



Mender

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Category: Romance, Thriller, Action, Suspense

Description: Maggie Evans has gone into hiding. After five years her life in Ashport, protecting its gifted community, is over. Being the town's only Mender is not easy when a nefarious corporation, a persistent FBI agent and a suspicious and captivating cop all want to stop her. But Maggie can't keep herself from looking for Andrea who desperately needs help. Detective Nate Hansen is trying to come to terms with the new realities of this world, Maggie's dangerous ability and their fiery blunder. The sensible thing would be to stay away... But when a torturous threat descends upon the town, hurting the strongest of the young, Maggie and Nate must deal with their distracting and tempting past while risking their own freedom to save them. Still, cops are not to be trusted by Maggie's kind. They always turn on them. And this cop has an uncanny way of putting two and two together.

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Chapter 1

Two set of eyes stared at me with restrained dismay. In a way, I felt like the suspects placed on the other side of the table in the interrogation room, the detectives asking questions and drawing their conclusions. Only, in this case, my interrogators were worse than the police. In my world, they were as close to the police as one could come, and at the moment they were not happy with me. Both because I had done something wrong, and because I had done something right. Only to no avail in either case.

“How long has it been since you slept, Maggie?” Gerard asked me, attempting to kill me with kindness. He was a big man in his fifties, heavy muscled with broad shoulders and thick arms. His russet skin was his softest feature as he otherwise had a weather-beaten face, graying beard, and balding head. A broad jaw and heavy features told of a long life lived, and of a once handsome young man.

“I don’t know,” I answered him and inhaled sharply, trying to think. Two days, probably. Two days since it all went awry. Which was a nice way of telling myself I had messed up royally.

“I’m betting a couple of days,” Annalise chimed in, who narrowed her eyes. “You look like it.” She was not a woman of patience, Annalise, nor was she inclined to spend her time on bullshit. Not in the least. Though one of my favorite people in my life, she could be tough to deal with. She had her own issues, though. I got that. She was about Gerard’s age, thin, and more and more frail-looking, which pissed her off to no end. But she still had her beauty, despite fine lines on her face and the light-gray haircut in a straight bob that reached just below her jaw.

“So what?” I told her, trying to sit up on Gerard’s soft couch. It made me sink down again. With them on each of their chairs facing me, the power show was all but decided.

“Andrea won’t be saved by me sitting on my ass.” The thought of the kidnapped woman who’d been tied to a chair for two days and now most likely chained in a dark basement, made me draw breath again. While I was out gaining no information, her situation worsened, and it pained me to think of it.

“She won’t be saved by you exhausting yourself and making mistakes, either,” Annalise pointed out. It made me hate her a moment. Then I realized she was right. She always was.

“No one has seen anything of the cars you described,” Gerard said. “Nor has anyone seen any of the men you encountered on the farm where they kept her first.”

I nodded. I knew we were at a dead end. But I couldn’t give up. I needed to help her. Bad shit happened to the affiliates of our Community. That was how it was. But you always did what you could to help. That was how we survived. That was how we stayed hidden.

“Doesn’t mean I should give up,” I told them.

“We’re not saying that,” he argued. “But you can’t go on like this. And you’re not alone.”

I knew that as well. Gerard had reached out to the Community. There were so many on the lookout for anything that could help that me wandering around blind didn’t add much. Not unless I happened to walk onto whatever hell-hole they were keeping Andrea in.

Fat chance.

“The time has come for you to step back and wait,” he continued, his voice soft now. Friendly. He knew how much this hurt me. Of course he did. When I had met him five years ago, my first impression of him had been that of a hard man; it still was, actually, but his ability was such a contrast to that. As an empath, he picked up emotions like a sponge, and unlike me, he couldn’t turn his ability on and off. It made it difficult to lie in his presence, and it also made it downright impossible to tell him he didn’t understand how you felt. He understood all too well.

“Please don’t make me do that,” I said. No point in protesting loudly.

“Only until we find something concrete. There are others that are in need of help.”

“What can possibly be worse than what happened to Andrea?” I said. Ashport wasn’t the biggest place in the world. Though bad things happened often, a kidnapping was not commonplace. A kidnapping that had been meant for me, I might add. The men who had taken her belonged to a company called Yorov, and they had been after me before. They were the reason I had been taken from my childhood home, and now they had found me again. And taken Andrea by mistake.

“I’m not saying worse,” Gerard said and rubbed a hand over his head. “But other things have happened.”

“You revealing our existence to a cop being one of them,” Annalise said.

I cringed at the thought. I hadn’t had a choice. I had tried so hard to keep Hansen in the dark about everything, but the problem with cops is they’re like dogs with bones. They keep sticking their noses where they don’t belong to find answers. And he’d gotten answers all right.

Get out of my head.

“There was no choice,” I said weakly. “He was going to arrest Rob. What was I supposed to do? He’d already seen Andrea’s mental projection.”

“Yes, I talked with Rob,” Gerard said. “He backs up everything. If his seeming like a psychic had been all the cop had seen, that would have been okay...but as it is—”

“We now have a cop in the know running around town,” Annalise broke him off. “You know how that usually goes.”

I nodded. Cops always did what Hansen had tried to do. He’d wanted to arrest Rob because to him there was no other reason for Rob knowing anything about Andrea than him being involved. It was why he had been so suspicious of me as well. He knew there was something not right. Cops usually did. That’s why you stayed away from them. That was rule number one.

Get the fuck out of my head.

I shook my head a little. Trying to think of something else. I’d had to reveal my own abilities to protect Rob. Of course I had. But in doing so, I’d done what I knew was a violation. I’d hated it. I never used my ability on anyone I knew. Not even remotely. And I’d stood there hearing him screaming at me, not verbally, no, but the words might as well have been roared into my ear: Get out of my head. Get the fuck out of my head. Get out. Get out. Over and over again. And the look on his face. I felt shivers run through me.

“I get why you did it,” Gerard said. He’d likely picked up on my certainty that protecting a friend was the right thing to do despite the danger. “However, we’ve heard enough stories of cops becoming even more difficult to deal with when they know about us.”

“I know,” I said. It wasn’t unheard of that they downright started hunting affiliates. There were even rumors of one such cop in Ashdale. No need for one of them here in Ashport as well.

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“So you need to deal with this now before it escalates.”

I nodded and then looked at Gerard. The message was clear despite any sympathies he might have. His duty was to the whole Community. He couldn't coddle me, nor did I want him to. He was the judge we'd all chosen to stand behind, and I mended things. That was how it was. So when he told me to do something, I had to.

“In addition, there is something else I'd like you to look into,” he said, making my heart sink even lower. More to do meant less time to spend on Andrea. Despite how many others were looking for her, I couldn't let it go.

“We should tell her while she eats,” Annalise said, a more sympathetic tone in her voice now.

“No need,” I said, though realizing that there might actually be some need. I had barely eaten in the last few days. Or slept. That was true. I had been looking for Andrea and hiding from Yorov, the FBI agent, and Detective Hansen all at once. Looking over my shoulder all the time was like a caffeine boost to me, but now, in the safety of Gerard's house, I felt the fatigue sneak up on me.

“Come on,” Annalise said, leading me to the kitchen where I saw a takeaway bag on the table. “I got you something spicy,” she said as I opened it, the smell of chicken tikka masala rising up.

“Extra spicy?” I asked hopefully.

“No bland food for you,” she said handing me a fork, and actually smiling a little.

“There’s one more thing before we get into details,” Gerard said behind me. Three problems? I turned to see him leaning against the door frame.

“Yes?” I prompted, seeing his eyes meet Annalise’s a moment. I didn’t need to listen in on his thoughts to know he didn’t like what he had to say.

“I’ve reached out to Eddie Hays. You might need a new identity before this is over.”

I nodded and sat down to eat. There was nothing else to do. My time in Ashport might not last much longer whether I left voluntarily or someone took me away by force.

Chapter 2

Gary’s Auto Shop looked worse than it was in the darkness. The large deep-green building could use a new coat of paint, sure, and maybe the yard could use fewer cars and junk, but all in all, it wasn’t much worse than any other auto shop out there. More importantly, it was run by Gary, who was an affiliate. That meant fewer questions when you had somewhat unusual car problems.

“Evening, Maggie,” he said as I walked in the door. The place was quiet this late, and Gary was putting away his ledger, having closed up the cash drawer for the night.

“Hi, Gary. Car ready?” I asked him as he turned back to me. He was about my own height, dark graying hair, a friendly face, and with a perpetual case of motor oil under his fingernails.

“It is,” he said, “but I talked with Gerard yesterday. Seems you’ve got people after you these days.”

I sighed. Of course Gerard had talked to him. He seemed to have talked to a lot of

people. That was how he'd found out what I'd been doing the last few days.

"You said my car was ready," I protested. I had called Gary from Gerard's before coming and he'd told me it was done. Getting around town took too long on foot, and it had to be done by now. It had been in the shop for days.

"It is, but Gerard's got a point. You'll be spotted if you drive that thing around."

I knew the chances of that, but I was starting to not care. It hadn't been much of a problem when Hansen had driven me around, but that was not the case anymore.

Get out of my head.

I swallowed hard. "Come on, Gary. What am I supposed to do?"

He gave me a warm smile. "I said it was ready. God knows it's not the first time you've come here with bullet holes in that thing."

That was unfortunately true, and I was thankful we had an affiliate mechanic in town. Bullet holes were hard to explain away to both doctors and mechanics. People had tendencies to want to call the damn cops.

"Anyway," Gary continued. "I won't leave you hanging. But I'm not giving you your own car, either. Gerard's orders."

I nodded, understanding. "So...?"

"I've got one you can borrow. Just please try to bring it back without bullet holes."

"You know I'll try," I said finding my wallet from my purse. We went through the usual bickering about payment. It was something I didn't like much. A lot of people

wanted me to get things for free on account of helping for free, but that was not how things worked. I could claim small favors from people, but that was it. All to avoid any extortion or misuse of power. These rules had evolved for centuries. Affiliates were no less greedy than regular people. Gary having waited for me after closing time, and lending me a car, was more than enough.

“Come on,” he said when I’d finally been allowed to pay my bill. “I’ll walk you out.” He switched the lights off and locked up. I was more capable of taking care of myself than he was, and we both knew it, but I appreciated the sentiment nonetheless.

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“There it is,” he said as he locked the gate. I turned to see what he nodded toward and stood staring a moment. A small Volkswagen Beetle was parked by the curb. The damn thing even looked cute in the darkness, despite it being hard to see details.

“You’re lending me a car that looks like it’s on a continuing smiling spree?”

Gary chuckled behind me. “No one will be looking for you in that thing.”

