



Lone Star Secrets

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Description: As teenagers, Maverick Ops security specialist, Angel DeLuca, and Mia Sawyer ended up in the same foster home where they became close friends and eventually lovers. After one of the other male residents tried to assault Mia, he disappeared without a trace. Now, twenty years later, Angel and Mia have drifted apart, but when the body of Mia's attacker is found, everyone in the foster home, including Angel and Mia, are suspects.

And targets.

Someone clearly doesn't want the identity of the killer to come out and wants the secrets of that horrific night to stay buried. As the attacks and the danger escalate, Angel and Mia reunite, stirring up the old attraction between them—along with Angel's need to keep her safe. Angel and Mia must confront the demons of their past and stand strong together, even as their world unravels around them.

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Chapter One

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“They found the body.”

Angel DeLuca stared at the text that he’d just gotten from an Unknown Sender. Some might have considered it spam. A sick joke even. But the bad feeling knifing inside him told him this was the real deal.

Sonofabitch.

This was the message he’d been dreading for twenty years.

“A problem?” he heard his boss, Ruby Maverick, ask.

That question did a quick job of yanking Angel’s attention away from the text. He pushed it, and what it meant, aside. He shoved it onto the back burner while he continued the briefing about the assignment that he’d just completed.

“No problem,” he lied.

Yeah, it was a big assed lie. Along with being a big-assed problem.

Still, now wasn’t the time to get into it. He just needed to get through this briefing, and then, well... damn it all to hell, he’d deal with it.

Somehow.

The personal briefings were something Ruby asked of all her team members at Maverick Ops, and Angel figured that the hands on attention was just one of the reasons Maverick Ops was the elite private security company that it was. That elite status had been hard earned by tackling missions that law enforcement didn't have the resources or the wherewithal to do: Tracking down kidnapped victims, neutralizing stalkers, making dangerous rescues, and solving the coldest of cases.

For this mission, it'd been the first on that list.

A kidnapping, AKA a shitshow, with the thirty-nine-year-old married kidnapper, Kristin Buchanan, abducting her nineteen-year-old-lover, Camden Reeves, when he'd tried to break off their relationship. Kristin had forced Camden at gunpoint into her car and driven off. When Camden's parents had learned what'd happened, they'd called the cops.

And Ruby.

Ruby had assigned Angel right away to locate Camden and extract him from the dangerous situation.

"About twelve hours after Camden's abduction, I located both him and his kidnapper at a rental cabin on the Guadalupe River," Angel explained. "Kristin had paid with cash and registered under an alias for both the cabin and the rental car she was using. She'd ditched her phone and was using a burner."

Angel had to give it to Kristin. For someone with no police record, she'd taken solid steps to conceal her identity and location.

But then the shitshow part had happened.

When she'd stopped by a convenience store in nowhere Texas to fill up with gas, she had gotten into an argument with the cashier when she'd accused him of giving her the wrong change.

"A cashier at the Hob Nob Texas Quik Stop—and, yeah, that's the actual name of the place—in Tallulah Point called the locals and reported an irate customer, and when he described her, I thought it could be Kristin. I had my AI app monitoring cop chatter, and I immediately put drone surveillance on her vehicle and drove straight to Tallulah Point."

That'd been about two hours from San Antonio, where both Camden and Kristin lived. So, another solid move to cover her tracks. Many kidnappers didn't put that much distance between them and the abduction scene.

"Did the local cops respond, too?" she asked.

"No. The dispatcher who took the clerk's call hadn't seen the APB on Kristin, and apparently this clerk has a history of reporting customers for, well, pretty much anything. The dispatcher passed along his complaint to a deputy who opted not to make a trip to the store."

As a former cop, Angel could understand the logic of dismissing something like this, but what he couldn't dismiss was that no one in the department had at least glanced at the APB. Then again, manpower in small towns was often stretched mighty thin.

"Did she sexually assault Camden?" Ruby pressed.

Angel shook his head. "Despite their previous sexual relationship, Camden said she didn't. However, she did give him some bruises when she slapped and punched him."

Not serious injuries, but Angel knew that often the worst injuries were the ones you

couldn't see. He had firsthand knowledge of that.

“Camden Reeves is back with his family and his kidnapper is in jail. She'll be arraigned later today,” Angel spelled out, hoping that concluded his briefing.

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Ruby stared at him a moment, her gaze slipping to his phone that he was still holding. Yeah, she hadn't bought that lie about nothing being wrong, but she didn't press him on it.

"Good job, Angel. Now, go home and take care of whatever that is." She motioned to the phone again.

"Thanks," he muttered, wondering when the hell he'd lost his ability to plaster on a poker face.

Once, he'd been good at it. Damn good, in fact. After all he'd been a deep undercover cop for six years and in covert military special ops before that. Poker faces were necessities for both jobs, and they'd saved his ass too many times to count. He should have been able to convince one woman that the text hadn't knocked the breath right out of him.

Cursing himself and the text, he said his goodbye to Ruby and headed out, threading his way down the stairs of the massive complex for Maverick Ops Headquarters. Only after he was inside of his van, did he send a reply to the text.

"Where r u?" he messaged.

He got an almost immediate response. "Outside the gate at Maverick Ops."

Angel glanced in that direction, and he spotted a white compact car parked on the layby lane of the private road. It was a space normally used for those visitors or delivery drivers who were waiting to be cleared for entry. He couldn't actually see

the driver from this distance, but he knew who it was.

Mia Sawyer.

Once, she'd been the love of his life, but that'd been when they were sixteen, when love and lives had felt as if they'd go on forever.

Mia had learned some hard lessons about that, too.

He drove toward the black wrought iron gate, using a voice command with his code to open it. As soon as he was on the other side, she got out of her car to come to him.

And the gut punch came, hard and fast.

It always did with Mia. Whether he wanted it or not, and he definitely didn't want it.

Angel hadn't seen her in a little over two years. That had been a chance meeting in a restaurant in downtown San Antonio. She'd been there on a blind date. He'd been there with friends. He'd gotten that gut punch then and was certain she had, too, but they hadn't acted on it. The past created way too many barriers and held way too many memories for them to even consider reclaiming that whole "love of their lives" deal.

Dreading every bit of this, he got out and walked to the front of his van, where he waited for her to join him. No immediate conversation started up. Just a whole lot of long, studying looks. Maybe she was getting the same kind of kick he was.

"Angel," she said, and for some reason—probably because he was thinking with his dick—it sounded as if she'd doled out his name as like a breathy kiss.

Yeah, dick thinking.

That came with the territory since Mia had been his first lover. And vice versa. Apparently, that had created a forever and ever amen bond. Well, one of them anyway. The other “bond” that they had wasn’t nearly as pleasurable.

They found the body.

Nope. No pleasure in that whatsoever.

With her gaze fixed to his, she stopped directly in front of him. The years hadn’t just been kind to her, they’d given her a damn blessing. She’d been pretty as a teenager, but Mia was downright beautiful now. With that slightly mussed black hair, cool blue eyes, and willowy body, she looked like some exotic fairy goddess.

Well, a sort of disorganized, couldn’t care less about her looks kind of goddess anyway.

She had on well-worn jeans, flipflops, and a snug black Guns N’ Roses t-shirt that probably didn’t hit the fashion status mark. Angel found her choice of clothing far more intriguing and attractive than he would have if she’d been wearing a modern-day goddess get-up.

Since he hadn’t been able to prevent himself from keeping tabs on her over the years, Angel knew she worked for a private security agency as their IT person. At least that was her official title. But because of those tabs, he knew she was a hacker, digging out data from the internet for the investigators. She didn’t quite have black hat status, but she wasn’t squeaky clean either.

Mia offered him a tentative smile that in no way made it to her eyes. “You look...” She paused as if trying to figure out how to finish that.

“I’m wearing my poker face,” he grumbled.

Her smile became a little more genuine. “I was going to say hot. Really, incredibly hot, but, you know, inappropriate. And unnecessary. You’ve no doubt got mirrors, so you’re aware of how you look.”

Angel frowned, uncertain how to take the compliment. But flattered. Yeah, really flattered. Which, of course, was the most ill-timed response in the history of such things.

“Sorry, I’m babbling,” she went on. “I babble when I’m nervous.”

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“Yeah, I remember,” and he quickly tacked onto that, “we need to talk.” He had to get his thoughts back on track.

She nodded, and any trace of her smile vanished. Mia gathered her breath, glancing around. “Your van or my car? Or do you want to go somewhere else where we won’t be monitored?” She tipped her head toward the security camera on top of the fence next to the gate. “Does the camera have audio capabilities?”

“Yes. And infrared.”

Which meant Ruby or one of the security techs could be watching and listening. Not that they would zoom in on him specifically, but they’d monitor anyone near the gate, and monitoring could mean hearing what was said.

That was the reason he motioned for Mia to get into his van, and once she had, Angel pulled to the side of the road behind her car so that if anyone else came along, he wouldn’t be blocking the entry.

Mia didn’t say another word until he’d finished parking and then turned to her. She unhooked her laptop bag from her shoulder, opened it, and took out a burner phone. Probably the one she’d used to text him.

“I didn’t use my regular phone,” she admitted. “I didn’t want there to be a record of, well, anything.”

Angel understood that. Hated it, but he understood. And there was something else he hated. For twenty years, he’d tried to protect Mia by keeping her secret. That secret

though was apparently in the open now.

They found the body.

Not a body. The body. That meant the time for secrets was over and that he was going to have to do something he should have done two decades ago. He was going to have to turn her over to the cops.

For murder.

She pulled out the SIM card from the burner phone, took out a small bottle of water, and after bending the SIM, she dumped it into the bottle. That would definitely destroy it, but she went a step further by dropping the phone on the floor and stomping on it.

With that “chore” done, Mia took out a tablet, opened it in an incognito window. “I’ve got firewalls on this,” she let him know.

Of course, she did. No hacker wanted to risk being hacked.

“I didn’t use the tablet to text you,” Mia added. “Because the police could get a warrant to access everything on it.”

They could indeed, with probable cause. And they would have that with the discovery of the body.

“I’ve set up alerts to get notifications of any bodies or remains being found that could possibly be a match for...him,” she settled for saying. “This morning a hiker came across some bones on a trail about five miles outside of San Antonio,” she explained. “When the county cops arrived, they determined the remains were human. There was enough of it intact for the cops to see this.”

Mia loaded a picture.

“Shit,” Angel ground out.

His reaction hadn’t been for the bones themselves but for the silver peso coin pendant around the skeleton’s neck. In the photo, the sun was glinting off it, drawing the eye right to it. But Angel hadn’t needed the glaring sunlight for it to get his attention. He’d seen that pendant many times and knew the owner.

Kenton Barker.

Angel got a quick flash of some really bad memories. Of the bruises Kenton had put on Mia when he’d tried to sexually assault her. He’d failed because their foster mother, Melanie Matthews, had come in. Melanie had hit Kenton to stop him, and Kenton had stormed off, but not before issuing a warning to Mia that he wasn’t done with her.

Since Angel had been at football practice, he’d missed the altercation. However, several hours later when he’d gotten back home and found out what happened, he’d headed straight to Kenton’s room to have a come to Jesus meeting with him about keeping his hands off Mia. There’d been no Kenton.

Just the blood.

A tire-sized puddle of it.

And in that puddle, he’d seen Mia’s little pocket knife. The one she kept in her nightstand drawer.

He had been sixteen, stupid and in love and desperate to both find and protect Mia, so he’d picked up the knife and had gone looking for her. She hadn’t been in her room,

so Angel had combed their usual spots. When he hadn't found her by midnight, he had returned to the foster home and had once again looked in Kenton's room.

The blood had already been cleaned up. Every speck of it. And the room had smelled of bleach. While he'd been trying to figure out what the hell had happened, Mia had shown up.

And kissed him.

And cried in his arms.

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She had also said something he'd never forget. "We'll carry this to the grave," she'd whispered.

Angel hadn't been sure how to handle that, and he'd decided he would spill everything to his foster father first thing in the morning. However, the following day, RJ and his wife, Melanie, had told everyone that Kenton had packed up and left. Even though Angel had figured that was bullshit, he'd wanted to believe it. With all his heart, he had needed to believe it.

Now, Kenton had been found, and it would spin Mia's and his lives way the hell out of control.

"If any questions come up about the text you got from me, you're to say you don't know who sent it," she insisted, "that you believe it's a prank."

Angel sighed and shook his head. "I can't do that."

She stared at him. And stared. Before she leaned in and got right in his face. "Angel, I don't want you to go to jail for killing Kenton. You did it to protect me, and I don't want you punished for that."

Angel was certain he didn't have a poker face now. WTF? "I didn't kill him," he couldn't say fast enough.

Mia flinched as if he'd actually struck her, and she leaned back, studying him. That lasted a couple of long moments before she frantically started shaking her head. "You didn't?" she muttered.

“No,” he managed, and he repeated it a couple of times while he tried to wrap his head around this. “I thought you’d killed him.”

Her answer came out on a rush of breath and was accompanied by more of that headshaking. “No.”

Well, shit.

That left Angel with one huge question. If Mia hadn’t killed Kenton, then who the hell had?

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Chapter Two

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Mia tried to speak, but her throat had clamped shut. Heck, her entire body had, and that’s why it took her a while to process what Angel had just said.

“No,” she repeated. “You didn’t murder him?”

“I didn’t,” Angel stated, and she didn’t think it was her imagination that he was dealing with as much shock as she was.

Because he’d thought she had killed Kenton.

“Oh, God,” Mia muttered. The babbling habit erupted again, and she just kept repeating it like a mantra.

She hoisted herself on the console between the seats and threw her arms around

Angel. She wanted to spew out words that matched the flood of relief inside her, but all she could do was hold him. And tremble.

And cry.

Crap, she was crying. She'd never been much of a crier, but apparently, that was how her body was choosing to react to this stew of emotions that had been pent up inside her for nearly twenty years.

She wasn't exactly sure how long the hugging went on, but Mia soon became aware that Angel wasn't hugging her back. And he also wasn't expressing any signs of relief.

"We didn't kill him," Mia spelled out, pulling back to meet his gaze.

Oh, even now those drown-in-me brown eyes got to her. Of course, pretty much everything about Angel got to her.

And now she knew he hadn't killed for her.

Angel hadn't gone to Kenton's room and beaten the jerk to death for attacking her.

But then she stopped her mental dance party, stopped crying, too, and let the rest of that sink in.

It didn't sink in well.

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“Your hat was in Kenton’s room,” she said, her voice a raspy whisper. “The one with the Spurs logo that you wore nearly every day.”

She saw the split-second of confusion in his eyes. “My hat went missing, but I didn’t leave it in Kenton’s room.” He paused a heartbeat. “I found your pocket knife in there and took it.”

“You...found it there?” she finally managed to get out. “It was there and you took it?”

He gave a double nod.

Mia had wondered what’d happened to it, and she had no idea how it’d gotten in Kenton’s room. After that sank in, it didn’t take her long to realize what Angel would have thought when he saw the knife and the blood.

That she had been the one to murder Kenton.

She hadn’t, but she couldn’t fault him for coming to that conclusion. Her knife. The blood. No Kenton. She’d considered the same thing about Angel when she’d seen his hat.

“Was there a body when you went in his room?” she asked, and because she was feeling a little awkward about practically being on his lap, she moved back to the passenger’s seat.

He shook his head once again. “What about you?”

“No. Not there. I took your hat, cut it up and went to that storm drain by the park and dropped it in, piece by piece. I’d planned on cleaning up the blood, but I needed to...compose myself first. By the time I got back to the house, someone else had already done the clean-up.”

“Shit,” he spat out. Then, he groaned, and even though he didn’t say a word, he suddenly sounded and looked very much like the cop he’d once been.

Angel glanced back at the camera on the gate. “Put on your seatbelt,” he instructed. Yeah, he still had that cop vibe. “Let’s go for a drive so we can talk. Once we’re done, I’ll bring you back here to get your car.”

“Does Ruby Maverick use lip readers or high-penetration listening devices?” she asked. And it wasn’t a joke. From everything she’d heard, Maverick Ops had a lot of tech bells and whistles, along with experts in nearly every field possible.

“No, but Ruby’s not an idiot so if she sees our expressions, she’ll know something’s wrong,” he spelled out as he drove away. “I’d rather not involve her in this yet. Not until I can figure out what’s going on.”

Mia agreed because there was so much to figure out. Well, one huge thing anyway. Who had murdered Kenton, and who had seemingly tried to set up Angel and her?

Because it was a set-up.

That was flashing like a neon sign in her mind. No way had his hat and her pocketknife gotten into Kenton’s room by accident. There were other flashes, too. Of that night. Of the absolute terror she’d felt when she had seen all that blood and Angel’s hat.

“Danno,” Angel said, yanking her out of those memories. It took her a moment to

realize he wasn't talking to her but to some kind of device in the van. "Search for any info on foster parents, Melanie and RJ Matthews and Kenton Barker. Time perimeter—nineteen years, eight months ago. Run background checks on all parties connected to them and then display on dash as the info comes in."

"Danno?" she asked, but she waved that off. "Is this the AI app that Ruby's techs created for all her operatives?"

"It is," he verified.

There was no need for him to spell out why Angel had given the app that name. Hawaii 5-0 had been one of his favorite shows. Also no need for him to explain what the app could do. The likely answer was pretty much everything that AI could do and then some. She'd heard that Ruby's techs had managed to link the AI apps with thousands of databases, including traffic and security camera feed.

Despite the troubling subject Angel and she had to discuss, Mia felt a fan girl type of moment over finally being able to see the app in action. It was like having a ticket to a techie Super Bowl.

"Tell me about what happened in those hours before you went into Kenton's room?" Angel said.

That put a quick end to the fan-girl giddiness, and the images of that night returned with a vengeance. Then again, those images were never far from the forefront of her mind anyway.

She gathered her breath because she was going to need it. "After Kenton tried to assault me..." But that was as far as she got before Angel interrupted.

"He didn't try. He succeeded. You had bruises on your face and arms," he spat out.

Oh, there was anger in his voice even now. His temper had been much, much worse on the night of the attack.

She nodded, conceding that he had a point, and she gave him the nutshell of events. “Kenton tried to convince me that he was the guy for me by groping me and trying to push me into my bedroom. I’m sure he had all sorts of quick, nasty things planned for me, but Melanie saw what was happening, and she stopped him. She hit him upside the head with a handheld vacuum that she’d just finished using. Kenton cursed us both and ran off.”

Even now, she could recall Melanie taking her into the kitchen afterwards to check her bruises and try to calm her down. Much calming down had been required since Mia had practically been hysterical.

If that attack had happened today, Mia knew how to defend herself. However, back then, she hadn’t had the strength. Kenton wasn’t a big guy and probably only outweighed her by twenty pounds or so, but he’d been damn strong. And she hadn’t been able to get to her pocketknife in time or she would have used it to get him to stop.

“Was Kenton bleeding from where Melanie hit him?” he asked, probably knowing it wouldn’t account for all the blood that had been in Kenton’s room. But Angel likely wanted to know if it’d contributed to it.

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“He was bleeding,” she verified. “Not a lot, but he seemed dazed for a couple of seconds. Then, the anger came, and I thought he was going to try to punch us or something. He didn’t, probably because Melanie was holding up that vacuum cleaner as if it were a billy club.”

Mia was thankful for that. Thankful, too, that Melanie hadn’t been larger than her. Melanie was closer to Kenton’s own size so he might have thought twice about going up against someone he couldn’t overpower.

“After a little while, maybe a half hour, I went up the street to the library,” she went on. “And I stayed there in the cookbook section until it was closing time. That would have been about four hours after the attack.” Mia paused and needed another deep breath. “I nearly called you. But I knew when I told you what’d happen that you would confront Kenton.”

“Damn right I would have,” he snarled.

And that anger proved her point.

“I was afraid you’d kill Kenton and then be arrested for murder,” Mia explained. “So, after the library closed, I went back to the foster house. Birdie was there, and she told me you’d gotten back from football practice and that’d you had gone to kick Kenton’s ass.”

At the mention of the woman’s name, her photo popped on the dash screen. Birdie Cowan. Once they’d been foster sisters and good friends, but Mia realized she hadn’t seen or heard from Birdie in nearly eighteen years, since they’d left foster care when

they had both graduated from high school.

“I went looking for you but couldn’t find you,” Mia said, going back to her account of that night. “You were gone. No one knew where you were.”

“I was looking for you,” he muttered, adding some profanity to that. But she didn’t think he was cursing her but rather their current situation. “The first place I checked was Kenton’s room, thinking that he might have...taken you.” The muscles stirred in his jaw. “He wasn’t there. No one was. And at that time, there was no blood.”

She nodded and watched as other photos began to appear on the dash. Their foster parents, RJ and Melanie. A picture of Presley Nolan, Angel’s best friend and now a fellow operative at Maverick Ops. Another picture of his other foster brother, Jace Malley, who’d already turned eighteen and left the foster home by the time of the incident.

And then the picture of Kenton popped up.

Even now, seeing his face filled her with a sense of dread and snapped her back into a nightmare that she wished she could forget.

“So, what did you do after you saw I wasn’t in Kenton’s room?” she asked. “You went looking for him?”

“No,” he was quick to say. “I continued searching for you.”

He, too, was glancing at the screen, and when a report started to load, Angel pulled into the parking lot of a donut shop. He didn’t say anything else until he’d stopped.

“During the course of the time I was searching for you, I went into Kenton’s room twice,” Angel spelled out. “The first time, there was blood and your knife. The

second time, it had been cleaned up. In between all of those two visits, I continued to search for you.”

She took a moment to process that and wished she had the timeline all written out. The foster house was big, one of those old Victorian mansions with lots of halls and more than a dozen small rooms. Still, it seemed like really bad luck that she hadn’t literally run into Angel that night.

Or into Kenton’s killer.

But maybe she had. Because it really sank in then. And she shifted her attention back to the dash.

“Someone in the foster house killed Kenton and disposed of his body,” she muttered.

Angel murmured in agreement. “And since we can rule out the two of us, that leaves them.” He pointed to the now thumbnail photos. RJ, Melanie, Birdie. “And him.”

He flicked his finger across the dash, bringing up the picture that Danno had just loaded. Dwight Barker, Kenton’s father. She remembered him visiting the foster home several times, and the man had given her the creeps, though she couldn’t say exactly why. And she had no idea why Kenton wasn’t living with him but had instead ended up in foster care.

While she was still studying Dwight’s photo and trying to figure out if he played into this, Angel’s phone rang, and she saw a familiar name on the screen.

Presley.

“Did you let him know about the body?” Angel asked her.

“God, no,” she was quick to say. “It was hard enough telling you.”

He muttered something she didn’t catch and answered the call. “Mia’s with me,” Angel said. “And you’re on speaker.”

“Mia’s with you,” Presley said, and then he sighed. “She told you they found the body.”

“Yeah,” Angel muttered. “How did you learn about it?”

“Blind luck. I was having lunch with one of the CSIs from my latest mission, and he got a call when I was about to dig into my fully loaded nachos. Gotta say, hearing about it and seeing the pictures didn’t help my appetite.”

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“Pictures?” Angel questioned. “As in plural?”

“Uh huh,” Presley agreed. “But I got better than that. I’m sending you actual feed of what’s going on at the site. It’s from a news media drone that I tapped into. Where are you?” he tacked onto that.

“Parking lot of that donut shop about a mile from Maverick Ops headquarters. I pulled over so I could read the reports that I had Danno generate.”

“I’ll want to read those, too. Send me a copy. And my advice—don’t go anywhere near the dump site.”

Angel huffed. “I didn’t kill Kenton. And neither did Mia.”

Silence for a long time. Hell’s bells, did everyone think she was guilty?

