out the side window. The server mentioned a sow had been hanging around with her cubs. He wouldn't mind catching a glimpse of her. Refocusing his attention on his laptop, he sorted his email into appropriate folders, then he started tackling the 'action' folder.

Before he got through the first task, Samantha arrived. She was still in uniform with her hair pulled back in a ponytail. The look gave her a youthful appearance. Spotting him, she smiled. The moment she sat down the server appeared with menus cutting off the words he'd wanted to say. Not necessarily a bad thing since he'd been about to tell Sam how cute she looked.

The server set down Samantha's glass of unsweetened tea and filled Gavin's coffee cup touching his hand before she straightened. She took their orders and then turned back to Gavin. "Can I get you anything else?" Never once did she glance at Sam, her focus was glued on Gavin.

He shook his head. "We're good for now."

Sam tapped the top of the open screen on Gavin's laptop. "You're a workaholic, aren't you?"

He lifted his eyes from the screen to meet hers. "The job never stops. When people hire you to protect them and their loved ones, it's a huge responsibility." Closing the lid to his laptop, he smiled giving her his full attention.

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She sipped her iced tea slowly before making eye contact. “I took a hike down by Adam’s Falls this morning.”

“Anything interesting?”

“No. I had some grim thoughts on how easy it would be to dispose of a body there, but I didn’t find anything that would raise actual suspicion or give me cause to investigate further.”

“The morbid thoughts make sense. Sometimes beautiful places hide grave secrets.”

“Hickory Run was a testament to that, huh?”

“That it was.” He cleared his throat. “Listen, I was hoping we could talk about why I never used your number before.”

Heat flooded her face. This wasn’t a topic she was comfortable broaching. “I thought this was a working meal. Aren’t we supposed to be talking about the case?”

“Not until we clear the air.”

“Fine. Let’s hear it, then.” She chewed on her pinkie finger’s cuticle, until she realized what she was doing and forced her hands back down to the table.

“The reason I didn’t call was because I was dating Sandra. We were keeping it on the down low, so she wouldn’t be treated differently because of her relationship with the boss. I’d even purchased a ring.”

“Then why did you flirt with me?”

“I don’t know. You were sweet and cute, and I liked how it drove her crazy when other girls paid attention to me. Petty, I know, but that’s the truth.”

“Wait.” A chill crept up her spine. “She was killed on that case. Protecting Emily.”

“She was.”

Reaching across the table she placed a hand over his. “I’m sorry, Gavin. I had no idea.”

“Few people knew that she was more than my employee. It was how she wanted things.”

“I cannot imagine losing someone you love so brutally.” As she said the words, she realized they weren’t true. She’d been imagining her uncle’s brutal murder earlier in the day. And what she’d seen hadn’t been pretty.

Chapter Ten

Gavin looked over the research Pierce sent him before stepping out on the porch of the lodge. Breathing in the cool fresh air, he stared out over the pastures before turning his gaze to the sky. Stars stretched as far as the eye could see.

Samantha had shown him a grace he didn’t deserve. He never should’ve flirted with her when he’d been there to protect Emily, but he thought it was harmless. Clearly, it hadn’t been. He’d not only hurt her, he’d hurt Sandra. Maybe if he’d shown more restraint, she wouldn’t have been distracted when confronted with a serial killer. He would never know how much his own actions had contributed to her death, but internalizing his guilt wasn’t healthy.

God's grace was there for the taking, same as always, so if he continued to beat himself up, it was on him. All he needed to do was surrender the past and let it go. He shook his head, so much easier said than done.

His cell rang pulling him out of his reverie. "What's up, Gray?"

"I hear you're keeping our best investigator inundated with work. How can that be when you're supposed to be on vacation?"

"It's connected to Cate."

"Say no more. You have my full support, but once you finish digging, you need to take some actual time off. It isn't healthy to work year round without a break."

"I haven't had a real break in years. Neither have you for that matter."

"Not true. When I take those trips with Dad, I always schedule a few days before and after so Jenna and I can have some downtime."

"If I ever have a wife who needs my attention, I'll be sure to take time off, but until then, my focus will remain on the job."

"Tell me what you have."

"A symbol."

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“And?”

“Pierce sent some research a short while ago. It has a connection to a group that formed back in the 18th century. I’m not sure what to make of it yet, but it’s also connected to Emmaline Swisher.”

“And what does any of this have to do with Cate?”

“Her sorority uses the same symbol on its letterhead. Emmaline is a member of the sorority, too. Which reminds me, I had Pierce looking into someone Emmaline was communicating with online. I have to check on his progress on that front.”

“Do we have someone keeping a close eye on our sister?”

“Scott.”

“Good. I’ve been working on another case, but I’m going to delegate it to Brady. It sounds like you could use a hand.”

“That’d be great. I have Kenneth doing interviews in Philadelphia. Maybe you could join him, or follow some leads down that way.”

“You going back to Philly?”

“I might be, but I want to check out a few more things here first. There is a cold case about a missing businessman that might be the missing link to all this. He had the same symbol on several items in his personal effects.”

ThreedayspassedsinceSamantha had last heard from Gavin. Which was fine by her. She had too much to do to spend time worrying about him and his unofficial missing person case. At least that was what she was telling herself.

She'd spent hours staring at her computer monitor and sorting through family documents in an attempt to build her family tree. Her uncle told her he could trace his ancestry back to the Mayflower, but she'd never asked him for more information. Now she was left to put the pieces together herself.

Where they came from didn't much matter to her, but she did want to find out more about the mysterious symbol she'd discovered in his belongings. She was certain she'd seen it somewhere before, but she couldn't figure out where. Something told her to dig through family documents, but she'd gone through all the important documents he'd given her, and there was nothing of consequence to be found there.

Stepping away from her desk, she headed to the bookshelf. Maybe a good book would be enough to keep her mind off Uncle Richard. Shaking her head, she realized her uncle wasn't the problem. She'd accepted that he was probably dead years earlier.

The real issue was Gavin. Somehow, she'd let him captivate her once again. If she wound up with a broken heart it would be her own fault. He'd as much as admitted to toying with her emotions while he'd be involved with another woman, yet here she was throwing herself at him once more. No. She hadn't done that, not yet. But if she spent much more time with him, she could easily see herself giving into his charm.

Caressing the spine of an old book on her shelf, she pulled it out. This one had been her uncle's. She took it with her to an armchair and settled down to read. When she opened the cover, she found the mysterious symbol. This time with words to accompany it. Continental Alliance. Founded in 1787. She stared at the symbol. Maybe this was what they needed to learn more about this group. A name and a year. It was big.

She flipped through the pages. It wasn't much more than a members list. The book contained information on members of the alliance and their ancestry. Flipping through the pages she found a familiar name. Cleveland. It wasn't her uncle, but it could be one of their ancestors. She pulled up her family tree. She hadn't traced it that far back, but the name of her mother's great-great grandfather was the same. Edmund Cleveland.

Her phone buzzed with a text message.

Gavin: Found something? Can we meet?

She needed to share this with him, but if she had to consider whether she might be somehow implicating her own family in his case. Swallowing her fear, she typed a response.

Sam: Sure. I found something, too. Let's meet at the coffee shop on the main drag in Benton.

Gavin: The one with the sidewalk sign?

Sam: That's it.

Gavin: Ten minutes?

Sam: Make it thirty.

She wasn't about to show up in her sweats with her hair tied back in a messy bun. While she had no intention of giving her heart to the man, but she had more self-respect than to leave her house looking a mess.

Chapter Eleven

Gavin kept his eyes glued to Samantha as she came inside. She wore jeans and a casual blouse with an oversized brown leather purse slung over her shoulder. He wasn't used to seeing her with a handbag, but he shook off his confusion. Women carried them. It wasn't all that unusual. He'd brought his satchel with his laptop inside. She wore her hair long and straight, and though not overdone, he was almost certain she was wearing makeup. He liked her fresh-faced look, but this was nice, too. She was pretty. He'd known that, of course, but seeing her now he recognized it on a deeper level. His attraction to her was growing. If he was smart, he'd put a stop to whatever was developing between them before one of them got hurt. Nobody ever accused him of brains when it came to women though.

"What are you staring at?"

He grinned. "You."

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She blushed. “Like what you see?”

“I’m not going to answer that question on the grounds that it might incriminate me.”

“Smart man.”

“You mentioned finding something.”

“So did you, and I’m nothing if not a gentleman. Ladies first.”

She shook her head before pulling a large book out of her bag. Mystery of the handbag explained. “I was looking through this old book and found this.” She pointed to the symbol and then to the name beneath it.

“This is amazing. I cannot believe you found this. We have something substantial to guide our search now.”

“It appears to be some type of membership list with a bit of history on each member.”

“Formed in 1787. That is the same year the constitution was ratified.”

“I hadn’t realized that.” She tapped her knuckles on the table between them. “My family is listed in that book.”

“Really?”

“I think so. My mother’s great grandfather was Edmund Cleveland, III. Went by

Skip. His father was Edmund Cleveland, Jr. My guess is that the Edmund Cleveland in this book is his father or perhaps grandfather.”

“Wow. I’m impressed at how much you know about your family.”

“Don’t be. I never had any interest in learning any of it. When we delved into that symbol I had to find out more, so I started digging. Ancestry.com seemed as logical a place as any to start my search. Thankfully, my mother kept great records, so I was able to find enough in her paperwork to trace back to Edmund Cleveland, Jr.”

“Do you mind if I read through this?”

“You can take the book with you, but please be careful with it.”

“I’ll protect it with my life.”

“Don’t do that. Just don’t be careless.” She tilted her head to the side. “Now tell me what you found.”

“It pales in comparison to what you shared.”

“Spill it anyway.”

“My investigator linked the account of someone baiting Emmaline online to a man who lives near Ricketts. I’m planning to stakeout his place later. I’ll interview him eventually, but I don’t want to spook him until I’ve had a chance to follow his moves.”

“A smart choice.”

“Want in?”

“In on a stake-out? Do I look a glutton for punishment?”

“It’ll give you a chance to spend time with yours truly.”

“Every woman’s dream, I’m sure.”

“So, you’ll come?”

“When?”

“How’s now?”

“You’re not much for planning ahead, are you?”

A slow grin formed. “Is that a yes?”

Samantha forced her eyes to watch the road instead of the man beside her. His subtle cologne that had tickled her senses on other occasions was intensified in the closed space inside his Range Rover. And she was nearly certain he cultivated the day old growth along his jawline intentionally to drive women wild. Why she’d agreed to spend time with him up close and personal like this, she couldn’t begin to explain. She must be glutton for punishment. Because no sane person would’ve agreed to put themselves in this predicament.

“There it is.” Gavin nodded toward a white farm house set back from the road. There was a car in the driveway.

“You can’t park here. Around here a strange vehicle will be spotted in no time.”

“What do you suggest then?”

“Turn right.”

“Okay.” He did as she instructed. About fifty yards down, she indicated a spot for him to pull over. “Tuck into that pull off far enough that your vehicle won’t be spotted.”

After doing so, he raised an eyebrow. “We won’t see much from here.”

“There is an abandoned cabin on state game lands about a quarter-mile from here. We can hike in and watch the house from there.”

“You sure it has a view of it.”

“Would I steer you wrong?”

He shook his head slowly a smile forming. “I don’t believe you would.”

“Let’s do this.”

He grabbed his backpack from the rear and loaded it with the snacks and drinks they’d picked up for their stakeout.

Inside the cabin, he drug an old spool over to a broken window and climbed atop it. Then he dug out his binoculars and aimed them. “I’m not seeing the house.”

“Here let me.” She focused on the house and showed him where to aim.

“Got it. Thanks.”

“We can walk over if we need a better view.” She chuckled. “I’d suggest game cameras, but that might be going too far. I could lose my job for setting up cameras on his property.”

“Not a bad idea. I’ll do it when you’re not with me.”

“You’re not protecting me from the consequences of your actions if you come right out and tell me you’re going to break the law.”

“Okay. I won’t come back and install game cameras.”

“Now you’re lying.”

“No pleasing you, woman.”

She bit the inside of her cheek. Answering that comment could prove dangerous.

“Let’s focus on why we’re here.”

He nodded and lifted the binoculars back to his eyes. “No movement in there.”

“Show some patience.”

Themanleanedbackin his armchair and stared into the blazing fire. This was his sanctuary. The place God had given him to carryout His will away from the unenlightened.

The door creaked open and Vanessa led Cate Garrison into his space before removing her blindfold. He insisted on the measure whenever people met with him in his study. As annoying as Vanessa was, she was a necessary tool and the only one with access to him. An obedient wife who knew that doing what she was told was the only way to ensure her own happiness.

Cate’s eyes widened as she took in her opulent surroundings.

“Take a seat, Miss Garrison.” He stood to greet her and indicated a chair across from his desk.

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She perched on the edge of the seat. “Why did you wish to see me?”

“Straight to the point, I see. Good. I’ll do you the courtesy of returning the favor. You have an opportunity to fulfill your divine calling, and I want to help you find fulfill it.”

“A calling?”

“Yes. You can serve God and his people by gathering some information for us.”

“How do I accomplish that?”

“You grew up in close proximity to the Swishers. Is that right?”

“I know them. Our parents are close friends, so we grew up together.”

“I want you to go visit Victoria Mae. Get her to leave you alone long enough to give you a chance to go through her father’s desk. There is a book there that we need. It is a matter of some urgency.”

“I’m not going to go snooping through Judge Swisher’s desk. That’d be unethical.”

“Ethics. They can pose such a dilemma. Here is your dilemma Ms. Garrison. Judge Swisher’s daughter, Emmaline, has been chosen by one of our members. He thinks she’ll make a delightful bride, and I couldn’t agree more. We’re preparing her for the occasion, and we’ll be finalizing their union officially with a formal wedding and reception soon. Then she’ll fly to France on his private jet and live out her life as a

faithful wife in blissful matrimony.

“What do you mean by chosen? Did she accept the man’s proposal?”

“Her marriage was arranged. It is not up to her to decide such things. The elders handle providing an assortment of eligible brides for our members to choose from. The only way that Emmaline will return to school and finish her degree is if you, sweet Cate, finish the mission she failed to accomplish. If you do, we’ll bring her back. If not, well, maybe you’d like to find a good home with one of our members. Do you understand?”

He leaned back and waited to see how Cate would react to the news. “Emmaline has no choice?”

“Choices are a luxury. Emmaline was given options, same as you. She failed to choose correctly, and though her life may turn out differently than she’d planned, she’ll be cherished by the man we chose for her. As long as she remains obedient to him, I’m almost certain her husband will be kind and faithful.”

‘And what if she disobeys him?’

“No need to worry yourself with that unpleasantness. Can we count on your cooperation?”

Her yes met his, and for a moment, he thought she would defy him, but she lowered her gaze to her hands and nodded her head in acquiescence. She would make an excellent partner from this point forward. Anything to avoid an arranged marriage to an unknown man. If she was smarter, she’d jump at the chance to get hitched to one of their fine members, but the fear served its purpose in helping to ensure cooperation.

He stood and gently secured her blindfold, then motioned for Vanessa to take her away.

Chapter Twelve

A persistent ringing pulled Gavin from sleep. "This had better be important."

"I can't find Cate."

He sat up in bed and gripped the side of the mattress. "You're supposed to be watching her."

"I sleep when she sleeps. As always."

"And?"

"When I arrived at the sorority house, she was already gone. I checked all her usual haunts. I can't find her."

"Did you check with Brittany?"

"Yes. She didn't see or hear anything, but they don't share a room now that they're staying in the house."

"Did you ask her other sorority sisters?"

"Nobody admits to seeing her leave."

Gavin's phone beeped with call-waiting. It was Grayson. Maybe he knew something. "Keep looking. This is Gray I have to take it."

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“Just landed in Philly. Any updates?”

“Do you always call people at the crack of dawn?”

“Only you. You’re always up.”

“Not when I have a stakeout the night before.”

“Sorry. Didn’t know.”

“It’s fine. Scott beat you to it. Cate is missing.”

“I thought he was watching her.”

“So did I.”

A text came through. He glanced at his phone. A text from Samantha confirming their plans for later. He should cancel, but first he needed to finish this call.

“I’m on it. We’ll find her.”

“Keep me posted. Call the second you hear something. I’m going to head back down there.”

“I’m booked at the Ritz. I’ll see to it that you have a room waiting here when you arrive.”

Samanthasatatatable staring the door to the coffee shop. She'd been waiting more than ten minutes. Gavin had better have a good explanation for his lack of respect for her time. She glanced down at the time on her phone again and took another sip of her caramel latte. At least something about this day had gone right. The barista made a perfect cup of coffee. She picked at the coffee cake muffin she'd added to her order.

After waiting another fifteen minutes, she decided to give Gavin the benefit of the doubt, maybe he'd forgotten they were meeting at the coffee shop and had gone straight to the cabin. She went to the counter and ordered a coffee and a blueberry muffin for him, then drove over to the same place they'd parked the afternoon before. No sign of Gavin's Range Rover.

She fought the rising irritation. It was fine. She'd handle this stakeout herself. And she'd eat his muffin and drink his coffee while she was at it.

After a few hours of staring through binoculars and only catching a single glimpse of a man on his way out, she packed up and headed home. An hour later her house phone rang. "Hello?"

"Sam. I'm sorry."

"For what, Gavin? Not answering my text? Leaving me sitting in a coffee shop waiting for someone who had no intention of showing? Or allowing me to spend the day staking out that house alone? Exactly which thing are you sorry about?"

"All of it." He sighed. "I meant to text. I swear I did. This morning a call came in early before I was even up for the day. My brain is so scattered right now. My sister is missing. I'm in Philadelphia. Grayson and I are trying to find her."

"Missing? That's scary. Are you sure she isn't with friends?"

“I don’t know where she is. Her bodyguard called before dawn to say he couldn’t find her.”

“Shouldn’t he have been with her?”

“It’s complicated. She won’t agree to protection, so he has to keep a low profile. He sleeps when she sleeps, but not on the same premises. When he arrived this morning to follow her to her classes, she was gone.”

“You’re having your sister followed against her will.”

“I know. It sounds bad, but you have to understand the kind of danger a billionaire’s daughter is in every time she steps out of the house.”

“Billionaire? I knew you were a Garrison, but you’re that Garrison as in Garrison Industries?”

“Yes. My father is the CEO of the global investment firm.”

“Ah. I hadn’t realized.”

“If I like a girl, I try not to let her know about my dad right away.”

She let that slide. Now wasn’t the time to ask him what he meant. “What can I do to help you find Cate?”

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“I left that book you lent me at the lodge. I know it’s a lot to ask, but can you bring it to me. If not, I’ll ask one of my men to drive out there to get it.”

She could call Billy and ask him to get coverage for her shifts for the next couple of days. “I’ll bring it.”

“Good. I was hoping you’d say that.”

“Why?”

He hesitated. “I’m not sure I have an adequate answer to that question.” But she thought she might. They’d connected in a way that rarely happened, and he needed the comfort of her friendship now. Someone to lean on. And, like a paramedic diving into a storm, she would jump in and provide for his needs even if it cost her everything.

Chapter Thirteen

Gavin sat beside Grayson in his brother’s hotel suite. Scott used the spare key Gray had given him to let himself in.

“Please tell me you found her,” Gavin said.

“Not yet, boss. I’ve got everyone looking.”

“That isn’t good enough.”

A text came through, so he glanced down to read it.

Sam: Valet is parking my car. Meet me in the lobby.

“I need to head down to the lobby. A friend of mine just drove three hours to bring me something that may or may not help.”

“Why didn’t you take the jet back to Benton. Don’t they have an airport?”

“There airport isn’t meant for jets. I’d have to fly into Avoca. I don’t know why I didn’t, except that maybe I thought my presence here was necessary.”

“Bring this girl up here. I want to meet the woman who has fried my brother’s brain.”

“All I can think of right now is Cate. Once she’s home, if Samantha is still in the picture we can discuss whether or not she’s affecting my mental capacity, but now is not that time.”

“You’re right. I apologize. Let’s see if this book she brought can somehow help us find our sister.”

Gavin took the elevator down to the lobby, and his eyes lit on Samantha. She lifted the book for him to see, but in that moment, he was more concerned with seeing her. He stepped forward and drew her into his arms embracing her in a crushing hug and clinging to her like a lifeline. After a couple of seconds he realized she probably wasn’t ready for the display of affection. “Sorry. Got carried away.”

“It’s fine.” Her eyes searched his, and he was pretty sure she found what she was looking for when she stepped close and kissed his cheek. “I didn’t just come here to bring the book.”

He lifted her chin so he could see her beautiful eyes. Then he kissed her gently on the lips. An acknowledgment that she was more than an employee and a friend. The last time he'd gotten mixed up with an employee had been a mistake, but Sam wasn't a regular employee, and he'd twisted her arm to get her to sign the contract. And he wasn't above firing her either. He didn't think she'd mind much.

Samantha studied the faces of the men surrounding her. She was the sole woman at the table. Scott had suggested they convene a meeting in the rotunda of the Fisher Fine Arts library. It was a place Cate frequented, so he surmised that some of her friends might pop in and out allowing them the chance to question them and find out if they knew where she might be. His logic made sense, but she was exhausted and hoped to get a room so she could catch a quick nap.

While she had every intention of staying up with Gavin, she also recognized that without a twenty-minute reprieve, her brain would cease to function at its best. She studied the grand space while listening to the men talk. The high, arching windows flooded the space with late afternoon light.

Grayson droned on about the names he was reading in her book. It seemed he knew many of the historic figures in the book and how they connected to the drafting of the constitution among other things. "I've seen this symbol before."

"Yeah. What is it then?" Scott asked.

"It's clear from Samantha's book, that it is the logo for a secret society that calls themselves the Continental Alliance. But that's not why I recognize it. It was on an invitation I received to join a fraternity back when I was attending university."

"You never mentioned that."

"I never was the frat boy type. When I refused to join, I was given another invitation

to join a chess club. I chose to politely decline.”

“You don’t even play chess.”

“Hence my reason for declining.”

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“I’m not sure if I should be offended. You and Cate were both asked to join this secret underground society, and I was ignored completely.”

“You joined the Army. Maybe that decision told them you didn’t fit their mold.”

“That’s probably for the best.”

Samantha let her eyes wander the space again. The warm color scheme of the ornamental woodwork and frescoes seemed to glow under the golden sunlight. Then she noticed it. The symbol. “Look.” She pointed above a door.

“How did we not see that sooner?” Gavin asked.

“Easy. We didn’t know to look.” Grayson said. “Good job spotting that, Sam.”

“Let’s get Pierce to look into any connection between the Continental Alliance and the Fisher Library. Scott can you make that call?”

“Sure thing, boss.”

Chapter Fourteen

Gavin’s watched as Scott went to do their bidding. Sometimes he hated being a boss. It tested the limits of friendship when the people you hung out with off-the-clock answered to you at work. It felt like he was always ordering them around, but Scott had been trusted to keep Cate safe, and he’d failed to do so. And as much as Gavin understood that nobody could watch his sister around the clock, it irked him that her

bodyguard had let her out of his sight. Recognizing that he was being irrational, he attempted civility.

He was mad at himself more than Scott anyway. Ever since he assigned Sandra to Emily and sealed her fate, he didn't trust his own decisions. And once again he'd made the wrong call. Maybe it would've been better to stick with Kenneth. But second guessing himself wasn't helping.

Shaking off his thoughts, he locked eyes with Samantha. Something was happening between them. There was no denying it. The question was would he sabotage it as per usual? She'd driven three hours to bring him her book. Glancing around him at the shelves lined with books, he wondered if a similar book may have been hidden here in plain sight all along. It wouldn't have occurred to him, had Sam not spotted that crucial clue. "Good catch on the carving, Sam."

"Hope it leads somewhere."

"Same here." Grayson stood and stretched. "We need to do something."

Scott rejoined them.

"What did Pierce have to say?" Gavin asked.

"He'll get right on it, but it'll take time."

"Time we don't have." Gray tapped the face of his watch to emphasize his point.

Gavin stood. "I'm going to take this book to the research librarian and see if he can help us."

"You sure that's a good idea?" Gray asked.

“No. But I don’t have a better one, and time is wasting.”

He stalked over to the desk and set the book along with a picture of Cate down on the counter.

A white-haired man identified as Fraser on his name tag raised his eyes to meet Gavin’s. “How can I help you, sir?”

Gavin handed him the book. “We’d like to see if you have any books on the Continental Alliance.”

“Let me check for you.” He punched some keys and frowned. “Nothing is coming up, but I can do a deep dive. Do you mind if I take a photo of the title page?”

“No. Go ahead.”

Fraser snapped a photo of the title page and another of the spine. “Check back in tomorrow, and I’ll have something for you.”

Gavin liked the man’s confidence in his own abilities. If he did have something the next day he’d offer him a job. “One more thing.”

The librarian raised an eyebrow.

“Have you seen this woman?”

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“Sure. She’s in here often. A fine arts major.”

“Yes. She is.” He lifted the photograph and stared at his sweet sister. “When was the last time you saw her?”

“This morning when I arrived. She must’ve been playing some sort of sorority game. She was wearing a blindfold and another girl was leading her down the front stairs of the library.”

Darkness had descended over the city when Samantha took a seat beside Gavin on the city bench. They’d attended a rally that Cate’s sorority had planned. It was a nothing more than a large gathering promoting local arts and culture. Definitely didn’t seem related to Cate’s disappearance. They finished searching the apartment she had shared with her friend Brittany before they’d moved into the sorority house. While she and Gavin handled that, Scott and Grayson interviewed everyone from the sorority they could convince to talk to them.

When they met up after, Gray insisted Gavin take Sam out for a bite to eat. He’d suggested Morton’s, but she’d convinced Gavin that cheese steaks from Gino’s made more sense. Neither one of them was interested in a five course meal. She took a bite and savored the mix of flavors. The rolls made all the difference. A genuine Philadelphia roll made for a great sandwich. But with Gavin’s sister missing, it didn’t have the same appeal it usually did.

She dabbed her mouth with a napkin. “Do you think this is a sorority stunt like that librarian suggested?”

Gavin shook his head. A weariness had come over him, and she wished she could lift the heaviness from his shoulders. Would his sister truly worry her brothers without good reason? If it was true that she didn't know Scott was watching her, then she might not even realize the harm she'd caused. Then again, the danger could be real. Just because it was a female she'd been seen with that morning, didn't mean she wasn't in danger.