I sighed. “You’re right about that.” I gave in. A car was a car.

I said goodbye to Gary and went and got into the little thing, throwing my purse into the passenger seat. While adjusting the driver’s seat, Gary started his truck and drove off. I was about to put the key he’d given me in the ignition when a movement inside the fence surrounding the auto shop caught my attention. What the hell? We’d been the last ones to leave that place, hadn’t we?

I sat still, straining my eyes to see in the darkness. And yes, there was definitely movement among the cars in the yard. Not a cat or any other animal. This was an intruder on two feet. I considered calling Gary a moment but decided against it. I didn’t want to risk anything happening to him. Cursing under my breath, I opened the car door. No light went on in the coupé to reveal my presence, and I sent a silent thanks to Gary for knowing exactly what I needed in a car. I slid out and ended in a crouch on the road then looked around a moment, like I had on the way into the auto shop. No suspicious cars around. No people. Gary’s was placed in a quiet area, not many residential houses, but close enough to town that he’d have enough clients.

I heard nothing out of the ordinary, only traffic further away and the muted soar of

the Greenlight River on the other side of the auto shop. I leaned back against the Beetle and zipped up my jacket so my white shirt wouldn't reveal my presence in the dark. Then I moved around the car and further down the metal fence that surrounded the lot. Gary had locked the gate, but there was another way in. It wasn't my first time dealing with problems there. I had no idea if I had come over a robbery or something else this time, but Gary was an affiliate and I had to check it out. Just because he wasn't there at the moment, did not mean something bad couldn't happen to him at a later time.

I found the opening in the fence that I was looking for. It was well hidden, but unfortunately by the ground, forcing me to roll under it, the metal trying to stop me all the way.

I heard nothing when on the inside, and moved closer to where I had seen the figure, my eyes as adjusted to the dark as they could be by now. There was no light source, either, to help me, or weaken my adjusted eyes. Not a damn sound gave away anything. I moved with silent steps between the cars. There were a couple of trucks and bikes in the mix as well, but nothing that revealed anything. The lack of sound or visual movements did not make me give up, though. I knew better than that. Likely the person, or persons here, were in the middle of something. Or they knew I was there, too. I moved carefully, hiding behind vehicles.

A sound in front of me made me stop abruptly. Someone moved a few feet ahead of me, scuffing along the ground, barely audible because I was so close. I realized I didn't have my purse with me. The metal lining would have been a helpful comfort now. As it was, I felt around the ground, finding nothing more helpful than a rock and gripping it tight. I moved forward, ready to strike.

A screeching wail met me as I stepped forward. A fat cat protesting sharply at my sneaking up on it. My pulse in my ears I stopped and lowered the rock. Damn cat. Relief hit me at the same time as anger. The real danger forgotten for a split second.

A hand clamped down on my shoulder, forcing me around as the muzzle of a gun found its place under my chin. I was slammed into the truck behind me as a man placed his arm on my chest pinning me back.

I had never seen him before, but the suit told me everything. This had to be the FBI agent assigned to Andrea's case. Agent Larkin.

"Ms. Evans," he said, "nice to finally meet you." The smug smile on his face was visible even in the dark night.

I didn't have time for niceties, though. I knew I had no time on my side. If this man got me, I would be taken out of town. I had to find Andrea. I noticed two things about the gun to my head. It was not the tranquilizer gun he'd try to take me out with last time, and his finger was not on the trigger, but resting beside it. He didn't want me dead. That was his mistake.

I opened my mouth as if I was about to say something, distracting him a millisecond, enough for me to raise my hands and slam my fists into his ears.

The gun did not go off as he jerked backward, stumbling to his knees, eyes closed as he grunted in pain. I didn't stick around to see if he was okay.

I ran for the nearest building which was the office, finding the door closed, my brain in overdrive, forgetting to think. Gary had locked the damn door. I had been standing next to him, watching it. I forced myself to calm down, hearing Agent Larkin moaning in pain where I'd left him. I had a second to think. Get inside, find a weapon, hide. I couldn't simply attack this guy. Everything I did to him could get me arrested. It would only be an excuse for him.

I moved around the corner, finding a window that wasn't closed properly. I'd have to have a talk with Gary about security. I scrambled into his office, hoping the agent

would think I'd run away.

I landed on the floor as inelegantly as possible, head first, legs up against the wall. I got up and closed the window, moving through the office in the dark, which was thicker in there. I found nothing that would help me and moved into the next room where I'd met Gary mere minutes earlier. I systematically searched the place, calming my breath by sheer will as I worked.

A scraping sound caught my attention, making me stop everything. I listened intently. Was I not alone in the building, either?

It came again, this low but distinct sound.

The realization made me turn toward the front door. Someone was picking the lock. I drew breath hard. Damn, the man did not give up easy. I looked around helplessly. If he used a flashlight he would see me at once. No use hiding by the door. That was the first place I'd look if I was the one coming in. I went toward the desk that sort of functioned as a reception, hiding behind a thin partition next to it that halfway divided the large room.

Hell.No weapon against an angry agent with a gun. He wouldn't let his guard down now. Not again.

The lock clicked and the door slid open. No flashlight, but the room became, not lighter but grayer, perhaps. A small nuance really, making shapes more visible, but that was all.

I heard him come in, but he said nothing. Walked steadily as I crouched behind the wall, keeping as still as I could, not making a sound. Barely breathing.

The steps came closer, then I could make out a gun, arms, and the agent coming past

the wall. He stopped a moment, gun toward the area behind me, and I realized he couldn't see me. And then the strangest thing. The room, in general, smelled like coffee, metal, and motor oil, but a soft scent—citrusy, earthy—reached my nose.

Familiar.

I looked at the figure again. Unless Agent Larkin had grown six inches in the last couple of minutes, that wasn't him.

I recognized him. We'd been walking through forests a whole day, cleaning up and changing clothes at Mrs. Williams, and yet that fragrance had been on him that night in the safe house.

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Realization dawned on me as I involuntarily drew breath. Hansen was here with Agent Larkin.

He must have heard me. He stopped moving a few feet to my left.

“Evans?”

Yup, that was him.

Get the fuck out of my head.

I couldn't deal with this. I got up on my feet and bolted for the now open door to my right, banking on him not shooting me, either. I heard him shouting my name after me, but didn't hesitate. I had no control of where Agent Larkin was, so I simply headed toward the river. I sprinted as fast as I could, managing to avoid stumbling over the various clutter on the ground. How was I supposed to follow orders and handle a cop who was already working with my enemy?

I heard footsteps behind me, but I didn't turn to check if it was only Hansen or the both of them. I kept running, heading straight for the river. The footsteps behind me slowed a bit. He probably thought the river would stop me as a natural barrier.

Wrong.

I had been here before a few years ago. I knew exactly what to do. I pushed on, keeping up the speed, and when close enough, I dove. I soared through the air a moment, actually smiling at the sensation, hearing him yelling my name somewhere

behind me.

I hit the water with a shallow dive, not wishing to break my neck. The water was deep, but not deep enough to go straight down with your head first. The cold water hit me like a punch to my whole body, but despite it being early fall, I knew it wouldn't kill me. I remained under the surface, the stream already moving me as I kicked my shoes off, making swimming easier. I kept myself under the surface as long as possible. The good thing about rivers is there's only one direction to go if you let the water take charge. In this case, that was down toward the town center and eventually the bay.

I broke the surface and drew breath, the cold embracing me like a horny drunk. Still, as I floated on my back a moment, and looked back toward Gary's lot, I saw a figure standing on the river bank.

Get out of my head. Get out.

Shit. I had made him hate me. The worst part was that I didn't really blame him. I forced myself to think of something else, and started swimming both to keep moving so as to avoid freezing and to get away faster. Well, I thought as I was taken into town anyway, Tegan was getting a house guest tonight.

Chapter 3

I awoke in dry clothes, feeling warm and comfortable the next morning, a crunching sound being the culprit in disturbing my slumber. I looked up, eyes heavy with sleep, and saw Tegan at the kitchen counter staring at me with a no-good smile on her lips, happily chewing cereal.

"You had a sex dream," she proclaimed and had another spoonful.

“What?” I stuttered, grasping for a dream that was out of my reach as consciousness claimed my attention.

“Dude,” she said, pointing at me with her spoon. “You totally had a sex dream.”

“Stop saying that,” I mumbled, starting to realize what she was implying. I rubbed my eyes a moment, also realizing Gerard and Annalise had been right. I’d slept heavily the night through, and the food last night had done me good. Despite feeling like I could sleep the whole day, I actually felt better than yesterday.

“So?” Tegan pressed as I sat up on her couch, blankets all around me. “Who was it about?”

“Gary,” I said, glad she’d asked. That meant I hadn’t mentioned names in my dream.

Tegan snorted. “Fine. Don’t tell me. Anyway...what do you think?” She indicated her hair, which was bright red. I was sure it had been its usual black last night.

“You did that now? How long have I been asleep?”

“It’s almost noon. You’ve been sleeping like a rock, until the end there.” She gave a knowing smirk at that.

“Yes, thank you,” I said, and looked at her hair again. The red was too bright to be natural, but with the curls and waves of her bangs, it looked stylish, as it always did with her. She had a light blue dress on, slim waist, and big skirts. Eye make-up heavy and lipstick bright red. “You’re unusually dolled up today,” I said.

She shrugged. “I have a date after work. And I have a later shift. No time to go home in-between.”

Lucky her. I had apparently dreamed of the guy who'd been chasing me with a gun.

Way to look out for warning signs, Margaret.

I sighed and got up from the couch, joining her in the kitchen corner of her apartment. "It looks nice," I said. "It's very you."

She smiled happily, knowing I meant it, despite us looking like complete opposites every day. Diving into rivers and the likes didn't make it easy to wear anything especially pretty.

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“Anyway,” she began, “there’s cereal, or you can help yourself to anything you like.”

I suddenly felt a lump in my throat. Tegan was one of my true friends in Ashport, and the thought of having to leave her as well got at me a moment. She was the kind of friend who would let you in without question, standing at her door, no shoes and dripping wet. She’d even bought a bigger couch a couple of years back, stating that I’d better have space to stretch out. She was an affiliate and we’d gotten to know each other that way. Her apartment was a place I could go, not only because she owed me a favor and I kept a stash of clothes there. Which I did of course, but that was beside the point. No, we’d become friends and liked each other’s company.

“Are you all right, Maggie?” she asked, picking up on my hesitation.

I swallowed hard again and nodded assuredly. “Yeah. Just tired.” I wanted to tell her everything. She knew about Andrea and Yorov, of course. By now I figured every affiliate in town did. But she didn’t know the rest and I didn’t want to worry her. I wanted her to enjoy her day. Her worrying wouldn’t help me anyway.