“Wish I’d known this twenty years ago,” Presley muttered.

“And so say all of us,” Mia muttered right back.

“Okay,” Presley went on a second later. “Let me see if I can get any updates, and I’ll get back to you.” With that, he ended the call.

The photos and reports dissolved from the dash screen, and in its place, Mia saw the live feed from the drone. It was an aerial view of the CSIs and responders on the scene. They were already in the process of moving the remains.

“What will happen to the bones?” she asked Angel.

“They’ll be examined by the ME first and then by a forensic anthropologist who’ll try to determine time and cause of death. Ruby has a good one on tap, but I don’t want to draw her or Maverick Ops into this.”

This.

For such a little word, it packed a punch. Because once Kenton was IDed, Angel, Presley, RJ, Melanie, and Birdie would all be questioned.

And maybe one of them would be arrested.

All these years, she’d stayed silent so she could keep Angel out of jail, and it might happen anyway.

“We need to find the killer,” she heard herself say.

“We do.” Angel’s response was so fast that it let her know he’d already come to the same conclusion.

And that meant getting info fast. “I want to look at those reports,” Mia insisted. “Can Danno split-screen them with the live feed?”

“He can.” And Angel gave the voice command to make that happen.

Mia didn’t even have time to start reading though because her tablet dinged. Not the sound of an incoming call, but rather a different kind of sound that put her on full alert.

“It’s my security system,” she muttered, using the tablet to access the cameras she

had on her front and back doors.

The footage quickly appeared, and while it was grainy, she could still see something she didn't want to see. Someone wearing a hoodie was at her back door.

And he was breaking into her house.

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Chapter Three

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Angel cursed when he glanced at the security feed. "Have you had a break-in at your house before?" he couldn't ask fast enough.

"No," Mia said, equally fast while she kept her attention pinned to the footage coming in from her camera.

Then, this wasn't a coincidence. Then again, he hadn't thought it was. The big questions now were who the hell was breaking in and what did he want? Angel intended to find out the answer to both.

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He studied the figure in the hoodie who was keeping his head down while he tried to jimmy the lock. He appeared to be firing glances all around as if making sure no one was watching. Either the camera was out of view so he couldn't see it, or he was an idiot. A third possibility was that he was desperate.

But for what?

And just how was this connected to Kenton's remains being found?

He glanced over at Mia as she used her tablet to contact the security company. They in turn would alert the cops to send someone out.

"Four twenty-two Mesquite Grove in Blanco Pass," Angel said, repeating the address that he'd just heard her rattle off to Sentron Security.

She nodded. "I've lived there about four years now."

Angel wasn't familiar with that exact address, but he certainly knew the location of Blanco Pass. It was a small ranching town only about five miles from where he lived in Bandera Bluffs. Since he'd driven the route many times now, he knew it would take them about twenty minutes to get there. Fifteen if he drove like a bat out of hell.

Which he would do.

Thankfully once they were away from the outskirts of San Antonio, they'd be on rural roads with very little traffic.

“So, you opted for not living in the city,” Angel commented, starting the van and driving toward the interstate.

He also continued to glance at the tablet screen. And around them. But that was his default mode. He was always looking out for a shitstorm.

“You opted not to live in the city as well,” she muttered. “I looked up your address when I was trying to figure out where to find you. Then, I read the news report about the woman being arrested for kidnapping that teenage boy and your name was mentioned.”

Hell. He didn’t want that kind of publicity, but Angel also knew it was next to impossible to avoid it.

“So, I decided to go by Maverick Ops headquarters first to see if you were there,” she went on. “And I spotted your van.”

He frowned at her. “How did you know it was my van?”

Her gaze met his for a second. Plenty of time for him to see the answer in her eyes. She’d hacked the info. Angel might have snarled at that, but she was no longer looking at him. Her attention was back on the tablet screen.

“He’s leaving,” Mia blurted. “And I still can’t see his face.” The frustration was in her voice now.

“Danno, deploy the drone to 422 Mesquite Grove in Blanco Pass,” Angel instructed. “I want to know who’s at the house and if he leaves, monitor where he’s going. I need a license plate number of whatever vehicle he’s in and a picture of his face.”

“A drone,” Mia repeated. “Will it have to come from Maverick Ops headquarters?”

“No. From my house. It won’t take it but a couple of minutes to get there.” He tipped his head to the tablet. “Can you adjust the security cameras to get a view of your driveway?”

She shook her head. “And I don’t have any nearby neighbors I can call to have them look.”

Angel didn’t have neighbors within sight of his house either, but his two foster brothers and now co-workers were fairly close. He nixed the idea of calling Jace since Angel knew he was away on an assignment that was out of the country. But if Presley was back home from his lunch with the CSI, he could get to Mia’s faster than they could. So, Angel texted him the address.

Her tablet dinged again. “According to the security company, the ETA for a deputy arrival at my house is twenty minutes,” Mia relayed from the message she’d gotten. “The intruder will be gone by then,” she added in a whisper.

Probably, but with some luck, the drone might be able to get an image they could use.

An image that might link them to a killer.

It might not have occurred to Mia yet, but it likely soon would that if neither one of them had killed Kenton, then this could be a person who might want to try to cover his or her tracks. And those tracks could mean eliminating anyone who could possibly tie him or her to the murder.

So, had this SOB intruder gone to Mia’s to kill her?

That got his blood running hot. Along with causing him to mentally curse. He couldn’t let these intense protective feelings that he had for Mia cloud his head. As far as he was concerned, this was a mission. A personal one, yes. But he had to try to

keep the personal out of it.

A text reply from Presley popped up on the dash monitor. “Not home. In San Antonio. Will head to Mia’s now.”

Both Angel and she groaned. Neither Presley’s nor the deputy’s arrivals would likely be in time to catch this person. Mia and he, however, were on pace to get there in about six or seven minutes.

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And that left Angel with a huge problem.

He could essentially be taking Mia directly into an attack. Because if this person had indeed come to her place to kill her, then the intruder could start shooting at them.

“The van is bullet resistant,” he told her. “But if something goes wrong, I want you to get down and stay put.”

Her eyes widened, and a soft burst of breath left her mouth. Yeah, she was quickly following the dots on how this could all end up playing out.

“Incoming drone feed,” Danno announced, breaking the thick silence that’d settled between Mia and him, and both of them glanced at the dash screen.

It was indeed the drone feed, but all Angel was seeing were trees and a narrow country road. Since Danno had programmed in the parameters for the search, the drone would no doubt soon get to the house.

And it did.

Angel volleyed his attention between the dash and the road, and the house soon came into view. It was positioned smack dab in front of that cluster of woods, and he was guessing from the pastures and fences, it’d once been a small ranch or farm.

Then, Angel spotted the vehicle.

A black truck was parked in the driveway.

He'd want the license plate numbers on that soon, but the drone would likely have to fly lower to get at the correct angle to do that. And, for now Angel had a different priority. He wanted a better look at the man in a hoodie who was peering through a window on the side of the house. That way, they'd know who they were up against.

"Danno, have the drone zoom in on the man's face," Angel instructed.

The would-be intruder helped with that by looking up in the sky. Probably because he'd heard the buzzing sound of the drone and had wanted to know what it was. He stared up, directly into the camera.

Both Mia and Angel cursed.

Because this was no stranger. Even after all these years, they could easily recognize the man in the hoodie.

RJ, their former foster father.

What the hell was he doing there? And Angel didn't care much for the answer that came to mind. RJ and Melanie had been damn good foster parents, and he hated to think RJ was now out to cover his ass.

Mia seemed to relax a little. "RJ won't try to hurt us," she concluded.

Angel hoped she was right, but he wasn't taking any chances. When he made the final turn toward Mia's house, he went ahead and drew his gun. He wanted to be ready just in case.

Mia made a soft gasp, but she didn't question him. In fact, she took out some pepper spray and a small pocket knife from her laptop bag. It was similar to the one she'd carried all those years ago. And that was a reminder for Angel that he still had her

original pocketknife at his place and that he needed someone to pick it up for testing.

Not the cops.

Not yet.

But soon, it would have to be admitted into evidence in what would almost certainly turn out to be a murder investigation. Angel figured if Mia and he found the killer first, that would save them both a whole lot of headaches with the police.

Had they now found that killer?

Angel was about to find out.

He spotted the house just ahead, and he braked to a stop behind the black truck. RJ had obviously heard the approaching vehicle because he was now peering around the edge of the house. Angel took a moment to study the drone feed, and while he couldn't see a gun or a knife, he saw something that could be used as a weapon.

A crowbar.

RJ had it gripped in his right hand.

"Stay put," Angel told Mia, figuring he had a fifty-fifty chance of her actually doing that.

"Angel," RJ said on a rise of breath.

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He sounded relieved. Sounded. But Angel wasn't taking that at face value.

"What are you doing here?" Angel demanded, and while he didn't take aim at RJ, he did hold his gun so the man could see it.

RJ opened his mouth, closed it, and his forehead bunched up as he stepped away from the house. He glanced down at the crowbar and frantically shook his head.

"It's not what you think," RJ finally said.

"Good. Because I'm thinking you're trying to break into Mia's house, and if that's the case, you should know the cops are on the way."

That put some instant alarm in the man's eyes, and he started toward them. "They can't come. I don't want them finding anything."

Well, that was damn confusing, and Angel thought his own forehead might be bunched up in confusion. The expression didn't last because something else happened to make Angel curse.

"Find what?" Mia asked, and, yeah, she was getting out of the van.

"I'm not sure. I got a note," RJ said, reaching into his pocket.

That had Angel going on full alert, and this time, he did take aim at the man.

RJ sighed as if hurt by the move, but Angel would rather him have hurt feelings than

to risk Mia being killed.

“I’m taking out the note so you can read it,” RJ went on, pulling it from his pocket while he continued to come closer.

Angel went closer, too, positioning himself so that he was between Mia and RJ. He took the note with his left hand so he could keep his gun ready, and Mia moved up behind him to read from over his shoulder.

“The cops will find the murder weapon in Mia’s house,” Angel read aloud. “If you don’t want her rotting in jail for Kenton’s murder, get it and destroy it.”

Angel turned the paper over to see if anything was written on the back. There wasn’t. “How did you get this?” Angel asked him.

“Someone left it on my doorstep about an hour ago,” RJ promptly explained. “I didn’t see who left it, but then I heard on the news that a body had been found, and I thought maybe, well, maybe Presley or you had put it there.”

“No, we didn’t,” Angel assured him and was still debating if he believed RJ or not when there was a sound that he damn sure didn’t want to hear.

A gunshot.

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Chapter Four

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Mia heard the sound, but while her mind was still processing exactly what it was,

Angel sprang into action. One second she was standing, and the next Angel had hooked his arm around her and was dragging her to the ground.

“Get down,” Angel yelled to RJ.

That’s when Mia realized someone had just fired a shot at them.

RJ moved, hurrying toward them while his gaze darted all around them. Mia was doing the same thing, but she had no idea where the shot had come from. She certainly didn’t spot a gunman.

But Angel seemed to have pinpointed him.

He glanced in the woods behind her house. Just a glance before he got them moving.

“With me,” Angel told RJ.

With his arm still around her and RJ right next to them, Angel hurried to the driver’s side of the van, and he took up position. He was using the front end of the van for cover.

“Stay low,” Angel instructed. “Danno, call 911 and Presley to alert him and the deputy about an active shooter in the vicinity. They need to approach with caution.”

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When he finished his order to the AI app, he aimed a glare at RJ while he ripped the crowbar from his hand and tossed it aside. It made a clanging noise as it hit the asphalt.

“And you’d better not be in on this,” Angel warned RJ, “or I will make you pay. Understand?”

RJ gave a long, shaky nod. “I swear, I’m not in on it. What is this?” he tacked onto that. “What’s happening?”

“A shooter’s at my one o’clock.” Angel tipped his head to the woods. “He’s using a rifle, probably with a scope, and you can bet he can see us just fine. So, stay the hell down.”

Angel didn’t have a chance to add more because at that second another shot came their way, and Mia thought the bullet skipped off the van’s hood. Way too close to Angel, and she wanted to latch onto him and drag him down to the ground with RJ and her. She didn’t only because she was afraid it would distract him and get him killed.

A third shot came.

Then, a fourth.

And they just kept coming.

They were loud, thick blasts that slammed into the van. Clearly, the shooter had a

decent aim, and since he was using a rifle, Angel's handgun probably didn't have the range for him to return fire.

Her heart was pounding now, the sound crashing in her ears and making everything feel loud and out of control. Her chest was too tight. Her breathing was way too fast, and Mia had to force herself not to give in to the panic that was spiking through her.

God.

Why was this happening?

It had to be connected to Kenton's death. Had to be. But why did someone want Angel and her dead?

Or was the target RJ?

That question flashed in her mind. After all, if he was telling the truth, and she believed that he was, someone had lured him here with that note. Did that someone want to kill him because he might be able to identify Kenton's killer?

Maybe.

But the same could be said of all three of them. Heck, of Melanie, Presley, and Birdie, too. And for that matter, anyone else connected to Kenton, such as his father, Dwight.

"We need to warn the others," Mia muttered. "Someone could go after them like this."

"Warn them?" RJ questioned, and then several seconds later, when it no doubt sank in, his eyes went wide again. "Melanie. Oh my God, Melanie." He yanked out his

phone, no doubt to call her.

“Danno, put the drone feed on my phone,” Angel said, and he finally lowered himself so he could look at his screen.

Since Mia was right there next to him, she looked at the feed as well. But she saw nothing. Just those blasted trees. Dozens of them, all jammed together just on the other side of her fence.

Those trees were the reason she’d fallen in love with the property. They’d made the place look so quiet and peaceful. Well, they sure as heck didn’t seem peaceful right now since they were hiding a would-be killer.

Three more shots came, each of them hitting the van, and it seemed to Mia as if they cut through the air directly above their heads.

And she still didn’t see the shooter, not even when the drone panned over the entire length of the woods.

“There he is,” Angel muttered, pointing to a large oak. “He’s perched on that limb.”

She shook her head, but then the drone made another adjustment, and Mia saw the late afternoon sun glint off some kind of metal. The rifle, no doubt. The one he was using to try to kill them.

Mia tried to imagine someone she knew doing this. And she couldn’t. But then, she couldn’t have known everyone who’d crossed paths with Kenton since she had only been in the foster home with him for a couple of months. With his personality, he had no doubt made plenty of enemies, and one of those enemies could have murdered him and disposed of his body.

But then why come after RJ, Angel, and her now?

Why not try to cover his tracks twenty years ago?

“I need to get a rifle out of the back of the van,” Angel said, and he passed her his phone. “Stay down and keep watching the drone feed. Let me know if this asshole moves or if you get a look at his face.”

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That was all the warning she got before Angel moved around RJ and her and raced to the driver's side door. It wasn't far, but since it could make him an easier target, it seemed to take an eternity for him to reach it. He yanked open the door and dived inside.

In the distance, Mia heard the sound of a police siren. Danno had no doubt already alerted the cops about the shooter, and they clearly weren't making a silent approach.

How would the gunman react to police arriving?

Would he stop firing and run, trying to escape? Or would he only amp up his efforts to kill them?

She soon got her answer.

And it was the last one.

The shots started coming at them nonstop, and the shooter seemed to be adjusting his angle, too. Or else he was adjusting his position on the tree branch. Of course, there was another possibility. A worse one.

That there could be two gunmen.

Even though it was next to impossible to focus, she looked at the drone feed, and like before, she saw the sun flashing off the metal. Or was that the gunfire? Hard for her to tell since she had next to no experience with firearms. But she kept watching, kept looking for anything that would identify who was doing this.

A few seconds later, Angel barreled out of the van door, and he did indeed have a rifle with him. And the shooter must have spotted him because the shots immediately shifted in Angel's direction.

Sweet heaven.

He could be shot.

Reacting purely on instinct, Mia yelled, yanked off her flipflop and tossed it into the air. And the pseudo Hail Mary worked. Because the gunman shifted and fired at it.

And in that split-second, she saw him.

Not his face, but the black hoodie covering his head and the ski mask he was wearing. There was nothing visible that helped her figure out who this was. In fact, she realized it could even be a woman.

"Nice move with the flipflop," Angel said, dropping down beside her. "It's shot to hell and back."

It was. Mia glanced at the mangled remains on the ground behind her. "Better the shoe than your head. Please tell me you're going to stay down?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

No.

He wouldn't be staying down. Not a chance. He was going to lever himself up, take aim, and try to shoot their attacker. Mia had to remind herself that Angel was no stranger to this kind of danger. He'd likely faced it in the military and as a cop. Still, it ate away at her like acid to think that he could be killed by some SOB trying to cover up a crime.

Angel's phone flashed with a text. "It's from Presley," she relayed to him. "He's five minutes out."

Judging from the sound of the sirens, the deputy was much closer than that, but Angel clearly wasn't going to wait on them. He got the rifle into position, gathered his breath and lightning fast, he stood, crouching some but still with his head and torso higher than the hood of the van.

He fired.

Ducked back down.

And then repeated the process.

Babbling out every prayer she could think of, Mia volleyed glances between Angel and the drone feed. On his third shot, she finally saw what she wanted to see.

The shooter dropped from the tree.

Not a jump but a fall.

And the shots stopped.

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Chapter Five

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Angel sat in the breakroom of the Blanco Pass sheriff's office, waiting for Mia to finish her interview. Also waiting for, well, a miracle. He'd already gotten one in that Mia hadn't been hurt in the shooting. Neither had RJ and him. But Angel was hoping for a couple more.

That Mia and he wouldn't be arrested for Kenton's murder.

And that the shooter would be found so that Angel could have a word with him or her.

So far though, no sightings of the shooter. Only some blood beneath the tree where the asshole had been perched during the attack.

Angel was positive he'd shot the SOB, but clearly it hadn't been a kill shot because there was no body. Now, he'd have to wait for analysis of the blood to know who they were up against. He was hoping the identity of the who would give him the why. Or a more specific angle on the why anyway.

The attack had to be linked to Kenton.

Now, Angel needed to know what the attacker had hoped to accomplish by killing three people who might have witnessed something critical about the murder.

Shortly after Deputy Issac Rivera had arrived on scene, Mia, RJ, and he had been instructed to go to the sheriff's office. No surprise there. They had to give statements,

and that included speculating about the possible motives for the attack. Angel had considered holding back on saying anything about Kenton, but he just couldn't do that.

As a former cop, he didn't have rose-colored glasses about a small-town police force. They could be good, bad or anything in between. Ditto for city cops. But Angel hadn't wanted Sheriff Tyler Banyon and his deputies going into the investigation with a proverbial hand tied behind their backs. So, Angel had spilled about Kenton's body being found and about the note that had led RJ to Mia's.

What Angel had kept to himself was the pocketknife.

And his Spurs hat that Mia had found in Kenton's room.

Yeah, it hadn't been easy to stay quiet about those, and it'd felt like multiple gut punches to hold back on the two pieces of info. But an admission like that would almost certainly get Mia and him arrested. Now that he knew she hadn't been the one who'd killed Kenton, he needed to find the killer and make sure Mia's and his names were cleared.

Identifying the shooter would have almost certainly helped with that. Even if the shooter was someone the killer had hired, knowing who he or she was could still lead back to their boss.

Angel stood when he heard the footsteps, and Mia appeared in the doorway. She was way too pale, clearly shaken to the core, and Angel wanted to throttle the shooter for that alone.

She was also hobbling a bit, and it took him a moment to realize why. Someone had mended up her shot-up flipflop with duct tape, and it had created an uneven surface on the bottom of the shoe.

He went to her, pulling her into his arms. That had a two-fold purpose. He really wanted to hug her, to try to ease the crap she had to be feeling. But the close contact made it easier for him to whisper in her ear. There were no cops around at the moment, but Angel didn't want to risk this part of their conversation being overheard.

"Did they ask if you'd killed Kenton?" he wanted to know.

"No," she said, her voice barely audible. "And I didn't say anything about the hat or knife."

Angel hadn't figured she would volunteer that since they'd already discussed it in the drive to the sheriff's office. Of course, getting their stories to match was a big-assed legal no-no, but Angel had to hold onto the big picture here. If Mia and he were in jail, they wouldn't be able to find out what the hell was going on.

RJ hadn't been in on the van conversation since he'd driven his own vehicle here, but as far as Angel knew, RJ wasn't aware of either the hat or the knife. If he was, that meant he was likely the killer and had used those items to set up Mia and him.

Angel just couldn't wrap his head around that possibility though.

RJ had been a damn good foster parent, always putting the kids first. Angel couldn't see him letting someone else take the blame for something he'd done. Or rather, Angel didn't want to believe something like that was possible. But he had to remind himself that RJ might not be the same man he'd been twenty years ago.

And that his former foster father might be protecting someone other than himself.

Like Melanie.

Yeah, Angel could see RJ doing that, and it was the reason Angel wasn't going to

trust him with full info on the investigation. RJ might be willing to throw Mia and him under a bus if it kept Melanie from facing a murder charge.

“How did your interview go?” Mia whispered.

“As I expected.”

The deputy had been focused on the attack itself, on Angel’s response to the gunfire and on any possible description Angel could give him of the shooter. Angel hadn’t been able to give him squat about that last part, but he had turned over the drone feed.

Well, a copy of it anyway.

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The original footage was already with the Maverick Ops' techs who were analyzing it. They might be able to get something that law enforcement and Angel could use.

And that brought him back to yet another miracle he needed.

He would have to tell Ruby everything, and when he did, Angel only hoped she didn't yank him off the investigation and force him to do a tell-all with the cops. That would include both the sheriff here and SAPD since the body had been found in their jurisdiction.

"Are you okay?" Mia asked.

Angel eased back enough to see her face and stared down at her. For some stupid reason that made him want to smile. That she would ask how he was doing when she was the one who was clearly shaken the most.

"I've been better," he said. "And you?"

She attempted a smile, too. "Been better," she echoed.

What she didn't do was move out of his arms. Angel stayed put, too. And they continued with the full-on eye contact. Gazes locked. Bodies pressed against each other. And despite the crap going on, Angel got a flash of memories that didn't have anything to do with murder or gunshots.

The memories were of Mia and him naked.

Definitely something he shouldn't be thinking about right now. Still, the memories came along with that punch of heat he always got whenever he was around her. He suddenly wanted his mouth on hers. He wanted to let the kiss melt away some of the bad.

But the sound of more footsteps nipped that thought in the bud.

Mia and he stepped away from each other, both of them automatically turning toward the doorway. Angel figured it was one of the deputies or the sheriff. But he was wrong.

It was Presley.

A welcome sight, especially since he'd already filled Presley in on the whole truth. He'd done that in a phone conversation during the drive to the sheriff's office.

Presley had arrived on scene at Mia's shortly after the deputy, and while he hadn't actually witnessed any gunfire, he'd had to give a statement, too. He'd done his first and then had left the building to go out to his SUV, where he'd no doubt made some calls and gotten started on digging out any helpful info.

"That hug looked like old times between the two of you," Presley said, winking at Mia.

Presley kissed her. Not the kind of kiss Angel had been considering but rather a friendly peck on the cheek. Presley followed it up with a glance around the breakroom.

"This doesn't feel like old times," he added. "I just talked to the sheriff, and he's going to cut us all loose once the statements are typed up and signed. Shouldn't be much longer."

Good. Angel wanted to get the heck out of there and get started on his own phone calls, his own digging.

“What else did you find out?” Angel asked.

“SAPD is trying to verify if it is Kenton’s body. They’re using dental records.”

That was standard procedure in a situation like that. Dental records could give an immediate ID, whereas DNA took a little longer, especially since the DNA would have to be extracted from the bones and then processed.

“Is it possible it isn’t Kenton?” Mia asked. It was a question that Angel had already been mulling over.