"I wish I could turn back time and keep her from doing whatever stupid thing it was she did this morning that is keeping her away."

She patted his knee. It was a sad fact that loved ones couldn't always be protected, no matter how much a person wished it.

Gavin's phone rang. He glanced at the screen, but silenced it without answering.

"Guess it's not important."

"It's my dad. I don't have any good news to share."

Her eyes filled, and she blinked away the response. Jealousy. She'd give anything to speak to her father again, and here he was ignoring his.

Gavin brushed hair away from her eyes. "Hey. What's wrong?"

"Maybe you should call him back. You never know when you won't have the chance again."

He squeezed her hand. "You're right." She hadn't told him about her parents, but with his background in security, she was certain he'd looked into her history. Probably back when he'd first met her when Emily was staying at her house. There was no way he would've trusted Emily with someone he hadn't done a background

check on.

Chapter Fifteen

Gavin sat on the edge of the hotel bed and stared at his cell phone. He needed to call his dad back. Sighing, he hit the speed dial number. His father answered on the first ring.

“Dad, it’s Gavin.”

His call waiting beeped in with an unknown caller. “One sec, Dad it’s the other line.”

“Hello?”

“Gavin, it’s me. Listen, I need you to—“

“Cate, you’re breaking up. Are you okay?”

“—leave it alone. Let things—.” He was barely catching anything she said. Panic clawed at his throat making him wish he could jump through the phone to rescue her. The line went dead.

He went back to the call with his father. “That was Cate.”

“Is she okay?”

“I honestly don’t know. The call was breaking up. She said something about leaving it alone. That’s all I caught.”

“Leave what alone?”

“I wish I knew. Something’s going on. I think she was trying to warn us off of

searching for her, but I'm more determined then ever to find her now."

"Is it a good sign that she had access to a phone?"

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“Maybe.” He sighed. “Could be. I’m going to see if she called Grayson. Maybe, if she did, he got a clearer message. The moment I hear anything more, I’ll call.”

“I’ll do the same.”

SamanthastayedbyGavin’sside as he approached the research librarian he’d consulted the day before.

The man looked up and smiled. “Ah, you’re back. I’ve got something for you.” He opened a desk drawer and pulled out a leather-bound book. Over-sized by modern standards, it barely fit in the drawer. “I found something that might pique your interest.”

Gavin flipped through the pages, and Sam caught a glimpse of “Continental Alliance” at the top of one of the pages. This could be what they needed. She hoped so.

“Thanks, Fraser. I appreciate your finding this.”

As they made their way to the table in the rotunda where Grayson was waiting, Gavin placed his hand on the small of her back. The gesture seemed both sweet and possessive in equal parts. She wasn’t quite sure what to make of it but decided it meant nothing. He was in the business of protecting people, so that was probably all it was. Grayson grinned at her, and she closed her eyes to keep him from reading too much into her expression. Her thoughts tended to play like a movie screen across her face.

“What do you got there?” Gray asked Gavin keeping his tone hushed so as not to

disturb the other patrons.

Gavin set the book down on the table between them. “Our new buddy, Fraser, found us something linked to the Continental Alliance. Let’s check it out. Shall we?”

Since she couldn’t read from her spot at the table, she moved her chair closer to Gavin. His arm brushed hers as he turned the page. “Look here.” She read the text, but didn’t understand the significance. Something about qualifications for membership.

Grayson lifted the book he’d been perusing and pointed at small text near the bottom of the page. “This tome is about the Fraser Fine Arts Library. It says here that there were underground passages. They’ve been sealed off, but were once used to allow servants to move about freely without disturbing anyone.”

“Cate was seen out front, so I don’t think she’s being kept in some passageway in the building.”

“True. But it’s interesting.”

“It is. If it turns out to have any relation to what happened to our sister, though that seems unlikely, I’ll ask my friend, Rita, to tell us more. She has expertise in 19th century architecture.”

Gray leaned forward. “Guy’s wife, Rita?”

“Yeah. They started a business restoring old buildings. They’re working on a church at the moment, but I’m sure she’d make time for a consult if I asked.”

“Good deal,” Gray said.

Sam tapped the book. “Did you read this?”

“What is it?”

“The Continental Alliance was founded here in Philadelphia. My uncle obviously had some connection, and he lived in Benton. Are they tied to both areas? Are they statewide? Countrywide? Worldwide? Are we sitting in a historic building that they had a hand in designing? It would seem so from their symbol up there.” Her gaze wandered to the design mocking them from above the massive oak door.

“Maybe. A man named Frank Furness was the architect for the Fisher Fine Arts Library. I doubt he was a member. But who knows?” Gavin glanced down at his phone. “Pierce is calling. Maybe he has a lead.” Once he walked away, Grayson scooted into Gavin’s former seat, and studied the book with Samantha. There didn’t seem to be any clear connection between the library and the secret society, but her gut told her to keep digging.

Chapter Sixteen

Gavin’s vision blurred as he stared at the words on the page he was reading. Blinking, he closed the book Fraser had found. He wasn’t getting anywhere with it. His phone buzzed. Grace.

He answered in a whisper. “I’m in a library. Give me a second, and I’ll walk outside.” When he reached the outdoors, he leaned against the old bricks. “What’s up Grace?”

“Victoria Mae got a call on her cell from her sister’s phone.”

“What? Is Emmaline okay?”

“That’s the weird part. The call was from a park ranger. Some hikers found it.”

“Do you know what park?”

“Victoria Mae was in a panic. She didn’t catch what park they were calling from.”

“I have Emmaline’s number in my file, but can you give it to me so I don’t have to look it up. I’m going to call it and see if the park ranger answers.”

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“Sure thing.” She rattled off the number, and he ended the call before immediately dialing the number. The call went straight to voicemail. The ranger probably turned the phone off after identifying it’s owner.

He went back inside to get Samantha and Gray.

“Let’s go. We have a lead.”

Gray raised an eyebrow. “Care to share?”

“Outside.”

When they were outdoors, he shared what he’d learned.

“My best guess is Ricketts. The ping from the tower on Route 118 would seem to indicate that was where the cell was last turned on.”

“It’s a plausible theory. We can see what towers the call came from, but it might be easier if you could call someone?”

She nodded and dialed a number on her cell. After a brief phone call, she made eye contact. “It was Ricketts Glen.”

He raked his fingers through his hair. “We’re finally getting somewhere.”

“Ranger Stone made the call. The cell was found along a game trail. It surprises me it would be found where he said.”

“Can you show us where it would be?” Grayson asked.

She pulled up a map of the park on her phone and indicated the area along the northwestern border of the park. “I was out in that area twice last week because of complaints of drones disturbing the wildlife, but before that, I hadn’t been in that area in more than a year. It’s not part of our regular patrols.”

Gavin squinted. “Drones?”

“Yeah.”

“Is that unusual?”

“Not really. We don’t allow them, but visitors bring them.”

“Could be surveillance drones,” Grayson said.

“My thinking exactly. Get the jet ready. We’re heading up there.”

“You two go ahead. I’ll drive. I have my Subaru,” Sam said.

Gavin frowned. “I’ll have one of our men drive your car home for you. Come with us.”

Mason Kennedy leaned against the stone facade of nearby building and watched the Garrison boys exit the Fraser Fine Arts Library. Quick to act, yet slow to understand God’s grand design for humankind. Once they slowed down enough to consider the grand scheme, they could have a place with the Continental Alliance themselves.

His phone rang. Glancing at the caller ID he saw that it was Philip Monroe. “Philip, to what do I owe the pleasure?”

“I received an unsettling telephone call before dawn yesterday.”

“You don’t say?”

“Cate Garrison called. Wanted me to extend her the courtesy of my assistance since I’m friends with her father.”

“I’m sure you agreed to do so.” Mason grinned at Cate’s tenacity. The girl would be punished, of course, but he had to admire her courage to act against him. Most young ladies would’ve obeyed without question.

“Cate claims Emmaline Swisher was kidnapped. When did you venture into such sordid affairs?”

“Kidnapping is a ridiculous accusation. We arrange mutually beneficial marriages for our members. You know this.”

“You’re telling me those marriages aren’t consensual?”

“I said no such thing.”

“Cate is in my guest house. She’s getting antsy about her cell phone not working, so she’s asking me to take her somewhere to make a call. If my wife finds out she’s here, there is going to be trouble.”

Cate had gone rogue, but it would work to his advantage in the end. “Drive her to our Central Pennsylvania location. Tell her you need her to go undercover, so you can rescue not only Emmaline, but any other girls we might be holding. Leave her there to make nice with the others. Warden will know what to do.”

“Warden? What are you running out there? A prison?”

“Mr. Warden James. He’s in charge of the women, but he does get a kick out of the double meaning.”

He smiled as he disconnected the call. The game was afoot, and he enjoyed the competition.

Samantha ascended the stairs leading to Garrison Securities’ private jet. The opulence of the space shouldn’t have come as a shock. After all, she knew the brothers were wealthy, but it seemed more like a penthouse suite than an aircraft. Not that she knew much of about airplanes. This was her first time in one, and the prospect of lifting off the ground wasn’t appealing in the slightest.

Gavin smiled. “Like it? It’s not American Airlines, is it?”

“I wouldn’t know.” She lowered herself into one of the white leather seats. “This is my first time in a plane.”

“You’re kidding?”

“Do I look like I’m joking?” Her knuckles whitened on the arm of her chair.

“My apologies. I didn’t realize. It’s not as scary as you might think.”

She breathed in a calming breath and glanced over her shoulder at Grayson who was chatting with their pilot. “I’ll take your word for it.”

When the plane roared to life , she closed her eyes and dug her fingernails into her palms. Gavin who had taken the seat beside her, placed a hand on top of hers. His presence was a soothing balm.

“You okay?”

“I will be.”

Once they were in the air, she was able to breathe normally again.

“We’ll be in Benton in no time.”

“Then what?”

“I guess we investigate the area where the phone was found. See if we can spot a drone. If so, we keep it in our sights until someone brings it home. Then we’ll have a starting place on where to search for Emmaline.”

“Do you honestly think she’s alive?”

He shook his head. "I wish I did."

Looking out the window, she took in the patchwork of fields and trees below. It was beautiful from above. Better than the view from the old fire tower at Ricketts. "What about Cate?" Her whispered question caused him to tense making her regret the words.

"She called yesterday. I have hope. And I keep praying."

"God doesn't always answer our prayers. At least not the way we want him to."

"True. I've had more experience with His will over mine than I care to admit, but I've come to the conclusion that if God allows something in my life, I'll learn something from it even if I hate the process."

"Will you be able to keep saying that if we don't find Cate?" she asked.

"Only if God gives me the grace to be able to do so."

Chapter Seventeen

Gavin stayed close to Samantha's side as she led the way through the dense forest to the coordinates where the geocachers claimed they'd found Emmaline's phone. He couldn't imagine someone placing a geocache in the area, but maybe there were people out there who liked hiking through briars and marsh, being clawed by sticker bushes, and wearing hitchhikers on their hiking boots. Gavin was not one of those people. He liked well-worn trails. Sam's GPS beeped indicating they were approaching the waypoint.

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Sam stopped. “This is it. If you look off to your right, you’ll see a high fence.”

He didn’t see it. “All I see is greenery.”

She pointed again and he spotted it. Grapevines had spread from the trees to the fence effectively concealing it from view. “That’s the old Ricketts Estate. It’s private property, but I saw a couple of people on the porch when I was out here investigating those drone sightings. They were having a strange conversation. At the time I dismissed it as nothing to worry about, but now I’m not so sure.”

“What did they say?”

“Something about protecting themselves and about it being too risky.”

“Could be related.”

“Or it could be something as unrelated as a risky challenge like sky diving or bungee jumping.”

“But you don’t believe that’s the case.”

“No. I don’t.” She frowned. “It didn’t feel right at the time, but there wasn’t much I could do about it. They hadn’t said anything that was truly incriminating. And even if they had, I would’ve needed more proof, and they weren’t even in my jurisdiction. Even though it’s surrounded by state land, it’s private property. Not part of the state park.”

“Let’s find a place to watch from.”

“There’s a tree stand about fifty yards that way.” She pointed southeast.

“Is there anything you don’t know about this area?”

“Not much.” She grinned. “Hunted from that tree stand when I was a teenager.”

“You hunt?”

“I did back then. Wanted to make Uncle Richard proud.”

She led the way. The boards nailed to the tree had seen better days, but they made their way up to the tree fort like structure.

“We should’ve each brought a portable tree stand. They would’ve been much safer.”

“But this way we get to sit together.” He nudged her shoulder with his own.

She sighed. “About Philadelphia. That kiss—”

“What about it?” His eyes searched hers. If she had didn’t want a relationship, he needed to know, but he didn’t want to know.

“I’m not going to hold you to whatever that was. It was an emotional moment, and I understand if you got caught up in it.”

“Do you think that’s all you are to me? Some kind of an emotional lapse in judgment?”

A blush colored her cheeks. “How should I know?”

He tugged her closer. “I have no regrets.” He nuzzled her nose with his. “Do you?”

“No regrets.” Her eyes dropped to his lips, and he took it for the invitation it was.

As his lips dropped to hers, a buzzing noise drew close. He sighed. “It’s the drone, isn’t it?”

“Sure is.”

“The worst timing ever.” He fumbled for a tracking device to attach to the machine, but it had already risen too high for him to reach. “I guess we’ll have to watch to see where it goes.”

Samanthaleanedagainstthesturdy tree and listened to the sound of Gavin’s breathing. He’d almost kissed her again. It was something she’d been certain she wanted when she’d first met him, but when he’d failed to call, she’d given up on any kind of relationship with him. Now he was the one making the overtures, but could she trust him not to hurt her?

His fingers found hers, and he laced their hands together. A perfect fit. He lifted their combined hands to his lips and kissed the back of her hand. She wanted this. The whole thing. The flirting, the hand holding, even the kisses. Especially the kisses. But the drone had interrupted, and he hadn’t tried again. She wasn’t forward enough to initiate one. The kiss on his cheek in the hotel lobby was one thing, but leaning up to place one on his lips that was something she couldn’t see herself doing. So, she’d wait. Not patiently, mind you. But that was life.

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She disentangled their hands, so she could lift the binoculars to her eyes. As she looked through them, Gavin ran his index finger along the length of her neck leaving delightful shivers running down her spine. The man would be the death of her.

“It’s going back.” She pointed to the descending drone. Gavin lifted his own binoculars and the two of them watched as the miniature aircraft returned to its owner. A man stepped outdoors, lifted it to his chest, and carried it inside. “Well, I guess we now know that the Ricketts Estate has a drone operator. It’s not much, but it was on park land, so Billy and I can go talk to them.”

“I’m not sure that’s the wisest idea.”

“We’re law-enforcement. I’ll be armed, and I’ll be with a fellow ranger. You don’t have to worry about me, Mr. Bodyguard.”

“Can’t help it. You’ve become important to me, Sam. I know it’s only been a week or so, but—”

“Please don’t make me any promises. If you don’t say the words, I can’t throw them back in your face when you return to your life in New York. Whatever we have here may feel real, but it can’t be. I won’t live in a concrete jungle, and a billionaire could never be happy in an old farmhouse.” She blinked away tears then rose to her knees and placed her lips close to his.

Chapter Eighteen

Gavin closed the distance and drank in Samantha’s kiss. Her lips were honey sweet just

as he'd imagined them. She was warm and compliant in his arms, but he wasn't looking for a fling. He couldn't do this. What he wanted was a woman he could marry. One who would give him children. They'd raise a family together.

He let her go. "I'm not looking for a casual relationship, Sam."

She turned from him, and he couldn't read her expression.

"It's fine. Let's head back. I need to update Billy and see if he's available to do a door knock at the Ricketts Estate."

"Sam."

"Please don't. I want us to remain friends. Let's not mess that up by over-analyzing whatever this was."

"Does that mean you don't regret the kiss?"

A smile tugged at the corners of her lips. "Regret is a strong word."

"I'm not sure I want to head out of these woods."

"Why is that? Afraid of a little poison ivy?"

He gave her a half smile. "No. I'm scared that I lost whatever chance I had with you."

"We want different things. Don't stress over it." She tightened the laces on her hiking boots instead of meeting his gaze.

"I wish I could see things as casually as you seem to. I'm not built that way."

“I think you mentioned that before. Suppose I should’ve understood what you meant. If I was willing to give up country living for anyone, I could see it being you.”

“Is that because I’m rich?” He forced a grin, hoping that if he faked it, he’d feel it.

She tilted her head to side and batted her eyelashes. “Do I strike you as a gold-digger?”

“You didn’t until now.”

“If I hadn’t gotten to know you before I found out you were wealthy, I would’ve held it against you.”

“Why is that?”

“Bad experiences with wealthy people.”

“What about your uncle? I’m guessing he had money.”

“Some. Nowhere near as wealthy as you. And he didn’t flaunt it. He drove a beat-up Ford Pickup and lived in that ramshackle farmhouse I call home.”

“I have a feeling I would like him.”

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She nodded. “Kindred spirits. You would’ve loved each other. Wish I knew where he was so I could introduce the two of you.”

“You think he was killed, right?”

She breathed out a long sigh. “I do. I guess I always have.”

“God help the people who took my sister if they hurt her.”

“I’m not sure even God can provide that kind of help.”

“He’s the only one who can, Sam.”

Bythetimetheyarrived back at her Park Ranger SUV, Samantha wished they’d driven separately. Risking her heart on a billionaire playboy wasn’t worth it. His putting a stop to things was for the best. She knew he wanted to make promises, but she knew better than to believe he’d keep them. Besides, his sister was missing. He didn’t need any added complications. And that’s all she would be in the end. Once Cate was safe at home, he’d get back to his life, and she’d be nothing more than a pleasant memory. At least she hoped the memories would be good for him.

“Sam, why are you shutting me out?”

“I’m not. But I do need to focus on my job.” She headed down Red Rock Mountain hoping she could drop him at the lodge before he tore her insides apart any more than he already had.

He stared out the window. "I think you're brakes are burning."

She'd forgotten to down-shift. Something she never did. Putting her car in 2nd gear she continued down the incline. When the road flattened out at near the stop sign, she put her vehicle back in drive. Gavin stared down at his phone. "Scott sent a text. He's on his way back with your car."

"Great. Thanks."

"Call, and I'll pick you up at work when you're done."

"No need. I can take the Explorer home."

"You sure? Gray said he was renting something from Bloomsburg. I think he was hoping for a pickup truck."

"I'm sure. Shouldn't Grayson be getting home to his wife?"

"Jenna is flying into Avoca later tonight. He offered to send the jet to pick her up, but she refused. She hates the idea of wasting all that fuel when she can fly commercial."

"Sounds like a good woman."

"She is. He's a blessed man."

"Here you are." She pulled into the parking lot of the lodge.

"I don't like the way we're leaving things."

She shrugged. "I have to get on with that door knock. I'll let you know how it goes."

He reached over and squeezed her hand then got out of the car. Instead of waiting for him to go inside, she circled around the drive and headed back to the park.

Billy was sitting at his desk when she arrived at the office.

“You up for a door knock?”

“Sure.” He squinted at her. “Where we going?”

“The Ricketts Estate.”

“Really?”

“You know those drone calls we keep getting?”

He nodded.

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“Seems they’re originating from there.”

“So, a knock and talk is in order?” He chuckled. “You’re looking for more than a drone operator. Tell me what you’re thinking.”

“That cell phone you found?”

“I think they may have her.”

“Quite a leap from drone operator to kidnapper.”

“They seem to be using those drones for some sort of patrol.”

“Maybe a simple security measure?”

“It’s possible. I don’t think so. A knock and talk should allow us to get a feel for whether or not their hiding something. If we think they are, we can set up a stakeout.”

“You’re coming to some far out conclusions, but I’m in.” He grabbed his keys. “I’ll drive.”

Ten minutes later they were standing on the wide front porch of the Ricketts’ Estate. Billy knocked, and she prepared herself for a confrontation should it come to that.

The man she’d seen bring the drone in earlier came to the door. “How can I help you?” He frowned.

“Rangers Stone and Rollins. We had some reports about a drone being operated on park land. You wouldn’t know anything about that would you?”

The man chuckled. “You came all the way out here to ask me about my drone? Sure I had it up today, but I didn’t realize it went over the fence. I’ll be more careful in the future.”

“You do that.”

As they drove away, Billy smiled and glanced her way. “Did he seem to be hiding anything?”

“He thought it was a laughing matter at first, but then he suddenly turned cooperative. Maybe overly so, don’t you think?”

Billy shook his head and parked his SUV. “You thinking stakeout?”

“I sure am.”

“I’ll grab some snacks. Meet you back at the park office in three hours?”

“Perfect.” She smiled. They didn’t always work with partners, but she thought of Billy as hers. He was a good friend and trusted her instincts even when they went against his own.

Chapter Nineteen

Gavinsankintothesoft leather of his favorite chair in the rustic living area of the lodge. The rest felt good. He hadn’t gotten much sleep the night before. His eyes drifted closed, but the sound of a powerful engine startled him awake. He glanced up in time to see Grayson step out of a Ford Bronco. It’s bright blue paint gleamed in the

sunshine. Looked new.

He ambled out to meet his brother, but after the afternoon hike, he was dead on his feet. “That yours?” He raised a brow.

Grayson grinned and patted the hood. “It was sitting there at a dealership calling my name when I was driving past it on my way to the rental place. Figured, why not?”

“Why not, indeed. You always did love shiny toys.” Gavin chuckled.

“Life’s short, and Jenna’s flying in tonight. I can pick her up in style.”

“I’m sure she’ll love it. But do you think the optics look good? Our sister is missing and your off buying new vehicles.”

“Most people will understand we need a way to get around while we’re here. They won’t care if I rent or buy.”

“I suppose you’re right.” Another car pulled into the lot, and Gavin smiled. Scott had arrived with Sam’s Subaru.

“Perfect timing. Gray and I will follow you to Sam’s place, so you can drop off her car, and then we’ll give you a lift back here. You need the address?”

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“Nah. She has her house programmed into her GPS all we need to do is tell it to ‘go home’.”

Gavin shook his head. He’d have to suggest she change the address on her GPS to the closest police station. Programming home with your real address was a terrible idea. “See you there in a few.”

“My new toy is already benefiting you, little brother,” Gray said.

Gavin chuckled. “I’ll admit it looks fun to drive. Toss me your key fob. I’m driving.”

After dropping off Sam’s car, Scott climbed into the back of the Bronco. “Love the wheels, Gray.”

“How do you know it’s not mine?” Gavin asked.

Scott laughed. “I just know.”

“So, I’ve been thinking. When Grayson gets back with Jenna, maybe you and I can do a little breaking and entering.”

“Trying to convince me your wild like your big brother?”

“I’m serious. We have the resources and the skills. They could be holding Cate over at that Ricketts Estate. If she’s there, who knows what she’s enduring?”

Gray nodded. “I’m with you. Let’s go get our sister.”

“Not you. What I’m talking about doing could get me arrested, and Jenna won’t appreciate me dragging you into it.”

Samantha sat inside the pop-up hunting blind she’d brought along to conceal herself from drones if they were deployed again. Darkness had descended, but she had her night vision goggles. Billy was close by if she needed him. He’d stayed on the paved road, headlights off, watching for trouble.

Her walkie talkie crackled. “See anything yet?” Billy asked.

“Nothing worth noting. A light went on in a back room and another in the basement.”

A chorus of spring peepers filled the air. Weather in the fifties the past few nights had no doubt brought them out. Closing her eyes for a second, she drank in the moment.

“Sam, there are two figures headed toward the property. See them yet?” Billy asked.

She scanned the area until she found them approaching the fence with wire cutters in hand. Prepared to do a little breaking and entering. “You’ve got to be kidding me?”

Billy chuckled. “Friends of yours?”

“Yeah. Now what? If we stop them we tip off the people inside that we’re on to them, but if we don’t we’re complicit in a crime.”

“Let’s see if we can stop them quietly. No arrests. No noise. Then we’ll regroup back at the park office.”

“You sure you’re okay with that Billy? I don’t want you to put your job on the line.”

“Let me worry about that. I’m retiring soon anyway.” She’d been hearing that line

since she'd started working with him, but let it go. He wouldn't retire until he was forced out.

"Do you mind joining me over here? A show of force so my friend doesn't think he can talk me into letting him break the law."

Sam moved silently toward the fence.

Scott bent down with wire cutters in hand, and Gavin flipped on his flashlight illuminating Samantha's face and temporarily blinding her. "Sam, I, uh—"

"Save it, Gavin. Head back out to the road."

"You know I have to find out if she's in there."

Billy had arrived, so she cleared her throat to let Gavin and Scott know they weren't alone. "Ranger Stone, do you have your cuffs?"

"Of course. Never leave home without them," Billy said.

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“No need.” Gavin raised his hands. “I’ll cooperate.”

She gestured for him to walk ahead of her.

Chapter Twenty

Samantha perched herself atop a picnic table outside the park office and crossed her arms over her chest. Ranger Stone stood with one foot on the bench of the picnic table, an amused look on his face.

Gavin didn’t see what was so funny.

“What were you thinking?” Sam asked.

“My thought process shouldn’t be too hard to discern. My sister could be in there. And what about you? You didn’t mention a stakeout when you dropped me off. When did you come up with that plan, and why didn’t you tell me?”

“I’m not in the habit of sharing information about official investigations with civilians.”

“Is that why you and I staked the place out together earlier?”

“That was a mistake. I never should’ve let you know where that cell phone was found. And I should’ve kept the information about the drone to myself.”

“I’m going to find her, Sam. You won’t keep me away from that place.”

Billy stood to his full height and narrowed his eyes. “If you tell us you’re planning to break the law, we’ll have no choice but to prevent you from doing so.”

“You two remind me of a couple of cats fighting over the last bite of tuna,” Scott said.

Gavin drew in a breath and glared at his friend and employee. “I’ll tell you when I want your input.”

The corner of Scott’s mouth turned up. “Testy. You know it’s true. Just tell the girl how you feel already, so we can get back to work.”

Billy smacked Scott on the shoulder. “Maybe we should give them a minute to work out their domestic dispute.”

Scott laughed and the two of them walked away.

The moment they were alone, Sam lifted her eyes to his. “We’re not a team if I can’t count on you not to go rogue.”

“That’s not what happened. You know I have to find Cate. You, of all people, should understand.”