“So, what’s on your agenda today?” she asked, handing me a bowl and spoon.

“Gerard’s got me checking out a guy who has fallen into some kind of coma,” I said, the disinterest unhidden in my voice. If he was in a coma, he could wait, and what could I do about it anyway?

“Really?” she said, seeming more interested than I had expected.

“What?”

She shrugged. "It might be nothing, but Dr. Morris has an affiliate patient in some weird state at the hospice."

"What kind of state?" I asked, suddenly a little interested despite myself. Tegan worked as a nurse at the Ashport Hospice. When affiliates got hurt and needed a doctor that wouldn't involve the police, we didn't go to the hospital. We went to the hospice where we had an affiliate doctor working. If she had a patient now, it meant there was something about him the police were not supposed to know about.

"Not sure," Tegan answered. She didn't work exclusively with Dr. Morris and she was only called in to help if the doctor needed assistance. "But it seems to be some sort of permanent non-responsive state."

I made a note of that. It might be worth checking into. First, however, I had to do as Gerard had said.

"Anyway," Tegan continued, putting her cereal bowl in the sink. "I'm off."

"Be careful out there," I said on reflex.

She smiled as she swung her coat around her. "Come on, Maggie. I get that Yorov are here, but they wouldn't be interested in me anyway. My thought control is too weak."

She was right. With regards to humans anyway. Still, considering that they had kidnapped the wrong person, you could never know.

"The only way I'll be late for work today is if you'll tell me who that dream was about," she said, her smile wide.

"Fuck off," I laughed and watched her blow me a kiss before she opened the door and left. She could lift my spirits all right, but no way was I telling her I'd slept with a

cop. Even Tegan would balk at that. She did know about my working for them now and then. It had been sanctioned by the Community authorities. It had all been Chief Mulligan's idea. She'd more or less guilted me into it after helping her with her kid. Convinced me I might do some good, and I had, of course, fallen for it. The thought of being able to help had gotten the better of me. And the authorities had agreed, reluctantly, though still thinking a positively inclined police chief might be a good thing. Turned out the police chief wasn't the problem. The first time I'd met Hansen was after helping out Detective Bowman a couple of times. My first impression had been...a little too positive, I guess. He was a looker, that one, with the tall, fairly dark and quite handsome thing going for him. Light brown hair, bone structure to kill for. Yup, I'd been suckered in until he'd opened his mouth making it clear he didn't like me being called in to help out when an interrogation was going nowhere. I wasn't a cop, and he had never liked my method. Not that he'd known the truth of course. I knew he'd thought I did cold reading, not a bad guess actually, but the truth it was not. His dislike had made me resent him. I had enjoyed making him uncomfortable as he retained his professionalism all the time. So when he'd lost it, yelling accusations at me at the police safe house a few nights ago, I'd been truly surprised when he'd gotten too close, his breathing changing, pupils dilating. All clear-cut signs. Old habit had made me egg him on, and I'd been astonished when he didn't back down, which in turn had made me refuse to do so as well.

The night had been intense and fiery, interspersed with resentment and an odd sense of antagonism. Yet, there had been moments of consideration as well. Him pulling me back against him, lips brushing my neck, holding me up with a strong arm, his other hand working me into a frenzy. While joined together, I'd felt him struggle to restrain himself against my movements.

A clink as my spoon fell down into the bowl startled me back to the present. What the hell was wrong with me? I had serious problems, and the guy who hated my guts wasn't even at the top of the list.

“Focus, Margaret,” I told myself, forcing down some cereal, not enjoying the boring taste, but knowing I needed some fuel. I knew what I had to do. Keep my head down, do what the Community demanded, and in return, hope they found even a semblance of a clue as to Andrea’s whereabouts.

Easy peasy.

Right.

Chapter 4

I had barely rang the doorbell before the front door opened. I had clearly been expected and instantly felt bad I’d slept in that morning. A woman with a warm and dark-sepia skin and steel-gray hair looked at me with what I could only call despair.

“You’re the mender?” she asked.

I nodded. “I’m Maggie. Gerard sent me.”

The woman stepped aside, holding the door open for me. “Please come in, Maggie. I’m Mona.” She was polite, but there was a sense of urgency in all of her few words.

I decided to skip any pleasantries and get to it. “What’s the problem, Mona?”

She looked grateful a moment, before taking my hand and leading me upstairs to a bedroom. It seemed like the room of a high school boy, posters and video games, a guitar in one corner, but on the bed lay a man, not a child. College age, I thought. Perhaps home visiting his parents?

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“Your son?” I asked Mona as I stepped closer.

“Yes, this is Jake,” she said and followed me. I could see the resemblance, especially around the eyes and nose. Likely, there was something of his father in him, too. What was strange was that while he lay in bed, the covers tucked tight around him, he wasn’t asleep. His eyes were open, and they followed me.

“Hello, Jake,” I said, trying for a friendly smile, but I got no response. He only kept looking at me. “What happened to him?” I asked his mother. “Gerard didn’t go into detail, but he said it was recent.”

She nodded and took her son’s hand in hers. His eyes moved to look at her, but that was all. “Two days ago. His father and I went out for dinner, and Jake was out with friends. All I know is he came home before us, and we found him like this in the living room downstairs.”

“Any sign of a break in?”

“The front door was wide open, but otherwise, no. Nothing was stolen.”

I looked at Jake. He seemed conscious but unable to speak or move. Like a horrible nightmare come true. I sat down next to him on the bed, seeing his eyes turn back to me. “Can you communicate in any way, Jake?” I asked. He blinked once and I looked at his mother for clarification.

“He’s in there,” she began, saying the words more to herself than me, I expected. “We figured out that when he blinks once, it means yes. Twice means no.”

I nodded my understanding, turning back to him. I had a quicker way of getting information from him, though. I had learned over the years to keep my use of it to the most necessary cases. I knew it was a violation to hear people's most private thoughts. I'd met enough empaths in my time to know what it was to be on the other end of the stick, at least to some extent. Feeling someone's emotions often got you pretty close to what they thought of something, but with me, there was no doubt. I could hear it word for word. I could hear what was not meant for me or anyone but those who were thinking the thoughts.

Get the fuck out of my head.

With Jake, I really had no choice. However, if he didn't know that I read his mind, he would likely not go to thoughts he didn't want me to hear.

"Did someone attack you, Jake?" I asked trying to lead his attention to the reason I was there. To what I wanted to listen in on. I barely noticed his blinking once, as I looked into his eyes, concentrating on hearing him. It's hard to describe how it works. I could turn it on and off at will, but the mechanism itself...well, it's like when you decide to focus on a sound...or when you consciously tell your arm to move. It required me to maintain eye contact...that is to say, I have to see the person's eyes. People call them the mirror to the soul, but to me, they're like the loudspeakers of the conscious brain. When I had that and decided to listen in, people's voices would come to me like a radio had been turned on. But as I looked at Jake, there was nothing. Like he'd been switched off. That had never happened before.

"Can you pick up something?" Mona asked me, looking hopeful.

Yeah, that was the thing. Except for Gerard, Annalise, Rob, Tegan, and Chief Mulligan...and Hansen, no one knew of my true ability. It usually made people uncomfortable and downright afraid, and unless I trusted them and vice versa, I didn't tell anyone. It was generally believed in the Community that I was an empath. They

were much more tolerated as well as common. And as close to the truth as I could get.

“Unfortunately not,” I answered Mona. “It’s like he’s closed off on the inside as well.” I sighed and went ahead. We had to do this the old-fashioned way and ask yes and no questions.

“Is Jake an affiliate?” I asked Mona as she walked me downstairs to the front door sometime later. She looked a little taken aback at the question, which let me know he didn’t get it from her.

“Yes,” she said. “It comes from his father’s side.”

“Every generation?”

“No. Before Jake, it had been a couple of generations. We actually had to ask his grandparents when he started developing his skills.”

I nodded. That was not unheard of. Abilities usually ran in families, and like green eyes could skip a generation, so could abilities.

“One last question,” I said, but Mona beat me to it.

“He can control people’s minds,” she whispered and must have seen a reaction on my face because she hurried to put my mind at ease. “Not uncontrollably. He can turn it off. He’s a good boy,” she added in the end.

“I believe that,” I said, but I knew her son had a dangerous ability. It was lucky for him that he could control it.

“Can you help him?” she asked as I opened the door and stepped outside to what was

a beautiful fall day, though with a cold wind that ran through town. I turned around and did my best to look confident.

“I’ll do what I can,” I said, going for reassuring. “But medically...I’d talk to Dr. Morris.”

She nodded and we said goodbye.

As I headed away from the house, I kept calm, walking briskly until I got to the car. The beetle, which it had turned out was blue when seen in daylight, had been where I’d left it the night before. Gary had assumed I’d been derailed somehow, and let it be until I came to claim it. That was a good thing about the affiliates as well. They didn’t panic unnecessarily. My purse had even been in there. Not stolen, thankfully. No, there weren’t many car thieves in Ashport, and the few who had tried stealing from Gary over the years had had to deal with menders, including myself on one occasion. We were not a forgiving group when our people were mistreated.

I got in the car, grateful I had parked a few houses down from Mona’s as I had to close my eyes a moment and breathe calmly. What a fate. The poor guy. He was trapped in his body, fully conscious and imprisoned in himself. I felt shivers run through me at the thought. What piece of shit had done that to him? I had no doubt someone was behind it, even without Jake’s answers to my questions. People didn’t get locked into themselves in our world. When bad stuff happened, very often it was because some ass-hat among us, or someone in the know, did something shitty. I opened my eyes and nodded to myself. It was necessary that Mona, and Jake, for that matter, had not seen me like that. You didn’t help people by showing your fears or anger. What they needed was someone who was calm and in charge of the situation.

“Time to be in charge,” I told myself and got the car key out. I was about to put it in the ignition when the car door opened and Detective Hansen got in.

“Yeah,” he said as if he’d been sitting there all day. “We need to talk.”

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Not something you wanted to hear from a cop.Ever.

Chapter 5

I stared in disbelief a moment before getting my bearings. I grabbed for the door trying to get it open. If he was there, that damn Agent Larkin wouldn't be far behind. Turned out Hansen was quicker than me. He leaned over me, not a long stretch on his part, really, and pulled the door firmly shut, before leaning back, glancing at the steering wheel a moment. He looked like he wondered why his head hadn't been smashed into it. What can I say? Sometimes I'm just that nice. At least when someone can arrest me. I looked around in worry at the thought. The guy who'd actually put a gun to my head was nowhere to be seen. The street was empty save for an old couple walking their dog.

"Who're you looking for?" Hansen asked, seeing my unease.