“It’s possible,” Presley verified. “The pendant isn’t common, but it isn’t unique either. In fact, they’re sold in plenty of souvenir shops. And there’s the part that we don’t actually know if Kenton is dead.”

Yeah, that had occurred to Angel as well. Apparently not to Mia though because she made a soft gasp, and Angel could practically see the wheels turning in her head. Taking her to one very nasty conclusion.

“Kenton could be alive,” she murmured. “He could have faked his own death.”

Angel waited for her to grasp one more key point. And he didn’t have to wait long.

“He could have been the one to shoot at us,” she blurted. “Kenton could want revenge.”

Bingo.

And wouldn't that tie up everything into a neat little bow? Well, neat-ish anyway. There'd still be the question of why Kenton had waited all this time to get back at Mia for defending herself against him.

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Angel looked at Presley, knowing he would have been looking into possible answers.

“There’s been no sign of Kenton since he disappeared,” Presley explained. “Of course, he could have left the country or else just been very successful in changing his identity. He could have done that if he thought he would be arrested for assaulting Mia.”

Yep, he could have. But that still brought Angel back to the time lag.

“He could have been in jail or in a situation where he didn’t want to get revenge,” Angel speculated. “Then, the situation changed or there was some kind of trigger that prompted him to get revenge.”

“Melanie,” Mia said. “She could be in danger.”

Presley nodded. “She’s on her way here to be with RJ, and Ruby provided an escort. Melanie will be protected.” He paused. “Ruby’s trying to track down Birdie, too, just in case.”

“Birdie,” Angel repeated.

He took out his phone to bring up the background check he’d already had Danno run on her. Birdie had been somewhat of a wild child during her time in foster care, and that had continued into adulthood.

“At nineteen, she was arrested for shoplifting,” Angel summarized. “At twenty-one, another arrest for assault in a bar fight. A year after that, she got picked up for being

drunk and disorderly. After that, she stayed out of trouble with the cops, but according to social media posts, she attended a lot of parties, some of which had busts for drugs.”

Mia sighed. “Birdie had a shitty childhood.” But then she added, “All of us did.”

True. And that included Kenton, too.

From what Angel knew and had learned, all of their placements into foster care had come when the parents or custodial relatives had screwed up enough to lose custody. In Angel’s case, it’d been his father. A widower at the age of twenty-six, his dad hadn’t been able to cope with the loss of Angel’s mother, who’d been killed in a car crash, and his dad’s depression had led to suicide. With no immediate kin to take Angel in, he’d landed in foster care.

Mia’s situation had been in that same wheelhouse. Her mother had been murdered in a botched robbery at the diner where she worked, and with no father in the picture, Mia had ended up in foster care, too.

Presley’s story was slightly different but still went back to absentee parents. As a newborn, he’d been left at a fire station. He had no idea who his bio-parents were or what had led to him basically being discarded. He’d been “discarded” yet once again when his adoptive father had murdered his mother in a jealous rage before ending his own life. Since there’d been no one else to take Presley in, he’d been sent to foster care.

Mia, Presley, and he had all beaten the odds and had come out of the system and stayed arrest-free. Birdie clearly hadn’t taken that path. At least not until very recently.

“Two months ago, Birdie got married,” Angel went on with the report. “No wild

child background for him. He's a very successful, very conservative small-town businessman, Roger Farrow."

"Opposites attract?" Presley questioned.

Angel had to shrug. "Roger's worth a fortune." And he pulled up the man's photo to show them.

He figured no one would consider him good looking. Unlike Birdie who was a curvy blonde who could have shared Marilyn Monroe's gene pool.

"So, money attracts," Presley amended. He leaned in, lowering his voice. "If she killed Kenton, she might not want new rich hubby to find out."

Angel made a sound of agreement.

"Once Ruby manages to contact Birdie," Presley went on, "she'll offer her protection."

If Birdie was innocent, maybe she would take Ruby up on that. Then again, Birdie might not need such measures since her rich husband could provide her with a bodyguard as well. Of course, that would mean Birdie confessing to him why she might need a bodyguard, and Roger might not even be aware of his wife's checkered past.

"One more thing," Presley continued a moment later. He moved in even closer to them and whispered, "After I gave my statement, I drove to your place and got the pocketknife."

That wasn't a surprise since Angel had instructed Presley to do that first chance he got.

“I had a courier pick it up and take it straight to Maverick Ops for testing,” Presley spelled out. “The lab techs are already working on it.”

Good. Maybe after all these years, there’d be something on the knife that would help them. Hopefully, it wouldn’t be something that would land Mia or him in even hotter water.

Presley’s and his phones dinged at the same time, and a sense of dread washed over Angel when he saw it was from Ruby. It was possible his boss would demand they all come in right away to give her a briefing.

One with the full facts.

But that wasn’t it.

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Angel read the short text and turned to Mia to tell her the news.

“The dental records confirmed a match,” he said after dragging in a long breath. “The body found is Kenton’s.”

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Chapter Six

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Mia felt the flood of emotions go through her. The dread. So much dread over the murder of someone she’d known, even when that person had been an SOB. There was also the worry about what this discovery might mean.

And the fear.

Not for herself but for Angel. He was the do-gooder. A cop to the core. It would rip him to shreds to be arrested for murder. Especially a murder that she now knew he hadn’t committed.

“Did they find anything else?” Mia managed to ask. “Cause of death? Anything that points to the killer?”

Angel shook his head, and he turned his attention from his phone to look at her. “That’ll take time, and there might never be anything conclusive as to cause of death.”

Yes, because of the possible damage to the bones. If Kenton had been stabbed, there might not be any marks if the blade had gone into soft tissue.

“It’s possible he wasn’t even killed in his room,” Angel added. “He could have been injured there. Or maybe the blood was from the head wound he got from Melanie hitting him.”

“It was a lot of blood,” she muttered, shifting the volume of her voice back to a whisper.

Angel made a sound of agreement. “But we have no way of knowing if there was something mixed with the blood. Maybe some water, for instance.”

Mia sighed because the person who’d cleaned up that blood had made it impossible for them to know that. Then again, the only way they would have known was to call in the cops.

“Was there anything else in that room that pointed to a struggle or someone else being in there with Kenton?” Presley asked. He’d also gone back to a whisper. “Anything other than Angel’s hat?”

Mia forced her mind back to that horrible night. “I don’t think so. I mean, I’d never been in that room when it was his. And I didn’t notice anything toppled over. I just saw the blood, and I...panicked. I grabbed the hat, destroyed it, and then eventually went back to clean up.”

Angel and Presley exchanged glances, and she figured they were likely trying to piece together the timeline. She tried to help them out with that.

“My knife wasn’t there when I went in the room and found the hat,” she said, hoping by spelling it out aloud for Presley, it would help all of them see things more clearly.

“Nor was it there when I went back to clean up. Someone put both of those things there. Someone who wanted Angel and/or me to be blamed for what happened.”

“And anyone in the foster house would have had access to your rooms to get those items,” Presley pointed out. “In fact, Kenton could have set you up, been discovered by someone who ended up killing him. Someone who maybe wanted to protect Angel and you.”

That brought them right back to RJ or Melanie.

Mia wanted to talk to both of them, and Angel almost certainly did as well. But not here. This was something better discussed away from the sheriff’s office. Because if either RJ or Melanie was indeed guilty... well, Mia didn’t know what would happen next, but there was no way Angel would just bury this. No. Eventually, he would need to tell someone.

They all turned toward Deputy Rivera when he came through the door, and Mia figured he was there to tell them the reports were ready for them to sign. But the deputy wasn’t alone. There was a man right behind him, and even after all these years, Mia recognized him.

Dwight Barker.

Kenton’s father.

He hadn’t changed much over the years. He still had his been there, done that rock star looks in the dark wash jeans and muscle tee. Still had the vibe that made her skin crawl as well. She could feel something dark and dangerous about him beneath the surface.

“My son is dead,” Dwight gutted out. “My precious boy,” he added on a sob, though

Mia saw no tears in his eyes. “Who killed him? Who did this to Kenton?”

“We don’t know,” Angel said. “The police are investigating.”

Dwight made that sobbing sound again, and he lowered his head. “But you were there when it happened. You must know something. You have to tell me what happened to him.”

“We don’t know,” Angel repeated, and he was studying Dwight as carefully as Presley and she were.

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Were Angel and Presley buying this sad father act?

She doubted it. There was just something off about the man.

Dwight lifted his head, looking up at the ceiling as if praying. “They found his body, and on the drive here, I got a call that they’re sure it’s my boy. Somebody killed him and buried him, hoping he’d never be found. Well, he was found, and I need to know who’s responsible.”

“On your drive over?” Mia questioned just as Angel said something similar.

It was Angel who continued. “Why were you coming here? How’d you know we’d be here?”

Dwight seemed to do a mental doubletake, and he paused for a long time. “I, uh, heard some things,” he finally said “And one of those things was that the three of you were here at the sheriff’s office. Four of you,” he amended. “Apparently, your former foster father is here as well.” He shook his head again. “Never could understand why RJ called himself that.”

“Called himself what?” Angel questioned.

“Father.” Dwight stretched out the word. “I mean, he never fathered a child so he wouldn’t know what it was like to have one. Or to lose one,” he added in a sad murmur.

She nearly blurted out that RJ knew far more about being a father than he did. After

all, he'd lost custody of Kenton, and while she didn't know the specific reason for that, it had to have been huge.

"You heard some things?" Angel pressed. He was in the cop mode now, and his tone let her know he wasn't buying this grieving father act.

"Yes." Dwight repeated it a couple of times. Stalling. "I have some friends in law enforcement."

So, there was possibly a leak of some kind. Maybe a friend with the sheriff's office or at SAPD since they were aware that Angel, RJ, Presley, and she were here.

But maybe there was no leak.

Maybe Dwight knew because he'd been the one who'd fired shots at them. Mia had to immediately rethink that though. He didn't appear injured. That didn't mean he wasn't. Some blood had been found at the scene of the shooting, but the wound could have been minor.

Or Dwight could have hired the person who'd shot at them.

Dwight volleyed glances at them again before his focus settled on Deputy Rivera. "Could you give me a minute alone with them? I've got some personal things to say to them."

Rivera looked at the three of them, and when they each gave him a nod, he muttered an agreement. "When you're done talking to Mr. Barker, your statements are ready to sign. Mr. Matthews had already signed his and left with his wife. He wanted to get her home."

With that, the deputy stepped out of the breakroom. Dwight reached behind him and

shut the door. Later, Mia would wonder why Melanie hadn't at least come in and spoken to them. For now, she kept her focus on Dwight.

"I'll, uh, need to bury my son," Dwight said. "And I'm a little short of funds right now. I figured since Kenton was your foster brother, you'd be willing to help me out."

Mia huffed. So, that's what this visit was about.

"It'll be a while, maybe months before Kenton's remains are released," Angel pointed out. "Both the bones and the grave site will have to be thoroughly examined. SAPD will investigate." He paused a heartbeat. "Unless you can tell them what happened to Kenton."

"No." Definitely not a hesitation that time. "I was hoping the three of you could tell me, but it's obvious none of us knows why my son is dead." His voice cracked, and he covered his face with his hands. "I just want to do what's right by Kenton. I want to buy a grave plot to have it ready for when he's finally released. I was thinking maybe ten grand would cover it."

Angel stared at him for a long time, and when Dwight finally lowered his hands, he flinched a little at Angel's intense stare. "Tell you what, I'll buy the grave plot and that way you don't have to deal with it. I mean since you're obviously so torn up about your son."

Something hard and cold went through Dwight's eyes. "Okay. Thanks." But there was no gratitude in his eyes.

Dwight stood there for several more moments, and she imagined he was trying to think of some argument that would get one of them to pay up and give him some cash.

“I’m guessing RJ and Melanie will be suspects,” Dwight threw out there. “Probably the three of you, too.”

“And you,” Angel added.

There it was again. That glimmer of the dark edge beneath the rock star surface. “Maybe,” Dwight muttered. “But Melanie and RJ will definitely come under fire. It’s a shame. I should be careful what I say to the police when they interview me.”

It was a threat, plain and simple.

Angel threatened right back.

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“I’ll be careful, too, when I talk to SAPD about you,” he said. “I recall Kenton and you arguing on one of your visits to the foster home. If pressed, I might be able to come up with some details. But I’ll be careful how I word it.”

This time, it wasn’t just a mere glimmer of the darkness. It was there, right there. Dwight opened his mouth as if he might return verbal fire, but then, he changed his mind.

“I’ll be in touch,” Dwight said. That, too, sounded like a threat, and then the man walked out.

All three of them blew out long breaths.

“Dwight is at the top of my suspect list,” Angel muttered. “Let’s sign those statements and get the hell out of here so I can start digging into his background. I want to find out exactly where he was and what he was doing around the time Kenton disappeared.”

Mia couldn’t agree fast enough, and they all went to the bullpen, where Deputy Rivera did indeed have their statements ready. They read through them, signed them and started out.

Only for Mia to come to a stop.

“I can’t go home,” she remembered. It was being processed by the county CSIs.

“You’ll come with me,” Angel insisted. He turned to Presley and seemed to offer an

unspoken invitation.

Presley shook his head. “I’m going to head back to San Antonio and have some chats with some of our old cop friends. I also want to see if the lab has anything for me.”

He was talking about the pocketknife. Yes, she very much wanted to know about that as well.

“I also want to make a quick stop by the sheriff’s office and alert him to the possibility that Dwight might be involved in this all the way up to eyeballs,” Presley added. “Who knows, I might be able to convince him to have Dwight tested for gunshot residue or injuries he might have gotten when he was shot and fell out of a tree.”

“Do that,” Angel said. “We might get lucky.”

But he didn’t sound very hopeful about that. She’d heard GSR was harder to detect when a rifle was used. Added to that, Dwight could have showered after the attack. Or maybe he hadn’t even been there if he hired someone to do his dirty work for him.

“I’ll be careful,” Presley muttered to them. “You two do the same. And, uh, don’t bother trying to keep your hands off each other.” He winked at her again.

Presley had maybe meant that as a joke, but even with everything going on, Mia thought he was right. Angel and she didn’t have a history of resisting each other. Not when they were in the same vicinity anyway.

And soon, she’d be under his roof.

Since they’re parked right out front, they didn’t have to be out in the open long. They quickly got in Angel’s van, and he drove away. While keeping watch around them.

She did as well because, after all, the person who'd attacked them was still at large.

"Danno, run a deeper background check on Dwight Barker," Angel instructed the app. "Go back at least thirty-six years to the time his son was born. Then, dig into the son and get any details on his mother. According to the preliminary report, she's deceased, but I want details of when and how she died."

That was a good angle since they knew nothing about the woman. Unlike Dwight, she hadn't visited Kenton at the foster home, but that didn't mean she'd been totally out of the picture. She could have played a part in what happened to her son.

"Background check in progress," Danno let him know.

Angel drove out of town and took the turn toward Bandera Bluffs. He didn't have the GSP map on, but she guessed it wouldn't take them long to get there. And with each mile, they would get further and further out into the country.

"What Presley said..." Angel started, but then he stopped.

"About not keeping our hands off each other," she filled in for him.

Angel nodded, and a muscle flickered in his jaw. "I've, uh, never stopped wanting you, but I won't give in to this..." He stopped again, muttered some profanity.

He glanced at her. Just a glance. But, mercy, even that could pack a wallop. The man certainly had her hormonal number.

"It'd a bad idea," she finished. "Yes, I understand that."

"Good," he said and nodded as if that would guarantee that nothing sexual would happen between them.

It wouldn't.

She knew it. So did he.

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But maybe he was hoping by spelling it out, that the words would have a magical effect and stop them from doing something stupid. The words wouldn't do squat, but the threat of Angel being killed might do the trick for her. She didn't want him to pay for something she should have shut down twenty years ago.

"The first time Kenton tried to come onto me, I should have kneed him in the balls," Mia said. "If I'd done that instead of just avoiding him, he might have realized he stood no chance with me."

Angel glanced at her again, but this time there was a different kind of heat. There was anger. "The first time? Are you saying he tried shit with you before that night?"

Sweet heaven.

Mia instantly regretted her babbling. Angel didn't need to deal with another slam of emotion. Still, she'd opened this Pandora's box so she had to go with it.

"Yes, twice," she admitted. "Once on the day he arrived. He asked me out, and I told him that you were my boyfriend. Then, a few weeks later, he sort of cornered me when I was in the pantry searching for a late-night snack. I was trying to get by him, and he was moving in for a kiss when RJ came in to ask what was going on. I said nothing and then hurried back to my room. That's when I should have kneed RJ in the balls."

Angel did a whole lot of cursing. "Yes, you should have kneed him and then come straight to me. Why the hell didn't you?"

Oh, it was so hard to explain the mind of a teenage girl. “Because I didn’t want you to think I’d done something to lead Kenton on.”

As she expected, that brought on an f-bomb and some other ripe profanity. “I wouldn’t have thought that.”

“Yes, I know that now, but at the time, I didn’t want to do anything to lose you.” She paused. Had to. “Because you were pretty much the only good thing in my life right then.”

Or for the years before that.

Or after.

No way would she admit that. Mia figured she’d already spilled way too much for one day.

Thankfully, Angel didn’t get a chance to push for more info because he turned onto a narrow private road, and she could see the house ahead. Definitely not what she’d been expecting. It looked like a very modern take on a two-story log house with sharp roof angles and lots of windows and decks.

“I didn’t expect to see a place like this out here,” she muttered.

He didn’t jump to answer, and for a moment she thought he was going to ask for more details about her encounters with Kenton. He didn’t. But Mia figured this wasn’t the last of that particular conversation.

“Ruby had several houses built out in this area, and I bought this one when I started working for her,” Angel finally said.

“Your boss has good taste,” she remarked. “Guess you do, too, since you made it your home.”

And it was indeed a home.

The yard was bursting with flowers of all colors, and the land behind it, a clearing of at least ten acres, was covered with wildflowers. She was about to ask him if he’d gotten into gardening, but his phone rang, and she saw Presley’s name pop up on the screen.

“Is everything okay?” Angel asked him the moment he answered the call on speaker.

“No one attacked me or anything. Hope you can say the same for Mia and you.”

“No attacks,” Angel assured him as he drove the van into the garage. “I just got home, and we’re about to go in.”

“Good. Because I’m sending you a lab report about Mia’s knife.”

Her stomach instantly knotted, but she didn’t pepper Presley with questions. She just waited for him to continue.

“It had blood on it,” Presley said. “Not Mia’s.”

Mia’s breath of relief rushed out. “Kenton’s?” she managed to say.

“Yeah, and someone else’s,” he explained. “Birdie’s.”

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Chapter Seven

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Angel stood where he did every morning when he was home and not away on assignment. At the window of his office that overlooked the gardens.

And as usual, he was in awe of the view.

The flowers weren't his doing but rather the landscapers that Ruby had hired when the place was built. Thankfully, those same landscapers came out on a weekly basis to tend the grounds. If not, they sure wouldn't be worth looking at while he had his morning coffee.

This place, the view, the house were a far cry from his roots. The foster home hadn't been a dump by any means, but this house, this life he was living, went far beyond his expectations.

And his expectations for himself had been damn high.

Now, it could be snatched away, and he had to deal with that.

With the revelation of Birdie's blood on the knife, Angel had to take everything to the cops. Even though the statute of limitations would save him from being arrested for tampering with a crime scene, it wouldn't set well with Ruby. She'd likely fire him. Mia was facing the same thing with her boss, who had apparently already put her on a leave of absence.

But he had far worse things to worry about than losing his job.

Mia and he would be murder suspects. Birdie, too. And depending on what else the cops found, one of them would likely be charged with killing Kenton. Angel only hoped before that could happen, he could find the person who'd actually put Kenton in that grave.

That search for the killer had kept him up a good chunk of the night. But Mia had also had a bit part in his inability to sleep. She was here, in the house with him. In fact, just up the hall in the guestroom, and his body wasn't going to let him just forget that.

He wanted her.

Bad.

And that had to stop. Sex shouldn't end up being a fatal mistake, and that's what it could turn out to be if it caused him to lose focus. So, hands off. Thoughts off her, too.

That pep talk he was having with himself came to a quick end when Mia walked into his office and gave him another reminder of this heat between them. She'd obviously just showered because he took in the scent of the soap she'd used. Took in, too, that she was wearing his boxers shorts, and t-shirt.

"My clothes are in the dryer," she said, fluttering her fingers in the direction of the laundry room. "I washed them while you were in the shower."

That explained why he hadn't heard the washer going. Then again, the laundry room was in the far back of the house off the kitchen, and the rooms had better than decent soundproofing.

"Presley went by your house this morning, picked up some things, and dropped them

off,” he explained. “Not sure if they’re things you’ll actually wear, but he did grab another pair of shoes for you. Everything’s in a suitcase in the living room. I didn’t want to bring them to you in the guestroom because I didn’t want to wake you.”

And because Angel hadn’t wanted the temptation of being in there with her when she was in bed.

“Great. Thanks. But it’s sort of a cheap thrill wearing your things.” She glanced down at the boxers and tee. “Confession time—I stole one of your shirts shortly after we started dating.”

He frowned. “Why?” he had to ask.

She shrugged. “A comfort thing. Sort of like a teddy bear.” Mia frowned, too, and waved that off. “All right, you’re not remotely the teddy bear type. It was kind of sexual. Not so much comfort but sort of like having you in bed with me. And I’m babbling again,” she added in a mutter.

Yes, she was. But this was very enlightening.

“Is that creepy about me sleeping with your shirt?” she pressed.

Despite everything, Angel almost smiled. Almost. He didn’t come close to that particular expression very often.

“Not creepy,” he assured her.

He was about to say something that he was glad he managed to shut down before it came out of his mouth. That he wished he’d been wearing the shirt when it was in bed with her.

Yeah. That wouldn't help this lust zinging back and forth between them.

Time to change the subject. "There's coffee and plenty of breakfast stuff in the fridge and pantry," he offered, ready to go to the kitchen and make her something to eat.

She shook her head and lifted the bottle of fizzy water. "My stomach's a little unsettled so I thought this would help."

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Hell. Of course, it was unsettled. Yesterday, someone had tried to kill her, and there were no guarantees that wouldn't happen again today.

"I'm guessing from your expression you haven't gotten any good news this morning," she said, walking closer to him.

He shook his head. "No sign of the shooter and the blood found by the tree wasn't a match to anyone in the system."

"So, the guy didn't have a criminal record," she muttered. "And it rules out Dwight because he does have one."

True, but sometimes there were occasional glitches in the system, in the search itself or even the way the blood sample was collected or processed. So, Angel intended to request that it be run again.

"What about the drone feed? Any images of his face?" Mia asked.

This wasn't going to be a positive report. "None. He kept on the ski mask the whole time. And he didn't leave any fingerprints on the spent shell casings. There were also no trace evidence or fibers on the tree. No reports either of anyone matching his height and weight being treated for a gunshot wound."

Mia stayed quiet a moment, obviously processing all of that. "Maybe he's dead?" she speculated.

"Not enough blood. The CSIs followed a short trail of blood drops to a trail where it

appeared there had recently been a motorcycle. That's probably what he used to escape."

She sighed. "Both the CSIs and you have obviously worked most of the night... wow," she muttered when she made it to the window. "Wow on steroids. What an awesome view."

"I find it soothing," he settled for saying. "A far cry from the traffic noises in the city."

She made a sound of agreement and stood there several long moments before she turned to him. "I hacked into some files," Mia said, definitely causing that soothing moment to vanish.

"What files?" he was quick to ask.

"The latest police report on Kenton."

Angel groaned. "There was no need for you to do that. Presley got an update by talking to a few of his cop friends."