She rubbed her temples. “Understanding doesn’t equal approval. You can’t take chances out of desperation. What you did tonight wasn’t smart. You almost let them know that we were watching them. If they are holding the girls there, They could’ve moved them. Thanks to Billy’s quick actions, I think we kept them from knowing any of us were out there, but what if they did hear us out there. They could be moving those girls right now.”

“We should get back there.”

“Do you hear yourself, Gavin?” She threw her hands up. “Go home. Get a few hours of sleep. We’ll regroup in the morning.”

“Will we, or are you planning to attempt a take down on your own?”

“Honestly, I think it’s time we call Wade. Working for the state police, he can do far more than either of us can.”

“You’re right. We should’ve called him before we flew back here.”

“And we would’ve if either of us had been thinking clearly. Between Cate going missing, and whatever was going on between us, we both lost our minds. Let’s see if we can get refocused.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Samantha awakened to a rooster crowing outside her window. Her neighbors’ chickens wandered over each morning to dig around in her mulch. This time of year she didn’t mind so much. Once she planted her gardens, it was a different story entirely.

She rubbed her eyes and sat up. It was time to tackle the day, but right now a hot shower was calling.

Twenty minutes later as she was swiping some mascara onto her lashes, her house phone rang and announced a call from Emily. She almost let it go to voicemail, but decided to grab it. “Hey, Em. What’s up?”

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“You missed the cake tasting. You were supposed to be meet me at the bakery. How could you forget?”

Sam smacked herself in the forehead. “I’m so sorry. Things have been so crazy.”

“I chose the pink champagne. It’s topped with raspberry mousse and vanilla buttercream. I wish you could’ve tasted it.”

“You have no idea how bad I feel about missing it.”

“It’s fine. Wade left work early and filled in for you. It wasn’t terrible. We haven’t had much time alone lately.”

“Wasn’t your mother there?”

“She went home the day before yesterday.” Emily sighed. “I love my parents, but since Nora died they’ve been mostly hands-off, so I don’t know what made my mother think she needed to plan every little detail of my wedding.”

Sam laughed. “What shocked me was her taking Wade up on his offer to stay at his place.”

“That was a head-scratcher. She could’ve rented her own place. I think she was hoping to figure out why I settled for a cop.”

“Didn’t she know him when you two dated in high school?”

“She did. And she wasn’t his biggest fan then either. Thought I could do better.”

“Well...”

“Don’t start.”

“Just kidding. I think you two are the perfect couple.”

“Wade mentioned bringing Gavin in to look at a symbol in your uncle’s case. How did that go? Sparks flying?”

She had no idea. And Sam wasn’t sure she was ready to share the details. “We’ve actually been working closely together. His sister, Cate, went missing, so I drove down to Philadelphia to bring him a book he needed. We spent a bit of time together trying to figure out what could’ve happened to his sister. And then we flew back on his jet when another lead came up.”

“He got you to get on an airplane?”

“That’s all you got from that?”

“Sorry. The flying thing caught me off guard. Does he know about your parents?”

“Probably. He hasn’t mentioned it. I haven’t mentioned it. But I’m sure he checked me out before you stayed at my place last year. If not, he definitely would’ve had me vetted before he gave me that employment contract to sign.”

“Back up. Employment contract? You’re working for Gavin?”

“Sort of.”

“There is no sort of. You either are or you aren’t,” Emily said.

“It’s complicated.”

“You’ve lost me.”

“Join the club.”

“I can’t believe Cate is missing. How is Gavin holding up?”

“Losing his mind.”

“I get that.”

“Yeah. I know you do. I wish you didn’t.”

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“Me too. Wade hasn’t mentioned anything about Cate. Maybe he thought I was too wrapped up in the wedding to bring it up.”

“I don’t think Gavin called him.”

“Really?”

“The two of us decided last night that he would call Wade first thing this morning. We need his help.”

The moment the clock struck nine, Gavin pushed the send button with his thumb.

Gavin: Can you meet? I’m staying at the Lodge at Raven Creek in Benton.

Wade: I’m tied up this morning, but can be there by one.

Gavin: See you then.

That left plenty of time to scope out the Ricketts Estate before meeting with Wade. Something was happening there, and he needed to get to the bottom of it.

Gavin glanced out the window at the Bronco. He could ask his brother for the keys, but if he went off without consulting her, Samantha would get testy again. Probably best to stay on her good side.

A quick text would give him his answer. She was either in or she was out, but nothing would stop him.

Gavin: Want to do some investigating with me?

Sam: Ricketts Estate?

Gavin: Where else?

Sam: Pick you up in ten.

That was easier than he'd expected. More than likely, she planned to voice her objections in person. What better way to do that than to have him captive in her car? Maybe he should've considered the stakes before texting Sam.

When her Subaru pulled into the lot, he hurried outside and let himself in the passenger side. "Sleep well?"

Samantha glanced his way before pulling out onto Raven Creek Road. "Not really. When I finally managed to get to sleep my neighbor's rooster woke me."

"But how cool is it that you have roosters here? The only time we hear them in New York is when kids press buttons on their toys to play the sound."

"Yeah. They're okay I guess."

"So, where are we headed?"

"Coffee shop then stakeout."

"I do need to be back by one. Wade's coming by."

"Good. His connections should be helpful."

“Tree stand again?”

“Nah. I’m thinking we should approach the property from another angle. Their land borders Game Lands Thirteen, so we can go in dressed as turkey hunters.”

He glanced down at his clothing. “Since I left the Army, I don’t even own a piece of camo clothing.”

“I’ve got you covered. There’s a windbreaker and a baseball hat in the back. They were Uncle Richard’s, but I’m sure they’ll fit you.”

“Been taking my measure, have you?”

She smiled, but remained silent.

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Mason cringed as his Jaguar bottomed out turning onto the private drive that led to the back of the estate. They needed to get it repaired before the party. Wouldn't want any of their fine members damaging their vehicles on the roadway.

He opened the passenger door for Vanessa and held out a hand. She placed her delicate hand in his and allowed him to assist her from the vehicle. A smile formed as they entered the grand foyer. A painting along the south wall caught his eye, so he stopped to admire it. "I think this is a new acquisition. Lovely, don't you think?"

"Yes." Her voice was timid and fearful. She'd need training before the party. He could not present a mousy woman to the world as hostess for the Continental Alliance.

"It's the perfect place for a party, don't you think so, love?"

"Might be a tad ostentatious."

He let out a derisive laugh and shook his head. "Not so. This is the grandeur and spectacle our members have come to expect, and we shall exceed their expectations this year with me at the helm and you by my side." If he could get her into shape in the short time he had left. If not, maybe he'd choose one of the other girls to play hostess. Some men kept more than one wife. It wasn't frowned upon when David and Solomon did so. Yes, that was the answer. He'd take another wife if Vanessa couldn't handle his needs herself.

Taking her hand, he proceeded into the library and pulled out the book detailing the history of the Continental Alliance and pressed the plate that sat flush with the

bookshelf. The shelves swung out allowing him access to a long hallway that lit as he entered. He followed it until they reached a set of spiral stairs leading down to another locked door. One that required a code to enter. He punched it in and followed Vanessa into the soundproof dormitory style room where several young women awaited suitable unions.

A pair of flashing green eyes locked on his. It was a shame he wouldn't be able to make her his wife. Cate Garrison was exquisite in nearly every way. Her father and brothers would find her if he kept her in the United States though. The only thing to do with a girl like her was to ship her out quickly. There was a member in Columbia looking for a wife of her caliber. Might not be far enough. Perhaps New Zealand or Australia would be good choices for the insolent girl.

"I overestimated you, Ms. Garrison."

"No. You underestimated me."

He chuckled. "Then explain how you ended up here in our women's dormitory."

Defiant eyes met his.

"You'll accept your fate soon enough." He turned his attention to his wife. "Since you find the grandeur of the estate objectionable, perhaps you'll be more comfortable in the dorm."

"You're not serious."

"Oh, but I am. If, perhaps, I decide to call for you at some point, I'll expect you to comport yourself with the utmost grace and poise. Should you fail, don't think you can't be easily replaced."

He walked over to a blonde woman in a tattered green dress. “Why are you dressed in filthy rags?” He glanced around noticing the girls’ outfits for the first time. “All of you are filthy. I expect that to be rectified immediately.” He twirled a lock of the hair on the girl in green. “You first. I think you’ll clean up quite nicely. I’ll send Warden down to help you prepare. Tonight you shall dine on caviar while my wife considers all she stands to lose should I decide to put her away permanently.” Yes. He could get behind the idea of multiple wives. Maybe he’d keep ten of them. Why hadn’t he considered the idea sooner? After all, David was a man after God’s heart, and he certainly didn’t stick with the wife of his youth throughout his years.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The hike from the game lands road to the perimeter of the property took ten minutes. Thankfully, the path was a well worn hunting trail, leaving it easier to navigate than the one they’d taken the day before. “We’re here.” Sam stopped at an oak tree and pulled something from her backpack. A few seconds later she’d popped up a blind that blended rather nicely with their surroundings.

“I never saw myself falling for a wilderness girl.”

She shook her head. “Don’t even talk about falling. You aren’t. I’m not. We had a couple of great kisses. Leave it there, Gavin.”

“For now.” He longed to kiss her again, but he’d settle for holding her hand. For now, he’d behave and accomplish what they came here for. His sister’s life might depend on his focus.

The area inside the blind was smaller than the tree stand had been. When he raised the binoculars to take a look at a catering van slowly making its way down the estate drive his arm brushed Samantha’s. The look in her eyes told him every touch was as torturous for her as it was for him. They would be fools not to explore the lava

bubbling under the surface, but that could wait. Right now they needed to figure out why a caterer was visiting the estate. It could be their in. If Wade could get a couple of undercover cops in there, they might get somewhere without breaking any laws.

“When we get back to the lodge, we’ll have to look up ‘Taste of Class’ Caterers.”

“They could be our way in.” He raised the binoculars again. A man stood on the back deck speaking with the caterer. “I’ve seen that man before.”

Samantha preceded Gavin into the lodge’s great room. The rustic elegance of the place fit with its mountain setting while providing the luxury guests expected.

Gavin grinned as he set his backpack down beside a leather chair. “Didn’t expect to come back to a full house.”

Grayson glanced at his wife and then over at Scott before locking eyes with Gavin. “I’m just as invested in this as you are.”

“No doubt,” Gavin said.

A knock sounded before the door of the lodge swung open. “Surprise bachelor party? For me? You shouldn’t have.” He laughed.

“We didn’t. But fun’s just getting started. Coffee?” Sam asked.

“Sure.”

She brewed him a cup in the Keurig and brought it out to him.

Gray grinned. “We could get used to having a coffee girl around. You’re hired.”

“Your brother already hired me, but not to bring you coffee.”

“Wait. What?” Gray raised an eyebrow.

Gavin stood. “She needed to be briefed on Emmaline Swisher, and the only way that could happen was if she signed the contract.”

“So, you’re not hiring your girlfriend as your personal assistant or some such nonsense?”

“No. He is not.” Samantha scowled at Gray. “First of all, I’m not Gavin’s girlfriend. Secondly, I’m a law-enforcement ranger, you think I’d be happy acting as anyone’s personal assistant?”

“I’m betting working as Gavin’s assistant pays far better than the state of Pennsylvania does.”

“Drop it before you put us both in the doghouse. There is a reason I hired Ben for that job. I don’t have to worry about him getting emotionally attached.”

“Smart move, bro. Keep shoveling until the hole swallows you.”

Sam decided to let him off the hook. “Let’s get back to the matter we’re here to discuss.”

“Right.” Gavin sat and leaned forward in his chair. “Samantha and I did some more surveillance this morning at the Ricketts Estate. A catering van pulled in. The side read ‘Taste of Class.’ It might be a lead worth following. If we can get them to cooperate Wade, you might be able to get a couple of your people inside to check out the estate.”

“You lost me, Gavin. Why exactly are we investigating the Ricketts Estate?”

“I forgot you weren’t up to speed.”

Gray cracked his knuckles. “We think they have Cate.”

“What do you mean ‘have Cate’?”

“She’s missing. So is Emmaline Swisher. Emmaline’s cell phone was found near their property line. They’re using drones for what seems to be security measures. And on top of all that, Emily overheard snippets of conversation that didn’t sit right with her. Something is going on there. We need to find out what they’re up to, and if Cate and Emmaline are there, we have to get them out.”

“How is it that a federal judge’s daughter and a billionaire’s daughter both go missing and I know nothing about either of those cases?”

“We kept it out of the news thinking Cate would be safer that way. Swisher thinks his daughter is off gallivanting somewhere. He didn’t want to stir up a fuss only to find out she’s partying in Malibu.”

Wade continued as if Gavin hadn’t spoken. “Worse part is how my best friend’s sister

is one of the missing girls, and he doesn't even think to call me the moment he realizes she is gone? What is wrong with that picture?"

"Sorry. My brain took a hiatus the second I got the call from Scott." He gestured to his right hand man.

Wade frowned. "You were with Cate when she was abducted?"

"No. I got to her sorority house in time to follow her to class, and she was already gone."

While Gavin and Gray caught Wade up on all the details Sam slipped from the room and made herself a cup of tea. Jenna joined her in the kitchen. "You okay? The guys can get a little weird when they're together. Gray doesn't mean any harm."

"I'm fine. Just needed a breather. Gavin can be a little intense."

"I've never seen him so smitten before. It's cute."

"Stop. He is not."

"Didn't you notice the way he couldn't even look in your direction without looking away. He's afraid everyone in there will see the emotions flit across his face."

"You're imagining things."

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“Am I?”

“Even if there were something there, and I’m not saying there is, Gavin’s life is in New York City. I’m not leaving Benton. This is my home.”

“What if his life didn’t have to be in New York?”

“That’s crazy talk. He has a company to run.”

“A company he could run from anywhere in the world. Even Benton.”

“I wouldn’t ask him to uproot his life for me.”

“Maybe not.” Jenna chewed on her lip. “Forget I said anything.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

After Samantha left to get ready for her shift at work, Gavin listened intently as Wade reviewed the facts they laid out for him. “I want to hear more about this man you saw talking to the caterers. You sure you can’t remember where you saw him before?”

Jenna placed a hand on Gavin’s arm. “Do you think you could describe him well enough for me to sketch?”

“Worth a shot, I guess.”

She returned a few minutes later with a sketchbook and looked over her shoulder at

Grayson. “You’ll have to make dinner tonight, I’ll be busy working with my brother-in-law.”

“Now we know why she offered to help. Anything to get me into the kitchen.”

“You won’t mind. It’s well-stocked, and you won’t be forced to eat another one of my burnt mac & cheese dinners.”

“You know, you two could hire a cook,” Gavin said.

“I’ve tried. She won’t let me.”

Gavin laughed as Gray and Wade left the room, presumably to make dinner.

“You really won’t let him hire a cook?”

“If he really wanted to, I’d support him, but he loves spending time in the kitchen. I intentionally burned the mashed potatoes last week, so he’d be able to make one of those fancy dishes he saw on the food network. Hiring a chef wouldn’t be a good thing for him. The time he spends cooking relieves the stress from the office.” She tilted her head. “Now back to this. Describe the shape of the man’s face.”

After drawing each feature, she’d ask him to describe the next one. When she turned the page toward him, he nodded. “It’s close. His nose is a bit straighter, more aristocratic looking with one of those little bumps in it.”

“Like it was broken at one time?” She made the change.

“Exactly like that.” He grinned. “That’s him.”

Grayson returned to the room and dropped a kiss on the top of his wife’s head.

“Dinner’s ready.”

“So is my sketch.”

“Can I see that?” Gray reached for it. “I know this guy.”

“You do?” Gavin asked.

“He’s older here, of course, but that’s the kid who tried to recruit me to join the fraternity, Xi Zeta Gamma, back when I went to Penn.”

“Pierce discovered a connection between them and Cate’s sorority, Zeta Gamma Xi.”

“Sounds like a lead,” Gray said. “Let’s find out what this guy has been up to since I last saw him.”

Samanthawrotethepoachera ticket and sent him on his way glad to have finally caught the creep, but sad that another deer lost its life in the process. She dropped it at the local butcher. Once it was properly packaged, the meat would be donated.

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She headed back to the office and found Billy staring at paperwork. “What’s going on? You’ve been taking longer with that stuff lately.”

“It’s my eyesight. I think it’s going. Maybe I’ll really have to retire this time.”

“Could it be cataracts?”

“Probably. The doc mentioned them last year, but I didn’t take him seriously.”

“Surgery might correct it, and you can keep working.”

“We’ll see.”

“In the meantime, let me help you with that stack. She took a good chunk of the work from his desk.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask you about the guy who tried to break into the Ricketts Estate. What’s going on with you two?”

Heat flooded her face. “Nothing.”

“Eh. No need to lie about girl. It’s written all over your face.”

“He seems to like me, but I told him I didn’t want a relationship with him.”

“May I ask why you did that when you’re clearly smitten with him?”

She let out a mirthless laugh. “A relationship with a New York billionaire is not something I’m ready for. It doesn’t matter how much I might like him. I can’t go there.”

“That’s silly. How much money a person has shouldn’t matter, and people can move, so geography isn’t that huge an obstacle. If you care about each other, you’ll make it work.”

Sam focused on the paperwork in front of her. There was no way she’d convince Billy of what she knew in her heart. Taking a risk with Gavin would devastate her in the end.

Mason leaned against the marble fireplace and watched Brittany as she addressed envelope after envelope, her hand gliding across the parchment. The inkwell beside her was near empty, a testament to the fact that she’d spent hours mastering the art of calligraphy under his tutelage. She kept her eyes focused on her work avoiding any careless smears.

“Your penmanship is improving. Keep at it, and you’ll soon be adequate.”

“I’ve completed the task. May I go now?”

Mason chuckled. “You’ll remain with me this evening. Tonight’s menu is fillet mignon, I trust that’s to your liking?”

He was fairly certain the girl was one of those insufferable vegans, but she’d eaten the caviar without complaint when it was served to her. Employing a tactic similar to the one the military used in basic training worked well for training women. He broke them down and built them up. It was usually a task left to Warden, but since Mason was staying at the estate for the next couple of weeks, he was only too happy to participate in the process for the current round of girls. It brought him pleasure to see

them find the humility they lacked when they arrived. Brittany turned to face him, her eyes filled with fear.

“Nothing to fret over, darling, I’ll need two more cards. One for Grayson Garrison, plus one. And another for Gavin Garrison, plus one?”

Brittany’s eyes widened. “You’re going to invite them to the same place where there sister is being held captive?”

He leaned close, his eyes boring into hers. “Dare you speak without permission?”

She lowered her head, and he raised her chin with a gentle finger. “Look at me when I’m talking. The Garrisons have money, power, and influence. Cate was invited, and by extension, you were invited into our ranks so that the Continental Alliance could gain from their prestige. Cate failed, but we can still entertain her brothers. Perhaps even her father. They are influential people. And once they see the good we do, they’ll want to join our mission.” He dropped his hands to his side and stood to his full height. “Finish your task and I may even allow you to act as hostess for the party.” Unless Vanessa found a way to redeem herself by then. Then again, perhaps he’d choose someone else entirely. So, many to choose from.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Gavinsatathebreakfast bar in the lodge’s kitchen. He’d decided to forgo a big breakfast in favor of a bowl of cereal. As he ate, he scrolled through his emails on his cell phone. Nothing noteworthy that he hadn’t already addressed.

He glanced at the time, and then dialed Ben. His assistant should be in the office by now.

“Hey, boss. Need something?”

“Just checking in. How’s everything at the office.”

“Snail mail is piling up, otherwise everything’s under control. Want me to fed-ex you this stuff?”

“Not unless it looks important.”

“I think it’s mostly junk mail, but there is a fancy invitation that looks like it might need your attention.”

“Do me a favor. Open it, snap a photo with your phone, and send it to me. Then make sure you open everything else. Toss the junk mail, and if anything looks important scan it in and email it to me. Okay?”

“Will do.”

“Call if something should come up.”

“Sure thing.”

A moment later the photo came through. He found Grayson in the great room, a book open in his lap. “I know you can’t be reading for pleasure at a time like this.”

“I keep trying but can’t get my mind off Cate. What’s up?”

Gavin handed him the phone. “What am I looking at? Is this that place you and Samantha think they’re holding Cate?”

“It is.”

“And they invited you to a party there?”

“Looks like it.”

“Wonder if I’m invited. Could this be some kind of strange hostage negotiation?”

“I have no idea, but I’ll be RSVPing yes. Anything to get inside the place.”

Gray left the room to go call his doorman. When he returned a few minutes later, he confirmed that he did indeed receive an invitation and it allowed for a plus one.

Samanthaheldthedoorfor Emily when they arrived at the upscale boutique. The gowns and dresses were displayed under soft lighting. Racks of shoes and purses were interspersed tastefully throughout the space.

Emily moved around some dresses on a rack. “I can’t believe we’re here looking at dresses with everything going on.”

“Your wedding is coming up in less than a month. It’s now or never. If we don’t pick something out soon, there won’t be enough time for any necessary alterations.”

“Right. We can’t let them steal our joy.”

“Spoken like someone who has been through the ringer, yet manages to keep smiling.”

“Only with the good Lord’s help, Sam. I couldn’t do any of it alone. Wade’s nice to have around, too, of course.”

“I’ll bet.”

“So, how are things going with Gavin? Kiss him yet?”

Warmth flooded Sam's face. She didn't want to answer the question, but she was pretty sure the blush she knew she was sporting answered it for her.

"You did! And you didn't tell me?"

"Yes, we kissed, but we both decided it was best that we not let it happen again. His life is in New York. I am not and never will be a city girl."

"I know, you've told me. You want the old farmhouse filled with kids, a few goats, and some chickens of your own."

"It may be a dream that'll never come true, but I won't give up hoping for a man that'll share my dreams. Even if my biological clock is ticking overtime."

"Fair enough."

"Gavin did ask me to go to a fancy party with him though, and this dress could be right for the occasion." She held up the crimson colored frock for her friend's inspection.

“Go! Try it on.”

She went into the dressing room and slipped the silky material over her head. The back of the dress was mostly bare, but it had a modest cut in the front and the slit on the side didn't quite reach as high as her knees. “You'll wow him in that gown.”

“You think?”

“I know.”

“Did you find anything you liked for us bridesmaids?”

“You're my maid of honor.”

“We're all wearing the same thing though, aren't we?”

“I haven't decided.”

“You'd better decide quick. We're running out of time.”

They left after choosing a pale lavender chiffon gown for the bridesmaids and a darker lavender for Samantha's dress. The lighter color reminded Sam of cotton candy. It fit her friend. And she hoped Emily's wedding would be the wedding of her dreams.

Gavin fiddled with the buttons on his vest. He was no stranger to black-tie events, but this was different. He'd be taking the woman he could see himself falling for to the very location where he suspected his sister was being held captive. The irony wasn't lost on him.

He headed down to the great room and waited by the door for his brother and sister-in-law. Before long they appeared both exquisitely dressed, Grayson in a tuxedo similar to his own, and Jenna in a stunning dark blue gown.

"Ready to gather your girl?"

"She's not my girl."

"She'll be on your arm tonight, as far as I can tell that means, at least for tonight, she's agreed to be your girl." Gavin hated that the arrangement was temporary, but he knew she wasn't coming to play the part of trophy date. Her attending was all about the investigative potential the night might bring.

Samantha was so much more than beautiful. The woman had it all. Brains, fortitude, strength, and, yes, she was a knockout, too. He'd more than met his match with her. He also knew her to be a believer, but she was guarding her heart instead of opening it to the Lord. It was the one thing that had the potential to ruin them before they got started, even if she was willing to give him the chance to prove he wasn't some playboy planning to toy with her emotions and then leave her in the dust. It was essential that he choose a woman who loved the Lord as much as he did.

"Yeah. It's almost time. Let's go get her."

They piled into the Bronco and headed to Samantha's place. He went to the door to get her, and when she opened it to him, he stood there staring. "Wow!" her dark red dress was elegant and classy yet daring, much like the woman wearing it.

She grinned.

“You are breathtaking.”

“What am I usually, chopped liver?”

He shook his head. “You’re beautiful on a bad day, but tonight, you’ve stolen my breath away.”

“And you’re awfully wordy for someone without breath, but you don’t look so bad yourself. You clean up good, Mr. Garrison.”

He opened the rear passenger door for her, and then went around to the driver’s side, joining her in the back seat. Once they were seated, he reached for her hand. Tonight he’d make the most of the opportunity to be with her.

Samantha relished the feel of Gavin’s work roughened hand. She couldn’t understand how someone who sat in an office all day developed callouses like his, but there was something manly about his hands. If the seatbelt wasn’t trapping her in place, she might’ve been tempted to scoot closer to him. The man affected her far more than she cared to admit.

Grayson interrupted her thoughts. “Wade’s Lieutenant, Mac, called with an update. Wade arrived at the estate two hours ago. He’ll be one of our waiters tonight.”

“What else did he have to say?” Jenna asked.

“Mac said that Wade and the other two undercover chose not to wear wires. They thought it was too risky, but now, if something has gone wrong, nobody will know until we get there and get the lay of the land.”

Gavin's grip tightened on her hand and silence filled the Bronco. Nobody seemed willing to say what they were all thinking. That now instead of two lives being in danger, Cate and Emmaline, five lives hung in the balance. Sam hoped they'd made the right call.

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Grayson pulled onto a freshly paved driveway. “Seems our host has spared no expense.”

The parking area sported some of the most expensive sports cars around, which seemed odd being that the estate was out in the middle of the boondocks. Not many people drove Ferraris and Aston Martins up on Red Rock Mountain. It was a rare sight indeed.

Mason wandered around the grand hall, a champagne flute in one hand as he chatted with his guests. He’d spent a small fortune on the party, but it was worth it. Fresh flowers adorned the tables. A string quartet—the epitome of musical sophistication—performed an intimate conversation, each musician skillfully expressing their instruments own voice and charm. Such a contrast to the cacophony that passed for music these days. Electronic dissonance with no emotion or skill. It was like measuring a meal at a Michelin-starred restaurant against one at a fast food chain. There simply was no comparison.

When the front door swung open, and the butler took the invitations from the men standing there, Mason stepped forward to greet his guests of honor.

He took Jenna’s hand into his own and raised it to his lips. “A pleasure to formally meet you, Mrs. Garrison. You look radiant this evening.”