"Where's your new partner?" I asked, realizing I had dropped the key. I struggled to get hold of it between my feet.

"Who?" Confusion held his words.

I closed my fingers around the car key and felt an urgency in getting away before the man got there. "Agent Larkin," I said as I straightened up, key triumphantly in my hand.

"What?"

“Spare me,” I said as I turned the engine on, “you were both trying to arrest me yesterday at the auto shop.”

“That was Larkin?” he exclaimed. “I thought it was one of the kidnappers.”

Something in his voice made me turn to look at him, and I saw his unease at this. He thought I was reading him. I let him think that a little longer. Not my most honest moment, but I was allowed to watch out for myself, too.

“You’re not working with Agent Larkin?” I asked.

“No,” he said, brows creasing. “Can’t you tell that with your...” he made a rolling gesture with his index finger next to his temple before pointing between our heads a few times.

I rolled my eyes. That was how long that assumption would last.

“No,” I said and hit the gas, only lucky no one came driving by at that time.

“Okay, so we’re driving,” he said, fumbling for the handle under his seat to push it back. He was sitting with his knees pressed into the glove compartment.

I glanced into the rearview mirror, seeing his gray car parked further up the street. He must have followed me to Mona’s house. Since he thought I’d been reading his mind, I believed he was telling the truth about not working with Agent Larkin. But that didn’t mean the suit wasn’t following him.

“How did you find me?” I asked, making a hard left turn that pushed him into the door. I smiled a little at that and felt better. Childish? Yes. Did I care? Not in the least.

“Don’t you know?” he asked as he fastened his seatbelt. Smart choice.

“No, I don’t,” I said. “Didn’t you hear me? I’m not listening in.”

Eyes on the road, I could still see him looking at me. I couldn’t see what kind of look, though. Probably his usual suspicious one, narrowed eyes and all.

“You’re not?” he asked again, clearly not trusting me.

“No. Now tell me...how did you find me?” I’d been keeping my head low for two days. It could pay to know where I had screwed up.

“Easy,” he said and sat back. “You didn’t have a car when we needed you for the Hensley case. I figured it was in the shop. If you were still looking for Andrea, you’d need it.”

“Of course I’m still looking for Andrea,” I mumbled.

“Anyway,” he continued. “Gary’s Auto Shop was the only place where a mechanic didn’t have to think for a second on whether he knew you or not.”

Damn it. That would have been Alan, Gary’s assistant. Not the best at lying. After that, it had only been a matter of staking out the place. Hansen was right. It had been easy. Stupid me.

“Then I suspect you saw me entering the place again?” I asked.

“Yeah, if you mean breaking in. Saw someone moving around inside the fence, too.”

“I wouldn’t be so smug about calling other people out on breaking into places. That lock didn’t pick itself,” I said and was instantly ignored. I did, however, see how he

had found me again today. He'd known what car I was driving.

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“So what were you doing at that woman’s house?” he asked after a moment of awkward silence. “Does it have something to do with Andrea?”

“Your colleagues not finding her?” I asked.

“No. Not a trace, in fact. Do you think they’ve moved her out of town?”

“I hope not.” That would explain no one seeing even a hint of them in the area. “If you’re right and they’re after me, I have to hope they’re still here.”

“So what does that woman have to do with it?” he pressed.

“Not a damn thing.”

“What?”

“I’m working on something else.”

I could feel him staring daggers at me more than see it. I knew one thing for sure without reading his mind—he was as invested as I in finding Andrea, especially after our failed attempt at the farm. Me doing other things did not fit with that.

“You’re doing other things—”

“Listen, I have to do as I’m told just like you, by the way, or was it not your boss who ordered you to investigate me? I’ve been told to look into something else, and that’s that.”

“By who?”

“What?”

“Who’s telling you to do things?”

I sighed and made a new left turn, nice and easy this time. “My boss.”

“And that is...?”

I smiled at that, and then remembered my other order. I had to deal with this cop.

Make sure he didn’t start hunting us. That meant not concealing everything all the time. I bit my lower lip a moment, considering it. “Listen,” I said finally, “I have to do this. There are others that need help, and while I wait for any news on Andrea, I have to deal with this.”

“So you’re still looking?”

“Not me personally. Not now...”

“But others like you?”

I took my eyes off the road a moment and looked at him in astonishment.

“There’s a whole bunch of you, isn’t there?” he asked, though it wasn’t really a question. “You, Rob, even Andrea. All the places you keep clothes stashed. How many are there?”

I shrugged. “I don’t really know.” And that was the truth. “We don’t keep records. It’s safest that way. Keeps people like you at bay.”

He snorted at that, but let it be as well. Then he noticed where we were, as we were driving up to a large white stone building with six floors, and a beautiful garden out front.

“Ashport Hospice?” he said.

I simply nodded and drove the car to the back of the building. I wasn’t going to the front door to conduct my business.

There were three doors on that side, and I parked near one almost at the corner of the house, dumpsters close by.

“No cameras,” Hansen commented as he got out and looked around. There wouldn’t be for this particular area. We made sure they were regularly broken when someone tried to fix them. Nice little town like Ashport? Nothing ever happened here. That’s why the cameras weren’t a priority, either.

“So,” he began as he followed me to the door. I rummaged through my purse for the burner phone Gerard had given me. What with Larkin tracking my regular phone, I needed something else. I texted Dr. Morris.

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“You’re not listening in...as you put it?”

I stopped typing a moment and looked at him. I couldn’t quite decipher the look he gave me, but my guess was that of worry and trying not to think of anything at all at the same time. That never worked. To be fair, he had gotten into my car thinking I did it all the time. And I knew how he hated it. I had to admit—that took some guts. He was in on my secret now, so the least I could do was to be honest.

“No. I can do it at will, but I never do it to people I know. I never do it to anyone without a damn good reason.”

“The interrogations—”

“Is a very good reason, I think.”

He nodded. I had talked to some seriously twisted people when helping the cops. There had to be exceptions.

I finished my short text and hit send. “Listen,” I added. “I know it’s a violation. I’ve had to learn that the hard way. I know you don’t trust me, but in this case, you have to. Or you can not give a crap about Andrea. If you’re sticking around, you’ll have to trust that I don’t listen in.Ever.The only reason I did it at Rob’s was to convince you we weren’t lying. I’m sorry I had to do that, really I am, but I had to protect Rob.”

He considered a moment and then nodded. “Okay.”

“Really?”

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard you apologize for anything before, so I guess you mean it.”

I scoffed at him. “Ass-wipe.”

“Yeah, that’s more like your way of apologizing,” he said and laughed, a sound that startled me a little as I’d barely heard him do it before. At that point, the door opened behind me, and I turned to see Dr. Morris looking at me with a smile. Then she noticed Hansen and the smile vanished.

“Maggie, what the hell?” she said.

“Hello to you, too, Dr. Morris,” I said and walked up the few steps to the door.

“You brought a cop? Are you insane?” she said, gray eyes narrowed. She was a short woman, mid-fifties. Slim and energetic.

“No more than yesterday,” I smiled at her.

“Maggie, what have you done?” she hissed the words at me, clearly not wanting him to hear, but really wanting to yell at me at the same time. She stood behind the door, refusing to open it more than she already had. I looked back at Hansen who waited patiently at the foot of the stairs. His badge was visible on his belt. He needed to stop with that.

“Nothing that isn’t sanctioned,” I told her as I turned back to her. “He knows too much already. Gerard wants to make sure he doesn’t turn on us.”

Her mouth turned into a thin line as she considered this. “I could lose my license,” she whispered.

“No, you won’t,” I assured her. “Not because of him.”

“So he knows?”

“He’s learning, but yeah.”

She inhaled sharply and opened the door, letting us in, though she stepped in front of Hansen as he came up the stairs, extending her hand. He took it with a bemused look on his face. He might not have heard what we said, but he could probably guess. “Nice to meet you, Detective,” she said as they shook hands. “I’m Dr. Morris and I have the ability to speed up cell deterioration.”

I sucked in air through my teeth. Affiliates didn’t go around announcing their abilities, especially to outsiders. This was a threat. She could do as she said.

Hansen’s eyebrows went up a bit at this, but he did not jerk his hand back. Instead, he put his other hand over hers. “Nice to meet you, Doctor,” he said calmly. “Since I’m not decomposing yet, I guess you’re giving me a chance.”

Oh my God. I looked in stunned silence as the doctor laughed and nodded approvingly. “I like this one,” she said over her shoulder to me. “Quick on the uptake.”

An odd sense of relief flooded through me and it took me a moment to realize I felt pride for his quick handling of her. I shook my head, reminding myself he didn’t trust me and that he despised what I could do.

Get out. Get the fuck out of my head.

I shivered a moment, glad they were busy chatting and not noticing.

“I guess you’re here for my patient,” the doctor said a moment later.

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I nodded, not mentioning where I'd gotten the information, though I was sure she knew it was Tegan. Hansen didn't need to know everything.

We followed her up a flight of stairs and into a small room that looked like any hospital room, except this wasn't a regular hospital. On the bed lay a young man, motionless and still, except for his eyes. Exactly like Jake.

"This is Michael Phillipson," Dr. Morris told us as she walked over to the bed, checking his vitals. "I sent his parents out to get some food. I'm waiting here with him. This is Maggie, Michael," she told the kid. "She's a mender. You've heard of them, right?"

I walked closer, seeing the boy's eyes following me. He was younger than Jake, probably still in high school. I knew of his family. The Phillipsons had lived in Ashport for generations, several of them having abilities that made them affiliates. Even many of those without were seen as affiliates. Their abilities tended to differ, though, as many affiliates had married into the family over the years.

"Hello, Michael," I said as I stood next to him. "I've been talking to someone with the same problem as you today." I looked at Dr. Morris and she nodded. Likely, Mona had called her the minute I left the house. That was good.

I went on, getting him to respond with the same blinking Jake had to resort to. However, having gone through it once before, it didn't take that long this time.

"Were you attacked by a masked man, who hit you before this happened to you? And did he render you unable to speak before he did this?" I asked. Getting those details

simply by yes and no questions had led to some unrelated queries for Jake, but we'd gotten there in the end.

Michael blinked once. I almost thought I saw relief in his eyes as well. I nodded and looked at the doctor. "Same thing that happened to Jake. It can't be a coincidence."

"What exactly is this?" Hansen interrupted. I'd forgotten he was in the room a moment.

Dr. Morris tipped her head to the side, looking at the boy. "If I didn't know better, I'd say it's locked-in syndrome, but—"

"So it has a name," I said.

"Yeah, but that's not contagious, though, is it?" Hansen asked. Apparently, he had heard of it. "You keep talking about another case."