"Yes. I saw a note about that, and I also saw that the officers weren't going to keep Presley or you in the info loop until they were sure you were ruled out as suspects."

"Shit," he snarled.

"That was my reaction, too, so I kept digging. FYI, cops suck at protecting their files. I mean, really, someone needs to talk to them about that." She stopped, waved the rest of that off and continued. "What they didn't tell Presley was that the CSIs managed to find traces of blood in Kenton's old room when they went through it last night."

Angel wasn't the least bit surprised about that. Traces of blood spatter could stay around for a long time, and while DNA couldn't usually be extracted from samples that old, the odds were that the blood belonged to Kenton.

And Birdie.

Since he couldn't undo the hacking, Angel decided to go ahead and hear if she'd learned anything else from those reports. "Did the cops get into any suspicions they have about Birdie?"

She shook her head. "Like us, she got a mention as someone to be interviewed because she was living in the house with Kenton when the crime would have occurred." Mia paused. "We're going to have to tell the cops about the knife and the blood on it, aren't we?"

"We are," Angel confirmed. "I want to hold off that until we're all called in for questioning. And I'll take full blame for removing it. I don't want you caught up on that. There's no need—"

She stopped him with a kiss.

A full-blown, hot, hard, right on the mouth kiss.

The kind that twenty years ago would have been that final foreplay kiss before he sank deep into her.

Damn it all to hell and back. The taste of her slammed right into him and took him to another place, another time. But still the same Mia. The one who could fire up every inch of him. Of course, this kiss could have fired up an igloo.

Only after she'd left him breathless did she finally pull back.

She smiled. Shrugged. “That wasn’t a mistake,” she insisted.

“It felt like one,” he lied. It hadn’t felt like a mistake at all but rather a much wanted distraction. One that’d given him an instant hard-on.

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Her smile stayed in place a moment longer, but it and the heat in her eyes tamped back down. “I’m going to apologize. I consider that a sort of air clearing. I was thinking about doing it, and I figured if I didn’t, then I’d just keep thinking about it, and this need for you would continue to build and—”

He stopped her with a kiss. And, yes, it was a mistake. Even though he thought it was a mistake worth making.

Angel kissed her the way she’d kissed him, and he let the pleasure fill him. Let it tease his senses. Let him forget for just a second or two that all was not right with their world. It was that reminder of the not right that had him moving back and meeting her gaze.

“Tit for tat?” she questioned. “Or is the tit for later?”

Shit. He laughed. The sound burst out of him before he could stop it, and then he remembered something that he’d stomped down all these years. Mia had been one of the few people who’d ever made him laugh.

“We need to be serious,” he said, mainly to himself, and he got a little help with the mood shift because his monitor dinged.

“Incoming report,” Danno announced.

And just like that, the lighthearted moment was lost, and their moods shifted back to the business at hand.

The report appeared on the wall monitor, joining the other half dozen reports he'd gotten in the past couple of hours. This one was on Kenton's mother, Aileen. Unlike some of the others, this one wasn't long. Probably because the woman had died when she'd been just thirty.

"Kenton was two when she died," Mia muttered as she read through the details. "Complications from an ectopic pregnancy. No criminal record. She was a preschool teacher." She paused, looked at him. "So, why would she marry a sleazeball like Dwight? Because, unlike Birdie's husband, Dwight didn't have money, not then and not now."

Angel knew sometimes there was no logic. Sometimes, there was no common ground. No external motivation.

Only the heat of attraction.

He knew that firsthand with Mia.

But the difference was he wasn't an asshole like Dwight. So, Angel kept looking, and he saw something that might make sense of things.

"Aileen and Dwight had a baby who died of SIDS." He pointed to that part of the report. "When she was barely nineteen," he tacked onto that, and he searched for another date. "A baby that was born five months after they married. So, I'm guessing she got pregnant and decided to try to make a go of it with her baby's father."

"Yes," Mia murmured. "That's probably it. So, did Kenton keep staying with Dwight right after his mom died?"

"No." Angel shifted to one of the other reports. One that he'd run around midnight on the full bio of both Kenton and Dwight. "His mom's sister took care of Kenton for

about a year. When she had a child of her own, she passed him along to another relative. An elderly cousin. That cycle continued with two more relatives until Kenton was nine, and he was placed in foster care because, at the time, CPS couldn't locate Dwight."

The moment Angel finished telling Mia that, his phone rang, and when he saw it was from Presley, he answered it right away.

"Blunt force trauma," Presley immediately said. "A blow to the head. That's what the ME believes was the cause of Kenton's death."

"Not stabbing," Angel murmured.

"Doesn't look that way, but, of course, the forensic anthropologists will have the final say on that. Still, I've gotten a look at the pictures of the injury, and the back of his head was caved in."

That damage could have happened postmortem, but there must have been enough compelling evidence for the ME to suggest it as the cause of death.

"How'd you get to see the pictures?" Angel asked. "Aren't the cops freezing you out?"

"Some are, but Ruby managed to pull some strings. I'm at headquarters right now with her."

Hell. Did that mean Ruby knew everything? Angel didn't get a chance to speculate about that.

"I know Presley and you aren't killers," Ruby said, her voice coming through loud and clear. "And, no, Presley didn't spill anything, but I can often add two and two

and come up with the correct answer of four.”

And apparently that’s what she had done. Angel just stayed quiet and let her continue.

“My techs also told me about the knife. The one with your foster sister’s blood on it,” Ruby went on. “That’s connected to all of this, I’m sure, and I’m equally sure you’ll explain the connection to me. First though, I need you to tell me something. Do you know who killed Kenton Barker?”

“I don’t,” Angel said, “and neither does Mia or Presley.”

“Finally, we’re getting somewhere,” Ruby muttered. “So, either someone in the house or someone with access to it killed Kenton and buried him. Since it was Birdie’s blood on the knife, is she your main suspect?”

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“One of them,” Angel answered. “So is Kenton’s father.”

“Yes, a piece of work,” Ruby grumbled. “But the cops will also question your foster parents, Mia, and anyone else who lived in the house at the time.”

“They will,” Angel and Presley verified together. “And they’ll want DNA samples from all of us for elimination purposes in case they do manage to get some DNA from the blood they found.”

“Absolutely. Presley’s and yours are already in the system since you’re former cops,” Ruby stated. “Birdie’s and Dwight’s as well because of their criminal records. The CSIs got them from Melanie and RJ when they were at the house. That leaves Mia, and from what I understand, Sentron has a DNA and fingerprint database on all their employees.”

“Yes,” Mia verified. “I can give them permission to release that to the cops.”

“Good,” Ruby concluded. “That can save some time.”

“Do I need to turn in my resignation?” Angel came out and asked when Ruby paused.

The woman took her time answering. So much time that Angel could feel his future crashing and burning. “No,” she finally said. “And if you try to turn in your resignation, I won’t accept it.” She huffed. “Am I happy with the way you’ve handled this? No,” Ruby answered for him. “But if I had been in your situation when I was sixteen, I likely would have done the same thing. I don’t want to lose a damn fine operative because of mistakes made as a kid.”

Angel felt some of the muscles in his chest and stomach unclench. He had very much wanted to keep his job, but more than that, he had needed for Ruby to be on their side. She could be crucial in Mia and him clearing their names.

“So, now let’s move on,” Ruby continued a moment later. “I have a suggestion for the next steps. Let’s do something to maybe jog your memories of what went on when Kenton was killed. The CSIs have finished processing the foster house, and I want Mia and you to meet Presley and me there. Your foster parents will be there. And Birdie.”

Angel didn’t ask how she’d managed to put together that gathering with Birdie. Ruby had a broad skillset that included, well, pretty much everything.

“Meet us there in one hour,” Ruby spelled out. “We’re going to do a reconstruction of the crime scene, and with some luck, we’ll be able to figure out the identity of the killer. After that, we turn everything over to the police. Everything,” she emphasized.

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Chapter Eight

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Mia had to wonder if the morning was going to end with her arrest. Or Birdie’s since it was her blood on the knife. Heck, the cops might end up arresting both of them, but Mia had to hope that Ruby’s reconstruction would work and that Angel’s and her names would soon be taken off the suspect list.

She had to take several steadying breaths when Angel took the final turn toward their old neighborhood, and some familiar places came into view. The library was still there, but the café where Angel, Presley, and she had worked part-time in high school

was now a thrift shop for used clothing. The stately church had been converted to a halfway house.

Once, a hundred or so years ago, this had been a somewhat affluent area of San Antonio with its large Victorian-style houses. Over the decades, the community had declined. Some houses had been converted into apartments. Others hadn't been well maintained, and it'd been one of those rundown houses that RJ and Melanie had bought twenty-four years ago.

Because of the recent background checks that both Angel and she had run, Mia now knew the couple had gotten the house for well under market value and had used donations for the down payment and to do the necessary repairs. RJ and Melanie were now fifty-two but had been in their early thirties then. Of course, as a teenager, Mia had thought of them as old. Ironical, since they'd been younger than Angel and she were now when they'd started here.

"I can't imagine taking on a houseful of foster kids," Mia muttered. "Especially teenagers."

Angel made a sound of agreement. "And they're still at it."

They were indeed, and because of those reports, Mia knew they currently had three teenage girls who wouldn't be there today. The ever-efficient Ruby had arranged for them to be with a trusted neighbor just up the street while the scene reenactment was in progress.

Mia needed a few more deep breaths as Angel pulled to a stop in front of the house. There were already two vehicles in the driveway, and Presley was waiting for them on the front porch. As usual, Presley wasn't showing any nerves. In fact, he smiled at them and greeted her with a hug.

“RJ, Melanie, and Ruby are inside,” Presley relayed. “But you should probably steel yourself up some. Ruby’s gone all out on this reconstruction.”

That didn’t help settle Mia’s stomach which was already in a tight, hard knot.

Presley led them into the foyer, and Mia felt the slam of memories. So many good ones. This was where she’d met Angel. Where they’d become lovers. They had lives here through those often turbulent teen years.

And then Kenton had arrived.

Definitely no good memories associated with him. He’d been a pain in the ass from the moment he’d stepped foot in the place.

“Mia, Angel,” she heard someone say, and she turned to see Melanie making her way down the stairs toward them.

Melanie was still just as beautiful as ever with her blonde hair and sparkling blue eyes. Of course, those eyes were filled with concern today, but just as Presley had, she greeted them with a smile and hugs. When she pulled back from the hug, she was crying.

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“Happy tears,” Melanie assured them, but Mia suspected that was only partly true. She had to be as worried as they were. “It was horrible what happened to RJ, Angel, and you yesterday. A shooting. You could have all been hurt. Or worse.” She pressed her hand against her chest. “I hope they catch the person and lock him away so he can’t do that to anyone else.”

“A lot of people are looking for him,” Angel assured her.

“Good. Maybe they’ll find him today.” Her forehead bunched up for a couple of moments. “Look at you,” she went on, inching back and giving them long once-overs. Her smile returned. “Are you two together?”

“Uh, no,” Mia managed. Then, she got a flash of another memory. Of those two scalding kisses just an hour earlier.

Angel and she might not be together together, but there was still plenty of the old feelings between them. Well, one feeling away.

Lust.

It apparently had no expiration date when it came to Angel and her.

“Oh, well,” Melanie muttered. “You two just look so right as a couple, and I assumed you’d found your way back to each other.”

Mia settled for a shrug. Angel went with a grunt.

“The military,” Melanie went on as if she’d had a light bulb moment. “That’s why you two drifted apart. I remember Mia telling me that when she visited while she was in college.”

Angel’s leaving for the military had indeed been a big reason. After his extensive training, he’d gone on back to back deployments to classified locations. However, the biggest factor that had torn them apart was Kenton. The secrets they’d kept about that godawful night had eaten away at them until it’d made it feel impossible for them to be together.

Now, here they were, poking at old wounds and trying to get to the truth.

“Birdie’s not here yet, but I’ll leave the front door unlocked for her. Ruby and RJ are waiting for us upstairs,” Melanie muttered, motioning for them to follow her. “Presley has been catching me up with what’s going on in your lives. Maverick Ops. Impressive! Though Ruby is a little intimidating,” she added in a whisper.

Mia had to agree with that.

“But what a stellar operation,” Melanie went on. “I’ve heard nothing but good things about them. Good things about the company you work for, too, Mia,” she tacked onto that with significantly less enthusiasm.

Angel and Presley cleared their throats at the same time. Hardly resounding endorsements for Sentron.

“My boss sometimes cuts corners,” Mia admitted. “Who knows, one day I might get lucky and work for Maverick Ops, too.”

The idea of that had just flashed into her head, but she liked the sound of it. Too bad Ruby might consider her unacceptable employee material because of how she’d

handled the situation with Kenton. She had basically destroyed evidence that she had taken from a crime scene.

Yes, Ruby wouldn't approve of that.

Melanie's pace slowed considerably when they reached the top of the stairs, and as they started down the hall. Once again, Mia got hit with another slam of memories. Specifically, of that night when she'd made this trip to what was called the boys' wing. The girls' rooms had all been on the third floor, with RJ and Melanie's bedroom on the main floor.

Mia was trying to tamp down her racing heart when she felt something. Angel. His hand brushed against her, and she turned to him, their gazes connecting. He definitely wasn't smiling or sporting a TLC kind of expression, but the TLC was there all right. She could feel it. And just that touch steadied her.

They stopped outside the open door to Kenton's room, which had been directly across from Angel's. Presley's had been on the other end of the hall where the boys' breakroom was located.

Mia immediately saw Ruby standing back against the far wall, typing something into a tablet. RJ was next to her, and he was looking down at the floor.

At the blood.

God, there was blood.

Mia felt as if she'd been hit by a Mack truck, but then she realized it wasn't blood at all but some red fabric spread out on the floor next to the bed. There was also a Spurs' hat and a pocketknife.

It was like stepping into a nightmare.

And it took all of Mia's resolve not to turn and run. She forced herself to remember that she was no longer a frightened teenager. Nor was this real. The blood and the "props" weren't real, and Kenton was dead. He wasn't going to come rushing in to try to assault her again.

"Birdie should be here soon, but we can go ahead and get started without her. Feel free to adjust the placement of things," Ruby offered, glancing at Angel and her. "Is this how it looked the night of Kenton's disappearance?"

"The knife wasn't here when I saw it," Mia managed to say, and she gave the hat an adjustment, moving it further away from the fake blood.

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“And what time were you up here?” Ruby asked.

“Around seven p.m.” Since this was all about full disclosure, Mia went ahead and spelled things out. “I saw the blood. And the hat. The knife wasn’t there. I took the hat, disposed of it, and went up the street to the library. I didn’t come back until it closed at ten.”

Angel walked closer to the staging and did an adjustment, too. He moved the knife toward the foot of the bed.

“I came in about seven-thirty or so,” he explained. “No hat but the knife was there. I took it and went looking for Mia.”

“Because you thought she’d hurt or killed Kenton,” Ruby said.

Angel nodded. “And she thought I’d murdered him when she saw my hat.”

“But neither of you killed him,” Ruby concluded, typing something into her tablet. “Someone else did and cleaned up the blood. When was your second visit to the room that night?”

“Just before ten,” Angel answered. “I still hadn’t been able to find Mia so I came back here. There was no blood. Someone had cleaned it up.”

“I didn’t know either of you’d been in here that night,” Melanie muttered.

Mia doubted the tears in her eyes now were of the happy sort. No, Melanie was no

doubt dealing with her own trauma that night. RJ, too, who had a shell-shocked look on his face.

“What about the three of you?” Ruby asked, volleying glances at Presley, Melanie, and RJ. “How did the room look when you saw it that night?”

“I didn’t see it until the next day,” Presley volunteered. “I was next door with Alisha Carver.”

His then girlfriend. And lover, Mia knew. Because Alisha and she had been friends back in the day.

“I should have been here,” Presley added in a mumble. “I should have been able to stop what Kenton tried to do to Mia.”

“I should have been here,” Angel insisted, and he was even more adamant about that than Presley.

“I hit Kenton, and he was bleeding when he stormed off,” Melanie provided. “I figured he’d go to the cops and report me. I deserved to be reported. He’s the only one of our fosters that I’d ever struck, but I wouldn’t have done it had he not been trying to hurt Mia.”

“Thank you for that,” Mia told her.

Melanie moved in to give her another hug, and the tears weren’t just in her eyes now. They were spilling down her cheeks.

“What time did Kenton assault Mia and how soon afterwards did you hit him?” Ruby asked.

Melanie eased away from Mia, but she didn't turn to face Ruby. Instead, she looked down at the fake blood. "Around six o'clock. I went up to the girls' wing to bring back the little vacuum cleaner I'd gotten from their bathroom. The one I normally used was broken, and I'd needed to clean up some flour I had spilled in the kitchen."

Mia had no trouble recalling Melanie's arrival that night. Then again, there wasn't anything about that night she'd managed to shut out.

Melanie swallowed hard. "I saw Kenton and Mia in the hall, and he was trying to push Mia into her bedroom. He had her in a chokehold," she said, her voice cracking. "I yelled for him to stop, but he didn't. He told me to back off. Except he cursed and tried to shove me away. That's when I hit him."

"And that was around six, you said," Ruby clarified.

Melanie nodded. "I'd just cooked a pot roast, my usual Saturday night meal, and I could smell it." She paused. "And smell the alcohol on Kenton's breath. He'd been drinking, and that's not allowed."

Mia had smelled the booze, too, and she suspected Kenton had also been high. He was fond of smoking joints in the little park behind the house.

"What about you?" Ruby continued, turning to RJ. "How soon did you see this room after the incident with Mia and Kenton?"

RJ shook his head, and he seemed to have to pull himself out of a trance before he answered. "Not until much later that night, probably close to midnight. I was at my parents' house across town. My mom was recovering from cancer surgery, so I was over there most of the evening."

Because of the reports, Mia knew that both of his parents were now deceased. Which

meant there was no one to confirm the exact hours of that visit.

“I took the bus to my folks since I didn’t want to leave Melanie without a car. And after I got home and Melanie told me what happened with Kenton and Mia, I came up here to Kenton’s room,” RJ continued. “I was going to talk to him and tell him that in the morning I would go to CPS and ask that he be moved to another foster family. I didn’t want him here any longer.”

“What happened when you came here?” Ruby prompted when RJ fell silent.

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“Uh, Kenton didn’t answer when I knocked so I went in.” RJ stopped and scrubbed his hands over his face. “He wasn’t in here, and there was no blood, hat or knife.”

“That was around midnight?” Ruby questioned.

“Probably closer to one,” RJ corrected. “After I got home and Melanie told me what Kenton had done, she and I talked for a while before I came up.”

The silence settled in the room for several moments before Ruby shifted her attention to Melanie. “And what about you?”

“I didn’t come up here until the following morning,” Melanie was quick to answer. “When Kenton didn’t come down for breakfast, RJ and I went to his room together because I didn’t want to face Kenton alone. There was no blood, knife or hat.”

Ruby nodded, and she looked at her tablet. “I’ve worked out a general timeline based on what you’ve all said. The assault on Mia happened around six. We haven’t heard from Birdie yet, but that’s the last time anyone saw Kenton. Is that right?”

All made sounds and responses to indicate that was correct.

“About an hour later, Mia, you came up here,” Ruby went on. “Why?”

“To kick Kenton in the balls,” she answered honestly. “I hated that I’d let him get to me like that, and I wanted to make it clear that it wouldn’t happen again.”

Ruby kept her stare fixed on Mia. “And you’re certain you didn’t bring your knife

with you?”

“Certain. I couldn’t find it. I usually kept it in the drawer of my nightstand, and it wasn’t there.”

Ruby did more staring. “And the blood and hat were here in the room by then but not the knife. You took the hat.”

Mia nodded. “So, I guess that means Kenton was killed between six and seven p.m. that night.”

“It looks that way,” Ruby murmured. “And shortly after you made that discovery in Kenton’s room, you left, and then Angel arrived home.” She shifted her gaze to him. “Birdie told you what had happened with Kenton attacking Mia so you went to confront him. You found the blood and the knife in Kenton’s room, took the knife and went looking for Mia.”

“I did,” Angel said. “I didn’t see Kenton at all that night.”

Neither had Mia after Kenton had attacked her, but that led her to another question she needed answered. “Kenton’s killer put him in that grave. That meant moving the body down a flight of stairs.”

“Maybe,” Ruby muttered, but then pointed to the large window. The bottom of the sill was only a couple of inches from the floor. “One possibility is the killer could have dragged him there and tossed him out. The body would have fallen very close to where Kenton’s car would have been parked. From there, the killer could have managed to get him inside it and drive away.”

“Even if Kenton was larger than the killer?” RJ asked.

“Even then,” Ruby confirmed. “Adrenaline can give a person a lot more strength than they usually have. It could have been enough to hoist Kenton onto the seat and drive off before anyone could see what was going on.”

Yes, Mia could see it playing out that way. There were no street views or exterior lights on that side of the house.

“Another possibility is that Kenton was alive when he got into his car,” Ruby went on. “He could have set up this scene, gone to his car, and been attacked while he was already inside it. The killer could have then driven him to the dump site and buried him.”

That made more sense than the first theory, but Mia didn’t get a chance to verbally play it out because of the sound of approaching footsteps. They turned to see Birdie step into the doorway. She wasn’t alone. Her husband, Roger, was right by her side.

Birdie was wearing a red top and pants that looked as expensive as the rest of her. That included her sky-high designer heels, her hair and makeup, and the diamond earrings that sparkled in her earlobes. She’d definitely come a long way from her time in foster care.

Roger was every bit just as polished and looked as if he were on his way to an important business meeting rather than escorting his wife to what had once been the scene of a crime.

Birdie took one look at the blood, and even though it wasn’t real, she went pale and turned toward her husband, burying her face on his shoulder. A gravelly sob tore from her throat, and it took her several moments before she lifted her head and looked at them.

“I don’t want to talk here,” Birdie said, her voice a tangle of nerves. “Please, let’s go

downstairs. There are some things I need to tell you about that night.”

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Chapter Nine

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Angel hoped like hell that soon they'd have answers as to what'd happened to Kenton. The civilian in him wanted to hear what Birdie had to say right away. But the former cop wondered if this info should be given down at the police station after the woman had been Mirandized.

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But one look at Birdie's husband, Roger, and Angel knew the man wasn't going to easily let that happen. He kept a protective arm around his wife as they walked back downstairs, and he shot Angel and Presley a few glares that weren't hard to interpret.

Don't do anything to hurt or upset my wife.

So, if Angel insisted they go to the cops, Roger would likely just lawyer up, and it could be hours or even days before they found out what had happened. Angel needed to know now because he was battling his own need to keep someone safe.

Mia.

With Birdie's blood on the knife, then maybe he'd be able to clear Mia's name here and now. And while he was hoping, he added that this conversation didn't come back to legally bite him in the ass.

With Melanie leading the way, the seven of them went downstairs and to the back of the house to the kitchen. It had been updated since he'd lived here, not in a high-end kind of way, but the white appliances looked fairly new, and the old linoleum floor had been replaced with gray wood planks. It still had that homey, welcoming feel.

There were plenty of memories here, mostly good, of the delicious meals that Melanie had cooked for them. Nothing was simmering on the stove today, but there was the scent of coffee.

"Excuse me for just a minute," RJ said, looking and sounding as frazzled as Melanie. "I need to run to the bathroom before we get started." And he headed out of the

kitchen.

“Should I pour us all cups?” Melanie asked, motioning toward the coffeepot. “It’s fresh, and I have some scones.”

They all declined, but Birdie asked for some water. Melanie got it for her, and they sat at the huge table. Birdie gulped down nearly half of the water, set the glass on the table, and ran her fingers over the outside surface. What she didn’t do was launch into an explanation.