The woman nodded a greeting with a polite thanks and stepped closer to her husband. Grayson must’ve trained her well. She understood her place. Maybe he’d misjudged the older of the two Garrison boys, he might have more backbone that Mason had credited him with.

Mason turned to Gavin's date. The sweet little thing he'd seen with him at the Fisher Fine Arts Library. Must be serious if she was with him again tonight. He lifted her hand to his lips as he had with Jenna's, but she stiffened at the move. "You must be Samantha. Your name was on the RSVP with Gavin's. Lovely to meet you."

He turned to the men effectively dismissing the women from the conversation. "So good of you to come. I trust the drive was uneventful?"

"Other than the deer that darted out in front of us, all was fabulous."

"Those are the perils of country roads, I'm afraid. But the location cannot be beat for it's beauty and historic significance."

"Is that right? You'll have to share some of that history with us. I'd love to hear more." Gavin said. "Thank you for the invitation, Mr. Kennedy. We're honored to be among your guests tonight."

Grayson grinned and took a step away to grab an hors d'oeuvre from a waiter walking by.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Gavin scanned the room hoping to spot Wade again. The last he'd seen him had been thirty minutes earlier when Grayson had snagged a smoked salmon roll from his tray shortly after they'd arrived. At first he thought his brother came hungry, then he realized who it was balancing the tray on his shoulder.

After spotting him, he watched as he moved around the room with a tray of Caprese Skewers. The cherry tomatoes with fresh mozzarella looked delicious, but he was here to work. Wade held out the tray before passing by, so he snatched one. Might as well indulge his palette. It would give him some sustenance in case things went awry

later. He followed his friend as he made his way down a hall and set the tray on table before turning into a room. As Gavin approached, Wade dragged him inside.

“You pulled me into a bathroom?”

“Thought it might be a safe place to speak where we wouldn’t be disturbed.”

“Any chance you found the girls?”

“Would I still be serving hors d'oeuvres if I had?”

“Unlikely.” Gavin frowned. “What can you tell me?”

“The staff are afraid to say much. It’s like they know that it’s not just their jobs on the line if they say the wrong thing. There are cameras everywhere. Even in strange locations like the wine cellar and the library. They even put them in the kitchen and the pantry area being used for flower arranging.”

“Odd, but some people go crazy with security cameras, yours truly included.”

“True enough. Something else seemed odd. I think the room dimensions are off.”

“You mean there are hidden passageways like the Fisher Fine Arts Library?” He laughed.

“I don’t know anything about that library other than what you and Gray mentioned about it the other day, but I did notice that this building seems too big for what’s on the inside despite how expansive these rooms may seem. I’m no carpenter, but something feels off. I can’t exactly pull out a tape measure to check, but I thought it was worth noting that something is wonky. Also, that symbol for the Continental Alliance you showed me has found it’s way into several places in here. Take a look at

the crown moldings when your return to the main hall.”

“Will do. Thanks for the tip.”

“Also, that guy whose house you and Sam were watching, Ted Roberts, the one you claim was messaging Emmaline through Facebook?”

“Yeah?”

“He works here in security.”

“Can you point him out?”

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Samantha shifted her weight from one foot to another, trying to relieve the pressure from the high heel shoes she'd crammed her toes into. They'd been fine earlier, but as time passed they became quite painful. She looked around the room hoping to spot Gavin. He'd disappeared some time ago, and she'd felt like a third wheel following Grayson and Jenna around, so she'd made her way over to a wall of windows, and stared out into the darkness.

Everything about this party left her feeling out of place. She didn't belong in this world among these elegant people. Sure she could put on a fancy dress and fit in with the best of them, but the moment she opened her mouth they'd know she was nothing more than a preacher's daughter. Not that her dad was poor by any means. He'd inherited plenty from his parents, but he hadn't acted like the men in his congregation who tried to force him into changing his sermons to accommodate their particular sins and then they would threaten to quit tithing or leave the church if he didn't acquiesce to their demands. No. Her parents weren't like that at all. They were salt-of-the-earth people who made her long to be a better person.

Her uncle had tried to teach her about the finer things and had educated her on how to act among the rich and famous, but she'd resented him for it. She liked Uncle Richard best when he was a regular guy who rode horses with her and took her hunting.

When he was around his hoity toity friends, she hated how he became a different person. The people around her now, were the type he changed for. She didn't want to blend in like he had. If she stuck around Gavin it would happen eventually. Slowly maybe, but she'd eventually become a person she loathed. And if Gavin came to despise her, too, it would be more than she could bear.

A hand on her shoulder pulled her from her reverie. Gavin smiled and kissed the back of her neck. “Want to get some fresh air? There is a balcony off the sitting room.”

She tucked her hand into his proffered arm and soon they were breathing in the night air. The starlit sky brought a sense of peace she’d been lacking inside the party atmosphere. “Do you really believe God cares? That he has a purpose for all this?”

“You know I do.”

“I haven’t been close to him since my parents died.”

“You haven’t told me about them.”

“I’m not sure you’d believe me if I did.”

He cupped the side of her face. “There is nothing you could tell me that I wouldn’t believe. If you said pirates were about to kidnap us and take us to Mars, I’d trust every word.”

She grinned. “You’re a liar.”

He dropped a kiss on her nose. “Tell me about your parents. Maybe it’ll help me understand why you stopped believing.”

“Don’t misunderstand. I believe in God. But I don’t trust that He’ll make everything all right. That he’ll love me unconditionally and make all things work together for good.”

“Things might not all work together for good in this fallen world, Sam, but God has a better world for us when we’re done with this one. While we’re here, we need to make the most of this life we’ve been given. Have you ever heard the quote “Only

one life twill soon be past, only what's done for Christ will last"??"

"Daddy used to quote it in his sermons." She watched as understanding dawned in his eyes.

"Your father was a preacher."

She nodded. "My parents were killed in a plane crash. On their way home from preaching the gospel in Romania. They weren't missionaries, but he'd been asked to come preach at an event. Daddy was a fantastic preacher. Hellfire and brimstone, but also grace and mercy. I struggle to understand how the loving gracious God my father preached could let him preach in a far off land, but not bring him back home to his only child."

"That's a question I can't answer, but I know God loves us even when he allows us to suffer through tragedies."

"Like missing sisters and uncles."

"Exactly like that." He tilted her chin up and kissed away a tear that had almost reached her mouth. "I want to be there for you, Samantha. If you'll let me."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Gavin offered a polite smile to the man beside him, who was passionately discussing the nuances between the Nasdaq, the S&P, and the Dow Jones Industrial Average. While the intricacies of the stock market usually held his interest, tonight his mind was elsewhere. He felt his phone vibrate in his pocket and a quick glance confirmed it was a message from Wade. Etiquette demanded he ignore it, but he knew his friend wouldn't risk texting if it weren't urgent.

Mason approached. He'd been playing the host making the rounds and showing off his youthful bride. The girl was barely out of college, if she was even that old. While the gray at Mason's temples and the lines around his eyes and mouth would put him closer to mid-forties, maybe even early fifties. Gavin shook his head. It wasn't any of his business.

A curt nod dismissed the woman, and Mason waved over Grayson. "How would you gentleman and your lovely companions like to take a tour of the estate?"

Gavin raised a brow in Gray's direction. His brother nodded his assent. Of course, they had to take the tour. It was their chance to see what the man was hiding, but he was on alert. "That sounds delightful, but if you'll excuse me, I'd like to use the restroom first."

Once alone, he checked his cell to see Wade's message.

Wade: Somethings happening. A few of Mason's men appear to be searching the woods around the estate.

Now that was interesting. He rejoined the others staying near the back of their small group, he discreetly passed his cell phone to his brother, so he could see the text.

Mason led them through a wide hallway with framed portraits on the walls. Samantha gasped when they reached one of the last paintings in the collection. He shook his head to remind her not let on that anything bothered her. Mason mistook her shock for admiration of the artists work. "It's the play of light and shadow, my dear. Brings the portrait to life. Anybody can take a photograph, but capturing the essence of a human soul on canvas takes true skill."

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She nodded, but there was no mistaking the weight pressing down on her spirit. That painting had meant something to her. At his first opportunity, he intended to find out what that might be.

When they reached the end of the hall, Mason led them into a library, then a conservatory, before taking them into a trophy room filled with hunting trophies that seemed at odds with the man leading the tour.

“You hunt, Mason?”

“I do not hunt wild game. However, I can appreciate the skill it takes for a sportsman to bring home his prey. Our organization, let’s call it an alliance, has had esteemed members throughout our history many of whom enjoyed the sport.”

“What do you do for fun?” Grayson asked.

“A little of this. A little of that.”

“Hmm.”

“I’ll admit, I am partial to a fine Chess match.”

Gavin raised a brow. “Is that so?”

“Would you care to see the other buildings?” An alarm shattered the relative quiet.

“Raincheck?” Grayson asked.

Samantha's head hammered against her ribcage. "Is that a fire alarm?"

"No. It's our security system. If you'll excuse me, I need to see what triggered it. Probably nothing to worry about."

After Mason rushed off through a doorway leading into another unknown hallway, Gavin turned to Gray. "You saw Wade's text. This might be a good time to investigate."

"You do that. I'll stick around here. If we both disappear, Mason will know something is up."

Gavin turned to Sam and took her hands in his. "Stay with my brother and Jenna. I'll be back in a jiffy."

She narrowed her eyes. "There is no way you're investigating anything without me."

"It isn't safe. Besides, how are you going to traipse around in the woods dressed in your Jimmy Choo's?"

"You must be out of your mind if you think I would waste money on designer heels. These babies are from a DSW sale."

"I've exhausted my knowledge of shoes and women. If you're coming, let's go." He shrugged and Gray and Jenna headed back the way they'd come. Gavin held out his arm for her, but she ignored it.

"What was in Wade's text?"

"Ugh. That reminds me. Grayson has my cell."

She tilted her head to the side waiting for an answer.

“He said there were men searching the woods. It seemed suspicious to me.”

“How do we get out of here without being spotted?”

“Good question.”

It took them several minutes to find a side door. Once outside, Sam looked to Gavin for direction. “Which way?”

“I have no idea.”

“Wade didn’t say?”

“If he did, I don’t remember.”

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“And Gray has your phone.” She shook her head. “Let’s look at this logically. If men are searching the woods, they’re looking for something or someone. It could be lost dog or a cat.”

“I didn’t see any signs that there were pets living here.”

“Me neither. They could be looking for Emmaline’s missing cell phone?”

“They’d probably do that in the daylight.”

“I agree. So, chances are good that what they’re looking for is a human being.”

“Highly likely.”

“So, if you were going to run from this place, which way would you go?”

“If I were thinking clearly?”

“Let’s assume that’s the case. If by chance it’s Cate, she would try to keep a level head.”

“I’d stay close enough to the road to follow it, but far enough away so that I couldn’t be spotted by vehicles and search lights.”

“Makes sense.”

“Shall we do the same?”

Sam entered the woods near the drive they'd used to access the property. Her heels sunk deep into the peat moss making traversing the ground a chore. Gavin stayed close and reached out to steady her when she stumbled. "You're right. These heels are a menace."

"Barefoot probably isn't a good plan either."

"No. Keep going, I'm going to head back."

"Not a chance am I letting you out of my sight. I'm missing a sister. I refuse to lose you, too."

She reached out and touched his face caressing his cheek bone. "You can't lose someone you never had."

"Don't close yourself off to me, Sam."

Drawing in a deep breath, she took a step away and dropped her hands to her sides.

"Tell me about the portrait."

"It's a painting of my father." The words were a mere whisper, but the questions inside her head were shouting for answers.

Mason's leathersoled shoes made a brushing sound on the marble tile as he strode toward the security office. His head of security, Dennis Derck, wasn't in the control room. Ted Roberts sat at the wall of monitors.

"What triggered the alarm?"

"Could be an animal?"

“Isn’t that why we have deer fencing to keep that from happening? And smaller animals shouldn’t be able to trigger it, right?”

“Dennis has four men out there combing the woods. The trigger didn’t come from the fenced area, it was from the area near the driveway. Could simply be a malfunction, but it’ll take some time to investigate.”

“Very well.” He turned on his heel.

“Sir?”

“What is it?”

“That was actually the second alert we had tonight. The silent alarm went off about forty-five minutes ago, but we had instructions not to disturb you.”

“Who gave those instructions?”

“Your wife, sir.”

His wife, indeed. Brittany would find herself back in the dorms with Vanessa. Impertinent creature. Married less than five days and already she had the nerve to defy him. That would end tonight.

He stormed down to the library and swung the door open, so he could make his way to the dormitory. He pressed the code and scanned the faces of the women. Blood drained from his face. Vanessa and Emmaline were absent. If they made it off the property, they had the power to bring him and the rest of the Continental Alliance to their knees. Only three people had the code to the door. Himself, Warden James, and his second in command. Wilhelm Adams. Warden had been with him from the start and with his father before him. He trusted him implicitly. On the other hand, the Adams family had been with the Alliance since its inception, so he couldn't believe Wilhelm had a hand in the girls' escape. It was a real conundrum. For the time being, he'd trust nobody but himself.

The immediate priority was for him to check and make sure the girls didn't interrupt the party. If they did it would be a disaster. One that could only be cured with a sudden infusion of carbon monoxide. He refused to accept defeat. Shuffling back to the hall, he took in the scene in the ballroom.

All was well. His guests were enjoying themselves. He made his way over to Grayson and Jenna Garrison. “I trust you're enjoying the evening.”

“We are.” Gray squinted at him. “You don’t look well. Are you ill?”

“No. No. I’m fine. Delightful in fact.” He cleared his throat. “We were interrupted before I could share the details of nature of our organization. An alliance I’m hoping to entice you to participate in.”

“Yes. Your alarm disrupted the moment. Perhaps we can set up a meeting. Call my office, and my assistant will get you on my schedule.”

“Of course, I’ll do that.” Mason bit back the cuss word he was on the verge of uttering. His father had taught him that the use of swear words were a sign of a weak vocabulary and a weaker mind. He agreed with sentiment, but sometimes it was hard to control one’s tongue.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Gavin scanned the woods for any sign of movement. Samantha remained close, but continued to refuse his assistance despite the blasted impractical shoes she wore.

“We should head back,” he said.

“You’re probably right. We’re not going to get far dressed for a black-tie affair. And the longer we’re gone the more suspicious it’ll look.”

“They probably think we’re necking in the backseat of Wade’s Bronco.”

She chuckled. “That would never happen.”

“I could make a compelling argument for why it should.”

She shook her head, and took a step losing her balance in the process. “Argh. Broke

my heel.”

Her delicate fingers clutched his bicep as she removed her shoes. “Glad I didn’t spring for designer ones. These are replaceable.”

“You want to head home now that you’re shoeless? I can go in and make our excuses.”

“Yuck.”

“Huh?”

“I stepped in something. She touched her foot than raised her fingers to her nose.”

“Why would you sniff it?”

“Habit from work.” A frown wrinkled her forehead. “It’s blood. Coppery scent.”

He knelt and examined the spot swiping a finger through it. Reaching inside his jacket he pulled out a cotton swab and dabbed it in the blood, wrapped it inside his handkerchief, and stuck it back in his inside jacket pocket.

“You always carry q-tips?”

“They come in handy for a variety of things.”

“Hmm.”

“You’re right. It looks and smells like blood. Could belong to an animal, but could just as easily be human. If Cate is out here somewhere, we’ve got to find her. I wish I had my phone so I could use the flashlight function.”

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“Go inside and get it. You can say goodbye to everyone while you’re in there. I think I’ll take a seat in the back of the Bronco.”

A man appeared just beyond the shadows. “Is that you, Gavin?” Mason.

“Yeah. Sam and I wanted a few moments alone.”

The other man chuckled. “Completely understand, but I do have a few things I still want to talk to you and your brother about. He suggested setting up a meeting.”

“Great. Let’s do that. How about tomorrow at noon?”

“So soon?”

“Is that a problem?”

“Not at all. You’re here. I’m here. Tomorrow at noon it is.”

Samantha pulled her feet up under her and rested her head on the plush couch in the lodge’s great room. A tense silence had descended over the room as they waited for Wade to arrive.

“You sure you don’t need to get home, Sam?” Gavin asked.

“This is more important than sleep. We need to make sure Mason didn’t discover Wade and his team were there tonight.”

A relieved sigh escaped when Wade stepped through the door a few minutes later. “I see all of you made it through the evening unscathed.” His gaze settled on Sam. “Good thing, too. Emily would have my head if something happened to you.”

A hint of a smile lifted the corners of her mouth. “Yeah. She loves me.”

“Indeed, she does.” He chuckled. “And if she were forced to find another maid of honor at this late hour, she wouldn’t be pleased.”

Sam grabbed a throw pillow and tossed it at him. He caught it and threw it back smacking her in the head. “Hey!”

“Turnabout’s fair play.”

Gavin reached into his pocket and pulled out the handkerchief wrapped bundle. “Hate to interrupt the fun, but thought this might be worth checking into.”

“What is it?” Wade unwrapped it and stared at the swab. “Blood?”

“Sam found it on a rock near the estate house. On the property.”

“I’ll have it tested.” He glanced down at his phone. “Looks like Mac’s got our chopper in the air. They’re doing a thermal imaging sweep of the area. If anyone is wandering around those woods, we’ll find them.”

“Good. The sooner we find Cate, the better.” Gavin dropped onto the sofa beside her, and she adjusted her position, so she could rub his shoulders. Tension radiated off him in waves.

“You need to prepare yourself. It might not have been her wandering that property. In fact, it could’ve been a critter that set off that alarm.”

The knot in Sam's stomach tightened. If something happened to Cate, Gavin would lose it. Part of her wanted to lift a prayer to the Lord, but He wasn't in the habit of answering her requests, so she didn't bother.

Mason paced the length of his study. A helicopter flew by overhead. A niggling suspicion told him the Garrison boys had something to do with it, but he wasn't sure how, yet. The dark mahogany walls closed in on him as he considered how the night had nearly become a complete disaster. If his rebellious wife and her friend didn't return soon, things would get quite complicated indeed.

What he needed was a plan. They could move the ladies awaiting unions to a new location. Somewhere less visible than Ricketts Glen Estate, but if the Garrisons suspected anything, they might have the authorities watching. It was too risky to move them off the property, but there might be another solution. There was a bomb shelter built in the late 1950s that his father had converted into a fortified underground bunker. Relocating the women there was a plausible option. Yes, it could work. If it became necessary to get the girls out of the main house that's where he'd put them. He hated to do it, but he would need to protect himself should his wayward wife go to the police. He needed to find other more creative ways to discredit her, but moving the girls was a good first step.

When the boys came by for their meeting tomorrow he would invite them into the board room where the Continental Alliance held their quarterly meetings. They'd once been held at the Fisher Fine Arts Library, of course, but when pressure came for them to shut their doors, they'd simply changed locations. Since, at the time, Mason's father was the head of the Alliance, they'd chosen his estate.

His maternal great-grandfather, Colonel Ricketts had once owned or at a minimum controlled, more than eighty thousand acres of land in the area, but much of that was sold off over the years, and a large portion of it became public land. Thankfully, Mason's grandfather was able to grab the slice with his family's manor house situated

on it, but now the responsibility for maintaining his family's legacy fell on squarely on his shoulders. He would bear it with honor.

Having a descendant of Colonel Ricketts on the property brought about acceptance within the community, almost a reverent respect. He was certain the Garrison men would come to understand the value of the Alliance once it was properly explained to them. Soon the alliance would enjoy the additional funding, power, and influence that the Garrison name would provide. The thought sucked some of the gloom from his spirit.

His phone rang. Glancing at the screen he saw a name he dreaded. Philip Monroe. The man would be trouble in the end.

“Speak.”

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“And good day to you, too, fine sir.”

“Why are you calling?”

“Straight to the point, as usual.” He chuckled. “Missing someone?”

“Did you have something to do with their insubordination?”

“Do you really think I’d do anything to upset the great and noble Continental Alliance?”

No. The FBI Agent was smarter than that. He’d know that their reach extended far enough to cause him considerable harm. “Go on.”

“They called me. Your packages have been secured. You can pick them up at the location I’ll text you. I’m sure your bride will be thrilled when you show up to collect her and her friend.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Billylookedupfromthe stack of paperwork when Sam walked into the park office.

“Morning.”

“Good morning, Sam. You’re bright and early.”

“I’m five minutes late.”

“I expected you to be later after your shindig last night.”

“That was quite the event, let me tell you.” She frowned. “I’m convinced something is hinky over there.”

“Yeah? What did your friend with the state police find out?”

“He didn’t have too much to say last night. The state police was sending a helicopter to do a thermal imaging sweep. I’m sure if they learned anything substantive, he would’ve called.”

“What was your impression?”

“I think they’re holding Emmaline and Cate there, and they might’ve escaped last night, but I can’t be certain.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Alarms went off. Mason Kennedy was acting odd. Blood.”

“Blood?”

“Not enough to be a serious concern, but Gavin managed to grab a swab of it for Wade to get tested. If it’s a match to Cate or Emmaline they’ll have probable cause for a warrant.”

“I hate the thought of either of them out there bleeding, but a warrant would be good.”

“Yeah. It’ll allow them to kick down some doors and look behind walls since they won’t have to worry about being polite.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

“It might. This Mason fellow seems like a snake. All smooth charm, but you can sense the insincerity just under the surface. He’s not a good guy.”

“I believe it.” He stood. “Ready to get to work? Dispatch wants someone to check a disturbance near Adams Falls. Something about hooligans and marijuana.”

“Teenagers smoking pot. I’ll put a stop to it.” She gave him a mock salute and headed out the way she’d come in.

When she arrived at Adams Falls, her spine tingled. The air did have the lingering odor of weed, but there was nobody around. The stairs down to the falls were slick from an early morning shower. When she neared the base, her foot slipped and hands reached out to steady her. “Thanks.” Her eyes collided with those of Mason Kennedy.

“Funny us running into each other again so soon, Ms. Rollins.”

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“Yes. It is. Isn’t it?” She didn’t think it was a coincidence at all. He’d probably made the call about the kids to lure her here. “Thanks for keeping me from falling.”

“Not a problem.” He frowned. “I noticed your reaction to one of our portraits last night. It took a little digging, but I eventually uncovered that our esteemed Gavin Garrison has fallen in love with a legacy.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Don’t be coy, dear. It doesn’t become you.”

She narrowed her eyes. “I didn’t know my father was involved in your organization until I saw the portrait last night. I don’t consider myself a legacy of the Continental Alliance.”

“Yet, you seem to know our name.”

“My uncle had a book. It is now in my possession.”

“Good. Good. Your Uncle Richard, I believe. A good man. His disappearance was a real tragedy.” Something about the way he said the words made her certain he was behind her uncle’s disappearing act.

“Yes. It was.”

“Due to your legacy status, I’d like to offer you a position on our board. Get you back in the club, so to speak. You don’t have to give me your answer now, just think on it.

I'll be in touch soon."

Grayson pulled the Bronco onto the private drive leading to the Ricketts Estate. His body language was closed off, tense.

"What's your problem, Gray?"

"You should've run it by me before agreeing to this meeting."

"Maybe, but Cate is my priority. I want to keep Mason Kennedy close until we get her home."

"What if we're wrong? What if this creep has nothing to do with Cate?" Gray backed into a parking spot near the door. "All we have on him is Emmaline's cell phone. It wasn't even found on this property."

"Doesn't it all seem a bit too coincidental, Gray? One of his minions tries to recruit you to a fraternity all those years ago. Now Cate gets dragged into a sorority only to go missing, then out of the blue, we get invitations to come a party here. Seems far-fetched to me. The only way all this happens is if he's toying with us."

"And you played right into his hand by agreeing to this meeting."

"Maybe you're right, but we're here now. Let's make the most of our time with the adversary."

Mason stepped out onto the wide front porch. "Greetings, gentleman." He glanced down at his Rolex. "Right on time, I see. Punctuality is one of those indispensable qualities that so few exhibit these days."

They followed the man down the hall with the portraits to a set of double doors that

led into a room set-up with a large conference table. “Welcome to the boardroom for the Continental Alliance.”

“We read about the CA. Wasn’t it disbanded back in the late twentieth century?” Gray asked.

“Ah. That is what we wanted people to think.”

“Why?”

“There was quite a bit of pressure at the time. Conspiracy theories spouting everything from racism and lobbying concerns all the way to accusing us of being part of the antichrist’s network to usher in the end times. You can see why discretion became the better part of valor in this case.”

“How much truth was there to the rumors?” Gavin dropped into a chair and put his feet on the table.

Mason narrowed his eyes, but didn’t comment on the move. “We’re not working for the devil if that’s what you’re asking.” Gavin had his doubts.

“But?”

“I must admit we do lobby congress on behalf of our members. We’re an organization of like-minded people interested in preserving our freedoms and values. Membership is most often passed down through familial lines, but we do make occasional exceptions.”

“And what is it you want with us?”

“Your business acumen, connections, and financial resources.”

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“I’m not sure I see an advantage in it for us. Why would we have any interest in participating?”

Mason’s smile was smarmy and left Gavin feeling gross just listening to him. “I believe you’ll find that the network can offer you more opportunities than you could ever imagine.”

“Hmm.”

Gray stood. “We’ll consider your offer.”

Gavin joined him at the door. All three of them knew they had far more to offer than they would get in return, but they’d keep playing the game. At least until their sister was home safe and sound. Preferably under lock and key. He hoped their father never let the girl out of his sight again.

Mason pulled up outside of the rustic cabin. He had to admit it was genius for Philip to use an FBI safe house to secure the packages. He chuckled at the G-man’s terminology for the ladies. In terms of beauty, they were appealing packages indeed, but they would get their just reward for their insolence.

He greeted a man at the door, flashing the fake government identification Philip had overnighted to him. “I’ll take them from here. Thanks.” He shook the man’s hand, and watched until he got in his government issued car and drove away. Nothing like having the feds secure your property and return it to you unharmed. He might even believe his tax dollars were going to good use this year.

Swinging the door open, he grinned at the girls sitting cross-legged on the bed in the plain blue cotton sundresses he'd provided only days earlier.

Vanessa's eyes widened, and she slid further back on the bed as if to escape him. He narrowed his eyes and studied the grime on her clothing. "Since you've shown that you don't appreciate nice things, perhaps I'll take back that dress."

"No."

"Dare you talk back?"

She closed her mouth and remained silent.