"No, it's usually caused by brain damage, poison, stroke...things like that," Dr. Morris explained. "Which is why I don't think that's really what this is. Not when it concerns affiliates and not two healthy young men."

"Someone's doing this to them," I clarified. "Do you know what Michael's affiliation is?" I asked Dr. Morris, hoping his parents had told her. Luckily, she nodded.

"Yes. Michael here can compel people's bodies to do his bidding."

I smacked my tongue. Another dangerous ability. If he'd been free from his own body prison, he could have forced my body to walk straight out the window and fall to my death. My brain might have protested all it wanted, and all to no avail. I hoped his parents had instilled good morals in the kid.

“Jake can control people’s thoughts,” I said. There seemed to be a pattern here.

“Wait, that’s a thing?” Hansen blurted, instantly holding his hands up when we looked at him. “Never mind. Pretend I’m not here.”

“The Phillipsons have a long history here,” I continued. “Do you know of any of them with a similar ability? As in terms of danger, I mean.”

Dr. Morris shook her head and I noticed Michael blinking twice. That narrowed things down at least. Someone was targeting affiliates with dangerous abilities. Abilities that could cause severe harm from the wrong person. From what I’d seen so far, though, the victims were normal people. Normal people locked inside themselves. That had to stop, I decided, as I truly understood why Gerard had made me look into this despite everything else going on.

Chapter 6

“A mender,huh? Some sort of fixer?” Hansen said as we got back in the car. He made me think of a clown car as he climbed in, his long limbs not really suited for the Beetle. With the seat further back, though, he seemed to sit comfortably when first inside. Dressed in dark jeans, blue shirt, and a black jacket, he looked more laid back than he actually was. The badge and the dark blue tie said otherwise, though the tie being loosened around his neck made me smile.

“Not the kind of types you guys are used to dealing with,” I said. “I don’t sell anything or remove anyone. I merely try to help.”

“How many of you are there?”

“Only me at the moment,” I answered, suddenly missing Freddy very much. He’d been the mender in town before I showed up to share the job, up until the damn cops

arrested him. I didn't say anything about that, though. The less Hansen knew when it came to Freddy, the better. We had, after all, sprung him from the prison transport. But I did miss having another mender around. Sometimes being more than one person was a good thing. Though the affiliates were an effective support system, sometimes you simply needed help from someone with the right skillset. Normally, we could have dealt with each thing at this point.

"How many are there, usually?" Hansen continued.

"You know...you ask a lot of questions," I said as I drove away from the hospice.

"Well...you're finally answering some of them."

There were limits, though. But I had tried keeping everything under wraps and that didn't work with this guy. Maybe he couldn't help himself because of what he did for a living. The fact that he'd picked up on something about me meant he was good at noticing things, too. It wasn't like I had a sign on my forehead announcing my affiliation. The fact he'd been investigating me, though...that had caught me off guard. Mostly because I knew that would have involved McAllen, and I couldn't believe he'd be bothered enough to do that. Still, that reminded me of the shooting.

"How is Detective McAllen?" I asked carefully, knowing it was a sore point as I had been at the scene when it happened.

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“Not good,” Hansen said. “He woke up yesterday, but something went wrong and they had to operate again. Blood clot.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I said. I meant it. I liked McAllen. He’d always treated me fairly despite whatever misgivings the asshole next to me had. Said asshole kept silent a little while as we drove through town, heading back the way we’d come only an hour earlier. In the end, though, curiosity got the better of him.

“Why didn’t you come to us when you found out a cop had been shot in the same place Andrea had been kidnapped?”

I stopped at a stop sign, checking for traffic before driving again. “The same reason none of us ever do,” I said. I had left the alley in a haze of confusion after being hit by the van. I hadn’t heard about the shooting of McAllen until later. Since no one had come for me by then, I figured I hadn’t been seen. “You would have thought I had something to do with it. Hell, you did believe that,” I explained. “That’s why we stay out of your way. You lot always misunderstand and throw out accusations first.” At least now he knew I was the intended victim, not someone who was to blame for McAllen’s injuries.

“Yeah...everyone you know looks at me like I come spreading the bubonic plague or something.”

I shrugged. “You kind of do.”

It didn’t take long before we were back at Mona’s house, the street as peaceful as earlier. No Agent Larkin in sight, only people out walking or raking what leaves had

started falling in their yards. Picture perfect. Nothing to suggest the poor man inside the house, who couldn't move his fingers even if his life depended on it.

"And why are we back here?" Hansen asked as we walked up to the front door.

"Because I have a bad feeling about this," I said. "And put that away," I added, pointing at his badge.

"Can't do that," he said. "I'm supposed to—"

"I don't give a crap. Put it away. It upsets people."

He sighed, point made, but at least did as I said, putting the thing in his pocket, as Mona opened the door.

"Did you find out anything?" she asked before I could open my mouth. Didn't even care that I had brought a complete stranger to her doorstep.

"Maybe," I said. "I won't take up your time, Mona, but I asked the wrong question when I was here earlier."

"Okay," she said, no idea where I was going with this, but trusting me nonetheless. "Fire away."

"I shouldn't only have asked you about Jake's affiliation. I should have asked if there's anyone else in your family with the same or a similar one."

Her eyes widened at this. "Dr. Morris told me on the phone there was another boy with the same affliction. Do you think someone targeted them?"

Seemed Hansen wasn't the only one sharp on the uptake today.

“Might be, yeah,” I said. It was too much of a coincidence. According to Dr. Morris, Michael had been attacked yesterday. Jake the day before. I wouldn’t be surprised if it happened again. “So...are there more in your family?”

She nodded and swallowed hard. “My nephew, Will. He’s related to my husband’s side of the family.”

“And his affiliation is?”

“Exactly the same as Jake’s.”

Chapter 7

“I’m just saying there’s useful stuff in the other car,” Hansen pointed out. He sat against the hood of the Beetle, arms folded.

“Well, it’s too late now,” I said, sitting inside the car, door open, dialing Will’s number again.

“It wasn’t when—”

“Now we’re here, and I am driving this car.” I sighed. “Straight to voicemail again.”

We’d been trying to reach him since leaving Mona’s house, and so had she, no doubt. Will had come to Ashport with Jake, visiting his aunt and uncle, as well as going on a camping trip with friends and his girlfriend, who was local.

“What kind of kid keeps his phone off this long?” Hansen asked, shaking his head.

“The kind who’s sharing a tent with his girlfriend. Not like you were busy checking your phone the other night, either,” I said without thinking and saw his shoulders

stiffen as he looked down a moment. I had forgotten about his embarrassment regarding the safe house. So much else had happened. I tried very hard not to laugh as I got out of the car. There was nothing else to do but head up Highfield Ridge and look for the kid.

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We had about an hour of sunlight by this time, and we had no water and no flashlights. At least there was a wide trail heading up the ridge, as the area was used by people often. That was probably why Will and company had gone there as well. The trail was easy enough to be no hassle, and far enough away for them to be alone. A nice few days, no classes, enjoying the outdoors and drinking, I guessed. And so, Will hadn't heard about his cousin. No wonder Mona hadn't been alarmed when he didn't answer his phone. She'd had enough to worry about.

"You really think he's in danger?" Hansen asked as I locked the car and we started walking along the trail. It would be quite flat at first before a steep incline dominated the trek a while.

"I can't afford not to check it out," I said. "Whoever's doing this must be stopped."

"I agree, but—"

"No cops," I interrupted. "In all honesty...what would you say if I came to you claiming someone was using their special abilities to render people in a waking coma?"

"I'd think you were off your rocker."

"Exactly. So what do you think your colleagues would say to this?"

He didn't say anything, but his jaw tightened. It was a sore point; I knew that.

I'd seen how hard it was for him when we'd had to hide in the forest near the Kreutz

Farm from the same people he worked with every day. Then he hadn't even known what was really going on. It was only common sense that had gotten him to go along with what it.

"Okay, so what's your plan then?" he said finally.

"Plan for what?"

"Dealing with someone who can put us in the same state as Jake and Michael?"

"Oh, well...to deal with whoever it is very, very quickly."

I saw his lips twitch a little at that, almost like a restrained smile trying to escape. I did have a point, though. If we wanted to avoid the same fate, and I didn't want that to happen to us, we had to render the person doing it incapable of using their ability.

"So, we're basically walking blind into this?"

"Yup. I don't have luxuries like back-up."

He seemed to consider this a while. We kept walking, the susurrations of nature a continuing meld of sounds around us. The wind blowing through the trees, birds chirping away, a river far to our right, a creek crossing the trail at several points. It was like we were on a bizarre hike. All the visual beauty dampened by the crap-feast waiting for us.

"Why do you do this?" he asked, startling me a little as he'd been quiet for so long. We had started on the steep hills by now, our pace not slowing down, though.

"Someone has to," I said and shrugged. Had I ever had other plans? Sure. But life didn't always give a crap.

“That’s not really an answer,” he pointed out.

I bit my lower lip a moment, trying to figure this out. My first instinct was to keep quiet. But Gerard had been worried about Hansen knowing about us. If he didn’t understand, he could turn on us, and that would make things difficult.

“Someone helped me out years ago when I needed it,” I said slowly, measuring my every word. “My whole life turned around then and...I knew how much I had needed someone to care. To actually give a damn and give me a hand. Afterwards...I kind of gradually fell into this.”

I didn’t like thinking back on my early teens and my time in Yorov’s hands. They’d fooled my terrified parents into thinking they could help cure me. That’s what they had been promised, and so they’d sent me away. I didn’t really blame them anymore. I understood now how scared they must have been having a kid who knew what they were thinking all the time. But Yorov...I would be forever grateful they had spies in their midst. People who helped kids like me get away. My life now wasn’t only a way for me to pay them back. I actually knew what it was like to be on the other end of the stick. How could I stand back and not care?

He must have noticed my mind trailing off. “Care to elaborate?”

I shook my head and noticed the look of disdain on his face. “It’s not the first time Yorov’s been after me,” I heard myself explaining. “They tried various ways of manipulation when I was a kid. A kind person got me out.”

I blinked in confusion. How did he do that? Sometimes, he got this look in his eyes that made me feel like I was caught out, like my bad attitude was reined in somehow. It left me confused and angry each time.

“Hmm...kind of makes sense now, I guess,” he mused.

“How?”

“Now that I know what you...can do.” He didn’t seem able to actually say the words read minds out loud. “I get why a company that size is after you.”

I raised an eyebrow at this, not planning on helping him in the least.

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“Corporate espionage, deal manipulations” he continued, and gave a slight shrug. “I can see them using Andrea the same way. Why else would they have kept her alive these past few days when she was not their intended target?”