“This is very hard for my wife,” Roger said several moments later, just as RJ came back into the room. “And FYI, I didn’t want her to come here. I have lawyers who can handle this sort of thing.”

Bingo. Angel had been right about Roger being the lawyering up type, and it was a reminder for him to throttle back on the cop attitude. If Roger took Birdie out of there, they’d still get the answers since she would be questioned by the cops, but Angel wanted to hear what she had to say now.

Birdie moved her hand to Roger’s and linked her fingers with his. “Kenton was going to try to frame the two of you for his murder,” she finally said.

Of all the things that he’d expected the woman to say, that wasn’t one of them. Judging from the surprised expressions, no one else other than Roger had been expecting it either.

Birdie paused a long time before she continued. “I went up to Kenton’s room to give him a piece of my mind about what he did to Mia.” Another pause. “I’d been with Kenton. I’m not proud of that, but I’d been with him, and I wanted to know what the hell he was thinking when he and I were supposed to be together.”

Another surprise. Angel had had no idea that Birdie and Kenton had been lovers. And that was puzzling in a different kind of way. Usually, his foster siblings couldn't keep that sort of thing a secret. But then, someone had kept Kenton's death a secret all these years, so anything was possible.

"You were jealous?" Mia asked. "Because if so, I didn't lead Kenton on or anything. I was firmly hooked up with Angel."

"I know," Birdie assured her. "Melanie told me how it had all played out, and I went to confront Kenton about it."

"About what time?" Ruby asked.

"Only about fifteen minutes after the attack." Birdie stopped, drank more water. "I didn't knock on his door. I just barged right in, and I saw the blood. Kenton had cut himself and was letting the blood drip on the floor. He'd already flung some spatter onto the walls and his bed."

"He cut himself?" Melanie pressed her now trembling fingers to her mouth. "Oh, God."

"Yes, that was my reaction," Birdie muttered. "He yelled at me to get out and tried to shove me out of the room, but I held my ground and demanded to know what he was doing. He said he was going to make some people pay and pay hard. He said they'd regret ever fucking around with him." She paused again. "He had Mia's knife, and I tried to grab it from him, but I ended up cutting my hand on the blade before Kenton jerked it out of my reach."

So, that's how her blood had gotten on the knife.

Well, maybe.

All of this could be bullshit to make it seem as if she wasn't a killer.

"What happened then?" Angel prompted to get her talking again.

Birdie did, but her hands were trembling now, too. "Kenton punched me, hard, in the stomach, and he put the knife to my throat. He said if I told anyone what I'd seen in his room, that he'd kill me. I believed him," she added in a whisper. "I believed him, and I ran. I hid in the attic while I tried to calm down and think of what to do."

Angel nearly demanded to know why she hadn't gone to RJ or Melanie. Or why she hadn't called 911. But one look at Roger and he throttled back. He tried to plaster on his poker face.

"And what did you end up doing?" Angel settled for saying.

Birdie opened her mouth to answer, but Roger spoke first. "I'll remind you that my wife was a teenager who'd just been violently assaulted by a predator. She was almost certainly in shock."

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Hell. Did that mean Birdie had murdered Kenton? No way did Angel want to throw out that question so he just waited.

“I’m not sure how long I stayed in the attic,” Birdie finally continued. “But I decided to go downstairs and talk to Melanie. When I got to the boys’ wing, I could see that Kenton’s door was open so I risked glancing inside. I saw the blood, more of it than had been there earlier.” She looked at her husband, who nodded. “I cleaned it up and threw away the towel.”

“Because she didn’t want Mia to be blamed for what Kenton was trying to do,” Roger snarled, looking directly at Mia. “Birdie was protecting you.”

Maybe. But Birdie could have been protecting herself, too.

“Kenton was alive the last time I saw him,” Birdie went on. “And I have no idea how he ended up dead.”

Angel had to go with another maybe on this. Birdie could be lying. He could see Kenton setting up the scene to make it look as if he’d been murdered, but Kenton sure as hell hadn’t buried himself. Someone had put him in that grave.

And that led him back to the questions of logistics.

Kenton and he both owned cars. Junkers they’d bought to get them to and from their part-time jobs. Angel had had his car and keys with him that night, but Kenton’s could have been used to transport the body and then left somewhere or destroyed to conceal the forensic evidence that would have been in the vehicle.

Using the vehicle accomplished something else, too. It had made it seem as if Kenton could have just driven away. Since the cops had never even looked for it, there was no hope in finding it after all this time.

“Anyone here?” someone called out.

Angel muttered some profanity because he instantly recognized the voice. Dwight. And it was obvious the man was already inside the house.

“Anyone here?” Dwight called out again, but before the last word had left his mouth, he was already in the arched opening of the kitchen.

Hell. How long had he been here?

Angel recalled that Melanie hadn’t locked the door when they’d come in. Apparently, neither had Birdie.

“It’s customary to knock or ring the bell when you come to someone’s home,” Angel snarled as he got to his feet. So did Mia, Presley, and RJ.

For just an instant he saw the fury flash through Dwight’s eyes, but the man quickly tamped it down. “I know. I’m sorry. I knocked. At least, I think I did, but I feel like I’m in a trance. A grief trance for my boy.”

Oh, butter wouldn’t melt in that lying-assed mouth.

Dwight slid glances all around the table, lingering a moment and scowling a bit at RJ. Then again, according to RJ, the two had had a run-in.

“Why are you here?” Angel pressed just as Roger asked, “Who are you?”

Dwight volleyed glances at both of them and must have decided he could get a warmer reception from Roger.

“I’m Dwight Barker, Kenton’s father. It’s just awful what happened to my boy.” He gave his head a sad little shake and hiked his thumb in the direction of the foyer. “I was driving by the house, thinking of the times I’d visited Kenton here, and I saw all the vehicles. I figured whoever was in here would be talking about Kenton. Do any of you have any news about my son?”

“No,” Angel was quick to say. Definitely no need to spill any of what Birdie had just told them. “I’m sure the cops will fill you in on anything they learn.”

Dwight sighed. “That’s just it. They’re not filling me in. They’ve left me on my own to find out what happened to Kenton.” He seemed to try to conjure up those tears again by rapidly blinking his eyes. “Somebody please tell me what happened to him. Please.”

And with that, he turned to Birdie.

Angel did more cursing because he was almost certain now that Dwight had heard what she’d said.

“I, uh,” Birdie muttered, but Roger squeezed her hand.

“My wife is upset, and I think she’s had enough of this miserable trip down memory lane for the time being.” He stood, easing Birdie up with him, while he shifted his attention to Ruby. “I trust you have everything you need and that you’ll handle this with the care and diligence that your reputation indicates you have.”

Ruby nodded.

Dwight pounced right on that. “This? What do you mean by this? What’s going on here?”

Angel was about to repeat that bit about Dwight getting any other info from the cops, but he stopped when he caught a whiff of something. Something he didn’t want to smell.

Smoke.

Angel's gaze slashed to Presley, who was already moving. It was a risk to take Mia with him, but no way did he want to leave her alone with Dwight, so he took hold of her hand and hurried off with Presley and her. The moment they reached the foyer, they saw the smoke billowing down the stairs.

"I'm calling the fire department," Presley said, taking out his phone while the three of them started up the stairs for a closer look.

A glance over his shoulder let him know that RJ and Melanie had rushed into the foyer as well.

"What's happening?" Melanie blurted.

Angel didn't answer. He just went up a few more steps and saw exactly what he'd expected to see.

The flames shooting out the doorway of Kenton's room.

"Hell," Angel spat out, and he ran to the closet in the foyer where he recalled there was a fire extinguisher. One was indeed there, and he grabbed it and started barreling up the stairs, taking them two at a time.

"I'll get the fire extinguisher from the kitchen," RJ shouted, and he ran in that direction.

Angel shot Presley a glance that he hoped conveyed his concerns. He needed Presley to keep an eye on Mia in case this turned into some kind of full-blown attack. After all, the gunman was still at large.

And Dwight was right here in the house.

So was Birdie, and she was still high on Angel's suspect list.

Presley picked up on the glance because he moved next to Mia and he drew his gun. Ruby was already on the phone with someone, probably the fire department. Melanie was grabbing spare blankets and throws that she took from a chest in the living room.

While Dwight stood there, watching.

And while Roger whisked Birdie out the door.

Angel hurried to Kenton's room, staying back in case the fire rushed out at him. It didn't, but he couldn't see anything but flames. However, he could smell something.

Gasoline.

He hadn't thought for one second that this was some kind of accident, and the accelerant proved it. Now, the question was had Dwight set it or was someone else responsible?

Angel took aim with the fire extinguisher, spraying the doorway. Thankfully, the extinguisher was large, the type businesses often had around, and he was able to douse enough of the flames so he could see inside.

Shit.

The fire was mainly on the bed, which was fully ablaze, but the black smoke had already coated the walls and ceiling. It was a good thing the CSIs had already gathered what they could.

But did the arsonist know that? Or was this some attempt to destroy potential evidence?

Angel hoped he'd have the answers to that soon.

He heard the footsteps behind him and saw RJ rushing toward him with a second fire extinguisher. They released the foam together, taking direct aim at the bed now that the fire had been put out in the doorway. They continued to battle the flames until the bed was completely coated.

With his breath gusting, RJ stood back, taking in the damage. And Angel saw something on the man's face that surprised him.

Relief?

He had to be wrong about that, didn't he? But he couldn't be sure.

Shit.

Was RJ responsible for this? And if so, what the hell else had he done?

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Chapter Ten

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Mia re-read the preliminary report from the fire department and tried to make sense of it. She couldn't.

Because it didn't make sense.

Someone had intentionally set the fire, using gasoline and a simple timer that anyone could have set up after getting the instructions from the internet.

Well, anyone with a motive, that is.

And that was her sticking point. She was having trouble figuring out why anyone would have done this.

"You're sure the CSIs got everything they could from Kenton's room?" she asked Angel.

He was on the other side of his office, working on his laptop at his desk, and she'd taken his office sofa while she used her tablet. And they'd been at the research since arriving back at his place after having to give their statements once again about the fire.

"Yes," he confirmed. "SAPD and the CSIs wouldn't have agreed to let Ruby do the reconstruction if they weren't finished."

That's the conclusion Mia had drawn as well. So, she was back to this not making sense. Setting the room on fire didn't eliminate any evidence that had already been collected, and the blaze hadn't been big enough to destroy other areas that might have held something forensically important.

"Are you getting anywhere on this?" she asked.

His sigh told her the answer was a big fat no, and on that sigh, he swiveled his chair around to face her. "There are no traffic or security cams with feed that'll show if anyone sneaked into the house. Added to that, the person could have been there for hours. Hell, for days."

That was another truth. The house was plenty big enough for someone to find a hidey hole and wait. But wait for what? To hear what they all had to say about that shitty night with Kenton?

Maybe.

But then she thought of the two people who were known to have been in the house and had had the opportunity to set the fire.

RJ and Dwight.

RJ could have done it during that bathroom trip shortly after Birdie's arrival. Dwight, before he even showed up in the kitchen.

"I did turn up something interesting on Roger," Angel said, turning back to his laptop and pulling up something. "Six months ago he was investigated for using hired muscle to intimidate a former employee who was scheduled to testify against him in small claims court."

Mia frowned. “There must not have been a huge payout at stake if the case was being heard in small claims. And he used hired muscle for that?”

“He was accused, investigated but wasn’t charged. There wasn’t enough evidence, and the hired muscle vanished. But the former employee claimed she was wrongfully terminated because she’d bad-mouthed Birdie, his then fiancée. Apparently, Birdie and she had crossed paths during Birdie’s wild child days.”

Mia gave that some thought. “So, Roger would maybe go to some lengths to protect Birdie.”

Angel shrugged. “It appears that way. But that doesn’t necessarily mean he’d hire someone to burn that room, especially not while they were in the house. He could have hired someone to set it before Ruby ever got there. Or hell, do it last night when it would have been empty.”

That made sense unless... “What if Roger chose the timing of the fire so that Birdie and he would be excluded as suspects?”

“It could have played out that way. The front door was unlocked and obviously stayed that way since Dwight was able to walk in. And there were no signs that the lock had been tampered with.” He stopped. “My money’s still on Dwight.”

“Mine, too. He could have come into the house while we were in the kitchen, set up the fire on the timer and come back down, pretending that he’d just arrived. What I’m stuck on is his motive unless he killed his own son and then wanted to make sure there was nothing around that could incriminate him.”

“It’s possible,” Angel agreed. “But this could have been his warped way of stirring things up, or perhaps even bringing more media attention to Kenton and therefore himself.”

He turned his laptop so she could see the social media page on the screen. And the profile photo on the page was none other than a very young Dwight with his arm slung around a very young Kenton. Mia was guessing he'd only been seven or eight in the picture.

"Dwight's already set up a GoFundMe page to pay for Kenton's funeral expenses," Angel explained, "and I suspect none of that will be used for anything else but to line his own pockets."

She considered that as well, remembering something in the background check she'd done on Dwight. "He's flat broke, and while I couldn't find any debts to a loan shark, that doesn't mean there aren't any." Mia paused. "I just don't want it to be RJ who set that fire," she added in a mutter.

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She couldn't understand a motive for that either. Still, sometimes people panicked under stress.

"I wonder if RJ and Melanie could be going through something similar to what we did," she threw out there. "RJ could believe Melanie killed Kenton and wants to protect her. And vice versa." She stopped, shook her head. "But I just can't believe either of them setting a fire in their own home."

Mia groaned, set aside her tablet and went to look out the window. Maybe all those pretty flowers would ease some of the sense of dread that was claiming every inch of her. Of course, that was asking a lot of a beautiful view.

"Anything back from SAPD yet?" she asked, and she didn't clarify what the anything was she was talking about.

No need. Along with the fire, it had to be weighing on Angel's mind, too.

After they'd given their statements about the fire, Angel and she had also given their full statements to SAPD. Specially to the homicide detective, Asa Walker, who was in charge of the investigation into Kenton's murder.

It hadn't been easy.

In fact, it'd been damn hard to go through all of it yet once again, but now everything was out in the open, and they had to prepare themselves for the consequences. Because of the statute of limitations, they couldn't be charged with anything involving the crime scene.

But that didn't apply to the murder.

Mia didn't believe there was enough evidence to charge anyone for that, including Angel or her, but the cops would want to keep looking. Keep digging. And maybe would find enough circumstantial evidence to initiate an arrest. If so, Birdie had to be a top suspect since her blood had been found on the knife—even though that wasn't admissible because of the chain of custody issue with it.

“Nothing from Detective Walker,” he said.

Of course, she'd known there hadn't been. No way would Angel keep something like that to himself.

Angel stood, too, and went to stand beside her. He might be hoping for that same mood lift since it felt as if they were getting nowhere. They were certainly no closer to finding Kenton's killer, and it was obvious that someone wanted to make sure they never found out.

“Who's doing this?” she murmured.

She turned to Angel just as he looked at her. And she saw it. The frustration on his face that had to mirror her own. But that expression seemed to change when their gazes locked.

Damn it.

There it was again. All that heat that seemed to have a life and mind of its own. Angel must have felt it, too, because he cursed under his breath.

“If I kiss you, we might not stop,” he spelled out. “We never did have much willpower when it came to each other.”

“I agree,” she couldn’t say fast enough.

They’d become lovers within a month of meeting each other and had stayed together for over two years. Mia had never thought for a second that the attraction between them had died when they’d gone their separate ways, and that look he was giving her was proof of it.

The logical part of her ordered her to go back to the sofa so she could continue to dig. The illogical part of her didn’t do that.

Cursing herself, and Angel, she moved in, hooking her arm around his neck and pulling his mouth down to hers.

And, yep, there it was.

Instant scalding heat despite it not being as hard and hurried as their earlier kisses. But the intensity was there. Building, building. Building. And it only took a couple of seconds before there was no logical part of her left.

There was only the need.

So much need.

She fully turned toward him so that she could press her body to his. Angel was already helping with that anyway because he’d slipped his arm around her waist and was easing her forward. Her breasts landed against his chest, giving her another shot of that heat.

Not that she needed more.

But she took it, and let his touch and taste work magic on her mood. She certainly

wasn't thinking about, well, anything but Angel.

He slipped his hand underneath her top, his fingers brushing over her bare skin while his mouth continued to torment and tease. He'd been so right about the direction this kiss would take, and Mia knew one thing for sure.

She didn't want it to stop.

She wanted to continue this scorching foreplay until it led them straight to bed. Or rather the sofa since it was closer.

He deepened the kiss. And kept touching. Sliding those clever fingers up her body to her breasts. Over her nipples.

A fresh round of heat fired through her, and if he hadn't been holding onto her, Mia thought her legs would have buckled. She didn't care if they did. Or they dropped to the floor. As long as he kept touching, kept kissing, she was up for anything. In fact, she would escalate things by touching him as well, but even through the sexual buzz and her thrumming heartbeat, she heard a sound that she knew was going to bring all of this to an end.

Angel's phone was ringing.

"Incoming call from Presley," Danno announced.

Both of them cursed, and Mia forced herself to step away from him. A call from Presley was too important to ignore. Even if ignoring it was exactly what she wanted to do.

Angel took a moment, gathering his breath. Doing more cursing before he finally spoke. "Danno, answer the call on speaker."

The AI app did, and within seconds, she heard Presley's voice pour through the entire

room. "I figure I interrupted something nonwork related," Presley drawled right off the bat. "And I'm sorry about that."

His serious tone let her know that he meant it. And that something was wrong.

Angel picked up on that vibe, too, because he quickly asked. "What the hell happened now? Is this about the statements Mia and I gave?"

"No, but it is about Kenton." Presley groaned. "Remember those DNA samples the CSIs took from everyone?" He didn't wait for an answer. "Well, there was an...unexpected match."

Oh, God, no. Mia hoped that Angel's or her DNA hadn't been recovered from Kenton's room.

"What match?" Angel came out and asked.

"Melanie's," Presley said, surprising them both. "Are you ready for this?" Again, he didn't wait for a response. "Melanie is Kenton's birth mother."

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Chapter Eleven

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Angel definitely wasn't looking forward to this meeting with Melanie. Especially since it had only been six hours or so since the fire. And during that time, she had also no doubt just gone through an interrogation from SAPD.

He didn't know what Melanie had said during that questioning process, but Angel

wanted to hear from the woman herself what she had to say about the bombshell Presley had delivered.

That Melanie was Kenton's birth mother.

Yes, definitely a bombshell.

Mia was no doubt still reeling from the news as well, and as he drove toward their old foster home, she was frantically typing away on her tablet. Searching for answers that could help them understand, well, how the hell this had happened.

Melanie had never mentioned anything about Kenton being her bio son, and Angel figured there was little chance it was a coincidence that Kenton had ended up in her foster care. So, why had Kenton been placed there?

And how the hell had Melanie ever gotten involved with Dwight?

There was no doubt about an involvement either since Dwight's DNA matched Kenton's as well, making Melanie and him Kenton's biological parents.

A text from Presley popped up on his dash screen, verifying that Melanie and RJ were indeed at home. Since the fire damage had only been confined to the one room on the second floor, the cops and the CSIs hadn't forced them to leave.

"Danno, reply to text," Angel instructed. "Thanks. I'll keep you posted about what Melanie says."

Presley would need an update since he wouldn't be coming along on this visit. He was at SAPD trying to get info on anything pertaining to Kenton's murder investigation. That included any info on Melanie and Dwight.

Mia was doing the same thing, but she wasn't going the face to face route. Judging from her expression and grumblings, though she wasn't having much luck.

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“I’m guessing you’re not finding anything,” he said when Mia huffed.

“Nothing that’ll help us.” She huffed again. “To recap what we’ve already uncovered, when she was nineteen, Aileen had the baby that died, and it was nine years later before she had Kenton. To me, that suggests maybe some fertility or psychological issues for the lag in time between baby one and Kenton. But if it was an adoption or surrogacy arrangement, there’s no record of it.”

“Could have been a private arrangement,” he commented.

“I considered that, so that’s why I’ve been digging into Dwight’s financial history.” She shook her head. “The man has never had the kind of money it’d take to pay a surrogate. Ditto for Aileen. Added to that, Melanie would have only been sixteen at the time of Kenton’s birth. No way could she have entered into a legal surrogacy as a minor.”

Since Aileen was dead, they wouldn’t be getting any answers about this from her. And they couldn’t be sure they’d get the truth from Dwight either.

So, that left Melanie.

“How long after Kenton’s birth did Melanie and RJ marry?” he asked.

“About ten years. I can’t find anything that indicates Melanie and RJ even knew each other when Kenton was born.”

“RJ might not have known she had a child,” Angel muttered. “But Dwight sure as

hell would have been aware that Kenton wasn't his wife's kid." He paused. "Think back to those times Dwight came to the foster house. I remember arguments between Kenton and Dwight, but I recall at least one of those loud disagreements being between RJ and Dwight."

"Yes," she murmured, and her gaze met his for a second. "An argument that happened right around the time of what we now know was Kenton's murder."

Shit.

Angel so didn't want RJ to have done this. Hell, he could say the same for Melanie. But things were pointing in that direction.

With that sense of dread spreading through him, Angel pulled to a stop in front of the foster house, and he immediately spotted the black Lexus in the driveway. He didn't have to guess who the owner was because Angel saw him in the doorway with RJ and Melanie.

Roger.

Angel couldn't hear what was being said, but considering Melanie's and RJ's expressions, this was a friendly social call.

Keeping watch around them, Angel got of the van, and once Mia had joined him, they walked together to the front porch. Roger spared them a glance over his shoulder. Or rather he spared them a glare. Then, he resumed his conversation with Melanie and RJ.

"I won't have my wife dragged into this shitstorm," Roger spat out. "If you talk to the police again, you will not mention her name."

“That sounds like a threat,” Angel remarked, stepping onto the porch. He moved closer to Roger, violating the man’s personal space and returning the glare.

“It’s not a threat,” Roger said through clenched teeth. “It’s a demand for these two to quit pulling my wife into this.”

“Your wife pulled herself into it,” Angel was quick to point out. “Her blood was on the knife. She was living here at the time. And there’s that woman scorned angle since Kenton and she were lovers. Or rather girl scorned,” he amended. “Still, that makes the legal trifecta. Birdie had means, motive, and opportunity.”

Oh, if looks could have killed, Roger would have hurled him straight to the deepest level of hell.

“The same could be said about them.” Roger tipped his head to Melanie and RJ. “Or the two of you. It was Mia’s knife after all, and you removed it from the crime scene.” His anger-filled glare slashed to Mia. “And you had a strong motive for wanting to get back at your attacker.”

“True,” Mia admitted. “I did want to get back at him. But I didn’t.”

“Yeah, right,” Roger fired back. “You’re squeaky clean. All of you are.” His expression and tone dripped with sarcasm. “Lie to yourselves. Lie to others. But keep my wife the fuck out of this.”

With that, he stormed off the porch, got in his Lexus and sped away.

“He’s upset because the police questioned Birdie and him,” RJ muttered. “The cops specifically questioned him about the fire, asking if he’d paid someone to set it. He claimed he didn’t.”

Angel was glad the cops had asked Roger about that. Even though Roger hadn't been convicted of hiring someone to do the witness intimidation, that didn't mean the man was innocent.

RJ then shifted his attention back to Mia and him. "Come in," he said, stepping back so they could enter. His sigh and that look on his face conveyed a lot, that he knew the reason for this visit.

Melanie's expression wasn't faring much better. She was way too pale. Not jittery or on edge, though but rather exhausted.

Mia and he stepped inside and immediately smelled the stench of the smoke. He could also hear fans going upstairs, where they would no doubt be trying to air out the room.

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RJ immediately locked the door behind them and motioned for them to go to the kitchen. There were fans set up in there, too, and all the windows were cracked open to let in some fresh air.