"Did you honestly think I would let my own wife walk out the door without a backward glance? How could you not have realized that I would come for you? You belong to me. The vows you made before God to obey me and remain by my side are sacred. They will be honored whether you wish them to be or not."

"Get in the shower."

He waited until she returned to the room only minutes later once again clothed in the filthy dress. "I brought you each clean clothing, but whether you'll get to keep it once we return to the manor remains to be seen. Perhaps I'll let Warden decide. I imagine you'll be less likely to runaway without it." He watched his wife shudder. Perfect. Let her wonder about his intentions. A healthy sense of fear would do her some good.

He used the pen in his suit pocket to lift the strap of his wife's filthy garment. "I imagine it was quite cold last night with nothing but a thin cotton dress." He tucked the pen back into his pocket and pulled her legs out from under her. "What's this? You cut yourself?" He shook his head. "It seems you injured yourself running around the woods barefoot. Solitary confinement in separate rooms in the bomb shelter

should help you learn your place.”

The only answer was silence. His wife tucked her feet back under her, and stayed quiet. Good girl. Maybe he’d let her off the hook early if she continued to hold her tongue.

“And you, Miss Emmaline. Your new husband is awaiting his bride. The ceremony will take on Saturday night. I should probably push it back a week to be sure you’ve been punished for a suitable length of time before your nuptials, but I want you out from under my roof. I can no longer stand the sight of you.”

Chapter Thirty

Gavin pushed his laptop closed. He’d been staring at it for two hours, but he was no closer to finding out who the members of the Continental Alliance were. Perhaps the only way to get a membership list was to accept Mason’s invitation. On the surface, at least. They would be joining as a ploy to gain information, with absolutely no intention of helping the secret society. Of course, he was no idiot, he knew there would be some sort of initiation, whether it was financial, illegal, or immoral, there would be a means of testing them.

He headed down to the kitchen to grab a bite to eat. The sound of Grayson and Jenna’s laughter filtered out to him before he reached them. They were as in love today as they were when they’d wed. He envied his brother. It would be a dream to have that kind of easy relationship with a woman. A true partnership. Most women wanted him for his money. But even the ones who didn’t know he had money weren’t looking for a serious relationship. Too many were in it for the game. Three days had to pass before it was okay for you to call them after a date. And then they would ignore you, so you’d want them more. It was tiresome, and he wanted no parts of it.

Samantha seemed different, but she wasn’t willing to take a chance on him. He could

be convincing when he tried, but didn't know if pressuring her was the right move. Yes, she liked him. If he had to guess, he'd say she liked him nearly as much as he did her, but he couldn't force her to admit it, so he'd wait her out. Felt a little like a game, but he was at a loss for what else to do.

The laughter died down when Grayson's cell rang. Gavin stepped into the room and took a seat at the breakfast bar. He grinned at his sister-in-law. "You two are like newlyweds."

"We are, aren't we?" Her eyes twinkled.

"I'm glad you found each other."

"I've been watching you and Samantha together. Are wedding bells in your future?"

"Not if she can help it."

"But you're smitten with her?"

He shook his head. "I'll admit nothing."

Gray cleared his throat. "That was Judge Swisher."

“And?”

“Emmaline escaped last night with another girl.”

“Is she okay? Is Cate with her?”

“Cate wasn’t the other girl. Emmaline told the judge that she didn’t know where they were being held, but they’d gotten out and flagged down a car. The driver gave them a ride to a gas station and let them use his cell phone to call for help.”

“So where is Emmaline now?”

“That’s the problem.”

“Get to the point, Gray.”

“The FBI Agent they told Judge Swisher they had called says he never heard from them, so either he’s lying or they had a bogus number and called someone who wasn’t who they thought he was.”

“Did he give you the agent’s name?”

“It was dad’s buddy, Philip Monroe. I think we have to assume that the number they called belonged to someone else.”

“Or Uncle Philip is involved with the Continental Alliance.”

“We’ve known him our entire lives,” Gray said.

“Doesn’t mean he’s squeaky clean.”

“Innocent until proven guilty.”

“Not when it comes to Cate’s well-being. I’ll go with guilty until proven innocent in this instance.”

Samantha toweldriedherhair and walked to the bay window to see who had pulled into her drive. A smile formed when she saw Gavin’s Range Rover.

She threw the door open and met him on the porch. “You got your car back.”

“You dare call my baby car?”

A laugh bubbled up. “SUV?”

“Okay. I’ll accept that.” He sidled up next to her and leaned against the porch rail.

“Gray was tired of driving me around, so he had it brought up here.”

“Now your brother won’t have to chaperone if we go out.”

“Does that mean I can take you out? You’ll let me?” He grinned and moved closer, invading her space, but she didn’t mind one bit. “Thought we needed to back off anything personal. After all, you can’t stand billionaires and one who works in New York, he must be the epitome of evil.”

“All true.”

“Yet, you’ll allow me to escort you somewhere alone?”

“We need to get to the bottom of this missing persons situation, and to do that, it only makes sense that we spend time together. We’re going to need to eat meals, so we might as well share those meals.”

“Yeah?”

“Unless you object.”

“There is nothing about you, Samantha, that I find objectionable.”

“I’ll remind you of that next time I annoy you.”

“You available for dinner? I have some news I want to share.”

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“I was going to eat Kraft mac-n-cheese, so, I would be amenable to skipping that in favor of a real meal.”

“How’s Ricketts Glen Hotel? I hear the food is good there.”

“It is, but it can be a bit cozy. So, if you don’t mind a crowd?”

“Where can we go for more privacy? I’m not keen on people overhearing us.”

“The tables are farther apart at 2 1/2 Street.”

“That’s the name of a restaurant?”

“Sure is.”

“You’ll handle the directions?”

“I will.”

“Then let’s go.”

They parked in the lot and entered through the side door. The steps out front were too steep for Sam’s liking. She chose a seat in a corner where they’d have a bit more privacy. “This okay?”

Gavin nodded and held a chair out for her to sit. She spread her napkin across her lap and perused the menu. Deciding on the taco salad, she set it down.

“What are you going to get?”

“I’m thinking the cowboy chicken.”

“It’s good. You’ll like it.”

The server came to the table and asked what they wanted to drink. “We’re ready to order our food, too.” Sam said.

“Sounds good. What can I get for you?”

After they told her what they wanted, Gavin reached across the table and took her hand in his. She tried to tamp down the flutter his touch caused, but it was no use. “Judge Swisher called.” That did it. The flutters were gone, and she was all ears.

“Yeah?”

“Emmaline contacted him last night.”

“Is she okay?”

“Seems she was last night, but now she’s missing again.”

“How? Didn’t he call the police?”

“It seems his daughter had the number for an FBI Agent that was supposed to help. One of the girls on the inside was working undercover with him and gave her the phone number. The trouble is that the agent says he isn’t running an undercover operation and didn’t receive a phone call. Or, at least, he claims not to have received a call.”

“Was Cate with her?”

“No.”

“I’m sorry, Gavin.”

“Me too, but I’m not giving up. Mason Kennedy invited Grayson and I to join his little club. We’re considering doing it. It might give us the in we need to expose whatever it is that is going on there.”

“Maybe. I ran into Mason Kennedy this morning.”

“You did?”

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“I’m pretty sure he arranged it. We got a call about kids smoking dope. No kids to be found, but Mason was there.”

“Why didn’t you call me immediately?”

“For what?”

“So that I can protect you?” He frowned. “It’s hard enough worrying about Cate. I can’t let him get his grubby paws on you, too.”

“Nobody is getting their paws on me. And I’m quite capable of taking care of myself.”

“Were you alone when you went out there?”

“I was.”

“Can’t you see that it was his way of demonstrating to you how easy it would be for him to make you disappear just like he did to Cate and Emmaline?”

Chapter Thirty-One

The television was on mute and Gavin was catching up on emails while he waited for Wade to return his call. They needed to come up with a plan on how to infiltrate the Continental Alliance. He looked up from his computer. “Must you do that?”

“What?” Gray asked.

“Click your pen. You may not realize you’re doing it, but it’s driving me crazy.”

“Sorry.”

“What’s the matter? I mean other than the obvious.”

“This is dragging on too long. We have responsibilities. I’m trying to keep things running from here, but I’m distracted. Cate is a strong, capable woman, but I’m scared, Gavin. For all we know, they already did something to her.”

“Don’t go there. We have to keep our heads on straight, and we won’t be able to do that if we think worst case scenarios.” Gavin clenched and unclenched his fists as he tried to remove the images of what might have happened from his head.

“I know, but this is hard. Samantha’s uncle has been missing for how many years? And between the book and his personal items, we know he was affiliated with the Continental Alliance in some way. Most likely as a member. If these two cases really are connected, the Continental Alliance knows how to make a person disappear.”

“He’s been gone for five years. But if he was one of them, why would they harm one of their own?” Gavin asked.

“Maybe they didn’t. Maybe he’s involved in some kind of human smuggling situation with them. They could’ve simply moved him. Thought he’d be safer somewhere else. For all we know, he could be alive and well and facilitating a trafficking ring.”

“Whatever you do, don’t say any of that to Samantha.” Gavin frowned. The last thing he needed was for Sam to think he was trying to pin Cate’s disappearance on her uncle. That’d cause her to blow a gasket. She was already annoyed with him for wanting to keep her out of harm’s way.

Grayson tossed Gavin his phone and Gavin read the text on the screen. “Dad’s coming here?”

“That’s what it says.”

Gavin closed his eyes. He loved his father, but once he arrived, he would wrest control from his sons and order them to do his bidding. Not that he blamed his dad for wanting his finger in the investigation, but nothing was going to stop Gavin from doing what needed to be done to bring Cate home.

Judge Swisher’s face came on the television screen, so Gavin reached for the remote to turn on the volume. “This is it. Now that George has gone public, the feds will be involved, so maybe answers will be forthcoming.”

“Doubt it. The slow moving bureaucracy that is our federal government isn’t likely to expedite anything. Let’s hope Wade’s boss, Lieutenant McGinley, gets something done for us before the feds get in the way.”

Gavin narrowed his eyes. “Great attitude, bro.”

“Just keeping it real.”

Mason called the meeting to order and got right down to business.

“Before we get started, I want to remind everyone that we have a wedding with a reception to follow on Saturday. Your attendance will be required. The bride and groom will honeymoon in Spain before heading back to the groom’s home in France. The Lord has blessed our endeavors to arrange marriages that are beyond reproach, so we’ll continue to supply that needful service for our members.”

Cheers went up around room.

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“Now, that we’ve gotten that out of the way, the first order of business is a possible legacy membership.”

“Who might that be?”

“Samantha Rollins.”

“Do you think it’s wise to bring her into the fold? Her father wanted her kept out.”

“Her father is dead.”

“What good could possibly come from inviting another Rollins?”

“Her family go all the way back to the beginning. If she had a brother, I’d suggest him instead, but she doesn’t. She is an only child and without her we’ll lose that legacy line completely.”

“I know why you’re doing this.” Wilhelm Adams banged his cane on the floor beside his chair. “This has to do with those Garrison billionaires. You want them, so you’re using the girl that boy is sweet on to lure him in.”

“How astute you are, Wilhelm. I do indeed hope that by bringing Samantha Rollins in, we might persuade the Garrison brothers to join the fold.”

“They aren’t like us. There is a big difference in old money and new money. They’re only second generation wealthy.”

“True. True. However, each of their wealth individually exceeds the combined wealth of every member around this conference table.”

Heads nodded all around.

Wilhelm leaned forward and slammed an open palm on the table. “I don’t know about you Mason, I think you’re running us into the ground with these radical ideas of yours. Keep things as they’ve always been. We don’t need all this change.”

In that moment, Mason knew with a certainty. Wilhelm Adams had released Vanessa and Emmaline the night of the party. By day’s end, he would pay for his sins. There would be no redemption day for him.

Samantha once again stood with her hand on the master bedroom doorknob. Resting her head against the door, she blinked away tears. She could do this. It was past time she faced the reality that Uncle Richard wasn’t coming back. Losing her parents in the plane crash had been crushing, but the questions surrounding her uncle’s disappearance made his loss all the more excruciating. He was her only family. The man who had stepped in to take on the role of father once her own was gone. The love and protection he’d provided knew no bounds. She hadn’t been able to repay it. Despite her best efforts to find out what happened to him that fateful day, she’d failed.

Taking a deep breath, she pushed open the door. Maybe she’d start small and take one bag of clothing to the thrift store. No need to tackle it all in one day. Although maybe the analogy of ripping off a bandage was the right one. Tearing it off with one clean pull would be easier in the long run.

Stopping at the dresser, she took a moment to notice the layer of dust on his bottle of cologne. She lifted it and held it to her chest. It was a slightly sweet yet masculine scent, and she’d missed it. All she wanted was one more hug. A reminder of how

much he'd loved her. More than any other person alive. He'd tried to convince her to renew her relationship with the Lord, but she'd refused. They'd fought over it the last time she'd seen him. He'd wanted her to attend Sunday evening service with him. She told him she'd had enough of his God. That if He wanted Sam, he could take her anytime he wanted just like he'd done with her parents.

The look in his eyes reflected the hurt she'd inflicted, but she hadn't stopped there. No. She'd threatened to leave home if he kept bothering her about church. He'd left for work before she awakened Monday morning. There was nothing about that day she didn't regret.

She set the cologne down and turned to face the walk-in closet. Ten minutes later, she had all his suits and shirts laid neatly across the foot of the bed. Next, she filled a black trash bag with his shoes. Once that was done, she took stock of the shelves to the one side. A small fireproof box where he kept passports and other important papers sat on one shelf and a larger safe that housed his long guns took up the far end of the closet. Since she didn't know the combinations, she left them for last. Deciding to tackle a plastic shoe box of memoirs she took it to the bed and began to sort through it. A picture of her parents on their wedding day. Another one of herself the day she was born. Her first hunting trip. Ticket stubs from a movie he'd taken her to see. She hadn't realized he kept mementos. It was a side of himself, her uncle hadn't revealed to her.

After setting those items aside to take to her own room, she lifted a small black notebook from the bottom. Looked like dates and initials. She flipped the pages until she reached the back. On the last page there were sets of numbers that could be combinations. Her landline rang, startling her. Saved by the bell. She wouldn't have to deal with his weapons quite yet.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Gavin showed up at Samantha's house ten minutes after calling. She opened the door and waved him inside. Her hair was half in and half out of the ponytail she sported, and dust covered the front of her sweatshirt.

"What you working on?"

"Nothing that can't wait. You said you had something you wanted to tell me?"

"I do." He smiled and raised an eyebrow. "Can I come in?"

She shook her head. "Sorry, I'm not thinking straight. Come on in."

He followed her into the living room and sat beside her on the couch.

"What did you want to talk about?" She bit her bottom lip.

"Are you nervous?"

"Why would I be?"

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“Never mind. Grayson and I are going to join the Continental Alliance. We talked about it and agreed that it was the best course of action since it will allow us to dig deeper into what they’re up to.”

“Are you sure that’s wise?”

“No, but the decision has been made.”

“Just like that.”

“It wasn’t easy. Gray and I are both uneasy about it.”

“Then don’t do it. I didn’t join when they invited me to have a seat on their board.”

“Wait. What?”

“That day at Adams Falls. Mason Kennedy offered me a seat on the board since I’m a legacy.”

“Again. Backup. He’s known who you are this whole time?”

“I don’t know. He claims he didn’t, but the man is cunning. I don’t trust him and neither should you.”

“Never said I did. I know what I’m doing. Wade agreed this is the best way to gather intel.”

As if suddenly realizing her hair was a mess, she reached back and removed her ponytail holder then ran her fingers through the long strands. “If you’re in, I’m taking that seat on the board.”

“No. You’re not. It’s too dangerous.”

“Only one of us works in law-enforcement, Gavin, and it isn’t you.”

“Sam, please don’t do this to me.” His eyes pleaded with her to understand. “It’s too risky for you to have any contact with them without one of us present.”

“Yes. I get it, Gavin. You have a god complex. Think it’s your duty to protect me because I’m a woman.”

“No, Samantha. Not because you’re a woman, because I care about you. Every part of my being wants to keep you safe.”

“I care about you, too, but you didn’t even bother to run any of this by me before you and Gray made your plans. Instead, you just stop by to tell me it’s a done deal. You’ve already decided.”

“You’re right. I should’ve come to you first.”

“You can do whatever you want it’s not like I’m your girlfriend.” She stood and walked to the door. He followed.

At the door, his eyes searched hers hoping to find a hint of warmth, but she’d closed herself off. “Please don’t go there. I’m begging you.”

“And did it make a lick of difference when I asked you not to join their ranks?” Instead of answering, he walked through the front door. Maybe he couldn’t stop her

from making a huge mistake, but he could be there to catch her if she fell.

Mason leaned against the door to the bridal suite as his newest wife, Katarina, fixed the bride's hair.

"I won't do this."

"Ah, sweet, Emmaline, you will. You see, at this very moment, several of my men are picking up Victoria Mae and taking her to a party. At the party, she might have a few drinks. Whether she makes it home safely tonight is entirely up to you. Your cooperation will ensure your little sister has the chance to finish high school."

"Why are you doing this?"

"Because God gave men the authority to control women. You, my dear, are property. Right now you're technically your father's property, but he let you join a sorority." He shook his head. "That fateful decision, led you to me. Now, if you'd only obeyed your instructions to grab that ledger for me, you wouldn't be here today, but disobedient young ladies must pay the price of the failures."

Katarina handed her a tissue, and she wiped away her tears. "What was so important about that ledger?"

"Your father was keeping track of my business, and I decided it was time for that to end." He squatted in front of her and ran his hand down the length of silk clad arm. "I did manage to get it, by the way, without your help." He lifted her hand off her lap and held it to his chest. "Now that I have it, your dad will be eliminated."

She gasped.

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He chuckled. "I'll expect your smiles to appear genuine tonight, and the reports I get from your husband had better be stellar. Don't think for a second that once you've wed, I'll forget about you. You'll remain under my control for the rest of your days. You'd do well to remember that."

"Just leave Victoria Mae alone."

"She'll be safe for now, as long you continue to do your part." He handed her the marriage contract, and she signed with a shaky hand. "Sign on the dotted line, my dear."

Samantha sat cross-legged in the closet and stared into the open gun safe. In addition to the expected rifles, the safe was filled with journals. More than twenty of them. Names, dates, and locations. The names in the most recent one, matched up with the initials she'd found in little black notebook. He must've written the initials when he was out and filled in the rest when he returned home. But what could they mean?

She rose to her feet. Maybe googling the names would give her a clue as to what she was looking at. As she passed the mountain of clothing on her uncle's bed, her stomach clenched. Getting sidetracked with this rabbit trail was not going to do any good. It could wait until she completed what she'd set out to do. An hour later, she hauled bags and boxes out to her car. The thrift store in town had a sign outside saying they were in need of donations, and they were about to hit the jackpot. A multi-millionaire's wardrobe.

If her parents hadn't died, Uncle Richard would've remained at his fancy home in Corpus Christi, but he'd chosen to give up his own life in Texas to raise his niece in

her own home, a rural Pennsylvania farmhouse, rather than disrupt her whole life by uprooting her. For that, she hadn't shown enough gratitude, but now that she was grown, she understood the enormity of the sacrifice he'd made.

With a click of finality, she closed the back of her Subaru. Before she could head back inside to grab her purse, a Jaguar made the turn into her drive. Not a common sight in Benton. Her stomach lurched as realization dawned on her. Mason had come for his answer.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Mason blocked the drive to keep Samantha from leaving. He nodded to Warden, who stepped from the vehicle and stood nearby with his arms crossed.

The dark-haired beauty raised an eyebrow. "Is there a reason you're blocking me in?"

He grinned at her through the car window. "Have you thought about my offer?"

"I have, and I decline."

"That's too bad. I thought you were smarter than that."

"Well, I guess I'm not. You can go now."

He shook his head. "It's cute how you actually thought I was leaving you a choice in the matter. You are our newest legacy. Turning us down isn't an option."

"I just did."

Mason gave Warden a tiny nod, and the big man grabbed Samantha and secured her wrists behind her back. She kicked and fussed, but in the end, she was trundled up in

the car like all the rest had been. He grinned at her in the rearview mirror. “Glad to have you on board, Ms. Rollins. We hope you’ll enjoy the benefits of membership in our exclusive society.”

When they arrived at the estate house, he followed Warden as he carried the squirming bundle down to the bunker. It was safer than having her in the main house. He’d leave her locked up with Vanessa for a few days before integrating her into the dormitory with the rest of the women. She needed to have her spirit broken before she would be compliant enough for the next steps of her integration into society. According to his father, her mother had been compliant. Took no time at all to prepare her for a new life. But this one had fire in her veins. It might take weeks or even months to get her into a good, godly, obedient state of mind, but he was up for the challenge.

He opened the heavy steel door allowing them entry. “You see, Ms. Rollins, this used to be a bomb shelter, but we converted it to a real bunker. It’s got protective layers to prevent anyone from detecting the heat signatures down here, so your buddy’s friends with the helicopters won’t find you. Warden here will get you changed into proper attire. When you’re ready, I’ll return, and we’ll begin your training.” He looked her up in down. “You’re far older than our usual brides, but you’ll have to do. You were far too curious for your own good, and I’m sure one of our members will willingly marry you to take you off our hands. Why on earth are you still single? Such a shame.” He pushed the hair out of her face, and she tried to spit in his face, but he took a step back avoiding her spittle. He shook his head. “Uh, uh, uh. You don’t want to anger me, my dear. I can make your life a living nightmare.” He grabbed her by her ponytail and pushed her onto the cot in the small cell like room. “You should’ve been popping out babies years ago. Now your child bearing years are severely dwindling, but have no fear, there is time for a few children at least. You’ll need to get started right away, of course, but you’ll make someone a fine wife once we smooth out those rough edges of yours.”

Gavin sat beside his brother at the long conference table.

Once everyone was seated, Mason took his seat at the head of the table. A hush fell over the room as he scanned the faces present. “Where is Wilhelm Adams?”

Someone Gavin didn’t recognize cleared his throat. “I’m afraid he is no longer with us. The Lord called him home.”

“Is that so?” Mason cocked his head to the side. “Was he ill?”

“He had that triple bypass a few years ago, but he’s seemed fine since. After our last meeting, he returned home, but didn’t make it as far as his sofa. They think it was a massive heart attack. Maybe he got too worked up at the meeting banging his cane like he was.”

“They think it was a heart attack? Didn’t they perform an autopsy?”

“With his advanced age and his history of heart trouble, I doubt they would do one.”

“Why wasn’t I informed of his death?”

“Thought you knew.”

“All right then. Let’s get down to business. We have two new members to induct and a legacy to vote on. Any discussion before we continue?”

When Mason announced Samantha’s name as the newest board member, Gavin’s gut clenched. He’d been afraid that she would defy his request, but he’d hoped that she would do what was best for her. What was safest for her. Yet, he wondered where she was. Why was she being voted in in absentia?

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As the meeting closed and the others got to their feet, Mason tapped his glass on the table to get their attention. “Remember to be back here in three hours to partake in the festivities celebrating the nuptials of two of our dearest members.” His eyes locked on Gavin’s. “Black-tie of course.”

The man actually expected them to return in three hours time and be prepared for a formal event. Grayson raised a brow. “Should we bring our wives and girlfriends?”

“Of course, nobody attends a wedding solo, do they? You’re welcome to bring both your wife and girlfriend, should you please.”

Gavin shook his head at Mason’s tasteless joke.

Samantha’s armshadgonenumb from her restraints. She’d expected the big man to remove them when he’d left her in the room, but he hadn’t. She didn’t know if he’d been gone for ten minutes or two hours. Time wasn’t on her side.

Mason’s cruel words reverberated in her brain. He’d taken the things she desired most in life—husband and children—and twisted them into something perverse. His comments about her childbearing years nearing their end were painful to hear as true as they were, but she was certain he’d wielded his words like a Kensei swung his sword. With precision. They were meant to cut her down.

A soft sobbing sound drew her attention. Someone else was in here. Close enough that she could hear them.

“Hello?”

The sobs grew louder.

“Listen, we need to see if we can help each other, I’m Samantha. What’s your name?”

No answer. She tried again. “Maybe if we talk, the time in here won’t be as dreadful.”

“Vanessa.”

“How long have you been in here?”

“Since he brought us back.”

“Back from where?” Sam moved closer to what she assumed was the wall between their rooms.

“I guess these rooms aren’t soundproof.”

“Why would they need to be? It’s underground, so it’s unlikely anyone above would hear us scream.”

“The dormitory in the estate house is soundproof. I assumed these rooms would be, too.”

“I’m glad they’re not. At least that way we can talk to each other. Where did you return from?”

“A cabin. It was supposed to be an FBI safe house.”

“Go on, but start from the beginning. I think we have plenty of time.”

“Three years ago, Mason had another girl invite me to join a sorority.”

“Zeta Gamma Xi?”

“That’s the one. I did everything that was asked of me until I didn’t.”

“What did you refuse to do?”

“Post private pictures of a prominent politician on social media.”

“Wow.”

“I saw the possible fallout and couldn’t do it. That was when I was first brought here to the estate house dormitory.”

“And?”

“A few weeks later, I was offered an out. Instead of being married off to a member of the society in another country, I could remain near home and continue to care for my ailing mother.”

“What was the condition?”

“That I marry Mason Kennedy.”

“So you did?”

Sam barely heard her whispered “yes.”

“What happened next?”

“He forced me to recruit for him.”

“Ah.”

“Then when we came back up here a few weeks ago, he asked me a question about the estate, which I answered honestly. Big mistake. The next thing I know, I’m back in the dormitory, and he’s taken a new wife.”

“Doesn’t he have to divorce you before he can marry someone else?”

“You would think so, wouldn’t you?” She let out a bitter laugh. “Poor Brittany, she seems like such a sweet kid, but now she’s tied to Mason.”

“Brittany?” Sam recognized the name as Cate’s roommate. The one she joined the sorority for. Could it be the same girl? “Is she here?”

“Last time I saw her was when she entered the code on the door so Emmaline and I

could escape. We were supposed to contact an FBI Agent who had sent another girl in to work undercover and gather intel. We were then supposed to have the FBI raid the place and rescue the other girls. It was too risky for all of us to leave together.”

Dread curled in Sam’s gut. “Who was the other girl?”