“Huh...so you’re not just a pretty face, are you? And here I thought McAllen was the brains of you two.”

Comments like that usually disturbed his countenance, but not this time. Damn it. I clenched my jaw in silent consternation. For a brief moment, I had forgotten about the shooting. He was right, though. Andrea's ability to project herself into places where her physical body was not, could be very useful indeed when obtaining information.

“So where were you five years ago?” he asked, ducking under a branch that had grown over the trail, no threat to me, but low enough to hit him in the forehead.

I smiled. He was persistent. I would do as Gerard said, of course. Try to get this cop to let the Community be, but I couldn’t be sure he wasn’t still out to arrest me for anything. False identities weren’t exactly what you wanted to discuss with the police.

“Probably at a coffee house, enjoying a macchiato and—”

“Hey, I am trying to make some sense of this.”

“You ask too many questions, Detective.”

“Yeah? Well, we can’t all get information the way you do,” he snapped.

No, I tried very hard not to obtain information that way, so I was not having this scorn thrown at me. “I know all kinds of things about you without listening in,” I said, seeing the confusion in his eyes as he looked at me. “I’ve seen you naked, remember?”

“Damn it, Evans,” he exclaimed, averting his eyes, making me smile wider. Yep. There it was. Disconcerting him always worked.

As we came up the steepest part of the ridge, the sun was almost down, in its own way a stroke of luck, as it helped us pinpoint Will and his friends at once. They had lit campfires. Two to be exact. The camps were placed a little way off the trail, higher up than we were at the moment, but not in the most wooded area. I noticed the fire furthest from us was smaller than the other one. A private little camp? Will and his girlfriend, I guessed. We could hear singing and shouting from the other camp, though it was hard to see the people in the weak light. Still, it was not difficult to guess.

“They’re hammered,” Hansen commented as we sped up. I’d noticed he’d walked all the way with ease, not out of breath despite our high tempo. I knew very well how he looked—lean with defined muscles hidden under those clothes. A runner’s body, I had figured. It made sense now. The ground was flat for another hundred yards before several trails met ahead of us. Almost like a tiny mountain intersection. From there, we would have to walk up a steep area again, to reach the camps. It was the first time since we started the ascent we’d had any view far ahead, and what we saw, stopped us both short a moment.

It didn’t matter that details were difficult to discern. A figure was heading up toward the camps, moving fast, almost at a run.

“Shit,” Hansen uttered.

“I told you,” I said, staring at the dark figure. “This wasn’t a coincidence.” I barely got the words out, before Hansen ran forward.

“Wait,” I said before I managed to gather my thoughts and run after him. With his head start he was way ahead of me as he sprinted after the figure. I pulled at the strap of my purse so it rested against my back as I ran, seeing the figure was already halfway to the first camp. Whoever it was didn’t seem to be heading straight for it, though. I had no doubt the lone tent was the target. How the figure knew exactly how to find Will was beyond me, and I didn’t care as I ran hard to catch up, trying not to stumble over anything in the fading light.

Being stumbled over was, however, what I should have worried about.

Something crashed into my left side so hard I cried out in shock as I was slammed to the ground. I landed on my side, hearing a grunt from whoever had pummeled me as they rolled off me, hitting the rocky ground a few feet away.

I scrambled to my feet immediately, knowing that remaining on the ground could be my last mistake. As I turned, I saw my attacker did the same thing, unsteady on his feet a moment, like me, as he got his bearings.

Agent Larkin.

“Fucking hell,” I snarled in my confused realization. That made him smile as he instantly attacked again, his speed surprising me at such a short distance. I blocked his first punch, and barely averted the second one, which snagged my left shoulder. It didn’t unsettle me more than my attempted knee toward his groin did him. He quickly made a short jump back as I extended my bent leg, kicking him in the thigh, catching him off balance as the pain made him go down on one knee. I instantly went on the offense, hitting his head once, before his arm came up between us, his other hand coming up and deflecting my blows. I lifted my knee as I was pushed sideways,

hitting him square in the chest, but didn't see his already moving leg kicking out, hitting me and toppling me over.

I remember cursing my own inattentiveness as I landed on my ass, the suit over me instantly as he pushed me down, straddling me, trying to get a hold of my arms. I could hear myself snarling at him, though what I uttered I couldn't say. I bucked hard, my hips jerking thrice, unbalancing him enough for me to push him, hitting whatever part of his face I could. I rolled over him, hitting twice toward his head while extracting a glorious cry of pain from him as I inadvertently placed my knee with all my weight between his legs while trying to get up.

How he managed to stay focused I have no idea. Most men would have curled up at that point, but he managed to pull his gun on me, effectively stopping my movements by pushing it into my stomach.

"Get the fuck off me," he wheezed.

I clambered off him and got to my feet while I kept my eyes on him. I was out of breath and my arm and back hurt, but other than adding this up in my head, I didn't let it take my focus. No, that was reserved for the man in front of me. He was breathing hard, eyes squinting a bit. He stood up in a sort of crouch. I knew my punches to his head had been more distracting than pain inflicting. I'd hit him good in the thigh, probably not too bad in the chest, but his crotch had to be the worst. I had to give him some credit, though. The gun was still pointed at me with a steady hand.

Then I noticed it was the damn tranquilizer gun again. He really was set on taking me with him alive. I guess that was something to be thankful for.

"You're coming with me, Evans," he said, his wheezing forcing him to take a deep breath. "I would prefer you walking on your own, but I will carry you if I have to."

“Fuck you, you ass-turd,” I snapped at him. Not particularly eloquent, but it thoroughly painted a nice picture of my opinion of him.

“Drop it,” Hansen said somewhere to my left. Both Larkin and I glanced in that direction as the Detective came walking toward us, his gun raised and aimed at Larkin.

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“Ah, Detective,” Larkin said, forcing a smile through his pain. “I thought you left. Fancy seeing you here with her.”

“Put the weapon down,” Hansen said. I could see he was a little winded. He must have heard us and turned around.

Oh God, Will.

That meant the attacker was still coming for him.

“You’re interfering with an arrest, Detective” Larkin argued.

“The way I see it, you’re attacking a citizen for no reason. And trying to drug her.”

“Pervert,” I added for good measure.

“Clearly, you’re not in Ashport because of Ms. Kirby’s kidnapping,” Hansen said.

“Nor do you seem very intent on arresting her,” Larkin countered while nodding in my direction.

“We don’t have time for this,” I interrupted. “Look at your situation, Agent.”

He didn’t have a choice. If he turned to shoot at Hansen, I would attack him. If he shot at me, Hansen would shoot him. I hoped.

Larkin considered for a moment and then took a pained step toward Hansen and

handed him the tranquilizer gun, hilt first. I guess he didn't trust me not to shoot him with it.

"You're making a mistake," Larkin told Hansen, who simply changed his grip on the weapon and shot the agent. The dart hit him in the stomach, and he stared down at it in stunned silence. Then his eyes rolled back in his head and he fell sideways, hitting the ground with a thump.

"Where did he come from?" Hansen asked, holstering his own weapon, before stepping over to the unconscious man, extracting the little red dart, and throwing it away. If someone came by, likely they would think him injured or drunk.

I silently pointed behind me with a thumb over my shoulder. What had just happened? Hansen looked in the indicated direction—the agent had taken a steeper but shorter trail up the ridge. Hansen shook his head and turned back where he'd been heading.

We started running again without saying a thing. There was no time to discuss any of what had happened, and we both knew the figure we'd seen had to have too much of a distance on us now. My back and side hurt, but as we neared the first camp, the pain subsided as I focused on moving further up. Desperately hoping we'd get there in time. I had been right about Hansen. He had to be running on a regular basis to keep up the pace he did. Despite the situation, I glanced at the tranquilizer gun in his hand. He hadn't even thought twice about shooting Larkin. Simply removing the threat in one quick move. At least, for a while. I knew he'd done it before when Larkin had tried to take me out in the alley where Andrea was kidnapped. But from what Hansen had told me at the time, he had not been seen then.

The noise from the first camp reached its peak as we ran by unseen, hidden by darkness. They were quite audible, with their singing, laughter, and loud talking.

If there ever was a scream, we didn't hear it. The smallest camp lay about two

hundred yards above the other one, and I knew before we reached it that we were too late. The attacker had been too far ahead of us.

A small fire was lit outside a tent. It hadn't been tended to in a while and would soon be dying down. A light source in the tent revealed the silhouette of a person sitting in there. There was no sound.

Hansen reached it a second before me, ripping the unzipped flap to the side as I stopped beside him. An apathetic face met us before a scream erupted. A young naked woman sitting on her knees suddenly backed away at our intrusion. She grabbed at a sleeping bag, covering herself as her scream died on her lips, terror making her stop moving. I held up my hands. Palms out, about to say something comforting as I noticed the young man who lay still next to her.

Will. It had to be him. He didn't move. Did not react to our being there other than looking at us with a familiar blank stare.

Chapter 8

"Too late," Hansen said, straightening up. "How long since it happened?" he asked the girlfriend.

She swallowed hard, looking at us with petrified eyes. It took her a moment to realize we weren't there to hurt her. "Three, maybe four minutes," she stuttered, pointing in the direction the attacker had taken.

Hansen was about to run after the person, but I grabbed his arm, halting him. "No point," I said. "He's quick, and we can barely see as it is." Hansen hesitated a moment but remained where he was. I reached out and took the tranquilizer gun from him. A question seemed to form in his eyes, but he caught on and didn't stop me from aiming the thing at Will and shooting him with it.

“What did you do?” his girlfriend shouted as she lunged forward so the sleeping bag fell down, pulling the little dart out of her boyfriend’s thigh. It was too late, though. I saw his eyes close as the drugs claimed him for what would hopefully be a while.

“Right now, he was panicking. You couldn’t see it,” I said tucking the weapon into my waistband by the small of my back, while she covered herself with the sleeping bag again. “We have some long hours ahead of us. He doesn’t need to be awake for them. What’s your name?” I added. I kept my tone level, not making facts or orders optional. It worked in keeping her panic at bay.

“Liz,” she said, tucking her dark long hair behind an ear. I saw then how young she was. Will was nineteen, and I would bet she was the same age.

“All right, Liz,” I said. “Get dressed. We’ll wait out here, and then we’ll talk. Okay?”

She nodded, sniffing a little and wiping away a tear that broke free. I didn’t really have time for crying people now. We needed to avoid the rest of their friends, and therefore, be quick about things.

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“You need to hold it together, and we’ll sort this out,” I said, voice stern. I didn’t have more than six years on the couple, but I suddenly felt like an old crone. Still, coddling her would get us nowhere.