Maybe let in an intruder, too.

Angel would remind them of that before Mia and he left. No way did he want the arsonist returning to finish the job.

Melanie sank down at the table, burying her face in her hands. “For what it’s worth, I was going to tell Presley and the two of you the truth about Kenton being my bio son,” she murmured.

“But not RJ?” Angel had to ask.

“I already knew,” RJ was quick to answer. He sat down next to Melanie, eased her hand from her face, and slipped his arm around her.

Angel hoped that gesture wasn’t all for show and that RJ truly wasn’t feeling any ill will toward his wife. Because Melanie was going to need all of his support and then some. He’d mentioned that legal trifecta about Birdie to Roger, but the same means, motive, and opportunity could apply to Melanie as well.

“How long have you known?” Mia asked, taking the question right out of Angel’s mouth.

RJ wasn’t so quick to answer this time. “I found out shortly before Kenton

disappeared.”

Shit on a stick. That was motive, too, and unlike Melanie, RJ could have been the one to set the fire.

“Dwight came to the house earlier that day,” RJ explained. “Kenton and he were arguing, and it’d gotten physical. Melanie and I heard the commotion, and we ran upstairs. I got between Kenton and Dwight and broke up the fight. That’s when Dwight blurted it out that Melanie was Kenton’s mother.”

Melanie clamped her teeth over her bottom lip, but it didn’t muffle her groan. “Kenton obviously knew because he wasn’t surprised at all,” she muttered. “I wasn’t sure what to say to him. I was so shocked, and I guess Kenton took my silence as a rejection because he cursed at me and ran out. The next time I saw him was when he was assaulting Mia.”

So, maybe some leftover rage from the fight had played into that particular attack. Then again, Kenton had been wired hot. Just like Dwight.

“Would you please tell us how you got involved with Dwight?” Mia said with plenty of sympathy and worry in her voice. She definitely wasn’t judging Melanie.

Melanie nodded but took her time answering. “I was sixteen when I met him. He was twenty-seven and playing in a rock band at my cousin’s bar. I was too young to serve alcohol, but my cousin paid me to be bus tables.” She paused. “Dwight was exciting. So different from the boys in my high school.”

“Because he wasn’t a boy,” RJ spat out. “He lied to her,” he added to Mia and him. “He told Melanie he was twenty and taking a gap year at college.”

Melanie made a sound of agreement. “He certainly never mentioned he was married.

If he had, I wouldn't have started seeing him."

"But you did start seeing him," Mia prompted when Melanie fell silent.

"I did." She groaned. "I was so stupid."

"You were young," Angel amended. "Sixteen," he repeated, glancing at Mia. "We remember what that was like."

"Yes," Melanie murmured, but she didn't seem to be cutting herself any slack. "Anyway, I lost my virginity to Dwight, and then a week later, he broke up with me. I was devastated. Then, a month or so later, I learned I was pregnant, and my parents threw me out of the house. I ended up living with my cousin and his wife. They're the ones who tracked Dwight down and told him I was carrying his baby."

"And what did Dwight do?" Angel asked.

"Nothing," Melanie snarled. "Well, nothing other than saying he wanted no part of the kid. That's what he called the baby. The kid, and he said it as it were the worst of profanity."

"But Dwight ended up raising Kenton at least for a while anyway," Mia pointed out. "Until his wife, Aileen, died."

Melanie nodded. "Raising Kenton was all Aileen's doing. Apparently, they'd lost a child, and she'd had two failed in vitro procedures. She wanted a baby, and unlike Dwight, she seemed like a good person." She stopped, groaned. "And it felt as if I owed her for sleeping with her husband."

"But you didn't even know he was married," Angel reminded her.

“I should have known,” Melanie argued. “I had so much guilt, and I was planning on giving up the baby for adoption anyway. So, I decided to give the baby to Aileen. Dwight managed to get a fake ID made for me. One in Aileen’s name. When I went into labor and had the baby, I used the ID so that it’s Aileen’s and Dwight’s names on Kenton’s birth certificate.”

Angel took a moment to process all of that. “How often did you see Aileen, Dwight, and Kenton after he was born?”

“Never,” she said on a rise of breath. “Not until CPS called and asked if we’d take in a troubled teen, Kenton Barker. I wanted to say no. But I also wanted to see him, to see the kind of person he’d turned out to be.” She shut her eyes a moment. “And I soon found out that he was a monster.”

Melanie’s voice broke on that last word, and she began to sob.

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RJ tightened his grip on her and took up the rest of the explanation. “After Dwight told me that Melanie had given birth to Kenton, I called CPS. I didn’t mention anything about what I’d learned, but they told me that Kenton and Dwight had requested for him to be placed here with Melanie and me.”

“They requested it?” Mia asked. “Why?”

RJ lifted his shoulder. “I figure Kenton might have just wanted to be around his birth mother, but Dwight would have likely twisted that to his own benefit. He could have planned on using Kenton to blackmail her or something.”

Angel was betting the same thing.

He took out his phone to send a text to Ruby to have her arrange a meeting with Dwight, but some movement from outside the window caught his eye. It was a blur of motion. Someone running.

And a bullet came crashing through the kitchen window.

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Chapter Twelve

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Glass flew across the kitchen, and Mia gasped when she felt one of the shards slice across her arm. Her mind registered the pain right away. But it took her another

second to realize what had just happened.

Someone had fired a shot at them.

“Get down,” Angel ordered, and as he’d done at the shooting at her own house, he dragged her to the ground. Or in this case, the floor.

He glanced at her arm, at the blood, and cursed before he lunged across the table, shoving Melanie and RJ down as well. It was the nick of time.

Because another slot ripped through the gaping hole in the glass and slammed into the table, right where Melanie had just been sitting.

Melanie screamed, and even though it was at the top of her lungs, it still wasn’t loud enough to drown out the next shot. That one blasted in the wall above Mia, tearing through the wood and going heaven knew where.

“Crawl to the side of the fridge,” Angel said, whipping out his gun and positioning himself in front of them.

Mia didn’t want him to be her human shield. She didn’t want Angel to get shot or killed. But arguing with him might be enough of a distraction for that to happen anyway.

So, she moved.

Her arm was stinging, and, yeah, it was bleeding, but she didn’t think it was serious. She couldn’t say the same for the back of RJ’s head. There was blood there, too. Plenty of it, and she didn’t know if he’d been grazed by a bullet or if it, too, was a cut from the flying glass.

Melanie and RJ got to the fridge first, and thank God it wasn't a built-in. There was a two-foot wide gap between it and the partial wall, and the moment they reached it, RJ pulled Melanie to her feet and shoved her into the opening. He motioned for Mia to go in next, but she pushed him in next to Melanie instead before she got behind the cover of the fridge.

Mia wanted to be able to see Angel, and that wouldn't have been possible if she was crammed in behind RJ.

And she soon saw him.

Damn it.

Angel was crouched down but was making his way to that blasted shot-out window. The shooter must have seen him, too, because a bullet flew in Angel's direction. He dropped down to the floor, the shot narrowly missing him. But he didn't stay down. He got up again and darted across the room to the window.

"Danno, call 911," Angel said without even taking his phone out of his pocket. "Active shooter at this location. In need of backup."

Mia had no doubts that Danno would take care of that. No doubts either that SAPD would respond. After all, this was smack dab in the middle of the city. But she figured cops weren't just going to come in with guns blazing when there was a shooter present.

"The shooter just ducked behind the garden shed," Angel relayed to them. "Male. About five-ten, wearing a ski mask and carrying a rifle. Any chance there are security cameras out there?"

"No," Melanie and RJ said in unison. "Is it Dwight?"

“Possibly,” Angel muttered, and then he moved.

Fast.

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He brought up his gun and fired. The shot was deafening and seemed to rattle the entire house.

The gunman returned fire, and this shot slammed into the fridge. Mia had no idea if the metal sides would prevent the bullet from making its way through, but she prayed it did.

“Shit,” Angel spat out. “Someone’s breaking down the front door.”

Sweet heaven. Mia seriously doubted it was the cops since they couldn’t have gotten here that fast. So, there were possibly two attackers. One pinning them down with gunfire while the other came in through the front.

And they’d be trapped in the crossfire.

The partial wall on their right wasn’t going to do much to hold back someone hellbent on killing them. But who was the target?

Maybe all of them were.

“I’m going to hold off this guy by the tool shed,” Angel said, his attention volleying between the front and the back. “Move to the backstairs and try to get the hell away from here.”

The back stairway was across the room, tucked up behind another partial wall. Not far but not close either. A good fifteen feet away. But the part of the plan that Mia hated was that she didn’t think Angel would be joining them there.

“And what happens when we get to the stairs?” she asked Angel. “You face down two gunmen?”

He glanced at her, the fierce argument showing in his eyes. She was certain there was one in her eyes, too. But Angel diffused it right away.

“Please,” he muttered. “Get Melanie and RJ to safety.”

Hell. He was playing dirty. He also wasn’t giving her a say in this because Angel added, “Move now.”

That was the only warning she got before he turned to the back window and started shooting. He was sending a stream of gunfire at their attacker that would hopefully prevent him from shooting at them.

Mia didn’t waste any time. Staying low, she darted out from the fridge, grabbing a butcher knife from the block on the counter, and she took hold of RJ’s arm to get him moving. In turn, RJ took hold of Melanie.

And they hurried toward the stairs.

They’d barely made it to the first step when there was another shot. Not from Angel this time. It’d come from the front of the house.

Her heart stopped.

She was sure of it.

And for a terrifying moment Mia thought Angel had been shot. She was almost too afraid of what she would see, but she forced herself to look.

Just as Angel fired one shot into the backyard, pivoted, and sent a shot in the opposite direction. In the same motion he dived to the floor, sliding across it and coming up on the opposite side of the fridge from where they had been.

He took aim again toward the living room.

And fired again.

But so did someone else. Not a single shot either. But a barrage of gunfire.

“Get up the steps,” Mia told RJ and Melanie.

Thankfully, they did. Thankfully, too, Melanie had stopped screaming because Mia didn’t want the shooter to be able to use the sound of her voice to track where they were.

Behind her, RJ and Melanie began scurrying up the stairs. But Mia stayed put. She kept her attention on the back window and door.

Waiting.

If the shooter burst through there to try to trap Angel, she’d hurl the knife at him and then get the hell down. It might not work. She could be shot. But there was no way she would let Angel fight this battle alone.

While she was steeling herself up to join in the fight, the gunshots stopped. Just stopped. And the eerie silence spread through the house.

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Mia listened for something. For anything. Footsteps. Movement in the backyard. But the only thing she could hear was her own heartbeat and gusting breath.

In contrast, Angel wasn't breathing hard. He seemed to be in some kind of hyper-focus mode. And like her, he was waiting.

They didn't have to wait long.

The shots started again, slamming into the kitchen from both the back window and the front of the house. Angel dropped further down, but he wasn't safe. Nowhere near it. Either shooter could move in closer and have the kill shot they needed to end his life.

Mia needed to do something to stop that from happening.

She reacted out of instinct. Repeating the ploy she'd done with the flipflop, she hurled the knife toward the partial wall that fronted the foyer.

It worked.

The gunfire from the back window instantly went in that direction. Away from Angel. And Angel quickly took advantage of it.

Moving so fast that he was practically a blur, Angel levered himself up, taking aim at the shooter in the front. He fired twice. And the sounds of these shots were different. Not smacking into glass or walls.

But into the shooter.

She heard a sharp groan of pain, followed by the clatter of someone falling to the floor.

Angel quickly pivoted toward the window, and with that same lightning speed, he fired two more shots.

The seconds crawled by. And that eerie silence returned.

Mia held her breath. Prayed. Waited.

She couldn't see either shooter, but she could see Angel, and she watched his expression turn from the fierce warrior to the former cop.

Then, he said the words she had hoped she would hear.

“They’re both dead.”

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Chapter Thirteen

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Angel cursed the fog in his head. Slams of adrenaline were great for winning a fight, but the aftermath came with a high price tag. Bone-weary fatigue and a muddled brain. His body was yelling for him just to lie down and rest.

That wasn't going to happen anytime soon.

Mia and he had gotten through the first part of this latest shitstorm. They'd once again given their statements to the police who'd responded to the scene. RJ and Melanie had as well, after RJ had been treated for that cut on his head. It wasn't a serious injury which meant they'd all gotten damn lucky.

They could have been killed.

And Angel hated that luck played into something that critical. He could have lost Mia in this attack, and he cursed the gunmen for nearly succeeding in doing just that.

Now, they were dealing with the aftermath.

After seven grueling hours at the police station, they had all finally been released. RJ, Melanie and their foster girls had gone to a hotel, and Angel had brought Mia back to his place—where the grueling was continuing. They were both searching for some answers as to who had orchestrated the attack and why.

Mia had taken up her now usual position on the sofa in his office, and while she was indeed typing away on her tablet, she looked as exhausted as he was. Probably more since she hadn't had the experiences he'd had as a cop and in the military. No. This was all new ground for her, and soon, she'd need to crash.

He only hoped she didn't get plagued with nightmares.

Angel was about to suggest, again, that she just close her eyes and give in to the exhaustion, but he saw the silent notification pop up on his phone. It was a request for him to join a video call with Ruby. That gave him yet another hit of adrenaline, and he put the call on the wall monitor.

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Ruby opened her mouth and then sighed. “Since you answered this right away, that means you were awake to see the notification of my call. I silenced it in case you were sleeping.”

“We’ll rest as soon as we have the names of those two men I killed,” Angel assured her.

“Then rest will be happening soon because I have the names. Craig McBride and Reggie Crawford.”

Angel repeated the names under his breath. Mia did the same, but they both shook their heads.

“Maybe their pictures will jog something,” Ruby added, and the photos appeared on the monitor.

Not images of their lifeless faces as Angel had seen when he’d lifted their masks after he’d killed them. It’d had been hard to tell much about them since they’d both died from gunshot wounds to the head.

The pictures on the screen were clearly taken when both men had been very much alive. Angel studied both but then had to shake his head again. Mia did the same.

“Who the hell are they?” Angel had to ask. “They look like kids.”

That gave him a split-second of guilt until he remembered that these kids had had murder on their minds when they’d fired shots into the house.

“McBride is twenty-one and works mainly as temporary, fill-in type help for a catering company,” Ruby explained. “He’s not married, has no offspring, and no police record. That’s the reason the cops weren’t able to ID him from his fingerprints.” Ruby paused a moment. “Crawford is twenty, a high school dropout who’s been working at various fast food places around San Antonio. No record for him either.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Angel grumbled. “How did these two go from having no trouble with the cops to being killers?” Then, he tacked on the most important question. “And who hired them?”

“That’s what the team and I are working on,” Ruby said. “It’s a six-degrees of separation kind of search, though since neither man directly connects to anyone involved in Kenton’s murder. But there are some loose connections.” Something like an apology went through her eyes. “The strongest of those possibilities is to Melanie.”

Shit.

“How?” Mia and he asked in unison.

“Both Crawford and McBride were in foster care with an old high school friend of hers. Melanie actually visited the friend’s home several times while Crawford and McBride were there. The techs found that through a photo that the friend posted of Melanie and her on social media.”

“Were McBride and Crawford in the photo?” Angel asked. “In other words, is there proof Melanie actually met them?”

“No and none. The police are interviewing the friend now to see if she can place Melanie with the two, who would have been teenagers at the time since that visit was

three years ago.”

Some of the tightness in Angel’s chest eased up. “I don’t think Melanie kept the two on tap as potential killers for if or when Kenton’s remains ever surfaced.”

“I agree, but the police will have to investigate it, too. They’ve also got a warrant for RJ and Melanie’s financials and are doing another search of the house. This time for any sign she would have paid the two men to attack.”

“Paid two men to shoot into a house where she was at the time,” Angel snarled, and he didn’t bother to take out the sarcasm.

However, he did remember that Ruby was just the messenger for this so he toned down his anger over having Melanie front and center in attempted murder. Including the murder of her own husband. And either RJ was a phenomenal actor or else he’d been genuinely terrified for his life when those shots had started.

“You said the strongest of those possible connections was to Melanie,” Mia commented as she stood and went closer to the monitor. “So, who else are the men connected to? Dwight?”

“You’d think so, but it’s to Roger,” Ruby said without hesitation. “And while it’s thin, the link is more recent than Melanie’s. McBride was on the catering staff of an office party at Roger’s company four months ago. There’s absolutely no proof that the two ever met, and in fact, Roger had already been interviewed, and he insists he doesn’t recall seeing McBride.”

“You believe him?” Angel asked.

Ruby made a so-so motion with her hand. “Roger is wealthy enough to hire hitmen. And since these two failed, he has the money to keep hiring until he gets his targets.”

Mia made a slight gasp. That definitely wouldn't help stave on nightmares, and despite the fact that Ruby was watching, he slipped his arm around Mia and eased her side by side against him.

"Then, there's the motive for Roger," Ruby went on. "Or in this case, the lack of a motive. Unless, of course, he believes RJ, Melanie, Mia or you know something that could incriminate Birdie."

Angel had to shake his head. "I've made a full disclosure to the cops. Mia, too. And if RJ or Melanie saw or heard something, why haven't they spoken up by now?"

"You know the drill on this," Ruby answered. "Maybe because they aren't aware they heard or saw something. Or in this case, it could be because Roger wants to make sure everyone who was in that house is dead so that nothing can come back on Birdie. After all, it wasn't just RJ and Melanie under attack. It was the two of you as well."

Hell. She was right.

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“Don’t worry. I’ve already alerted Presley, and he’ll take precautions. I want both of you to do the same. Heck, I’ll even give Dwight a heads up just in case he’s innocent.” Ruby’s gaze dropped to Angel’s arm that was still around Mia. “In the meantime, quit working and get some rest. That’s an order,” she added before she ended the call.

Angel looked down at Mia and was about to reinforce that order, but she spoke first. “Please don’t let it be Melanie or RJ,” she muttered.

He was right there with her. It was hard to wrap your mind around beloved foster parents turned would be killers. Still, it was impossible to know what was in a person’s heart.

“Too bad McBride and Crawford aren’t alive so they can tell us who hired them,” Angel grumbled. “Because I seriously doubt this was some sort of botched home invasion or armed robbery.”

She caught onto his chin, turning his face toward her so they had direct eye contact. “You had to take the kill shots. It was the only way you could guarantee our safety. RJ, Melanie, and I would likely be dead if it weren’t for you.”

It twisted at him to know that was true. To know just how damn close he’d come to losing them. If he’d missed either gunman... Angel stopped. Best not to conjure up the worst-case scenarios.

Especially since he didn’t believe the killer was done with them.

With that dismal thought racing through his head, he decided to obey Ruby's order. Also, since Mia looked ready to collapse, he scooped her up in his arms, causing her to first make a sound of surprise before she chuckled.

"I could walk," she muttered, dropping her head on his shoulder and yawning.

"Possibly," he said.

"Where are you taking me?" Her voice was coated with that same fatigue that she apparently wasn't able to fight off any longer.

"To bed. Alone," Angel added.

"No, not alone," she insisted. "I want to be in your bed, please. And stay with me."

Angel debated that. Sleeping with her probably wouldn't lead to a whole lot of sleep.

But rather sex.

And while that appealed to him very much, he knew that sex wasn't what Mia needed. That meant he was going to have to force himself to keep his hands off her. Thankfully, the adrenaline crash would help him with that.

He took her to the room and eased her onto the bed. Thankfully, she didn't protest, didn't try to kiss him. If she had, he would have been toast. No way could he have resisted her. But no protest, no kiss.

The moment Angel had her on the bed, she closed her eyes and muttered something indistinguishable.

Angel covered her with a throw that he took from a chair, and when he was certain

she was out like a light, he did as she'd asked. He would stay with her.

He took off his boots and holster, putting his gun on the nightstand, and he slipped in next to her. Angel pulled her against him and let the fog and exhaustion drag him under.

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Chapter Fourteen

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Mia was caught up in the dream. Not a nightmare but rather a flood of memories from the past. Flashes of Angel and her as teenagers. Not of the misery of dealing with Kenton but the other times.

The happy times.

Before life and secrets had torn them apart.

"No more secrets," she muttered, and the sound of her own voice jolted her out of the dream.

She jackknifed to a sitting position and immediately saw the time. Easy to see it because it was on the wall straight ahead. The clock on the table in the sitting room was projecting the time in bright blue letters.

Just after midnight.

Her brain was too muddled to say for sure how long she'd been asleep, but she thought it must have been six hours or so.

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Mia glanced around and had a moment of total confusion when she couldn't figure out where she was. Definitely not her own bedroom at home or the guestroom. But rather Angel's.

And he was right next to her.

He was awake, staring at her with eyes way too alert for someone who'd just woken up. Way too hot as well.

Yes, that thought slipped right into her mind. Just as merely seeing him caused the heat to slip through her body.

"You know, no one has the right to look as good as you do after being asleep for hours," she muttered. "No bedhead. No weird creases on your face from where you slept too hard. Just..." She fanned her hand over him. "Drop dead hot."

The corner of his mouth lifted in an almost smile. "I was thinking the same thing about you," he drawled.

Oh, his mouth had made love to those words. Words that were an outright lie. She almost certainly did have the bedhead, weird creases, and maybe sleepy eyes. But the lie felt good. Made her feel even more of that warmth. Then, she realized the source of that warmth was right there. Next to her.

And hers for the taking.

Well, hopefully.

She leaned down and gave him a test kiss, just to see if he was ready and willing. He was. Angel made a sound deep from within his throat. A sort of husky grumble, and he slipped his hand around the back of her neck.

Pulling her down to him.

Exactly where Mia wanted to be.

He didn't waste any time deepening the kiss, making it long, French, and very hot. Then again, Angel probably wasn't capable of a kiss that was lacking that hot factor.

Mia slid right into that heat, into that kiss, into his arms, and she let the dreamy feeling of pleasure wash over her. Angel was good at that, too. Creating the pleasure. Building the need.

And, mercy, did the need build.

It went from that stirring heat to a full-blown fire. One where her body immediately started to clamor for more.

Angel was good at giving more, too.

Still kissing her, he slid his hand beneath her top and touched her. His fingers glided over her skin, going up, up, up until he reached her breasts. He shoved down her bra and tortured her nipples with swipes of his thumb.

He must have thought her breasts needed more of his attention because he broke the kiss, lowered his head and took her nipple into his mouth.

That caused an explosion of heat.

And it fired up the urgency even more.

Lust was greedy and demanding, and it was demanding that she take this up yet another notch.

Mia went after the zipper of his jeans. He didn't stop her. Angel just continued to kiss her, moving his mouth to her stomach, and only then did he put the pause button on her zipper duty by yanking her top off and over her head. Her bra soon followed, landing somewhere on the floor with her top.

Angel kissed her belly and would have just kept going down on her. And while she was certain she would have enjoyed that immensely, she'd been way too long without him. Mia wanted them to race toward this finish line together.

Well, hopefully together.

"Please tell me you have a condom," she blurted, putting her own pause button on getting him naked.

"In the nightstand," he said.

He did some multitasking by continuing to kiss her stomach while he reached over and extracted a condom from the drawer. Just the sight of it, coupled with the sight of him, revved her up even more.

Since her clothes were in the way, she levered herself off him, standing on the bed over him while she shimmied off her jeans and panties. Angel watched, the heat building in his eyes. Mia was certain there was some heat building going on in hers, too.

Heck, going on in every part of her body.

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He pulled her back down to her and didn't waste any time going after the newly naked parts of her. Angel managed to land a kiss in the center of all that heat.

Another explosion of pleasure, this one even more intense. And Mia had to grit her teeth not to just give in to it and let the climax consume her.