“Her name was Cate.” Was. Did that mean she was dead? How would Gavin and Gray ever reconcile that with their faith? She closed her eyes. Gavin was stronger than she’d been when her parents died. He would get through whatever happened.

“Do you know what happened to her?”

“No. Last I heard Mason was planning to marry her off to someone in New Zealand. I don’t know if when it’s supposed to happen. I doubt she’s left yet. It usually takes a month or more to get a bride ready for her new union.”

“What does that entail?”

“Making sure that by the time they send her, she’s sufficiently afraid to complain. The Alliance doesn’t want any of their marriages to fail, so they use coercion and threats to make sure the women remain compliant once they leave the dorms.”

“How on earth do they get away with it?”

“By killing anyone who objects to their methods.”

People like Grayson and Gavin. If they were to publicly resist Mason. Her stomach roiled as she got to her feet. Something had to be done, but she was helpless in her current state. No. Not completely helpless. Her father and her uncle had both introduced her to an all powerful God. If she couldn’t help the man she loved and his siblings now, she knew who could. The only question left was whether or not He

would answer her prayers this time.

Chapter Thirty-Four

When they returned home, Gavin hopped in his Land Rover and headed to Samantha's. They hadn't left things in a good place, so he thought the chances of convincing her to attend the wedding with him would be better if he showed up in person. As he pulled into her drive, something seemed amiss. Her Subaru sat in front of the house with the driver's door open, but there was no sign of her.

He slammed his car into park and jumped out. Banging on her door, he shouted for her to answer. No response. He tried calling her landline and heard it ringing inside, still no response. She could berate him over a broken door or window later if need be, but he was getting inside one way or another. Though trying all the windows and doors first seemed the wisest course of action. Everything on the main level was locked up tight, so he tried the bilco doors to the cellar and found them unsecured. The door leading inside was open, so he found himself back in the finished part of her basement staring at the box they'd gone through weeks early. Had it only been four weeks? It felt like far longer.

He took the stairs two at a time and entered the main level where he continued to shout her name. She was nowhere to be found. Upstairs he paused in her bedroom doorway. It was her intimate space, and he felt like an intruder as he stared at the place where she lay her head each night. When this was all over, he hoped she'd agree to marry him and then his space would become hers, but this wasn't the time to think about it. He needed to find her and make sure she wasn't in some kind of jeopardy.

The door to the other bedroom was open, so he walked over to it. Her uncle's room. He knew without needing to be told. She'd mentioned how she hadn't felt strong enough to go inside. Something must've changed. The first step into the room felt

like a violation of her privacy, but if she was in here, she had to be distraught. And if she needed him, he'd be there for her, even if she hated him for encroaching on her private space.

But she wasn't there. An open safe displayed long guns. A pile of journals were spread on the floor, and a tiny black notebook lay beside them. Stooping down, he picked it up and then gathered the journals into his arms and took them down to her kitchen table. Had something she read spooked her and caused her to take a hike? But what about the open car door? He needed more information, and he didn't know where to start, so he read. Yes, it was an intrusion into the privacy of a man who was most likely dead, and also a violation of his girlfriend's trust, she'd claimed she wasn't his girl, but they both knew that wasn't true. And right now, he needed to know what had caused her to flee her house in such a panic that she would leave doors open and rifles unsecured, so he read.

The walls were pressing in on Samantha by the time the muscle-bound menace returned.

"Think you can remove the restraints? My arms are numb."

He grunted and set a tray of food on top of the floor. He slid his pocket knife through the zip ties securing your wrists and pain shot through her arms as blood rushed into her limbs. Before she could say another word, he was gone.

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“Talkative fellow.” She spoke to Vanessa on the other side of the wall.

“In all the years I’ve known him, I’ve never heard him speak.”

“It’s not much of a meal, is it? I’m not sure a bird could survive on so few calories.”

“That’s the idea. He wants all the ladies to lose weight, so they’ll look good in their wedding gowns. The diet is precise. Warden weighs each girl, and determines how many calories she’ll needs to maintain her current weight, then he cuts that by 500 calories a day, so she’ll lose any extra pounds she might be carrying. If Mason tells Warden a girl is already thin enough, they’ll allow her a large enough portion of rabbit food to maintain her curves.”

“Oh joy. What a delightful place.” Sam picked at the lettuce on her plate. Her captor hadn’t bothered to leave her a fork, so she had to eat with her fingers, but she would eat. If only to give her enough strength to fight when they came back for her.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Gavin stalked into the lodge and found Grayson in the kitchen with their father.

“Samantha is missing.”

“Say what?”

“I arrived at her house to ask her to be my plus one, she wasn’t there. Her car door was left open. Her house was empty and in disarray. I don’t think she left willingly, but if she did, it was because of this.” Gavin tossed the handwritten letter that had

fallen out of the journal in front of his brother.

Grayson scanned it and passed it to their father. Then he locked eyes with Gavin. “That’s enough to make anyone want to run. Her entire identity must feel like a lie.”

“What do I do with this?” He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I don’t know if the Alliance has her, or if she went off somewhere in the woods to think. I can’t let anything happen to her, but I’m powerless to protect her. First Emmaline, then Cate, and now Samantha. We’re bodyguards and we can’t even protect the people we love the most.”

“Is this you admitting you’re in love with Sam?”

“Stay focused, Grayson. What do we do now?”

“First, little brother, you get on your knees and pray. You know as well as I do that if you want to fight your battles like a man, it’s your only recourse. Then after you have a good, long talk with the Almighty, get ready for the wedding we’re about to attend. I’ll find you some arm candy.”

“Tell me you didn’t just call a woman ‘arm candy’?”

“It was a joke... testing you to see if you’re paying attention. But you probably shouldn’t attend this shindig alone. If Mason took her, he did so to throw you off balance. Let’s let him think he lost this round.”

“Where are you going to get a girl to join me at this thing with almost no notice?”

“Trust me.” Grayson slapped him on the back. “Have I ever let you down?”

Gavin narrowed his eyes.

“Never mind. Don’t answer that.”

Samanthaknockedonthewall separating her from Vanessa. “Are you awake?”

“I rarely sleep.”

“What is it like to be married to a man like Mason?”

She heard Vanessa’s sigh. “I’m not sure you can understand what I’m about to say, but since my husband brought you here, I feel I owe you my honesty.”

“I appreciate that.”

“The first few nights were torture. I hated the idea of him touching me, but I got used to him. As time went on, he would show kindness. Little things at first, a pat on the head or a kind word, but eventually, his gestures were grand, like filling the house with my favorite flower or taking me to a play he knew I longed to see.”

Stockholm Syndrome. Samantha had heard of it, but never met anyone who’d suffered from it before. Vanessa had grown to trust her captor. She’d even allowed herself to love him. “Do you love him?”

“I did.” She let out a bitter laugh. “Until he replaced me. He claims it’s not permanent. He’ll bring me back when he’s ready for me, but he has in mind now that it’s okay for him to have multiple wives. He’s on number three, but told me he plans to have at least ten of us. I would’ve willingly stayed with him if he would’ve been content with just me. I know that sounds crazy, but I made my choice when I married him, and I was willing to live with it. Make the best of the hand I’d been dealt.”

“I’m sorry about the other women.”

“Don’t be. It’s God’s punishment for letting Mason use me to recruit new girls.”

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“You don’t believe that, do you?”

“Yes, but I deserve it, so I’ll accept God’s wrath.”

“God isn’t out to get you. He offers you grace. All you have to do is accept it.”

“There is no way he would forgive me after all I’ve done.”

“When Jesus was dying on the cross, he forgave the murderer hanging beside him. Told him he would be with Him in paradise that very day. I’m paraphrasing, of course, but that was the gist of it.”

“Why would he do that?”

“He died on the cross that long ago day to bridge the gap between us and God and allow us to enter into His presence, but we have to accept the gift He’s offered us.”

“But I don’t deserve it.”

Tears streamed down Sam’s face as she repeated her father’s words from so many years earlier. “Neither did I, but I accepted His gift and He gave me new life.”

She had. And then she’d turned her back on the God who saved her, but He kept reaching out to her. All she had to do was take hold of His hand. She could lean on Him, and He’d see her through. He didn’t promise a trouble-free life, but He promised to be with her through the suffering.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Gavin couldn't believe Grayson had managed to arrange a date for him on such short notice. Grace, the petite blonde beside him was familiar, indeed. She was one of the bodyguard's in his employ. And she was in the area with Federal Judge George Swisher. George had chosen to come to Benton to be near where his daughter was last seen. The same area from which she'd called him. Not wanting her out of his sight, he'd insisted his youngest daughter accompany him along with her protective detail, Grace. And Gavin would feel much better if the bodyguard was at this very moment be protecting Victoria Mae, instead of hanging onto his arm with a death grip. But as Grayson pointed out, she was entitled to a few hours off, and Scott and Kenneth could handle Victoria Mae for one evening.

Grace smiled up at him. "Are you going to get me a glass of champagne?"

He didn't imbibe himself, so he hadn't thought to grab one when the server came by with the tray. "Sure. I'll go fetch you one."

"Don't be long." She winked. Actually winked. He rolled his eyes as he crossed the room. He wasn't sure if she was overplaying a role or if she honestly thought this was a real date. He hoped it was the former because as much as he liked and respected Grace, he was smitten with Samantha, and as far as he was concerned that meant he was off the market. Besides, Grace was an employee. He grabbed the champagne flute. Yes, technically, Sam was, too, but he planned to fire her the moment he found her. And find her, he would.

Upon arriving back at her side, he handed Grace her drink and turned his attention to Mason who was clinking a glass to get everyone's attention. "There was a private ceremony in the conservatory, but the happy couple will now join us to repeat their vows publicly and celebrate their union."

Gavin felt the blood drain from his face when Emmaline Swisher stepped through the door and curtsied to the crowd. The round of applause from the onlookers couldn't drown out his pounding heart.

"Is that?" Grace asked leaning close.

He force his face to remain impassive. "It is."

"We need to call the judge."

"They checked our cell phones at the door, how do you propose we call him?"

"He's going to fire Garrison Security." She shook her head. "Does she want this?"

"I'm not sure." He clenched his jaw and watched helplessly as Emmaline pledged her life to a wealthy Frenchman more than twice her age. She said all the right words and smiled wide, but the joy didn't reach her eyes. The letter to Samantha from her uncle replayed in his mind, and he was as certain as he could be that Emmaline had not chosen this path.

Samanthakneltbythecot and poured her heart out to the Lord. It was the first time she'd truly leaned on Him since the death of her parents. He'd certainly found a way to get her attention.

Now that she knew the Continental Alliance was part of her family's history, and they had been forcing young girls into unwanted marriages, conflicting feelings stirred within her. Part of her knew for sure that her father and her uncle would never get involved in something so evil. They wouldn't be able to justify it, but the truth of her father's involvement hung on the wall in the gallery of the estate. And the book her uncle had that she'd taken to Gavin in Philadelphia. That book held her family's darkest secret. They'd been part of a secret society that aimed to undermine women's

rights and put women back into what they deemed was their proper place. It was backward. The Bible didn't claim those things. A woman shouldn't be forced to marry against her will. And men in general were not given authority over women in general. Her father had taught biblical authority as presented in God's holy word, but Mason Kennedy and his twisted group had wrested that same scripture to make it fit their perverse ways. No God wasn't behind what the Continental Alliance was doing. God was good. It was a simple truth, but one she'd pushed away for years. In that moment, she embraced it.

Prayers poured from her lips, and she felt serenity deep within her soul. A calmness she hadn't experienced in years. Here she was in captivity, and she'd never felt more free. "Thank You, Lord, for filling me with Your peace."

The door to her cell opened, and Mason appeared. He perched himself on the edge of her cot. "You missed a lovely wedding. I came by to fetch my wife, but I thought I'd stop for a visit with you first."

She looked away from him.

"How are you faring, my dear?" He glanced at her empty plate. "I'm glad to see you have your appetite. Maybe I'll have Warden bring you a slice of wedding cake. It's divine."

Tugging her knees to her chest, she lifted another silent prayer.

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“Cat got your tongue, love?” Mason laughed. “Maybe this will loosen its chords.” He held took out his cell phone and played a video clip. A buxom blonde clung to Gavin’s arm with the tenaciousness of an octopus. Sam frowned, but remained silent. “I thought you might want to see how easily you were replaced. Maybe it’s for the best that we saved you from the heartache of learning how fickle his heart was farther down the road.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Grayson slapped Gavin on the back and displayed a wide smile that Gavin knew was fake. Between his teeth, he asked “What are we going to do about these developments? We can’t let Emmaline Swisher or excuse me, Emmaline Devereaux leave with her new spouse, or we’ll both be looking for new jobs after Judge Swisher goes on Fox news and tells the world that the Garrison brothers and their security firm are inept.”

“I’m well aware. How are we going to play this? With Samantha going missing, I didn’t have a chance to call Wade today and tell him about this shindig, so we’re running blind. It’s us against the Alliance.”

“I think you forgot that we are the Alliance now. After donating a paltry ten million dollars to their cause, you swore your oath of loyalty this afternoon right alongside me”

“My fingers were crossed.”

Grayson chuckled. “Let’s find a way to bring Mason Kennedy’s world crashing down

around him before he tears down ours.”

Grace cocked her head and rubbed her chin. “I’m not sure I have a way to do all that, but I can make a splash while you two figure something out.” She stumbled toward the bride, her drink sloshing over the edge of her glass, and settled into a tipsy party-goer persona with ease. Several men tried to help her, but she brushed them off, and hugged Emmaline kissing both of her cheeks and spilling champagne on her gown. “Here, let me help you clean that off.” She snatched a napkin from a passing server.

“Do you think she has a plan?” Gray asked.

Gavin shook her head. “She’s winging it, but I’m guessing she’s armed since I’ve never seen her go anywhere unarmed, now I have to decide if that is a good or bad thing.”

“I’m armed.”

“I figured that. So, am I, but you didn’t need me to tell you that.” He frowned as he watched Grace and Emmaline stumble to the ground together. The whole thing only took a few seconds. Mason appeared in the doorway and led the bride away from the commotion.

The party continued, but the bride never rejoined them. Grace stayed close to his side, and they whispered about strategy. When it was time to leave, their cell phones were returned to them, and they made their way off the property in silence. “Now what?”

“We pull over at the top of the mountain and return on foot. Emmaline cannot leave that property tonight without one of us on her tail to keep track of her.

Mason waved goodbyetothe guests and shut the doors behind them. The blonde with Gavin was up to something. She wasn’t as drunk as she was pretending to be which

meant she was trying to get a message to Emmaline. He needed to find out what the girl had said to the newlywed.

He slid into the passageway in the library and made his way to the dorm. He'd considered taking Emmaline back to her bridal suite, but had chosen the dormitory for security reasons. If the Garrisons were considering an attempt to break her out, it would be far harder to do so if they couldn't find her. Now that they were gone, he'd find out what Gavin's sidepiece had passed along to the brand new Mrs. Devereaux.

There was a collective gasp as he entered the room. It was music to his ears. A healthy respect for his authority laced with just enough fear to keep everyone compliant. "My dear, Emmaline, my apologies for the interruption of your reception, but that ghastly woman seemed determined to harm you, and I couldn't let that happen, now could I?"

She stared at her feet and chewed on her bottom lip. A habit they should've broken her of before her wedding night.

"Did you forget how to use your words, dear?"

"No."

He took a seat on the edge of her cot and patted her knee. "Tell me word for word what the woman said to you."

"She offered her congratulations on my nuptials."

"You're sure that was all she said."

"Yes."

“Very well. Come along with me. You need to be on your way. I’m sure your groom is becoming impatient with the delay.”

She nodded her head, but the look she shared with the Garrison girl gave him pause. Something more was said. He’d review a recording of the event and read her lips if necessary. The Garrisons would not best him.

“Vanessa?” Samanthaleanedbackresting her head on the wall. No answer came. True to his word, Mason must’ve brought his wife back to the house. At least, she hoped that was the case, because the alternative was unthinkable. If Mason was a man of his word, he intended to keep Sam in captivity until he destroyed her spirit. How long would it take? A week? A month? A year? Would reliance on God keep her strong?

Did Gavin know she was gone? Was he looking for her? Something deep in her gut told her he was. And that he wouldn’t stop searching until he found her. Yet, she’d had a burning desire to uncover what happened to her uncle and had failed. Even if Gavin used all the resources available to him and brought in Wade to help, the chance of them finding her in an underground bunker were slim at best.

The only two ways she would escape this place was to pretend she’d been broken and was ready to accept a life with an unknown man or to fight her way out. The first option would take too long, which left fighting. Her physical prowess was nil compared to Warden’s, but she was pretty sure she could take Mason. If he came alone and left the door open like he had when he’d visited earlier, she might be able to overcome him and escape. It wouldn’t surprise her to find guards outside the bunker though. He’d want to prevent anyone from going in as much as keep her from getting out.

Next time he arrived to play his psychological games with her, she’d be ready.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Mason reviewed the security footage for the third time. It was there, the woman had slipped something inside Emmaline's stocking. He couldn't tell what it was, but was determined to take possession of the item at once.

Three minutes later, he stalked into the bridal suite. "Hand it over, or I'll strip you down and find it myself."

"I gave it to Cate."

"What was it?"

"You don't know?"

"Stop behaving like an insolent child and answer the question."

"A note wrapped around a pen."

"What did it say?"

"I didn't have the chance to read it before you barged back in."

"Liar! You were in that room for hours before I returned for you."

He pulled out his cell and punched in a number. "Drug the sister. I want her brought here tonight."

“No! Leave her alone. I went along with the wedding like you asked.”

“Give me what I want now if you don’t want additional harm to come to Victoria Mae. My men follow my orders within seconds, so it’s likely too late for me to stop the drug from paralyzing her responses making her oh so compliant, but I can keep my men from taking advantage of the situation, and I might even be persuaded to let her finish high school before I bring her into the dormitory. It’s entirely up to you, Emmaline.”

“It was a handgun. I gave it to Cate Garrison.”

Gavin scanned the darkness from his perch high on a hill outside of the perimeter of the Ricketts Estate. The place was a fortress. Over one hundred acres on its own and surrounded by thousands of acres of state park and game lands.

Nothing was happening. Claude Devereaux would want to steal away with his bride. Gavin tried to put himself in Mason’s place and think like him, he likely anticipated the possibility of an ambush and had prepared for it. Maybe he would send a decoy vehicle to distract them until he could get the couple off the property. Or he might have prepared a room or cabin on the estate where the bride and groom could spend their first night as husband and wife. That was the type of thing he’d come to expect from his adversary. The invitation to the wedding had been Mason’s way of showing them he was in control and wasn’t afraid of the Garrisons despite their wealth and connections.

Seeing Emmaline Swisher in that wedding gown had twisted his gut into tight knots and thrown him off his game, but they would find a way to rescue their client’s daughter. She wouldn’t leave the property with her new husband if he had anything to say about it. Now that they knew what the Continental Alliance was really up to, he hoped to have the place crawling with feds by morning, but they needed more to make that happen.

Grayson had sent Jenna and Grace back to the lodge in the Bronco and instructed them to bring their father up to speed and to call Wade and let him know what was going on. In the meantime, they needed to find a way to get Emmaline to safety.

Then they'd tackle what to do about Samantha and Cate, but without solid information to go on, all he had was hunches and speculation concerning their whereabouts.

Leaves rustled nearby. Looking up he saw Grayson approaching. "There's commotion on the other side of the manor. A white limousine pulled up, and the driver went inside. Could be a decoy. Or it could be the real thing."

Mason led Emmaline into the honeymoon suite where her nightclothes were laid out across the bed for her. "Get ready Mrs. Devereaux. We'll be sharing a cigar in my study, and then the mister will be up to join you."

The poor thing was shaking like a leaf. "Sit a moment. Have a glass of wine to calm your nerves. I'll have one brought up."

She didn't answer, so he lifted her chin and forced her to look him in the eyes. "Silence. I like that. Show your spouse that same respect, and perhaps he'll come to love you in time." He turned to leave, but stopped with his hand on the doorknob. "I won't keep him long, dear. Have no fear, you won't be spending your wedding night alone."

When the time came, he instructed Dennis to show Claude Devereaux to the second floor suite and to post a guard at the door. He'd secured the windows and made sure the alarms were functioning properly. The newlyweds wouldn't want any interruptions on their first night together.

If he had his way, he'd go find Katarina and show her some attention, but since

Gavin's little tramp had armed Emmaline, there was now a gun in dormitory, and he needed to see to it the problem was remedied before he could enjoy any downtime with his wives. He'd brought Vanessa back to the dorm this afternoon, but Brittany remained in solitary. By the end of the night, she should be sufficiently broken. He doubted she'd have the audacity to defy him again. If she did, he'd come up with a more severe form of punishment. It was for her own good. She couldn't be allowed to sin against God by disobeying her husband, God's ordained authority over her.

He'd make sure she understood that she was his property and had no rights of her own. In the end, she'd be grateful to have a man who was willing to step up and make the decisions for her. A real man.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Samanthadeflatedwhenthebig man showed up in her room. There wasn't much chance of her taking him on. David might've taken on Goliath with a sling-shot and a stone, but she didn't even have that much. She couldn't distract him with conversation since he wasn't much of a talker.

Maybe if she could convince him to let her leave, that would work, but she had a feeling he was loyal to Mason. But it was worth a try. "You know, there might be a way out of this for you."

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Ignoring her, he set a plate with a sliver of cake beside her on the canvas cot.

“The Garrisons are looking for me. You know they are. If they find you here, you’ll be tried as an accomplice. You could spend the rest of your life behind bars.”

He turned away and took a few steps before turning back to face her. She made eye contact. “You might be able to make a deal if you turn your boss in.” Something in his eyes made her think she’d hit a nerve. What did his boss give him for his troubles, anyway? Somehow, she didn’t believe they had a traditional employment contract. The thought brought on a shudder.

When the door clicked shut behind him, she frowned and picked up the plate. Even knowing it was another method Mason was using to taunt her, she still sat on the edge of the cot and dug into the cake. It was good. Lemon cream. There wasn’t enough of it to savor, but it would provide a few calories, and if she was going to fight for her life, she needed them.

Gavin was lying still watching the house when footsteps alerted him to someone’s presence. He jumped to his feet.

Grayson must have news. If they’d come to the wedding prepared for an operation, they would’ve had proper equipment to talk to each other, but as things stood, they didn’t even have enough service for a text. It wouldn’t surprise him if Mason used a signal jammer.

His eyes met his brother’s in the light of the full moon. “Find out more about the limo?”

“It drove away without her in it, but I found something else.”

“Yeah? What?”

He waved his hand and someone stepped out of the shadows. Ranger William Stone. Surprise, surprise. The same man who’d busted them for breaking and entering had broken and entered. Was he here to hassle them or help them? “What do you want, Stone?”

“I went by Samantha’s place when she didn’t show up for work.”

“And?”

“She wasn’t there. Looked like she left in a hurry, but didn’t take her car.”

“Get to the point,” Gavin said.

“I tried the lodge where you’re staying, and she wasn’t there.”

“No. I imagine she wasn’t.”

“Do you know where she is?” Ranger Stone asked.

“Do you?”

“No, but I remembered her gut feeling that those missing women were being held here on the Ricketts Estate, so I thought I’d check it out.”

“And here you are.”

“Yeah.” The park ranger shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

“You stopped me from trying to rescue my sister that night.”

“That was Samantha. She didn’t want you to break the law.”

“And how do you think she’d feel about that now that she’s the one they took?”

“The same, I imagine. She’s a stickler for rules and regulations.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll do whatever it takes to save her. I love that girl like she’s my own daughter.”

“Then let’s figure out where they’re holding her and bust her out.”

“I can call in more law enforcement, but we have to give them something solid if we’re going to convince a judge to give us a search warrant.”

“The swab of blood I gave Wade won’t accomplish much. He said it came back to an unknown female,” Gavin said.

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“What about the forced marriage?” Grayson asked.

“We witnessed her saying her vows. No judge will give us what we need unless she’s in our custody and willing to testify to the coercion.”

“I bet her father would sign a warrant,” Gray said.

Gavin shook his head. “He’d have to recuse himself with his daughter involved. If he gave us one and this thing eventually went to court, they’d throw the thing out the moment they learned the judge whose daughter was kidnapped issued it.”

“You’re right. It would jeopardize the whole case, but it might save them from what Mason Kennedy has planned.”

“A lifetime of servitude and submission,” Gavin said.

“What on earth are you two talking about?”

“Mason Kennedy is arranging marriages for the women he kidnaps. Or at least he did for Emmaline. And after reading a letter from Samantha’s uncle this afternoon, I learned that the Continental Alliance has been arranging marriages for a very long time. Samantha’s own mother was in one of those forced marriages.”

“You can’t be serious? That’s barbarous.”

“Sure is.”

Mason found Warden lounging in the security office with Dennis. “On your feet. Now.”

His head of security stood so quickly he nearly toppled, but the big man took his time obeying the command. It was a sign of disrespect, but there was no time for him to deal with that now. He’d take care of knocking Warden down a few pegs after they had the situation in the dormitory under control.

“One of our guests tonight slipped a pistol to Emmaline which she then passed off to one of the girls in the dorm.”

“Which girl?”

“What does it matter?”

Warden shrugged. “Guess it doesn’t.”

“We need to disarm them before they press the advantage.”

“You do realize they could shoot one of us the moment we open the door.”

“I’m not sure any of those ladies would pull the trigger, but we’ll find out. You’ll go in first.”

Warden chuckled. “I’m not your huckleberry, Mr. Kennedy. Find yourself another patsy.”

Mason narrowed his eyes. “Need I remind you who pays your salary.”

“The CA. Not you.”

“I’m the president of the Continental Alliance.”

“The CA’s president is only ever a vote away from impeachment, and today you voted in three new members all of whom now I have a say and can help vote you out.”

“And how do you suppose Samantha Rollins is going to vote? And who is going to tell the Garrison boys when the votes are scheduled?”

“Have fun dealing with your little gun situation.”

“Get moving or you’re fired.”

“You’re not that stupid, Mason.”

“I’ll deal with you later.” He snapped his fingers. “Dennis, let’s go. First grab a few syringes in case we need to calm down any hysterical women.”

His head of security ambled down the long hall ahead of him stopping at the break room to grab the requested drugs.

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Mason's head spun as he stood there waiting. Warden rarely spoke at all, so his verbose insubordination was completely unexpected. It would need to be dealt with swiftly. There couldn't be a repeat performance.