Hansen and I sat down by the fire, waiting as she got herself ready. I moved my right shoulder tentatively. It still stung from landing on the ground when Larkin threw himself at me, but all in all, I felt fine. Physically, that was. We had been too late.

“First Andrea, and now this,” Hansen said, his voice low. He was thinking along the same lines as me. The thought of the lifeless kid in the tent next to us was intolerable. He was trapped in a living nightmare now. The drugs only staved off the inevitable. He would wake up and realize his predicament soon enough.

I drew my knees up, leaned my elbows on them, and ran my hands through my hair. “Can’t catch a damn break,” I mumbled and grit my teeth.

“You’re not comatose, are you?” Hansen said, surprising me. I looked up to see him putting a couple of logs on the fire.

“Might as well be,” I said.

“You should take your own advice. Not just dole it out.”

“Yeah,” I sighed and looked around. He was right. The camp further down was still in high spirits. They were loud and hadn’t heard Liz’s scream, which was worrying but also a blessing for us. We didn’t need non-affiliates asking questions about this. Behind us, I saw a cooler and pulled it closer. The night was far from over, and I had

no reservations in helping myself to some food.

“So, we’re stealing now as well?” Hansen asked as he noticed what I was doing.

“That, or asking permission after the fact,” I said, opening the container before I became disappointed. “What the hell kind of trail-mix is this?” I pulled out a bag of cut vegetables, carrots, celery and some sort of turnip? Boring.

“Food’s food,” Hansen said, taking the bag and opening it. Apparently, he’d changed his mind. I found some water as well. That was a relief after our trip up the ridge. We ate in silence, while I stared down at the other camp. I suspected the real food was down there. Liz took her time, and I realized I might have to rush her. There wasn’t only Will. There was also an unconscious agent lying further down from us. What if one of the kids in the other camp wandered off and found him? We needed to be long gone if that happened. That did remind me of something, though.

“How did Larkin know where I was?” I asked Hansen.

“Ah, that.” He bit down on a piece of turnip and got his phone out of his pocket. “I guess he’s tracking me now,” he said as he took the turnip out again. He turned the phone off and removed the battery and sim card.

“The auto shop, do you think?”

He nodded. “Must have seen me. I knew there was something off about him.”

“Oh, that hurts,” I taunted. “Those are your special words for me.” I couldn’t help smiling and I saw him tense up, whether because of my comment or smirk I didn’t know. In that moment, though, Liz finally came out of the tent, dressed in jeans and a thick sweater. It shouldn’t have taken that long to get those clothes on.

“Please, for the love of God, tell me you’re an affiliate,” I said before she could ask us anything. She’d been there when it happened, so I couldn’t leave her there, but non-affiliates usually took some time when understanding what was going on. I had to give Hansen some credit, though. When first presented with evidence, he’d grasped the situation quick enough. But he had so many follow-up questions. It had to be an occupational hazard.

Liz, to my relief, nodded. In turn, she looked relieved as well. Up until that point, she had probably thought we’d happened to come by their tent. I shouldn’t have been too surprised. Affiliates often found other affiliates as partners. It made life easier. Liz and Will might even have bonded because of it.

“Okay,” I said. “My name is Maggie, and this is...uh...Nate.” Using his first name felt weird, but given the situation, formality was not what would make her trust us.

“Oh,” she said. “I’ve heard of you. From Freddy. You know...before he—”

“That’s nice,” I interrupted, giving her the slightest shake of my head. She did luckily take the hint despite looking confused. Unfortunately, I noticed Hansen watching me at this. Although he didn’t say anything, I could practically hear the cogwheels turning around in his head.

I went on with what we were now to do, pretending nothing had happened. I told Liz to sit down a moment, noticing she didn’t even raise an eyebrow at our raiding their cooler. I told her what had happened, noting that she was holding any attempt at crying or panicking back now. Good. It made me like her.

What she could tell was unfortunately very little. She and Will had been taken by surprise when a masked man had entered their tent, going for Will, who’d instantly slumped down. Liz, at first, thought he had fainted, realizing soon afterward as their attacker ran away, that her boyfriend was awake but unable to move or talk. What

differed from the other attacks was the lack of violence. Both Jake and Michael had been assaulted first, but Will and Liz had obviously been in the middle of sex during the altercation. This had rendered Will distracted and confused, no doubt, when the attacker came in.

“Why is that important?” Hansen asked when I lay this information out for them, noticing Liz blush at my directness.

“I think it means he needs eye contact when doing his thing. If his victims run away, or worse, counterattack, remember they are quite capable of doing harm, then he’ll not be able to do this to them.”

“He did turn Will’s face toward him,” Liz confirmed.

“Kind of like you, isn’t it?” Hansen commented, eyes narrowed as he looked at me. I had not told him that, but I had read him. Damn it. He was good at putting two and two together. I looked away at that, focusing on Liz again.

“You don’t happen to have an active ability, do you?” I asked bluntly. “You know, to help us get Will down to the cars?”

It wasn’t considered rude exactly to ask about people’s affiliation, but it was kind of like asking a stranger what color underwear they were wearing. In my case, though, people usually didn’t think twice about it. I could seldom do my job if they kept things like that from me.

Unfortunately, Liz shook her head. “I get death warnings,” she said.

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That made both me and Hansen stare at her.

“Not at this moment,” she clarified, exasperated.

“For crying out loud,” Hansen exclaimed. “Don’t any of you have any nice skills?”

“Absolutely,” I said, choking down a laugh, “but they don’t really cause problems, do they?”

“Is he...an affiliate?” Liz asked, looking at Hansen as if he was a fourth grader who’d snuck into a college lecture.

“Nope,” I said, giving no more explanation. No need to reveal his occupation right now. She had enough to worry about. We all did. We needed to get Will somewhere he could get help.

As we went to get him out of the tent, I saw the reason Liz had taken so long getting out of there in the first place. She had taken the time to dress him, protecting his body from both prying eyes and the elements. He would be heavy when unconscious, and I was dreading the trek back to the parking lot, and yet she’d managed this on her own. Despite the clusterfuck we were in the middle of, I was strangely moved by her act.

Between the three of us, though, carrying Will wasn’t so bad. Especially when we got back to the trail, which was wide and without rocks and roots betraying us in the darkness. We’d taken a wide berth around the other more lively camp, and Liz hadn’t even suggested we ask them for help. That only made me more certain their friends were not affiliates.

We passed Larkin on our way. He lay exactly as he'd fallen, looking like he was sleeping next to the trail, dressed in his dark suit.

"Is that the guy?" Liz said, stopping as she noticed him, making us do the same. Hansen held Will under the arms, while we carried a leg each.

"No," I said. "That's the pit-nipple from the FBI who's trying to kidnap me."

"No kidding," Liz said, sucking air in through her teeth, asking no more questions. "Damn cops," she added and started walking again, making me laugh at her practical way of dealing with this information. It was such an affiliate reaction.

In the end, we used both mine and Will's car to drive back to Ashport as the Beetle would be crowded as hell if we were to stuff an unconscious man in the backseat. We drove to Mona's house where Dr. Morris waited for us. There was no point in using the hospice for this. There wasn't enough room for all three of the young men who'd been trapped in their immobile prisons.

Hansen and I stayed until Will woke up. We could see nothing on him, of course, but I knew the panic that had to set in when realization hit him. We let Mona, Liz, and Dr. Morris deal with that. No one could help him better than his loved ones. I, sure as hell had failed him, and I had no more knowledge of how to deal with this.

Which meant it was time to go see the Judge again.

Chapter 9

Gerard watched us with a look in his eyes so dark that I couldn't think of any situation where it would be a good thing.

"I'm sorry," he suddenly said, the tension leaving both him and me at once. "What

you told me makes me so mad, and then there's all the pent-up anger in him mixing into it." He pointed at Hansen, who sat next to me on the couch, seemingly calm. A flicker of confusion crossed his face, but he said nothing. Knowing his stance on my ability, I had told him about Gerard on the way over, figuring that was fair under the circumstances. Gerard seemed fine with it. He had picked up on it as soon as we'd walked through the door. He'd been surprised to see a cop in his house, especially in the middle of the night, but he hadn't scolded me for it. It was, after all, his own orders that I deal with him.

"This is terrible," Gerard went on. "Three young men trapped like that. And poor Andrea Kirby, too." He shook his head again. His soft eyes found mine and though his face didn't smile, they did. "Are you all right, Maggie?"

"Peachy," I said, not wanting to go through this again. Not while Hansen was listening.

"You're not good at taking care of yourself when you get this invested."

"Yes, yes. Can we deal with your empathy thing later?"

He smiled and nodded. "At least I tried. What do you need?"

"I think this guy is targeting affiliates with dangerous abilities," I said.

"It's not really a guess anymore, is it?" Hansen interjected. "Three cases kind of proves it, don't you think?"

"Fine. This guy is targeting them," I said and turned back to Gerard. "Are there more affiliates like these three?" I could think of several in town with potentially dangerous abilities, but no one who could pose such a threat. Affiliates with thought control were, for example, never allowed to hold positions of authority in the communities.

One could never quite trust how they got there. It had happened in the past.

“I can think of a few,” Gerard said, “but it’s the middle of the work week and they’re in Ashdale.”

I sighed. Much as I hated it, I needed bait if we were going to get a chance at this guy again.

“I would check with Annalise, if I were you,” Gerard continued. “No one knows as much about our affiliates as her.”

This was the problem with not having a register documenting people and their affiliations. The problem did, however, not outweigh the risk of such a thing ending up in the wrong hands. He was right. Annalise was born and raised here; if anyone would know something, it would be her.

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“But I’d hold off until morning,” Gerard said. He was also right about that. It was tempting to disturb her, given the urgency, but I let the thought go. I didn’t want to cause her additional pain. We could wait a few hours.

“Why?” Hansen asked.

“Because she needs her sleep, that’s why,” I said, making it clear there was no discussing this. Her condition was painful to us all, but nothing compared to what it did to Annalise herself. Thankfully, Hansen didn’t press the matter. He would find out later anyway.

I noticed Gerard tapping his thick thigh with his hand, a signal that I was allowed to listen in. I looked at him and focused on what was under the surface.

How is he progressing?

I could hear him as clear as if he’d been using his voice, but the little echoes and breaths in normal speech were not there. Instead, I could hear several words underneath talking over each other, vying for attention or trying to stay hidden. I focused on the conscious thoughts, though. They were easier. I could, of course, not answer Gerard the same way, but my feelings of exasperation were enough as they flooded into him.

The corners of his mouth went up a fraction.

I understand he is seeing some of the worst of us, but is he a threat, do you think?

I wasn't sure yet. I didn't think he would be. At least not to everyone. Confusion and uncertainty dominated my mindset and I could not see how I expressed that very clearly.