She turned the tables on him by moving away and going after his zipper again. This time, she succeeded in getting it down. Succeeded, too, thanks to some help from Angel, in getting off his jeans and boxers.

He was huge and hard and ready, and she might have done a little payback by kissing his erection, but Angel clearly had other ideas. He got on the condom and pulled her down on top of him. All in all, she landed in a very good spot.

Straddling him.

And with her center pressed against the long, hard length of him.

Their gazes met. Held. And it was like stepping back in time to that moment when they'd first become lovers. But this was better. So much better. There was no jolt of pain from losing her virginity to him.

Only the pleasure.

When he pushed inside her.

Her breath vanished. She thought maybe her heart skipped a beat or two. And she

knew something this intense couldn't last. No. There was too much need. Too much urgency. They'd gone way too long without having each other.

So, she had him.

Mia rode him fast and hard. Taking him deep inside her. Building this already out of control fire. Taking and giving with each stroke. Driving them to the only place either of them wanted to go.

When she felt the climax roar through her, she leaned down, capturing his mouth, and she took Angel on that hot, deep ride right along with her.

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Chapter Fifteen

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Angel stepped from the shower, feeling a hell of a lot more relaxed than he had in a long time. Then again, it'd been a long time since he'd had Mia in his bed, and apparently, she was the cure for the tension he'd been carrying.

The sex had been amazing. So had the time afterwards when they'd slept some more, followed by some lounging around in a bed until the sun had come up.

That'd been followed by another round of sex.

It'd been equally amazing, but it had come to an end because they both needed to get up, get dressed, and dive back into the investigation.

Because there was a killer still a loose.

A killer who might hire more thugs like the two that Angel had killed the day before. Those two were definitely out of the picture, but until they learned who'd aimed those assholes at Melanie, RJ, Mia, and him, they were all treading dangerous waters.

Maybe Birdie, too.

Well, unless Roger had been the person who'd hired McBride and Crawford. If Roger had indeed done that, then he would make sure Birdie was safe. It would also point to Birdie having been Kenton's killer if Roger was indeed going to these lengths to make sure no one could incriminate her.

He towed off, glancing through the reports that he'd had loaded on the monitor in the bathroom, and he took in the scent of coffee, bacon, and some kind of bread. Obviously, Mia had finished the work she'd needed to do and was making breakfast.

The work was the reason they hadn't showered together. She'd gotten some paperwork from her boss that she had needed to take care of, and while the heat often made them do stupid things, both of them knew that if they got into the shower together that they'd have more sex. While that very much appealed to his body, Angel had known it was time to focus on work.

There was nothing in the reports that he hadn't already read. There were still no other links between McBride and Crawford and anyone else connected to Kenton. However, the cops had verified with Melanie's foster parent friend that Melanie had indeed visited while the then teenagers had been there. And the friend recalled something else.

That Melanie had taken McBride's cell number because he'd expressed an interest in doing some yard work for him to earn extra money. Melanie had then recalled phoning McBride once but claimed they'd never been able to work out a date and time for him to do the work.

That contact, even though it was just one call, didn't look good for Melanie. So did the fact that she'd been in a physical altercation with Kenton on the night he'd likely been killed. And then, there was the biggie. She hadn't volunteered to the cops that she was Kenton's birth mother.

All of that led to one big assed mess for Melanie, and while it twisted at him to even consider it, Angel figured it was enough for the cops to issue a warrant for her arrest.

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Of course, the cops could do the same to Birdie since it'd been her blood on the knife. But Roger was likely calling in favors and doing other outright illegal shit to keep her out of jail.

He dressed and made his way to the kitchen. Yeah, breakfast all right. Bacon, omelet, and toast. All served by the woman that he...

Angel stopped. Because the I-word had nearly flown into his head. Unlike some, he wasn't opposed to it, but Mia and him simply hadn't gone there when they'd been teenagers. They'd spent plenty of time together. That had included lots of sex. But there had never been an exchange of them saying I love you.

Best to keep it that way.

Just being with her was distraction enough without adding falling in love to the mix.

Smiling a smile that made him want to do the same, she went to him, and still holding a spatula, she kissed him. She tasted of coffee and smelled far better than anyone should.

"Morning," she greeted, kissing him again.

Angel was about to forget everything he'd just thought about distractions and deepen the kiss, but his phone rang. He scowled but knew he'd have to take it because the video call was from Ruby. As he'd done the night before, he put in on the monitor.

And he immediately cursed when he got a look at Ruby's expression. "What's

wrong?” Angel asked.

“Dwight is on the other line and wants to talk to you. Actually, he insisted on meeting with the two of you face to face, but I assured him that wasn’t going to happen.”

Good. Because Angel didn’t intend for that shitbag to be anywhere near Mia.

“Why does he want?” Angel pressed.

Ruby sighed. “Dwight claims he remembered something about the night Kenton disappeared, but he refuses to tell me. He says he’ll only spill to the two of you. Personally, I think this could be a total time waster.”

“Yeah,” Angel agreed. “Or he might want to try to hit us up again for money.” He paused. Then, cursed again. “Still, he might have something useful. Did he say why he didn’t take this revelation to the cops?”

“Said he didn’t trust the cops. That might be true,” Ruby muttered. “Might be. But my bet’s on the money. He could even work it as a blackmail angle, in that he remembered something that he’ll spill, or forget, for the right price.”

Angel could definitely see it playing out that way, and he almost wished he could see the man’s face to try to figure out if anything he said was the truth. But even a video call could be risky since Dwight might use it to determine something about the layout of the house.

Hell, he could use it as a distraction to launch another attack.

And that had Angel debating if he should just tell Dwight to go straight to hell. Still, there was that slim chance that the man could indeed give them some new information that would help with the investigation. There was an equally slim chance

that Dwight might say something to implicate himself in Kenton's death and the attacks.

Not intentionally.

But sometimes, if the right emotional buttons were pushed, a person could end up saying the wrong thing.

And that was the reason he gave Ruby the nod. "Transfer the call. No video. But I'll put it on speaker so Danno can record it."

"Okay," Ruby said, "and if it's all right, I'll be listening in as well. So will one of the techs. I want the call traced in case...well, in case Dwight is somewhere he shouldn't be."

Yes, somewhere like near Angel's house.

He wanted to know that as well.

"Listen in," Angel assured her. "Do the trace. Danno," he tacked onto that, "record the call and make sure the house is secure."

Of course, that last part was overkill since Angel knew the place was already as safe as it could possibly be. Now, he had to hope it would be safe enough to prevent someone from coming after Mia and him again.

After Ruby signed off, the monitor went blank, and a couple of seconds later, Dwight came onto the line.

"Angel," the man greeted, and just the sound of his voice set Angel's teeth on edge.

“What did you remember?” Angel demanded. He didn’t want to waste time dealing with this asshole.

“I, uh, wanted to talk to Mia and you about that in person.”

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“Not gonna happen. What did you remember?” Angel snarled.

Dwight huffed. “Well, if you’re going to act like that, I’ll just keep it to myself.”

“Fine. Then, this conversation is over,” Angel growled, and he was prepared to hang up. As he’d anticipated though, Dwight stopped that from happening.

“Wait,” Dwight snapped. “It doesn’t cost a damn thing to be civil, and I’m trying to help you out here. I’m trying to save Mia and you from having your asses thrown into jail.”

“From what I understand, your ass has a much higher chance of landing in jail than ours. Spill what you have, or quit wasting my time because I’m hanging up in three.”

Angel started to count, and he’d barely made it to two when Dwight blurted, “I think I know who killed my boy.”

“I’m listening,” Angel assured him, and he saw on the monitor that the tech had managed to trace the call. Dwight was in San Antonio, nowhere near Angel’s house. Of course, that didn’t mean the man’s hired guy wasn’t around.

“It’s about RJ,” Dwight said after a long pause. “A couple of hours after Kenton and I had our...disagreement.”

“The fight that RJ broke up,” Angel supplied.

“Yes,” Dwight confirmed as if the word was profanity. “Anyway, after I told RJ

about Kenton being Melanie's kid, he threw me out. I left but then drove up the block and parked, waiting in case Kenton came out and wanted to patch things up with me."

"And did he?" Angel asked.

"No. And I fell asleep while I was trying to figure out what to do. When I woke up, it was dark, and I saw RJ. I don't remember the time, but now that I think about it, this would have been when he said he was at his folks' house. He wasn't. Well, not the whole damn night anyway. Because I saw him get off a city bus at the end of the block and walk to his place."

"And you think what—that RJ went inside and killed Kenton?"

"Well, it makes sense. Earlier that day, RJ had learned his wife had had a kid she hadn't told him about. He had to have been upset, but he still left and went to his parents."

Maybe RJ had done that to give himself some thinking time, something that surely would have been needed. But it was possible RJ hadn't told the truth about when he'd come home. Then again, the more likely scenario was that Dwight was making all of this up.

"What do you want?" Angel repeated.

"That depends," Dwight answered.

Angel groaned. "On what?"

"On how important this info is if you want to keep it from the cops," the man finished.

Shit. There it was. The pitch for money.

Mia groaned and shook her head. Her expression mirrored the disgust that Angel felt for this piece of shit.

“Let me remind you that if you’re about to ask to be paid for your silence, that’s blackmail, along with a side order of obstruction of justice. The cops might add other charges when I tell them about this conversation—”

Dwight ended the call.

Angel wasn’t surprised by that. Nor was he surprised when Ruby rang in again on a video call. He answered, and she appeared on the screen.

“I’ll talk to RJ to see if there’s any truth in what Dwight just claimed,” Angel let her know. “And if he did go back to the house earlier than he said, I’ll encourage him to go to the cops.”

Ruby didn’t nod, didn’t give him a confirmation that it was the right approach. That’s when Angel saw there was dread written all over her face.

“Bad news,” Ruby murmured. “While you were on the phone with Dwight, I got word that Melanie was rushed to the hospital.”

Hell. “What happened?” Mia and he asked at the same time.

“Melanie attempted suicide,” Ruby explained after a short pause. “She’s alive, for now, but Angel, it doesn’t look good.”

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Chapter Sixteen

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As Angel and she drove toward the hospital in San Antonio, Mia couldn't stop the hamster wheel of woulda, coulda, shoulda going on in her head.

She should have checked on Melanie during the night or first thing this morning. That she should have realized the woman was on the edge and about to do something that could turn out to be fatal.

But she hadn't.

She'd been so wrapped up in her own sleep and Angel that she'd barely spared Melanie a thought. And now, Melanie could be dying.

"Critical," she heard Presley say as he gave the latest update to Angel. "Lots of blood loss from the stab wounds to her torso. According to the nurse who was just here, Melanie's in surgery right now."

That was more info than Ruby had given them. Then again, they hadn't pressed Ruby for more since they'd been anxious to get on the road when she'd delivered the bad news.

Anxious but not careless.

Angel had taken the time to check his security cams and to send out a drone to make

certain that a hired gun or a killer wasn't waiting at the end of the road for them. But no one had been there. Now though, the diligence was continuing on the drive with them firing glances all around while talking to Presley.

Since Presley had been at SAPD headquarters, he'd only had a short drive to the hospital and was now in the waiting room with RJ. Mia was thankful for that. RJ shouldn't be alone right now.

"Can RJ hear what you're saying?" Angel asked.

"No. I stepped to the far side of the room to call you," Presley explained. "And RJ's on the phone right now, checking up on their foster kids. CPS has already stepped up to remove them."

Of course, they had. They wouldn't have had a choice about that. The kids would need to be in a stable environment, and no way could RJ and Melanie provide that at the moment. It was likely they'd never be able to foster kids again, even if Melanie was cleared of all charges connected to Kenton's death.

"I need to know," Angel said, groaning, "is it possible that Melanie's wounds weren't self-inflicted, that someone tried to kill her?"

"I can't swear it on a stack of Bibles, but the EMTs believe she did this to herself."

"Hell," Angel muttered.

She totally understood his frustration. Mia didn't know which was worse. Attempted suicide or attempted murder.

"Who found her?" Angel pressed, still firing glances all around them. She understood the reason for that, too. If Melanie had been attacked, it could have been designed to

draw them out.

So they could be killed.

Yeah, she understood Angel's concern.

"RJ was the one who found her," Presley explained. "They were still in the hotel, and he went down to the lobby to pick up their breakfast that'd just been delivered. While he was gone, she used a knife that was from their room service the night before, and she stabbed herself in the stomach and chest."

"And he didn't see anyone coming into the hotel, someone who might have gone up to the room and attacked Melanie?" Angel pressed.

"RJ said no, that he was only gone about five minutes. When he got back to the room, he saw her on the floor, and she was bleeding. He dropped their breakfast, called for an ambulance, and started trying to slow down the blood loss."

Mia could picture that. The fear and panic RJ must have felt. And the sense of hopelessness that had driven Melanie to do this.

"Did Melanie leave any kind of note?" Mia asked.

"No, but she did keep saying she was sorry when the EMTs were loading her into the ambulance," Presley said. "And I have no idea if she was apologizing for stabbing herself or if that was a pseudo confession to her murdering Kenton and then covering it up."

Mia knew it could be either, but she was hoping that Melanie hadn't been the one to end her own son's life.

“There was a complication as they were prepping her for surgery. You probably remember that Melanie has that rare type of blood,” Presley added. “The doctors have been pumping her with blood to keep her alive, but they’re running low on their supply, and they’ve put out the call to get more.”

Mia remembered. AB Negative because she had the same blood type. And that had fueled her urgency to get to Melanie. If the woman needed blood, then Mia could become her donor.

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“We just got to the hospital,” Angel relayed to Presley as they approached their turn. “I’ll see you in a few minutes.”

Angel drove into the multistory garage, continuing to keep watch while he also looked for a parking space. It was jammed so he continued until he found one on the fifth floor. He glanced around, and he must have gotten an uneasy feeling because he sent a text to Presley.

“Meet us on level five of the garage,” Angel dictated to Danno. “You have your gun with you?”

“No gun,” Presley immediately texted back. “There are metal detectors so I locked up mine in the glove compartment of my SUV.”

Mia saw the sign on one of the pylons. Notice: No firearms or weapons allowed inside the hospital.

“Shit,” Angel grumbled.

And she knew the debate he was having with himself. Their instincts had been to rush to Melanie, but that could turn out to be a deadly mistake.

“Come to the garage,” Angel finally dictated in response to Presley’s text. “Parking space A13. When you’re here, we’ll discuss options.”

Everything inside Mia was yelling for her to get inside the hospital. For her to give that blood that Melanie would need. But she also recalled those two attacks and

stayed put.

Both Angel and she looked up as a car drove onto the level, and while Mia didn't recognize the vehicle, she did recognize the driver.

Birdie.

Birdie saw them as well, and she stopped, giving them a nervous little wave before she pulled into the parking space directly across from them.

"Roger's not with her," Angel muttered.

"No." That was a surprise since Roger had been right by her side during the visit at the foster house.

And Mia instantly got a bad feeling about it in the pit of her stomach.

Birdie got out of her car, and Angel drew his gun, confirming his bad feeling about this, too. He didn't take aim at her but rather kept the gun resting on his knee. Ready in case this turned into an attack.

Birdie made a beeline toward them, and she didn't look as polished as she had at the reenactment at the foster house. She was wearing black yoga pants, sneakers, and a gray top that slipped off one shoulder when she hooked a large purse over it.

As Birdie got closer, Mia could see that she'd been crying. There were makeup smears on her face, she was wiping at her eyes with the back of her hand as she approached them.

"Make sure your door is locked," Angel told her in a whisper.

That got Mia's heart revving, and she checked. It was locked. And she didn't see anyone sneaking up on her side of the van.

Angel lowered his window just a fraction, not even enough for the woman to stick the barrel of a gun through the gap if that was indeed what Birdie had in mind. Mia hated to think the worst of someone who'd once been her foster sister, but Birdie had a huge motive to want to silence anyone who could spill details about that last night with Kenton.

"Melanie," she blurted. Birdie looked at both of them and shook her head. "How is she? Is she still alive?"

Angel didn't jump to answer. He volleyed some glances around them. Aimed some at Birdie, too.

"We're waiting for Presley," he finally said. "He'll be here soon. Where's Roger?" he added.

Birdie got a deer caught in the headlights look for a couple of seconds and then shook her head. "He doesn't know I'm here. He, uh, wouldn't have wanted me to come."

"I'll bet," Angel muttered.

Mia picked up on what Angel wasn't saying. Maybe Birdie didn't want her husband to know that she had come here to kill anyone who might be able to put her in a cage for killing Kenton.

"Please don't tell him I came here," Birdie said, wiping away more tears. "Roger's trying to make sure none of this affects his businesses. I'm doing the same. In fact, I'm here to say goodbye to RJ and tell him how sorry I am about Melanie. Then, I'll be done with both of them. With all of this," she added in a mutter. "You're sure

she's still alive?"

Angel frowned. "Yes. Why? Did you hear otherwise?"

Birdie waved that off and made some nervous glances around her. "I have a friend, a nurse, who works here, and I called her. She said Melanie was critical and might not make it through surgery."

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That bad feeling came again, slicing through Mia.

The feeling skyrocketed when Birdie whipped out a gun and fired it directly into the window.

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Chapter Seventeen

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Angel didn't see Birdie's gun in time to get down, and the shot slammed into the window.

The sound, a thick blast, vibrated through the entire van. The glass held, thank God, and even through the cracked webbing, Angel could see the stunned expression on Birdie's face.

Birdie had obviously believed the point-blank shot would kill him on the spot, taking out the threat so she could move on to her next target.

Mia.

Angel had no intentions of letting that happen. Not to him. And especially not to Mia.

"Get into the back of the van," Angel told Mia.

There were two seats with a space between them so that Mia could go all the way to the rear, where hopefully she'd be out of range of Birdie's gun. Because eventually the shots would rip through the glass.

Mia obeyed. Without wasting a second, she crawled over the console and into the back where she immediately dropped down onto the floor of the van. Angel did the same thing.

Just as Birdie fired another shot.

This bullet did indeed tear a small hole in the glass, but that clearly wasn't enough for Birdie because the woman spewed out some raw profanity.

"You have to die!" Birdie screeched out.

Clearly, that was her plan, and Angel had a quick debate with himself about his options. He could slide open the side door of the van, just enough for him to return fire.

Which mean killing Birdie.

That was fine with him right now, but he preferred to know why the hell she was doing this. Of course, he didn't want that info to come at Mia's expense. First chance he got, he'd get her out of here, but he needed to deal with Birdie first.

"Die!" Birdie shouted again, and she kept firing into the window.

Angel reached for the door, to deliver that return fire in the form of a kill shot to the head, but the sound stopped him.

"What the hell?" Presley yelled.

From the windshield, Angel saw Presley racing across the parking lot toward them. And since he was armed, that meant he'd stopped by his SUV to get his weapon.

Good.

Angel wanted him armed, but he didn't want Presley being gunned down by a woman hellbent on murder.

Birdie shrieked out a sound that was more feral than human, and she turned her gun toward Presley. Angel's heart dropped straight to his knees when she pulled the trigger. But Presley had obviously seen it coming because he dived behind a car while Birdie continued to send round after round at him.

Angel had lost count of how many times she'd fired, but he wasn't surprised when she ran out of ammo. He reached to open the door. But before he could open it, he saw Birdie tossed the empty gun aside and whipped out another one from her purse.

Obviously, she had come prepared to kill.

"Birdie," Presley yelled, drawing her attention back to him.

She pivoted toward him, taking aim when Presley levered himself up from behind the car.

Hell.

Presley was obviously now Birdie's target, and Angel had to do something about that fast.

"Stay down," he told Mia.

He slid open the side door of the van, and since Birdie no longer had her attention on him, she didn't see him coming. Angel didn't shoot her. He tackled her, using the force of his entire weight to knock her off her feet and slam her face first onto the concrete.

She howled in pain, and he heard something snap. Her arm, he thought, and he hoped it was enough to stop her from firing again. Unfortunately, the fall hadn't knocked the gun out of her grip. She still had her hand wrapped around it, and her finger was on the trigger.

With Angel on her back, pinning her down, he latched onto her right wrist, twisting and turning her hand so that her gun was no longer pointing in Presley's direction. Once he'd accomplished that, Angel bashed her hand hard against the ground.

"Damn you," Birdie snarled, her voice trailing off to a hoarse sob. "You have to die."

Angel ignored her and rammed her hand down again and again, well aware that he was breaking more bones. He'd break every damn in her body to stop her from killing them. The fourth slam did the trick, and the gun went skittering away from them.

He didn't take any chances though since she might have brought even more weapons with her. Angel yanked off her purse from her shoulder and tossed it aside as well.

At the sound of approaching footsteps, he glanced up, already knowing that it was who it was. Presley. With his gun ready and aimed, Presley was making his way toward them.

Birdie started screaming and bucking to get out from beneath him, but Angel kept her pinned down. He definitely didn't want to let her up so she could try to make a run for it.

Or, hell, attack them again.

"I called the cops, and they're on the way," Presley let him know. "Are Mia and you all right?"

"I'm fine," Angel muttered, and he looked over his shoulder to see Mia in the still-open side door of the van.

She was pale and a little shaky, but she was very much alive and unharmed. No thanks to Birdie.

"Your chin's bleeding," she murmured.

Yeah, he felt it, but it was nothing. "The back of her head hit me when I tackled her."

In the distance Angel heard a welcome sound. Police sirens. Soon, he'd be able to turn Birdie over to them, and since she was very much alive, the cops could grill her and maybe get her to confess to whatever the hell it was she'd done. Angel was betting for starters she'd been the one to murder Kenton.

“Let me go,” Birdie shrieked. “I have to end this. I don’t have a choice,” she sobbed out.

Angel was about to tell her that she had choices all right, but she’d clearly made the wrong one. But then he caught some movement from the corner of his eye. Two things happened at once.

Someone—a man wearing a ski mask—came up from the back of the van and caught hold of Mia, dragging her out and pulling her in front of him. He was holding a Glock, and he put it directly to Mia’s head.

Angel turned, his gun ready.

But he was too late.

The man pulled the trigger.

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Chapter Eighteen

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The sound of the blast tore through Mia, the noise and compression slamming into her ears. So much pain. It ripped through her, and for a horrifying moment, she thought she’d been shot.

She hadn’t been.

From the corner of her eye, Mia saw the barrel of the gun, and it wasn’t aimed at her. But at Angel.

Oh, God.

He'd fired at Angel. Except he hadn't. She had to fight through the panic and fear to realize the bullet hadn't gone into Angel either.

But rather Birdie.

Birdie made a sharp sound of pain and clutched her side. She shook her head, clearly not understanding what was going on. Welcome to the club. Mia didn't know what was going on either.

Angel didn't have that problem. He was in fierce warrior mode, and he took aim at the man who'd grabbed her. The man who'd shot Birdie.

"Put down your gun," Angel demanded.

The guy laughed, and he turned his own gun away from Birdie and toward Angel.

"No," Mia shouted, and without thinking, she rammed her elbow into the guy's gut. In the same motion, she dropped down to give Angel a clear shot.

And he took it.

Angel fired, a double tap of the trigger, that created another wave of that deafening noise. The guy still had hold of her shoulder and had been obviously trying to pull her back in front of him.

He failed.

Angel didn't.

And the man's grip melted off her as he fell the ground behind her.

Angel moved so fast that he was practically a blur, and when he reached her, he hooked his arm around her, pulling her behind him. He didn't haul her into his arms, but he gave her a quick look.

A lot of things passed between them. The relief. The shock. The worry they'd had for each other's safety. Soon, she needed to tell him...so many things. But those things would have to wait.

As he'd done to Birdie, Angel kicked aside the gun the man had been holding, and stooping down, he yanked up the ski mask. And then he cursed.