When Dennis rejoined him, he held out his hand for the syringes and tucked them into his jacket pocket. They reached the dorm, and he entered the code, then stepped aside to allow the other man to enter first. There was no gunshot. He'd been right. Those girls weren't going to shoot anybody.

Mason sauntered into the room. "Ladies, how are we tonight?"

He was met with silence.

"So quiet. How nice." He walked over to Cate Garrison and twirled a lock of her hair around his index finger. "I understand you've been a naughty girl. Is that correct?"

She remained silent. He glanced over to Dennis. "Put her in restraints. I'll search the dorm while you take her over to the bunker. I'm sure our other prisoner will enjoy having company now that my wife has rejoined the party here." His eyes searched out Vanessa. A meaningful look passed between them, and he recognized the regret in her eyes. She'd learned her lesson. Maybe he'd bring her back into his household tonight. It was time. The younger two wives didn't know him like she did. They messed up his coffee and ran his bath water too hot. They'd learn, of course, but if Vanessa was there, she could train them. Help them learn the proper way of doing things. What was it the Bible said? Something about the older women teaching the younger. Not that he'd call twenty-five old, but she was more experienced than her counterparts.

Once Dennis left with Cate, he went to the first bunk and yanked the sheets and blankets off, tossing them to the floor. “We’ll do this all night, and I’ll leave you no coverings for sleep if someone doesn’t hand over the gun immediately.” He slowly scanned each face in the room. When he got back around to Vanessa she was pointing the pistol at his heart. “I don’t think you want to do that, love.”

“Don’t I?”

He stepped toward her. Her hand shook. “Give me the gun, love.”

“How about I give you the bullets instead?” Her finger moved to the trigger, and he raised his hands above his head. “You don’t want to do this, Vanessa. We love each other.”

“If that were true, you wouldn’t have taken Brittany and Katarina for wives. You’ve replaced me.”

“You, my love, are irreplaceable.” He frowned. “I’ve learned that the hard way. Now give me the weapon.”

Her shaking grew more pronounced, and he was afraid she might accidentally pull the trigger. “Don’t come any closer.”

He took a step toward her. She wouldn’t shoot him. He was almost certain, but he wished he hadn’t let Dennis leave the room. One more step. He was almost on top of her. “Give it to me, love.”

“You don’t love me.” Tears streamed down her face.

“I do love you.” He placed his hand over hers, and slid her finger off the trigger. “I’ll take this.” Forcing her to her knees, he held the gun to the back of her head. “Who

wants to see my wife's brain matter splattered around the dormitory?"

They all stared at him in horror.

"Try something like this again, and one of you will die." He pushed Vanessa to the floor with his foot. "I'll send Warden to put you back in solitary. This time consider it your permanent home. After this stunt, you will never see daylight again, my love."

Chapter Forty

Samantha heard someone coming. The steps were heavy. It was the big man again. Despair settled into her chest. Why wasn't Mason coming himself? She'd asked God to help her get out of this. He knew she didn't have a fighting chance against Warden.

The door to her room opened, but nobody came in. She got to her feet and peered out into the darkness of the bunker. "Hello?"

She didn't see anyone, but a voice answered. She'd never heard the big man do more than grunt, but she was almost certain it was him. "If you want to get off the estate alive, you'll need to find a way to do so without my help."

"Why did you open my door?"

"Mason pushed me too far."

"Which way should I go?" Footsteps were her only answer, and she knew he was gone. A man of his word, he'd left her to save herself. And that was what she intended to do. Before she made it to the stairs leading out, she heard the sound of keys jingling. Was this whole thing some kind of game? Did Mason and Warden like to chase their victims? She cowered behind a metal desk.

“Mason has never allowed me to come down here before, but I’m looking forward to a little quiet time with you, Cate.”

Sam had hoped to sneak away, but she couldn’t leave Gavin’s sister with this creep. Unarmed and dressed in the thin cotton sundress Mason had forced her to wear, she had no way of defending Cate against the security guard. At least nothing other than sheer will and training. Her feet bare, she followed silently until the man with the keys pushed Cate onto the cot. He hadn’t yet noticed that Samantha’s cell was empty. Maybe he was telling the truth when he said he’d never been down there before.

“You are too lovely for words, darling. That fiery red hair and those sparkling green eyes. It’s a shame it’s so dark down here, I want to drink in your beauty before I take you.”

Creeping up silently, Sam forced herself to keep her mouth shut. As long as he didn’t know she was there, she had a slight advantage. And she couldn’t afford to lose it.

The man climbed on top of Cate then yelped in pain and let out a string of expletives. It was the perfect opening. Sam kicked the base of his skull. He was dazed but conscious. She landed another blow to gut and followed it with a head-butt. He tackled her to the ground, but she used both her legs against him for leverage and flipped herself upright. Cate swung her cuffed hands over his head and held him a head lock. Sam searched his pockets for the key to the cuffs, but couldn’t loose them without giving him back control of the situation. She found some zip ties in a holder on his belt and used them to secure his hands. Then she unlocked Cate. He charged. Cate kicked him knocking him to the ground. While he was on the ground, they slipped from the room and closed the steel security door behind them. It locked into place.

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Mason stalked back to the security room. Warden was right where he'd left him. "Take Vanessa back to the bunker."

The big man lifted his chin. "No."

"You'll do what you're told, or you'll be out on your ear."

"Get your lapdog, Dennis, to do your dirty work. I'm out."

"The only way out is death."

"Then kill me if you think you can take me." Warden stood to his full height and moved toward him.

"Think twice about who you are threatening."

"I have." He sneered. "My decision is made, I'm out." He grabbed a ball cap from the desk and stuffed it onto his big head. "See you around, Mason."

The door to the office creaked open then closed again. Mason was left alone. Dennis should've returned by now. How long could it take to toss the Garrison girl into a cell.

He squeezed his eyes shut as realization dawned on him. He'd sent a boy to do a man's job. Dennis wouldn't be able to resist the fair-skinned temptress. He would ruin her. Fine, if Mason couldn't promise her fiancé that she was a pure, undefiled treasure, he would instead offer her up as a concubine for Dennis, provided he

promised to keep her locked up and out of sight. That would show Warden the error of his ways. He'd be back when he realized that Mason could ruin him, and then he'd see that loyalty was rewarded while betrayal was severely punished.

A movement in the corner of the screen caught his attention, and a grin slowly formed. The Garrison boys were breaching his perimeter. Trespassers could be shot on sight, and he happened to have a pistol handy thanks to Gavin's date. This would be fun.

Gavin brushed at the dirt on the slacks of his tux as he walked along the old logging road Ranger Stone had shown him. Stone believed it might be the only way they could get onto the property without setting off any alarms. He'd seen staff come and go using it, so it was a reasonable hypothesis and certainly worth trying. It had taken some doing, but Gavin convinced Grayson and the ranger to stay out of sight. If anything went wrong, he'd need them to provide backup.

Moonlight glinted off something to his right. Reaching for his Glock, he searched the darkness then took aim. At his sister. He tucked the handgun back into the holster and held his arms open wide. Cate jumped into his arms and they both fell to the ground. After rising to his feet and helping his sister up, he took off his tuxedo jacket and placed it around her shoulders. Her feet were bare, and the skimpy dress she wore offered no protection against the chill of the evening.

"How did you escape?"

She looked around, but whatever she was looking for wasn't there. "A woman helped me. I don't know where she went. One second she was beside me, and the next she was gone. She must've been captive, too, but she wasn't in the dorm."

"Dorm?"

“That’s what that sick freak called the room where he kept us.”

“Are there still girls in there?”

His stomach clenched at her nod. “Yes,” she whispered.

He clasped both sides of her face “Did he hurt you? Did any of them hurt you?” He knew she would understand what he was really asking.

“Almost, but that woman stopped Dennis before he... I’m fine. Really. Unharmmed.”

He wished that was true, but knew the psychological scars from what she’d been through wouldn’t heal easily.

As he thought on how he would make Dennis pay for what he’d done to his sister, a conversation he’d had with Samantha echoed in his mind.

‘God help the people who took my sister if they hurt her.’

‘I’m not sure even God can provide that kind of help.’

‘He’s the only one who can, hon.’

And now He was the only one who could keep him and Grayson from killing every one of the men involved in Cate and Samantha’s abduction.

“Have you seen a girl named Samantha?”

“I didn’t meet anyone named Samantha.” A tear slid down her cheek. “Emmaline was with me. They forced her to marry some guy. Even after all she’d been through, she tried to help me by sneaking a gun to me. Without Emmaline doing what she did, I

would still be locked in the dorm with no way out. In the end, even though I gave the gun to Vanessa, it helped me escape. They found out Emmaline gave it to me, so they moved me to an underground bunker. When Dennis was throwing me onto a cot in one of the rooms they use as cells, a woman came to my rescue.”

“Grace gave Emmaline that gun. She hoped she’d use it to escape from her so-called husband.”

“Grace? Bodyguard Grace?”

“That’s the one.”

“She’s here?” Cate looked around.

“She and Jenna went back to the lodge to call Wade for us, but despite us insisting they stay away, I’m sure they’ll be back knowing them as I do.”

Chapter Forty-One

Samanthastucktotheshadows as she made her way to the door she and Gavin had used to sneak out of the party a few days earlier. If it was open, she could get in there and rescue the ladies being held inside. Vanessa had mentioned a library as the means for entering the private rooms in the house, but she hadn’t known the code to open the dormitory door. She’d claimed Brittany had memorized it, so if Sam needed to find her. With the size of the estate, it would be a challenge, but she had to try.

She climbed a set of spiral stairs to the second floor and spotted a guard at one of the doors. It had to be where Mason was keeping Brittany. What other reason would he have for guarding the door? She needed a distraction. How could she get the guard to leave the room. An idea came to her, and she hurried back outside and tossed pebbles at the window. A man tried to open the window, but it didn’t budge. She hurried back inside and hid in a closet with a view of the door. If things went as she hoped, the guard would barrel outside to find out who was throwing the rocks. It would be even better if the man at the window went with him.

But why did Mason have another man in the room with Brittany? Her stomach roiled when it hit her. Vanessa had said that Emmaline was too marry tonight. Could that be where she was being kept?

A prayer fell rose from her heart asking God to spare Emmaline from what was planned for her that evening. Even as the prayer rose, she knew she was too late, so she asked the Lord to give Emmaline the strength to endure what had happened and to heal her psyche from the trauma she'd endured.

When the guard ran through the door, she hurried up the stairs and bounded into the room. The man was frozen in place dressed only in a pair of boxers. Samantha gestured for a teary eyed Emmaline to come to her. "Do you have a robe?"

The girl pointed to the attached bathroom, and Sam grabbed the silk robe from the back of it and helped Emmaline put it on. "Let's get out of here."

The sound of laughter broke through the silence of the evening, and Gavin looked up to see Mason holding a gun to Grayson's head. "Ah, sweet Cate, your eldest brother isn't so tough when faced with a bullet to his brain. Why don't you be a doll, and come on over here? Dennis wouldn't be happy if I let his pet escape."

Fire exploded in Gavin's veins. The situation was untenable. He was helpless. If he did anything other than stand still, his brother would die. If he did nothing, this creep would get his hands on his sister again.

"Let's all walk slowly back to the bunker. Once you're safely locked up, you boys can talk all you want. Of course, I'll be taking Cate with me. She was going to make a nice man a wonderful bride, but now that she's managed to annoy me, she'll be nothing more than a toy to be passed around among our most loyal members. That should be a suitable punishment. Don't you think so?"

The thought of anyone putting their hands on his baby sister made his skin crawl and had him longing to reach for his Glock.

“Cate, do me a favor, dear, get your brother’s pistol and bring it over to me. Keep it pointed at the ground like a good girl.”

Cate did as she was told, and Gavin thought he might explode with rage. A movement up on the knoll caught his eye, but he didn’t turn that way. If help was nearby, he didn’t want to alert Mason to their presence.

“March along, boys. We don’t have all night. Brittany and Katarina have waited long enough for their husband to join them in our chambers.”

The thought nauseated him. No woman should have to endure the presence of this snake in their lives.

“I do appreciate the ten million dollars you donated, boys. It was a generous contribution, but I feared there might be strings attached, so I’ve been watching for your return.”

They walked a few more yards before he spoke again. “I’d truly hoped you could be persuaded that serving a purpose greater than yourselves was worthwhile and that you might join me doing God’s work, but it’s obvious from your actions tonight that you cannot be trusted to choose the righteous path.”

They reached a set of stairs leading down to a steel door, and before Gavin could start down the steps, Mason kicked him in the kidneys sending him flying down ahead of the others. “You should be glad I’m letting you take some of Cate’s punishment. But know this, I’m only doing so to keep her beauty intact. I wouldn’t want to damage that adorably freckled face of hers.”

Mason smiled at Gavin's prone form. This was more fun than he'd had in ages. It might not be a bad thing to have Warden out of the picture for the evening. If he'd been around, Mason would've assigned him to dole out punishment, but it was far more enjoyable to do so himself.

Cate remained covered with her brother's jacket. A situation that needed to be remedied posthaste. He couldn't let her feel she had any dignity left. He also needed to find out how Dennis had let her escape, but first he had to get the boys into lockup. He gave Grayson a shove. Then grabbed Cate and held the gun under her chin. Controlling the tiny woman was easier than holding onto Grayson, and he knew both boys would do anything to protect their sister.

"Walk." Gavin got to his feet and limped beside his brother who held the steel door open for him. Once they were all inside, Mason noticed Samantha's cell door was open and sucked in a sharp breath. Warden. It had to have been him. He'd pay for the trouble he'd caused.

"Get in." He waved with his free hand to the room where he'd kept Gavin's girlfriend. Grayson and Gavin followed his orders as expected and he shut the door behind them and waited for the lock to engage. Then he turned his attention back to the prize and tore the jacket from her tiny frame and drank her in with his eyes. "You've been a naughty girl, Cate. And you'll pay the price for your insolence. But first you need to take a little nap." He tapped the side of the syringe, shot some of the drug into the air, and then injected the remainder into her vein.

He grabbed her wrist and drug her to the next cell. When the door swung open, he frowned at Dennis sitting on the cot with his head in his hands. "Care to explain how it is that I found this little slip of a thing out wandering around the property while you're sitting in her cell?"

Chapter Forty-Two

Samantha prayed for a hedge of protection as she helped Emmaline through the woods toward the fence line where she'd caught Gavin trying to break and enter weeks earlier. There were weak spots in the fence she'd noticed when checking out drone activity. If she could find one of them now, they could escape the property without climbing it and getting snagged on the barbed wire along the top.

When they reached the fence, a cloud covered the moon making it impossible to see clearly. She had a general sense of where her uncle's tree stand was. One of the weakest spots in the fence was in line with it, so if she could get them there, she could get Emmaline to safety. Sam yelped as she stepped on a rock. Moving barefoot through the woods was dangerous. Thankfully, rattlesnakes and copperheads didn't often come out at night, but plenty of other creatures made the forest their home and moved about in the darkness. The screech of an owl punctuated the thought.

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Emmaline cried out, and Sam reached for her. “Stickers,” the girl whispered.

Sam nodded and kept moving. “Thank the good Lord above,” she said.

“What is it?”

“Your escape route. Come on. She kicked at the fence, and then held it high for Emmaline to duck under. After she was safely on the other side, Sam joined her. In about twenty feet, we’ll reach a tree stand. It’s a good spot for you to hole up while I go back to get the rest of the girls.”

“Shouldn’t you call for help?”

“No phone.” She gestured at the sundress she’d been forced to don. “There wouldn’t be service if I had one.”

“Maybe I can help you.”

Sam shook her head. “You’ve been through more than enough for one night. Take a few minutes to regroup. I’ll return for you.”

Gavin pounded his fist on the door.

“Stop.” Grayson sat on the floor with his back against the wall. “It isn’t going to help the situation.”

“Neither was getting yourself caught.”

“I didn’t plan for him to put a gun to my head, but you should’ve let him shoot me instead of letting him get a hold of Cate again.”

“That wasn’t an option, Gray.” He ran his fingers through his hair. “A person doesn’t choose which sibling to let live and which one to sacrifice.”

“You should’ve done exactly that. Cate needed you to make the call for her.”

“I would do almost anything for Cate, but watching you get your brains blown out isn’t one of them. Did Ranger Stone see Mason get the jump on you?”

“Yes. I’m pretty sure Billy saw what went down.”

“Billy? You two are on a first name basis?”

Gray ignored the question.

Gavin continued, “I saw movement up on the knoll when we were marching over here. Hopefully, Billy can find a way to get us out of here. Or, more importantly, he can get help to Cate, Emmaline, and Samantha.”

“I think we need to accept that Emmaline is likely long gone.”

Gavin nodded. “Probably. And, if we get out of here alive, Judge Swisher is going to do everything in his power to have us shut down.”

“You’ve got that right. It’s ironic though. We weren’t even assigned to guard Emmaline, but we tried to convince him that she didn’t leave school on her own, and he refused to believe us.”

“Well, if you had a rebellious daughter, I imagine you’d be the same way,” Gavin

said.

“Nah. I know too much about the depravity of the human mind not to take the threat seriously.” Gray cracked his knuckles. “Besides, the good Lord has not seen it fit to bless us with children.”

“I didn’t know you were trying.”

“It’s been more than ten years, Gavin. It’s not going to happen for us.”

“Don’t doubt the power of God.”

“I’m not doubting His ability, I’m submitting to His will.” He frowned. “We’ll be okay with whatever God wills for us. It hasn’t been easy, but we’ve both accepted it.”

Mason and Dennis returned to the security room leaving Cate in a cell in the bunker. “This night has been a strange one, indeed. I cannot believe you were taken down by two girls.”

“I’m not proud of it, but I wasn’t expecting the other girl to be outside of her cell, so she caught me off guard.”

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“I’ve been tossing around in my mind what to do with her. She was supposed to go to Mr. Furman in New Zealand, but when I thought you defiled her, I almost gave her to you to keep as a concubine. Then when I discovered she’d escaped, I’d decided she should serve as a sort of toy for our most loyal members. I cannot decide which fate would be the worst punishment for her. She must pay for her sins.”

“We could stone her like they did in the old testament.”

“She hasn’t committed adultery, Dennis.”

“Let’s go with the last option. I want to see her passed around.”

“My, Dennis, you’re more sadistic than I gave you credit for. Your wish is granted. She shall remain the property of the Continental Alliance until she’s too old to serve in that capacity.”

“Then what?”

“We’ll dispose of her.”

Chapter Forty-Three

Samanthanearedthebunkerwhere she’d been kept. She needed to keep to the shadows, but to reach the estate house, she would have to dash across the yard and would be out in the open and vulnerable when she did. And if she didn’t find Brittany, all bets were off. There was no way she’d be able to rescue the girls without the code.

Leaning her back against the bunker, she waited and breathed a prayer. The blood-curdling scream of a fisher caused a shiver to crawl up her spine. It was the noise they made before they attacked. Something out there was about to die.

“Samantha?” Her heart skipped at the sound of the unexpected voice.

“Jenna?”

“Yeah. It’s me.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Long story, but Mason has Gavin and Grayson. They went into this building.”

“If the doors in there are locked, there is no way we’ll be able to get them out.”

“How do we get the keys?”

“I like the way you think, Jenna.”

“Cate and I locked Dennis up in one of the cells. He has the keys.”

“He’s not in there anymore. Cate is.”

“That’s not ideal.” She puffed out a breath. That meant Mason knew she was free and would be looking for her. “We have to get to the main house and steal the keys from the security office.”

“I imagine that won’t be easy.”

“No. I’m guessing it won’t be.”

“We have to get Emmaline out of there, too.”

“She’s not in there anymore. She’s safe for now.”

Another girl stepped from the shadows and Samantha recognized her from the video Mason had played for her. “You must be Sam?”

“And you are?”

“Grace. I was Gavin’s date tonight.”

“Gavin.Grayson?Youinthere?”

“We’re here, Billy,” Gray answered.

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Cate's soft voice came through the next cell. "I'm here, too."

"Cate? You're right next door! Are you okay?"

"For now. I just woke up. Mason drugged me. It mustn't have been anything too strong, or I'd still be out."

Gavin's stomach twisted. "Did he?" No they would've heard something.

"I don't think anything happened. I'm fine other than being locked up again."

"How do you propose we get out of this mess, Billy?" Gavin asked.

"I'm working on it. I'll need to find some keys. The locks on these doors are no joke. If I can get to a phone I'll call in backup, but out here in the wilderness that's easier said than done."

"What if you hiked back to the park office?"

"That would take half the night. We're not that close."

"Please tell me your armed," Gray said.

"I have my trusty Glock and a can of bear spray."

"That's good news."

“Someone’s coming.”

Gavin listened as footsteps descended the stairs into the bunker. Knuckles rapped on the door. “Welcome to the Continental Alliance hotel, gentleman. Thanks for staying with us tonight. We hope you’ll enjoy your stay.” The voice didn’t belong to Mason, so he assumed it must be Dennis.

They heard the keys clanking, and a cell being opened. “Well, hello again. Did you miss me, my little spitfire?”

Cate didn’t answer.

“Leave her alone!” Grayson shouted and pounded on the wall.

Gavin clenched his fists at his side wishing for a way through the wall. Billy was out there and would do what he could to protect Cate, but trusting others had never been Gavin’s strong suit. He needed to control situations. Just like his father. Closing his eyes, he looked inward. This was the moment God had been leading him toward, the one where he was forced to admit he was powerless and needed to rely on the Lord to get them through this nightmare. Heaven help him—it wasn’t an easy lesson to learn.

The man’s laugh filtered through the wall. “Well, Cate, can you believe that Mason is allowing me to choose your punishment? I’m going to have fun watching you get passed around like a cheap bottle of booze at a frat party.”

“I’ll have first dibs of course while your brothers are incapable of doing anything to stop me. And I’m looking forward to our time together. You won’t get the opportunity to kick me like you did earlier.” A loud crash echoed through the bunker.

“Got him.” Billy’s voice brought a ghost of a smile to Gavin’s face, and he released a pent up breath. “He’s out for the count. I’ll get his keys.”

“Maybe you should keep your gun trained on him, and I’ll get the key.” Cate said.

Seconds later, the door to their room swung open, and Grayson wrapped their sister in a hug.

“Lock that garbage up,” Gavin said.

“Wouldn’t you rather end him?” Gray asked.

“You know I would, but I won’t.”

Mason closed the door to his chambers and leaned against it, smiling. It was a trying night, but it ended in triumph. All three Garrison kids in custody meant easy access to billions in resources. He’d need to act quickly before their father discovered their fates, but with that kind of money the Continental Alliance would make some inroads into circles they’d previously been unable to infiltrate.

He made his way to the master bedroom. The bed was turned down, and a chocolate mint lay on his pillow, just the way he liked it. Maybe his wives were trainable after all. But where were they? Oh. He’d forgotten that he locked Brittany in the old butler’s pantry. But Katarina should be here. He heard the shower turn on. Perfect timing. Maybe he’d join her. He strolled to the window and looked out at the full moon. Such a lovely night.

A movement in the distance made him squint. Three shadows crossed the yard. Whoever it was would pay for interrupting his evening with Katarina. He crossed the room and left the way he’d come in, locking the door behind him to keep his wife where she belonged. Gone were the days when he’d let his women wander around the estate without him. Brittany and Vanessa had shown that women couldn’t be trusted. He wouldn’t make the same mistakes with wife number three.

He approached the kitchen door and peered out into the dark. No sign of the people who'd crossed the yard. They moved like ladies, but that was impossible. The only female unaccounted for was Samantha. Unless? Nah. Grayson and Gavin weren't stupid enough to allow their wife and girlfriend to remain on the property, were they? He shook his head. Unlikely, but possible. He'd double check the dorm before heading outside to look again.

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When he arrived, he could hear chatter inside. He punched in the code and pushed the door open. The room went silent. Good girls. All seemed to be in order.

Then his eyes rested on Vanessa. He'd forgotten all about her. Warden hadn't been around to take care of her, so he'd have to handle her punishment himself. He walked over and held out his hand. She placed her own inside it, and he helped her to his feet. "Let's go."

"Where are you taking me?"

"I haven't decided yet, but I'm considering the root cellar."

"Please don't make me go down there. I'll do anything."

He silenced her with a kiss on the lips. "You had every opportunity to please me, love. You failed. Come along now."

Whatever he decided to do with her would need to be done quickly. The bunker would be fine, but she could talk to the Garrisons, and he didn't love that plan. Not that any of them could do any harm while locked inside there. Nah. The root cellar was the greater punishment. She'd detest having rats running around down there with her. It would serve her right for holding a gun on him. He led the way out the rear door and took her over by the corn crib then lifted the hatch that led into the root cellar. "Here you go, love." He kissed her again and breathed in her sweet scent. Then drew her close in a warm hug. "I'll miss you, love. Be careful climbing in—I wouldn't want you harmed."

Chapter Forty-Four

Samantha hid behind the corn crib, heart racing while she watched in horror as Mason showed a woman affection before forcing her into an opening in the ground. Likely an old root cellar. She motioned for Jenna and Grace to stay where they were. When Mason was gone, they'd set the girl free.

Jenna stumbled, and Mason's head snapped around. "Whose out here?"

Sam's eyes widened, and she silently urged Jenna and Grace to stay put. Taking a deep breath, she stepped from the shadows. "It's me, Sam."

"Sam is a boy's name. Your parents named you Samantha."

She laughed. "You can't possibly think that your opinion matters to me."

"It will, my dear. It will. I've been wondering where you'd gotten off to. I figured your over-developed conscience wouldn't allow you to leave the property without first rescuing the Garrison girl."

"Not just her. All of them."

"A park ranger with a hero complex." He snickered. "I guess Vanessa told you about the rest of the ladies. Another reason why she'll be spending a few weeks in the root cellar. Would you care to join her down there?"

"She won't be remaining in there."

Mason grinned. "You planning on letting her out?" He reached for his gun. "This I'd like to see." A chorus of coyotes punctuated his words, then a shot split the night, and she jumped back.

“Did I do that?” Mason asked with a smile. “Let’s see if I can improve my aim with the next shot.”