"Who is he?" Presley asked.

"I have no idea. Never seen him before." Angel took out his phone and clicked a picture. "I'll send it to Ruby to see if she can ID him. I'm guessing he's a hired gun," he added in a mutter, and then he went to Birdie. "Who is he? Why did he try to kill you?"

Birdie shook her head and continued to sob. She continued to bleed, too, and Mia knelt beside her to try to apply some pressure to slow it down.

"You'll get medical help soon," Presley let them know. "And as you can hear, the cops are nearby."

They were. The wail of the sirens was echoing through the garage. She couldn't see

the blue lights yet, but Mia figured they wouldn't have to wait long before the cops were on this level. Then, they could also get Birdie the medical attention that would hopefully keep her alive.

Mia despised what the woman had tried to do, but a dead woman couldn't talk. And they needed answers. She was betting Birdie knew everything they needed to unravel about what had happened.

"Get down!" Presley shouted.

That was the only warning Mia got before Angel took hold of her and dragged her to the ground. She didn't have time to ask why he'd done that because Mia soon knew.

She heard a gunshot.

Another one, and it had come right at them and slammed into the side of the van. She didn't see the person who'd fired, but obviously Presley had.

"He's at your one o'clock," Presley shouted, and she saw him dive for cover at the front of the van. "Active shooter," he said a second later, and she realized he'd probably called 911 to let the cops know so they wouldn't be driving straight into gunfire.

Mia's heart was pounding hard now, and her breath was gusting out. Way too fast. She tried to tamp that down so she wouldn't hyperventilate. That wouldn't help Angel and could end up getting them killed.

Mia managed to look up, to try to get her bearings. Angel and she were toward the front of the van, too far from the still-open side door. And she couldn't see the shooter because of a large truck blocking her line of sight. However, she could hear him moving around.

No doubt moving to get into position to try to deliver another shot.

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Birdie kept on sobbing, and she clutched her hands to her injured side. “Don’t kill me,” she muttered. “Please don’t kill me.”

Did Birdie know who was doing this? Maybe. Maybe these two were men she’d hired, but then why had one of them turned against Birdie and shot her? Or had that been a mistake?

Had he been aiming for Angel instead?

Mia didn’t have time to even consider that question because another shot came at them. This one smacking into the side door. The next shot came even closer to them, and Mia could have sworn she felt the heat coming off the bullet.

Cursing, Angel shoved her up underneath the van, following her so that his body was nearest the shooter. And the shooter must have decided this was his best chance because that’s where the next bullet came. It smacked into the metal just above Angel’s head.

“Enough of this shit,” Angel growled.

He rolled to his stomach, automatically bringing up his gun and firing. The shot screamed out, nonstop, tearing into the van and arrowing into the concrete floor. Angel fired two more shots.

And then everything stopped.

It just stopped.

Mia had no choice but to release the breath she'd been holding because her lungs felt ready to explode. And the fear came. A horrible flood of fear that Angel had been shot.

She turned to him. No blood. Not on him anyway.

But she couldn't say the same for Presley. Clutching his shoulder, Presley staggered forward and dropped to the ground in front of them.

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Chapter Nineteen

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With RJ on one side of him and Mia on the other, Angel stood at the back of the hospital room as a petite blonde nurse checked the IV in Presley's arm. Presley was flirting with her, so Angel took that as a very good sign.

There were a lot of good signs.

And Angel was thankful for each and every one of them.

Mia had managed to donate the blood that Melanie needed, the blood that might give her a chance to survive. Along with that, Mia and he were alive and unscathed.

For the most part anyway.

Just a few scrapes and bruises. Of course, they'd have to deal with the mental aftermath, but for now, that was on the back burner while they still had so much on the front burner to handle.

Presley hadn't gotten the unscathed diagnosis what with a gunshot wound to the shoulder. And Birdie had topped him in the injury department by taking a bullet to her side. In both cases, nothing vital had been hit, and the shots had been a clean through and through. Both of them were expected to make a full recovery.

That didn't apply to the two gunmen who'd been in the parking garage.

No recovery for them. They were yet to be IDed, but they were both dead. And Melanie was still in the ICU, and her chances of survival were touch and go at the moment.

The nurse finished with the IV, flashed Presley a smile that practically yelled "Call me," and she walked out, easing the door shut behind her.

If she hadn't closed it, Angel would have because even now, he couldn't be sure that they weren't in danger. Yes, the two gunmen were dead, and it appeared that Birdie had been behind the attacks, and she was restrained in a hospital bed just up the hall. But there were still a whole lot of unanswered questions. Until Angel had those answers, he wasn't letting Mia out of his sight.

Maybe he wouldn't even after that.

Soon, he'd need to figure out a way to keep her in his life. Now that they'd found their way back to each other, he didn't want to lose her.

Correction: he couldn't lose her.

And, yeah, this was about that l-word. He'd need to tell her how he felt about her and let the cards fall where they may.

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“I suspect that nurse will be back in soon for a visit,” Mia remarked. “Hard to resist that Presley charm.”

He winked at her. “You’ve resisted it.”

“Because you never aimed it in my direction. You knew Angel would throttle you if you aimed those goo-goo eyes at me.” She went to Presley and brushed a gentle kiss on his cheek. “Are those drugs in the IV good enough to stave off the pain?”

“Oh, yeah.” He flashed her a grin. “Not feeling a thing. Well, maybe a little floaty. And Angel would indeed have tried to throttle me for goo-goo eyes, whatever the hell that is,” he added, obviously backtracking. “But I wouldn’t have messed with what you two had. It’s one of those soulmate kind of deals.”

Angel frowned. Hell. He was just getting used to the l-word, and now there was soulmate shit involved? But he had to concede that he’d never thought of a woman the way he had Mia.

“So, how’s Melanie?” Presley asked, his expression turning serious.

RJ stepped closer to the bed. “They’re waiting for her to come out of the anesthesia.” He groaned and scrubbed his hand over his face. “This feels like a bad dream, and I keep hoping I’ll wake up, and...” He stopped. “I wish I could go back twenty years and undo all of this.”

Part of Angel felt the same, and he hated to see RJ suffer like this. And the suffering wasn’t over, not by a long shot.

“What’s the verdict on Birdie?” Presley went on.

“She’s out of recovery, and Detective Asa Walker is in with her getting her statement. I have no idea what she’s going to tell him,” Angel admitted. “It’s obvious she tried to kill us, but then that gunman tried to kill her.”

Presley tried to shrug. Then, winced. “Maybe she reneged on a payment or something. Or maybe she hired them, and they wanted to eliminate anyone who could tie them to the attack. Kill the boss, and she can’t rat them out.”

Angel had considered all of that, but it still didn’t feel right. Unfortunately, the only person who could give them answers was Birdie, and he wasn’t sure they were going to get the truth from her.

“You gave your statements to Walker?” Presley asked.

Mia and Angel nodded. “You?”

“Not to Walker but to Lieutenant Landrieu,” he said referring to his former boss at SAPD. “She did a multitask drop by to take my statement, check on me, and try to talk me into coming back on the force. I declined and told her despite being shot, I was very happy at Maverick Ops.”

Presley seemed to be on the verge of adding more, but he stopped when RJ’s phone dinged with a text. It was one that he was clearly anxious to get because he yanked the cell from his pocket.

“It’s the ICU nurse,” RJ rattled off. “Melanie’s awake, and they’re going to let me in to see her.”

“You want me to go with you?” Angel asked.

RJ shook his head, already hurrying toward the door. "I'll give you an update once I've talked to her." With that, the man practically ran out of the room.

Presley muttered some profanity. "I don't believe any of this shit was his fault, but he's having to pay a damn high price for what happened."

Angel believed the same, and the bottom line was even if Melanie made a full recovery, their lives were forever changed. Then again, he could say the same about his own life. Before Kenton's body was found, he hadn't known just how much he needed Mia. His world had felt complete.

Now, he knew it hadn't been.

Soulmates and I-words. What an ass kicker.

"Please tell me Detective Walker's going to interview Dwight and Roger," Presley added a moment later.

"It's on his agenda," Angel assured him.

Walker had made that clear in the brief conversation Angel had had with him before he'd gone into Birdie's room to interrogate, and charge, her.

"Detectives are also going through Birdie's house," Mia added.

Presley smiled. "I'll bet Roger's mightily pissed off about that. Did he try to stop that?"

Angel nodded. "Ruby messaged to let me know that not only did Roger try to block it, he's threatened legal action against, well, pretty much every one of us. Apparently, he believes we've defamed Birdie's and his character."

“So, he thinks she’s innocent?” Presley questioned.

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“Yep. Of course, he has no explanation for why his squeaky clean wife would fire point-blank shots at us. Or why she would have been carrying two semiautomatics in her purse.”

“Love is blind,” Presley remarked. “Mia knows about that. Love has caused her to overlook your faults.” He grinned.

Angel scowled and would have tossed back a required insulting comeback, but he mentally tripped over what Presley had just said. Not the faults part. But the other.

Love has caused her...

He was still trying to wrap his mind around the possibility that was true when his own phone dinged. “It’s Detective Walker,” he relayed. “Birdie wants to talk to Mia and me.”

“Well, that oughta be an interesting conversation,” Presley concluded. “Fill me on what she says first chance you get.”

“I will,” Angel assured him, and he put his hand on the small of Mia’s back to get them moving.

Since Birdie was just up the hall, it didn’t take them long to get there. Not enough time for Angel to speculate about what the woman would say.

There was a uniformed officer standing guard outside her room, but he had apparently been given a heads-up about their arrival because he let them right in after

he checked their IDs.

Like Presley, Birdie was in a hospital bed and hooked up to a variety of machines to monitor her vitals, but she had the addition of being cuffed to one of the metal bed rails. A good precaution because despite her injuries, Angel thought Birdie might run if she got the chance.

Walker, an imposing man with his six-foot-six height and muscular build, was at the back of the room, and he nodded a greeting to them. Angel spared Birdie a long once over, and a scowl, before Mia and he went over to have a word with the detective.

“She’s confessed to killing Kenton Barker, but that’s about it,” Walker informed them. “I’ve reminded her that anything she says to you can be used to bring additional charges against her,” he added in a raised voice that Birdie no doubt had trouble hearing.

Good. Angel was glad that Walker had made that clear.

“Oh, and we just got IDs on the two dead guys you shot,” Walker said, taking out his phone. “Lou Trainor and Quinn Stephens. They were friends with the other two men who tried to kill you.”

So, connected. The question was—who had hired them?

“What about Birdie’s financials?” Angel asked.

Walker shook his head. “All tied up with her husband’s, and they have lots of money going in and out. Our forensic accounts will need some time to see if there was a payment to hitmen.”

That tightened his chest. Angel just wanted this over and done. Hoping to accomplish

that, he turned, and Mia and he went closer to Birdie. However, Birdie spoke before he could say anything.

“Kenton deserved to die,” Birdie spat out. “You know it. Mia knows it. And I know it.”

Since it appeared Birdie was in a chatty mood and not hampered by the gunshot to her side, Angel just stood by and let her continue.

“That night when I went to confront him about Mia, he spit in my face, told me I was just a good fuck, that was all. That the girl he really wanted was Mia.”

Birdie sobbed out Mia’s name as if the insult was fresh and not something from two decades ago. The tears came, spilling down her cheeks, but Angel couldn’t help but wonder who she was crying for. Certainly not Kenton.

“So, you went to Kenton’s room, and he spit in your face,” Angel said, making a circling motion for her to continue.

Birdie did, eventually, after several snail-crawling moments. Her fit of temper seemed to have been spent, and she sighed. “I slapped him and shoved him hard, and he fell. He got up to come after me, and I knew he was going to punch me so I grabbed his lamp and bashed him on the head. Over and over again, until he quit moving.”

Birdie paused again, shuttered, and was no doubt battling the motherlode of flashbacks.

“And?” Angel pressed. “What did you do then?”

She cleared her throat and continued. “I dragged him to the window. God, he felt so

heavy, like he weighed a ton, but I rolled him out. Ruby was right about that. I grabbed his keys that he kept on his nightstand and the lamp so I could get rid of it. After that, I hurried downstairs, managed to get him into his car and drove him to the woods. Since it'd rained the night before, the ground was soft. I used a rock to scoop out a shallow grave and put him in it."

Angel figured it wouldn't have been easy for her to do all of that. Kenton and she had been about the same size. But adrenaline would have given Birdie the boost she needed.

"What did you do with Kenton's car and the lamp?" Angel asked.

"I threw the lamp in a trash bin in the parking lot of the strip mall, and I left his car there with the keys in the ignition." Birdie gathered her breath. "I figured someone would steal it."

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Yeah, in that part of the neighborhood, it wouldn't have stayed in the parking lot long. And since no one had reported it stolen, the cops wouldn't have been looking for it.

"Did you lie when you said Kenton was trying to set us up with the hat and knife?" Mia asked.

Birdie's mouth tightened. "Partly. Kenton did have Angel's hat that he'd taken from his room." She paused a long time. "But I put the knife there after I got back from, well, disposing of the body. Yes, I know it was petty," she snapped, "but I was angry with him. And angry with you for him wanting you. Hell, for everyone wanting you. You were the princess of the house, Mia, and I hated you for it."

Angel hadn't seen that hatred in Birdie's eyes back then, but he sure as heck was seeing it now. He was seeing a lot of things.

"I hated you," Birdie repeated, "but I swear, I went back to the room to get the knife. And I nearly got caught. By you," she added, looking at Angel. "I saw you coming out of Kenton's room, and I waited until you were gone before I went in. The knife wasn't there."

"Because I took it," Angel said. "How did your blood get on it?"

Birdie lifted her right hand. "I cut myself on the lamp. It had a sharp edge around the base. I thought I'd cleaned all the blood off, though before I picked up Mia's knife."

Apparently, she'd missed some, enough for the blood to show up after all this time.

But for a teenager, Birdie had done a damn good job of covering her tracks. Still, if Kenton's disappearance had been investigated as a murder, the CSIs would have almost certainly been able to piece together what had happened because they would have processed every inch of the room. Kenton's car, too, if they'd been able to find it.

"I didn't want Melanie to notice Kenton's lamp missing so I put the one from my room in Kenton's," Birdie added. "Then, the next day I bought a nearly identical one to replace mine."

So, there it was. All spelled out. Well, mostly anyway. But there was one huge question he needed answered.

"Why try to kill us?" Angel demanded.

Birdie glanced away, and her mouth trembled. She quickly steeled herself back up though. "Because I thought you knew I'd killed Kenton and had some kind of proof that would get me locked away. And I had no doubt that none of you would be on my side. You'd be on Mia's. You'd throw me under a bus to protect her."

"Yes, I would," he snarled, the anger shooting through him. "But it turns out, the only person I needed to protect Mia from was you. Why did you believe we had proof you'd murdered Kenton?"

Birdie opened her mouth to answer, but the sound of someone shouting stopped him.

"I will see my wife now," Roger bellowed.

"Roger," Birdie shouted, and the woman moved as if to get out of the bed before Angel and Mia moved in to stop her.

On a heavy sigh, Walker went to the door and opened it. Roger was right there, his face tight with anger and determination. Walker simply stepped back and let him come in.

“Roger,” Birdie repeated. “Where have you been? I thought you’d be here sooner.”

The man stopped at the foot of her bed, and he ignored Birdie’s outstretched arms that were beckoning for him to come to her. “I was dealing with the cops who showed up at the house and my office. At my office,” he repeated in a snarl. “Do you know how humiliating that was? It’ll take years for the gossip to die down about this.”

“It’ll take longer than that,” Angel informed him. “Your wife just confessed to murdering Kenton Barker.”

Roger whipped back around to face Walker. “You questioned her without a lawyer and while she was in a hospital bed?”

“She waived her rights, said she just wanted the truth out in the open. The truth,” Walker emphasized. “Got anything you want to confess?”

“Like what?” Roger snapped.

“That you hired those gunmen who tried to kill Mia, Angel, Presley, and your wife,” Walker was quick to say.

The color drained from Roger’s face. “I didn’t hire them.”

That rang true to Angel. The man seemed stunned that the cop would have even suggested it.

“He didn’t,” Birdie spoke up. “Roger’s innocent in this. I’m the one who hired them to set the fire and eliminate any witnesses. I sold some jewelry to pay them in cash.”

“You have proof of that jewelry sale?” Walker asked.

She nodded. “A receipt in the glove compartment of my car from the pawn shop.”

Walker fired off a text, no doubt to the CSIs who were already likely going through the vehicle.

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“How did you even meet these two men?” Angel asked. “And the other two, McBride and Crawford?”

“I met McBride at a party at Roger’s office. He was wearing a class ring from our high school, and I asked him about it. We got to talking, and I realized that I knew his mom. She didn’t go to our school, but I knew her when we worked part-time at the coffee shop over on Harrison Street.”

That hadn’t come out in the background checks. Then again, it would have been hard to dig up that kind of data since most of the high school workers at that particular coffee shop had been paid under the table. Angel knew that because he’d worked there himself for a couple of months.

“McBride had three friends that he said would do the job, so I paid them each five thousand,” Birdie went on. “And I told them I’d give them the rest when the job was done. When McBride and Crawford were killed, the other two said they’d do it. For double the money,” she tacked onto that.

“And you agreed?” Angel asked.

“I didn’t have a choice,” she insisted. “But when I met them a block up from the hospital, they demanded the rest of the money then and there. I said no, for them to do what was needed, and then I’d pay them.” Anger raced through her eyes. “That’s why one of them shot me.”

“So, let me get this straight,” Walker said. “You just confessed to murder for hire on two separate occasions and arson to attempt to destroy any potential evidence in a

murder investigation?”

That got rid of the anger and instead put some panic on Birdie’s face. She looked at Roger. “I can explain—” she started, but she didn’t get a chance to finish.

“I’ll start divorce proceedings,” Roger snarled, and with that, he hurried out of the room.

A loud wail streamed from Birdie’s mouth, and covering her face with her hands, she broke down into sobs. Angel didn’t feel the least bit sorry for her. He felt nothing but complete and total contempt for this woman who’d nearly succeeded in killing them.

And that left Angel with the question he needed answered.

“Why try to kill Melanie, RJ, Mia, and me?” Angel demanded.

“Because you knew I’d murdered Kenton,” Birdie said through the sobbing.

Mia and Angel exchanged glances. “But we didn’t,” Mia assured Birdie. “We certainly didn’t have any proof of it anyway.”

Birdie took her hands from her face and gave them a fierce glare. “But you did,” she argued. “You had pictures of me going to Kenton’s room that night. He showed them to me.”

Everything inside Angel went still. “He?” Angel questioned.

“Yes,” she snapped. “Dwight managed to steal the pictures and destroy them after he showed them to me. I paid him for that with money from more jewelry I sold. But then, I figured with you being an ex-cop, you wouldn’t need the pictures to have me arrested. You could both just confirm the pictures had existed, and I’d be locked

away.”

“Shit,” Angel grumbled just as Mia said, “Hell.”

Gathering his breath, Angel looked the woman straight in those tear-filled eyes. “Dwight conned you. There were no pictures. If you’d just stayed quiet and not hired those gunmen, Birdie, you could have probably gotten away with murder.”

Birdie seemed to freeze with her gaze fixed on him. After several seconds, she let out another of those loud wails. Angel ignored her, slipped his arm around Mia and turned to Walker.

“I’ll get an APB out for Dwight,” Walker assured him. “I can charge him with extortion.”

That was a small price to pay, considering the man had spurred a deadly plan into motion. Obviously, Birdie thought the same thing.

“Dwight is responsible for this,” Birdie yelled. “I wouldn’t have done this if he hadn’t lied. I should be cleared of charges. I shouldn’t have to go to jail.”

Angel heard Birdie’s shouts continue, and then trail off, as Mia and he walked out of the room.

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Chapter Twenty

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Mia downed several large gulps of the Coke that Angel had just bought her from the

hospital vending machine.

“The occasion probably calls for something harder, like tequila,” she muttered, “but this would have to do.”

Angel made a sound of agreement and drank some of his own Coke. They stood there, leaning against the wall of the vending room. Trying to process everything that’d just happened.

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“Dwight’s scam nearly got us killed,” Mia spelled out.

Another sound of agreement before he turned to her. Cursed. Then, he pulled her into his arms. She could feel so much emotion in that embrace. The anger mixed with the relief.

Yes, Dwight’s attempt to extort money from Birdie had led to the attacks, but they were alive. And mostly unharmed. Mostly. Mia wanted to cling to that.

And to Angel.

“I’m guessing Dwight photoshopped the pictures he showed Birdie,” Mia added. “I doubt he’ll confess to that though. To any of it.”

“Walker’s good,” Angel assured her, easing back to meet her gaze. “He’ll figure out a way to make Dwight pay. In fact, he could threaten Dwight with a charge of accessory to murder after the fact since Birdie will confirm the photos existed and that Dwight destroyed them.”

That brightened her mood, and she liked the idea of Dwight spending some time behind bars. She got another mood lifter when Angel leaned in and kissed her.

Yes, definitely a way to improve things.

Even though it was probably meant to be simply a kiss of comfort, the heat was there. Mercy, was it, sliding through her and warming all the places that Angel was a pro at warming.

When he pulled back from her, Mia's mind was on more kisses. More sex, too.

And one big question.

What was next for them?

Secrets around Kenton's death had driven them apart, but then those secrets had brought them back together. They'd come full circle, and she didn't want this to be an ending for them. She needed this to be a beginning.

She didn't get a chance to broach the subject though because of the sound of approaching footsteps. Her short-lived good mood nearly went south when she saw it was RJ. She thought he might be there to deliver bad news, but then Mia saw his smile and the glimmer in his eyes.

Hope.

That was a good glimmer to have.

"Melanie's stable," RJ blurted. "Her surgeon believes she's going to make it."

He went to them, dragging them both into a hug while he cried what she was certain were happy tears. There were some in Mia's eyes, too, along with a whole mountain of relief.

"You can't see her today," RJ went on, but the doctors said people should be able to visit her tomorrow. She'll need counseling, of course, since she tried to end her own life, but Melanie's going to be all right," he repeated. "And I just saw Detective Walker in the hall, and he said there'd be no charges brought against her."

That brought on another group hug, and Mia held on tight. Soon, they'd need to tell him about Birdie and Dwight, but that would keep. No need to spoil this moment,

especially not after the hell RJ had been through.

RJ was smiling through the tears when he looked at them. “So, you two are back together. That’s good to see. Sort of icing on top of the happy cake I have right now.” He gave Angel a pat on the back. “Do right by her, son,” RJ added before he doled out yet another hug and hurried out. No doubt to go back to his wife.

The silence came. Not awkward exactly. But it was there, and she figured Angel was doing the same thing she was—figuring out what the heck to say.

Mia just went for it.

“I’m in love with you,” she spelled out. “And I want to be in your life in whatever way you want me to be.”

She held her breath, waiting, but she didn’t have to wait long. Angel hauled her into his arms and kissed her. Really kissed her. Full on French and loaded with Angel-style scorching heat. It robbed her of what little breath she had, made her lightheaded.

And the happiness floated through her.

“I’m in love with you,” he said when he finally pulled back.

She smiled and had to stop herself from doing a happy dance. “I guess that means you want me in your life.”

“I want you in my life. My bed. Everywhere,” Angel said, and she knew he meant it.

Angel still had his arm around her waist and he gave her a nudge forward. Putting them body to body. Center to center.

And heart to heart.

She could feel his beating. Hard and strong like the man himself. The man she loved.

“I’ll do right by you,” he assured her, repeating RJ’s words. Along with blowing her mind with another of those kisses. “And you?” he drawled.

“The same,” she promised. “Absolutely the same.”

And Mia sealed the deal by doling out one of those mind-blowing kisses of her own.