Sam saw movement off to her right, and knew with a fair degree of certainty that Jenna and Grace planned to come to her rescue. She couldn’t let that happen. If he saw either of them he’d shoot them. He was toying with her. She didn’t think he’d actually shoot her, but if he did at least the others would have a chance to be rescued. She’d play Mason’s game. Let him think she was cooperating. She lifted her hands into the air. “You don’t need to shoot me. I’ll cooperate.”

“Mr. Kennedy. You have not earned the right to use my first name.”

“Okay. Mr. Kennedy it is. Let’s talk about this. I’m sure we can reach some sort of understanding.”

“You were offered an excellent choice. I gave you the opportunity to have a nice family life, but instead you chose defiance.”

Time slowed. Sam’s mind raced. Would he kill her? She was afraid he might, and she was okay with it. There was nothing more honorable than giving your life for others, but knew the guilt would eat Gavin alive if he were unable to save her. And the last thing she wanted was to hurt him more than she already had when she’d pushed him away.

Mason steadied the gun and aimed it at her chest. “It’s too late for you. You’re no good to anyone.”

“Au contraire.” A deep voice spoke the words from nearby, and her heart jumped in her chest.

She closed her eyes and begged the Lord not to allow Mason to shoot Gavin. “Don’t

Gavin. Stay back.”

“I can’t do that, Sam.”

“Please don’t get yourself killed.”

“You should listen to the lady, Garrison.” Mason swung the pistol toward Gavin. Lifting another prayer that she wasn’t making a mistake, Sam seized the opportunity and lunged at Mason knocking him to the ground. The gun skittered out of his reach.

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Gavin picked up the weapon and aimed it at Mason. "I'm happy to have my Glock back. What did you do with Grayson's weapon." He patted Mason down but didn't find it.

"Where is he?" Sam asked. "I thought you two were locked up in the bunker. We planned to break into the security office and steal the keys, so we could rescue you."

"Gray is trying to find the ladies in the house. Your buddy Billy helped us escape."

She smiled. "Billy's here?"

"Yeah. When you didn't show up for work, he was worried."

"He's a good guy."

"Yes, he is." Gavin swept her into his arms, and she melted against him.

Samantha caught movement from Mason, and turned in time to see him pull a knife from his pant leg. She pushed Gavin to get him out of the way, but it was like hitting a cement wall. Mason threw his weapon and it found its purchase in Gavin's side. Before she could react, Grayson was on top of Mason throwing punches. Lights and sirens lit up the area.

Wade pulled Gray back while another officer read Mason his rights as he handcuffed him.

"I'm fine," Gavin told an officer who was trying to convince him he needed medical

attention. Sam's eyes locked on his briefly, and she felt his pain. He would want to see this through and make sure everyone held within the estate was rescued.

Billy pulled her free from the chaos. "You going with Gavin in the ambulance."

She shook her head. "I don't think Gavin will leave yet, but when he does, he'll probably want Grace there."

Billy ruffled her hair. "You're an idiot, you know that?"

Gavin opened the root cellar, descended the stairs, and shined a flashlight he'd gotten from Wade into the darkened space. "Hello?"

A soft voice responded, "Who are you?"

"Gavin."

"What do you want? Did my husband send you?"

"Didn't you hear any of what happened up there?"

"It's quiet down here. Like a tomb." Her words were true. The silence was surreal. He listened closely and could barely make out the sound of sirens which had been deafening above ground. "I'm here to take you to safety. What's your name?"

"Vanessa."

"Come with me. Let's get you a blanket to cover up with." He held out his hand, and she placed hers in it. When they reached the ladder, he steadied her as she rose ahead of him. After she was helped from the space, he went up another rung on the ladder and the world went black.

The sound of fabric rustling around him told him he wasn't alone. A flashlight blinded him, and then a searing pain lit into his side. He bit back the urge to cuss. "What's going on?"

"You lost a lot of blood then decided climbing a ladder was a good idea." It was Samantha's voice. She was safe. That was all that mattered. He reached for her hand, but she batted him away. "I'm working here."

He attempted to sit up. "Would you please stay put until I finish bandaging your wound?"

"Not a chance." His second attempt was successful, and he was upright back in the root cellar. He reached for Samantha's hand again. "You gave me a scare."

"Look whose talking."

"Are you upset with me, Sam?"

"Why would I be? You refuse to listen to reason, insist on antagonizing a psychopath, and won't budge when I try to push you out of the way of a flying knife, but that certainly shouldn't upset me, now should it?"

"I don't think that's what's bothering you."

"Oh no. What pray tell do you think I'm mad about?"

“Grace.”

“You’re free to date whomever you please. We didn’t have any kind of commitment to each other.”

“Grace is an employee and a friend, Sam.”

“So am I.”

“You’re fired.”

“Good.”

“Now tell me how I’m free to date whomever I please again?”

She didn’t respond, but instead unwrapped the bandage and covered his wound. Her touch made him long for more. He didn’t want her treating his injuries. He wanted her in his arms.

“You might not be asking for a commitment, but I’m giving you one.”

“I thought we talked about this.”

“No. You did.” He waited as she put medical tape to hold the bandage and then looped bandage around his waist. “Stop ministering to me, Sam and come here. His lips found hers—she was sweet and responsive, but then pulled back after a few seconds.

“I can’t do this.”

“Tell me you don’t love me, Samantha, and I’ll let you go.”

“We need to go up there. If we don’t, they’re bound to send someone in after us.”

“Sam?”

“We can talk more later.”

“What if we don’t have later. I love you.” He couldn’t see her face in the dark, but sensed her fear. “Let’s not give up the chance at happiness because we’re scared.”

“You took another woman out tonight. Give me time to come to terms with that. Mason showed me the video. She was clinging to you like ivy to a brick wall.”

“Exactly. I was a brick wall, Sam. But when I’m with you I’m the vine, clinging to you, and unwilling to release my hold.”

“What if we fail?”

“What if we don’t?”

Chapter Forty-Five

When Samantha and Gavin climbed from the root cellar, he was whisked away by his brother and sister, and she was intercepted by Wade and Billy. She gave him the rundown on what she’d found inside including the location of Claude Devereaux, though she had no idea if he remained inside. When she mentioned leaving Emmaline in the tree stand, Billy said he’d go get her, but she shook her head. “I think it would be best if I went back with you. Maybe someone can find me some shoes. And a quad

would be a real help.”

Forty-five minutes later with sneakers two sizes too big and two state park four-wheelers, she and Billy headed for Emmaline. When Sam scurried up the tree to retrieve her, she was nowhere to be found, then an acorn hit her in the head. Looking up, she found Emmaline clinging to a branch far above her. “It’s just me. Can you get down from there safely?”

It took several minutes, and she slipped a few times, but the girl made her way back to the platform and threw her arms around her. She hugged her back and lifted a prayer that God would use Emmaline’s nightmare to draw her closer to him, and that she would lean on him through all the trials she faced rather than turning her back as Sam had done when tragedy had shaken her world.

Patting her back, she whispered, “You’re safe now.”

“I wish I had never agreed to that kayaking trip.”

“Kayaking trip?”

“Some guy I met online. He seemed like a perfect match. Liked all the same things as me. And Carter, my boyfriend, cheated on me, so I figured why not.”

“Did the guy pick you up at school?”

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“He asked me to meet him on Route 11 in Shickshinny. I guess that should’ve been a red flag, but the road runs along the river, so it made sense to me.”

“The creeps made you come to them?”

“I guess they did. I saw the kayaks on a truck in the lot for the fitness center where he said he’d be. I pulled in and parked, the next thing I knew, I was being shoved in the trunk of a car.”

“I’m so sorry you had to go through that.”

Emmaline’s hands fisted at her sides, and fear filled her eyes. “My sister.”

“What about her, sweetie?”

“Mason said they drugged her. She was at a party, and they were going to take advantage of her.”

By the time they returned, there were nineteen ladies seated on the lawn of the manor house. They’d come from all over the united states from Maine to California. All from well-educated, wealthy families. It wasn’t that she’d necessarily believed human trafficking was a problem that only affected poor inner-city folks and immigrants, but she’d never imagined it touching families like the Garrisons and Swishers. Emmaline was ushered away to receive medical care.

Samantha leaned against the tailgate of Billy’s state park SUV. Gavin and Grayson both hovered over their sister, and their father stood beside them. Sam smiled at the

sight. Cate was blessed to have family who loved her so much. Gavin caught her staring and joined her.

“Didn’t you say you had a bodyguard protecting Judge Swisher’s other daughter?” she asked.

“That was Grace.”

“So, nobody’s with the girl?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Emmaline says Mason ordered some guys to drug her little sister.”

“We have two of our men watching Victoria Mae, but I’ll call them.”

He returned a few minutes later after using a landline in the house. “Victoria Mae has not eluded her security detail. She’s safely ensconced in a rental house with her father only a few minutes from here.”

She dropped to her knees. “Praise the Lord.” It wasn’t until that moment that she realized how scared she’d been for the girl.

Gavin helped her back to her feet. “Want to let Emmaline know the good news?”

Gavin closed his eyes. The FBI had descended upon them and taken the women to safety. The moment he received the call about Emmaline, they issued an arrest warrant prepared for the man he’d grown up calling Uncle Philip. The man had taken a flight to Switzerland two days earlier. Supposedly, it was his vacation, but it seemed clear to Gavin that he’d anticipated the coming trouble and fled the country.

Grayson convinced the agents to let Cate remain with them. Samantha didn't leave with them either, but he wasn't sure why she'd remained behind, but he was glad she had.

He walked across the yard to the wide front porch where she stood alone. When he reached her, he brushed his lips across her in a whisper of a kiss, then pushed a strand of her hair behind her ear. "Did you think anymore about what I said down there?"

"What do you think?" Her husky voice tested his self-control. "Your words are in my head on repeat."

"I think your heart wants to take a chance on us, but your head is shouting all the reasons why it's a bad idea."

"It's a terrible idea. It'll be a miracle if I escape unscathed."

"Why would you want to escape? I'm looking for a forever kind of commitment, Sam." He frowned. "Marry me."

"You don't want to marry me. It's the stress of the evening. Too much raw emotion."

"Don't tell me what I do or don't want. I knew I wanted to marry you before I went to your house and found you missing. Then that letter your uncle wrote fell from that journal and after I read it, for a split second, I wondered if you'd run. If you would be too afraid to get married after reading those words. But I knew you were too strong to leave like that. That's when I realized Mason must've taken you. I've never been so scared in my life."

"What letter?"

"The one where your uncle explains about your parents and how they got married."

“You mean how they met at Bible college, and it was love at first sight?”

“Is that what they told you happened?”

“It is what happened.”

“You haven’t seen the letter.” He closed his eyes and shook his head. The last thing he wanted to do was destroy her memory of her father, but it wasn’t his call. Her uncle had chosen to write it all down, and Gavin had no right to withhold it from her.

“What letter, Gavin?”

“When you weren’t answering my calls, I went to your house. I wanted to ask you to accompany me tonight.” He looked over at the rising sun. “Last night. But when I arrived, I found your car door open. It looked like you’d been in the middle of cleaning the house when you were abducted. I searched the house to see if I could find a clue that would lead me to you.”

“Stop beating around the bush, what did you find? Tell me about the letter.”

“You should read it yourself.” He reached into his back pocket and pulled out the letter.

“You kept it?”

“It was the only clue I had.” He sighed. “I showed it to Grayson, and he showed it to our father, but they’re the only other people who have seen it.”

She took a few steps so she could read by the porch light, and he followed and reread

the words over her shoulder.

Samantha,

You have been the light of my life, and I've never known how to tell you about this, even though you deserve to know, so I've kept these grave secrets to myself. Should something happen to me, you'll find this letter. It's the coward's way of sharing the information, but I ask you to forgive me for not having the courage to speak the truth.

When my sister and I were seventeen and eighteen, Sarah, your mother, was kidnapped. At first, we had no idea who had taken her, but then I heard from Mason Kennedy, Jr., and I told him how distraught I was that I couldn't find my sister.

He laughed and reminded me of something I'd done to annoy him. That was when I knew he had Sarah. I searched for her, and I begged others from the Continental Alliance to help, but nobody believed me that he'd taken her.

Then one day I was invited to a wedding reception. Sarah was the bride, all smiles, hanging onto the arm of her new husband. Though I knew it was likely coerced, I couldn't prove it. She claimed to be happy, and I was so glad she was alive, that I didn't press the matter until months later.

Eventually, I managed to get Sarah alone, and I asked her what happened. She told me how they'd kidnapped her and kept her in a room with other girls. She'd accepted her lot in life. She claimed that since she'd spoken her vows before God, she intended to keep them and to make her marriage work even if it wasn't what she'd thought she wanted. She explained that although your father knew the marriage was arranged, he'd had no idea that she hadn't been a willing participant until months later when he found her crying.

Given his heart in the matter, she opened herself up to him, and God blessed their

union. They fell in love and made a great team, but I was never able to accept him as family. I felt he'd stolen her youth and innocence. I've asked God to forgive me for the hardness of my heart. I stayed away for years, but the day your parents were killed, I realized the wrong I'd been. While your father may not have been as much a victim of the Continental Alliance as your mother was, he was an unwitting participant in their scheme. And didn't deserve my animosity.

Please forgive me (and your parents) for keeping this from you. If the CA ever approaches you about membership, stay far away from them. I've been trying to gather enough evidence to put Mason, Jr. away for years, but nobody will take me seriously. Names, dates, and locations are recorded in the notebooks in my safe. They list coerced marriages that have taken place since the date of your parents death. Take them to someone who will investigate.

Love you more than life itself, Uncle Richard.

A sob shook her body, and he held her close while she wept.

Chapter Forty-Six

Samantha sipped her morning coffee and read a passage from her mother's devotional. Her parents had been in love. She was certain of that much. She'd seen them together and knew it to be fact, but from what her uncle said, it hadn't started out that way. They must've grown to love each other. What a strange way to start a marriage. And she could've been placed in the same situation had she not been rescued from that bunker. The image of her mother held captive wouldn't release her. It was no wonder Uncle Richard struggled to forgive her father.

Her heart clenched. All the sermons she'd heard over the years hit differently now that she knew the truth, but if anything, the concept of grace and forgiveness felt more real. She knew that God's grace had shined on her parents marriage and healed

the wounds that could've festered and made both parties bitter. Instead, she'd grown up with loving, merciful parents who put her needs ahead of their own. She'd been blaming God for their deaths, but God hadn't forsaken her, she'd run from him. If she had leaned on him as she mourned their loss, he would've helped her through it, but instead, she'd refused to trust him with the pieces of her broken heart.

Now she was faced with a new challenge. How could she reconcile the parents she knew and loved with what she'd discovered in her uncle's letter? She'd made the call to tell Wade about the journals. He offered to come get them and take them to the FBI. It would be a relief to have them out of the house.

But in the meantime, she had to figure out what she was going to do about Gavin. She wasn't sure if he'd meant his proposal or not, but marriage wasn't something she could jump into without hesitation. Marrying a man like Gavin would mean giving up everything about herself. She couldn't continue her work as a park ranger if she were to move to New York City. Her friendships would suffer. But he would be worth the sacrifice. The devotional based on James 1:17 reminded her that every good thing came from God. Gavin was good. Did that mean he a gift from God? It seemed so.

Her phone rang, and she set down the devotional and glanced at the caller id. Her heart gave a little lurch. Would he ask again? If he did, she knew her answer.

Gavin sat between Cate and Grayson at the yacht club. Their father had insisted on taking them all to lunch to celebrate Cate's safe return.

The elder Garrison cleared his throat getting everyone's attention. Grayson leaned back and took a sip of his coffee like he was getting ready to watch an amusing show. Jenna rolled her eyes at her husband's antics.

"I think a semester off is in order, Cate."

“I know you went to the University of Pennsylvania, Dad, but I’m not sure I want to go back there. I’d never be able to force myself to go into the Fisher Fine Arts Library again.”

“Why not?”

“That’s where Mason’s office was. A secret passage. Couldn’t tell you exactly how we got to it since I was blindfolded before I could enter or exit it, but I know it was in that building.”

“Now that’s something you might’ve thought to tell us before now,” Gavin said.

“Sorry. Slipped my mind.”

Gavin pushed his hair off his forehead. “I’ll let the FBI know, and I’ll suggest they consult with Rita Branson. She should be able to help them find whatever they need without damaging the building.”

Their dad took a sip of water. “If you don’t want to go back there, we’ll pick another school.”

“I heard Penn State has a wildlife biology program. I’m thinking of enrolling in that.”

“Why on earth would you do that?” he set his water glass down with a bang.

Cate didn’t back down. “I want to work with wild animals. Don’t you think it would be exciting to work to preserve the habitat of elk and bears? To make sure they’re populations are healthy and thriving?”

Grayson laughed. “Are you trying to make Dad have a stroke? You just told him you want to work with bear.”

“I do want to work with them.” Cate frowned.

Gavin scratched the back of his neck. “I support you in whatever you decide, sis, but where is this coming from?”

“Remember that girl who saved me from Dennis’ attack that night in the bunker?”

Grayson laughed and spit coffee all over himself. Jenna handed him a cloth napkin to clean up. “Oh. He remembers her. No doubt.”

“Samantha?”

“I didn’t know her name at the time, but yeah, Sam. We’ve been messaging on Facebook. I told her how much fun I thought her job might be, and she asked what I planned to do with my fine arts degree once I graduated. When I considered the options, I realized I didn’t want to do any of those things.”

“So, you decided to work with wildlife?” their dad asked.

“Yeah. I’ve always loved the outdoors, and what could be better than getting up close and personal with the local wildlife?”

Gavin smiled. “I think it’s a great idea. You’ve always had a soft spot for critters.”

His father glared at him, and Gavin raised his hands in surrender. It was Cate’s life, but she could fight off papa bear on her own.

Chapter Forty-Seven

The following Saturday, Gavin arrived at the church dressed in his tux. He would see Samantha today for the first time since the night at the Ricketts Estate. They’d spoken

on the phone every night, but he hadn't brought up the proposal again. He hadn't wanted to pressure her for an answer, but that would have to change. He couldn't live with the uncertainty. It was eating him up inside.

It had been a busy week with Wade's bachelor party which was held in the social hall in the church where Wade served as youth pastor. They'd had cake, ice cream, and watched a movie about marriage.

That same night the ladies had their bachelorette party, which didn't involve a movie, but from what he'd been told was more of a spa night than a party scene.

He climbed the stairs leading to the church and made his way to the front where Wade was waiting with Ruger by his side. Gavin joined them, bending down to greet the German Shepherd.

"Did you remember the rings?"

Gavin stood and patted his pockets, faking a panicked look.

"Don't even mess with me. Where are they?" Wade asked.

He handed his friend the box that contained both rings. "It's about time the two of you tie the knot."

"You're telling me."

“You nervous?”

“A little.” Wade wiped his hands on his slacks. “I can’t believe this is finally happening.”

“You two are perfect for each other. I’m glad you rediscovered your love.”

“What about you? How are things with Sam?”

“No easy answer there. She knows I want to marry her, but she’s scared. I don’t think she trusts me. Maybe she doesn’t trust any man. I can’t say that I blame her after what she’s been through.”

“Give her time. She’ll come around.”

“We’ll see.”

The pastor moved into place, and the organist played the first strains of the wedding march.

Samantha watched as Emily stepped out into the center walkway of the church. Everyone stood to watch as she floated down the aisle, Sam followed, and Emily’s other bridesmaids filed in after her. Sam took her spot near Emily’s side and locked eyes with Gavin. The look in his eyes set her stomach to fluttering.

She missed most of what the pastor said as she couldn’t drag her focus from the best man. When they arrived at the reception which was held at the country club,

Samantha stood beside Gavin as expected while Wade and Emily shared their first dance. Then the wedding party was called to join them, and Gavin held out his hand. She smiled and let him lead her out onto the floor.

“I’ve been looking forward to this moment for a while.” Gavin gave her a mischievous smile.

“Is that so?”

“Ever since I learned you were the maid of honor.”

“I’m not sure I believe you.” She frowned. “I recall you saying I was prickly.”

“I’ve always liked cacti better than delicate flowers.”

“Did you just compare me to a cactus?” She pushed his shoulder away, but he pulled in close.

“You denying it?” he whispered the words against her ear.

She grinned. “I guess not.” Settling into the dance, and forgoing any further conversation, she got lost in the moment enjoying the strength of Gavin’s embrace. He felt like home. Safe. Right.

When the dance was over, they took their seats, and Gavin lifted his sparkling apple cider in a toast. She missed most of his words while she stared at his lips. Would she ever feel them on hers again? The night when everything unfolded, she’d assumed they would see each other the following day, but that hadn’t happened. He’d needed to accompany Cate back to their father’s estate. Then he’d returned to New York to run his company. Which left her with too much time alone to think. And regret not sharing her feelings with him.

Gavin looked down at her questioningly, and she realized she must've missed a question. He nudged her and chuckled. "I was looking for confirmation that these two were made for each other."

She lifted her glass and tapped it to his. "They certainly are."

Gavin watched Samantha flit around like a butterfly. Her lavender maid of honor gown flowed over her curves and brushed the floor. He swallowed a lump in his throat. No doubt about it, he wanted to make her his, but he'd need to convince her to risk her heart. With steely resolve, he walked over to her. It was time to find out where their relationship stood. If she rejected him, he'd get through it somehow, but he couldn't live with uncertainty indefinitely. "Care for a walk in the gardens?"

She smiled and looked around as if searching for someone else. "Oh. You mean, with you?"

He shook his head. "With me. Only with me."

"I'd love to take a walk with the sexiest man in the place."

"Wade's taken."

She gave him an exasperated look and rolled her eyes. With his hand at the small of her back, he guided her toward the door leading into the exquisite gardens.

They walked hand in hand until they reached a gazebo lit by twinkling white lights. It was quite a distance from the ballroom where the reception was being held, so he hoped they'd have it to themselves. He took her hands in his and rubbed her knuckles with his thumbs. "I asked you a question last week."

She cocked her head to the side and grinned. "I remember."

“Maybe I was a little hasty.”

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The pain that flashed in her eyes gave him the answer he'd been hoping for.

"The mistake wasn't in asking the question. That wasn't what I meant. I meant every word I said that night." He released her hands and scrubbed a hand through his hair. "But I should've asked you properly. My proposal shouldn't have been spur of the moment in the heat of a tense situation like that. You deserve better." He sank to one knee and winced at the pain in his side. The stab wound from the night at the Ricketts Estate was still tender. It had given him some trouble, but IV antibiotics had rid him of the fever that had plagued him for several days, and he was doing much better.

"Are you okay?" Samantha's eyes searched his. "Maybe you should stand back up."

"Why? Are you planning to turn down my proposal?"

She smiled and shook her head.

He took the ring box from his pocket and opened it. "Samantha Rollins will you do me the honor of becoming Samantha Garrison?"

The seconds it took her to answer were torture. He searched her eyes, but couldn't read them. Then she pulled him to his feet and held him close.

"Honey, you didn't answer me."

"Yes. Yes, I'll marry you, Gavin."

He let out a relieved breath. "That's good to hear. I settle on an office building in

Bloomsburg in four weeks, but I would've had to get out of the contract if you'd said no."

"You knew my answer before you asked."

"I couldn't be sure." He slid the ring on her fourth finger and brought her hand to his lips. "I love you."

Her lips brushed his. "I love you, Gavin Garrison. And I will follow you to New York City if that is where you need to be. I'm prepared to give up the farm house and go wherever you lead."

"Really?"

"Yes." He lowered his lips to hers and drank in the sweetness that was all her before ending the kiss. "I would never ask that of you. You belong in the woods, and I belong with you."

Getafreebonusscene for peek into what happened to Samantha's Uncle Richard.

Bonus Scene

Richard ascended Red Rock Mountain in his Ford Pickup on his way to the Ricketts Estate following a meeting at Clayburn's Farm. He was almost certain that Jeremy Sr. had been on the verge of signing the gas lease, but he'd gotten a call that required his immediate attention. He'd be sure to stop back in the morning to give him another opportunity. They were a nice family and deserved some good fortune. This deal was as good as it got around here. Having come from money, Richard had never suffered want like some of his neighbors, but he empathized the best he could, and when it was within his power to do it, he offered people a gas deal.

But right now, he needed to switch his focus. He'd spoken with an agent at the FBI

that afternoon before he'd gone out to Camp Lavigne Road for his meeting with Clayburn. After tonight's board meeting, he expected to have enough to take the Continental Alliance down. It had taken years to entrench himself deep enough in Mason Kennedy, Jr.'s inner circle so that he would be privy to the intimate details of their plans, but it had finally happened. He knew enough to put a stop to the animals. He had names, dates, and locations. But he needed one more thing to top it all off. The location of the wedding for the prominent New York socialite they'd kidnapped five weeks earlier. The girl was afraid they would kill her little brother if she didn't cooperate. They showed her pictures of the boy in his hospital bed with that monster, Warden standing over top of him.

Their cruelty knew no bounds, but the worst part was the way they manipulated people into believing they were doing God's work. Richard was a Christian, and seeing people twist God's word for their own nefarious purposes didn't sit right with him. Richard's sister had come out the other side stronger than when she'd been taken, and she'd made the best of a difficult situation, but that didn't excuse what the Continental Alliance did behind the scenes to put her in that position. What they continued to do to other women.

He pulled up outside of the Ricketts Estate and parked between a Jaguar and a Porsche. His was the only vehicle there with dents and dings. The other members liked to show off their toys. Mason met him at the door and shook his hand before turning to his right. "You remember my son, Mason Kennedy, III, don't you, Richard?"

"Of course. Good to see you again, son."

"I think you're the last to arrive, so we can head on over to the conference room. Can Mary pour you a drink?"

"A water would be great."

They took their customary seats around the big conference table, and a moment later, Mary returned with his water. He smiled his thanks and took a long sip.

“Shall we call the meeting to order, gentleman?”

They went through the rigmarole of proper meeting protocol, and then Mason, Jr. stood. “Our first order of business tonight is to introduce one of our friends from our satellite branch in our nation’s capital, FBI Agent Philip Monroe. He’s come to give a talk on safety.”

Richard looked at Mason and knew that he knew. The jig was up. Philip Monroe was a member of the Continental Alliance, and everything he’d told him that afternoon had been fed back to Mason. The chances of him leaving the estate alive weren’t great. He took a gulp of his water, and a wave of dizziness hit. As he reached for the table to steady himself, Mason locked eyes with him. Then walked over and placed a hand on his arm. “Are you all right, Richard? You don’t look so good.”

Everything went black.

* * *