I'm guessing you're not sure. Is he difficult?

"Are you two seriously having a discussion together with your thoughts and feelings?" Hansen interrupted our seemingly silent pause. His voice was pure disbelief.

I couldn't help but roll my eyes. Dr. Morris was right. He was quick on the uptake. A little too much maybe.

"To answer your question," I told Gerard. "He likes things done in a certain way."

"I also talk about people to their faces," Hansen said. "But that's neither here nor there with you guys, it seems. And speaking of which...what are you?"

I glanced at him. He seemed almost relaxed seated on the too soft couch, making even him sink down and look smaller than he was. Between wishes for coffee, sleep, and his slippers, I heard Gerard wonder how I hadn't told him this yet. I broke our connection.

"We're only people," I said. "Like the rest of you."

Hansen snorted at this. "Not quite."

"We're not a separate species," Gerard chimed in, "but we have something...extra...to put it like that."

"How is that?"

Gerard and I looked at each other. No one really knew the answer to this. “It’s hereditary. Runs in families, and manifests in different ways and strengths.”

“Since when?” Hansen pressed, focused on the big man. He wasn’t used to getting answers this readily. Hell, even I hadn’t expected that from Gerard. But he had a whole community to protect. Right now, he was trying the friendly approach. Different approaches would have to come later, if necessary.

“Since always, we think.”

“How is that even possible? How does no one know about this?”

“But you do know about us. Psychics, healers, mediums, and the like. Most of them are frauds, not all, but most. Those who are real are often disliked by their communities. Exposure puts everyone at risk.”

“How so? You seem to have some...advantages.”

Gerard shrugged, his bathrobe tightening over his shoulders. He was sitting in his nightclothes as we had woken him up. For something like what we were dealing with, that wasn’t an issue, though. Not with him.

“A few perhaps, but there are less of us. I don’t know why. Maybe it’s nature’s way of keeping us in check? Regardless, non-affiliates are no worse than us when it comes to doing harm, and we are usually perceived as a threat. Or as someone who can be used.” He glanced at me. “After what you’ve seen these last days, Detective, you can perhaps understand that?”

Hansen uncrossed his arms and nodded at this. He understood that most people have the ability to be shitty to others. I might not have liked his people, but I knew there had to be a reason he’d wanted to work as a cop. I guessed they did help regular

people.

“All right,” Hansen continued, “but what about—”

“Ah, I’m sorry,” Gerard stopped him by holding up a hand in surrender. “I can’t answer any more of your questions now. And I get that it is frustrating. Trust me, I know,” he said emphatically to the detective who had crossed his arms over his chest again. “But I have to go and pay my respects to the poor young men. And I need to talk to Dr. Morris. I can give you something in exchange for my rude departure, though. Any questions you might have about us can be directed at Maggie.” He looked at me, deadly serious, but I could see the mirth in his eyes. He knew I was crap at things like this. “And she will answer them,” he continued, “within reason, of course.”

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Of course. No need to tell the outsider all our secrets. But still...I groaned inwardly, knowing the number of questions he'd already thrown at me.

"Anyway," Gerard said as he got up from his chair. "Talk to Annalise and find this attacker. The only thing I do know is that he isn't one of ours."

I nodded, feeling the weight of it all. It didn't matter, though. Regardless of what I felt about this, it wasn't even near as bad as it was for the three young men who lay in their beds like living corpses. Or Andrea, chained up and drugged in a basement somewhere.

Chapter 10

"I'm not convinced this is a good idea," Hansen said, sounding...well, like himself when it came to anything I said or did, really.

"If Will's awake then you know the fed is as well," I said, pushing open a door in the basement we were in. "He might be trying to find us, but he'll never think I've gone here."

"And Yorov?"

"They might be watching the place, but would you expect me to come back?"

There was a pause behind me, but I heard his footsteps following. "I would now," he said after a little while. I scoffed at him but said nothing.

We walked through a small parking garage, used by the residents in the building above us. I opened another door, never locked for some reason, and we entered another similar garage, though this one belonged to the building next door. It wasn't noticeable from the outside, but the two buildings shared the basements.

"You've done this before, haven't you?" he asked.

"Not a good idea to live anywhere where there isn't an extra way in," I said, opening a door that led to the stairs. You learned things over time. Escape routes were dandy and fine, but sometimes you needed to go the other way.

"It's nice," he said as we walked into the apartment a few minutes later, "but small."

"You seem surprised," I said, kicking my shoes off while flipping through the mail I'd brought in. "What were you expecting?" I added, looking defiantly at him. I knew now that my lack of income was one of the things that had aroused his suspicions of me in the first place. He'd probably expected me to occupy one of the larger apartments in the building.

"Nothing," he said, but I saw him taking it all in with curiosity.

It was a tiny apartment. We were, simply by entering, standing in the living room and kitchen, which occupied the biggest room I had. The kitchen covered the wall to our right, except for the door to my immediate right, leading into the bathroom. The living room wasn't big, but I had a couple of hard chairs and a small mint-green rococo sofa, which faced a cluttered coffee table and a TV in the corner. The couch was a total knock-off, but it reminded me of my grandmother's, so I had bought the thing despite it not being particularly comfortable. I was always careful with photos, having as many as I could hang on the walls, the ones no one could pinpoint any locations on. Other than that, it was a mix of things I picked up now and then. Things I liked. Plants as well, but I had a knack for killing them. Not because I didn't know

how to water a plant, but because of neglect.

“I don’t need much,” I told him. “I’m not here that often.”

He nodded, but there was still a crease of confusion between his eyebrows. “It’s colorful,” he said, looking at me a moment.

I took his meaning at once. Dressed in black jeans, a gray top, and a brown leather jacket, I was not. The only color I ever really wore was lipstick. I shrugged.

“I like it,” I said and left it at that. I slung the envelopes on the little shelf by the door. I pulled the tranquilizer gun from my waistband before putting it in the same place, and walked over to the kitchen. I was hungry. Dawn was breaking outside, and it had been a long night so far. Since we couldn’t head over to Annalise yet, it was just as well to eat something.

I found some cereal, which lifted my hopes. Since I didn’t spend much time in my home, food tended to be scarce or past its expiration date.

“Hungry?” I asked over my shoulder. With all the faults he found in me I sure wasn’t going to add bad hostess to the list.

“Yeah,” he said and came over. “That’s what you eat?” he asked immediately upon laying eyes on the cereal box.

“What’s wrong with it?” I asked while opening the fridge, hoping for drinkable milk.

“It’s full of sugar.”

I shrugged. “I like sugar.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“Damn it,” I hissed as the sour smell of curdled milk hit my nose. I quickly closed the carton and put it back on the self.

“Seriously?” he blurted at the sight.

“What?”

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He shook his head in exasperation. “Move,” he ordered and pushed me aside, looking into the half-empty fridge.

“What are you doing?”

“Foraging for food, apparently.”

So much for being a good hostess. To my surprise, he did manage to find a few edible things in there. A few onions and some eggs. A little cheese. This seemed to please him, so I decided to ruin that feeling.

“Those have to be expired,” I said, nodding toward the eggs.

He actually smiled then, which shut me up a moment. Smiling? That was worrisome.

“Eggs usually last well past their expiration date,” he said as he found a large glass which he filled with water. He put a couple of the eggs in it and watched them sink to the bottom. He looked pleased with this as well. “These will do just fine,” he concluded. I didn’t let my confusion show. I had no idea what the glass of water was for, but I wasn’t going to admit that. I suspected he knew, but a woman had to have some pride.

“Fine,” I snapped. “Have fun.”

Which, it turned out, he seemed to have. Not fun, exactly, but he seemed to enjoy cooking up what turned out to be scrambled eggs, making use of the herbs in the kitchen window that had managed to survive my absence.

For lack of anything better to do, I tidied up the clutter on the coffee table, really just stuffing it underneath. I was aware that Hansen was likely living in a tidy place, everything in order. He did seem the type.

The hiss of the frying pan was the only sound in the apartment. I considered turning on the TV, but what would be on at this time? We didn't turn any lights on as we didn't want anyone outside who might be watching this place to know we were in there. Daylight was enough.

"It's ready," he said after a little while.

I jumped up, my stomach growling now there was an actual smell of food in the place. Liz and Will's vegetables weren't staving off hunger hours later. He handed me a plate and a cup. Scrambled eggs and tea.

Tea?

"I didn't know I had tea," I pointed out.

He filled his own plate and grabbed another cup before heading for the couch where he sat down. "In your window," he said.

I looked at the herbs, smelling them now that he'd made use of them. Despite using several of them, there was a dominating smell of mint. Peppermint, to be exact. I tasted the tea finding it both soothing and fresh. Then I tried the eggs. They were also good, tasty with spice and onions, not the bland mix I made myself. There was a reason I preferred going out to buy food. I turned to look at him where he sat eating.

"I get it," I said walking over to the couch.

"What?"

“You actually like to cook.”

He shrugged. “It’s okay,” he said without looking up at me.

I smiled. He looked oversized in my place, tall and broad-shouldered. The couch—a two-seater—also seemed small with him on it. I smiled viciously behind his back, and went and sat down next to him on the couch, a movement that made him try to move to his left, to no avail. The couch wasn’t big enough for our thighs not to touch. I could have sat down in one of the hard chairs, but out of the two of us, I was not the easily disconcerted one. I knew he wanted me to move, or to move himself, but he wouldn’t do that. That would be admitting he was fazed.

I bit my cheek to keep from smiling and focused on the food, which went down fast. My hunger and the taste being a perfect combination.

“I asked you why you didn’t call the police after Andrea was kidnapped,” he said after a little while. “Do you remember that?”

I swallowed while nodding. He had asked me that after I’d tried running from him the first time.

“You misspoke a little then,” he continued. “I almost thought you’d been about to say that you actually had called them.”

I snorted. “Fat chance.”

He looked at me with something akin to disappointment at that, but went on nonetheless. “You called Gerard, didn’t you?”

I lowered my plate a moment, considering what to say. Then I remembered Gerard had told me to be helpful. “Yes,” I said.

“I get he’s your leader or something,” Hansen said, chewing around the eggs. “Is he the equivalent of police to you?”

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I hadn't told him much more than that before we went over to Gerard's, and that had only been to make sure he showed the Judge some respect. But some sort of affiliate police?

"No," I answered. "We don't have that. If we don't trust you guys, why would we have any of our own?"

"Then—"

"He's our judge. He's elected. He will stay that way until he fucks up, steps down, or dies. That makes him a leader, not the leader." I raised my plate again and continued eating while he mulled this information over in his head. We didn't talk much for the rest of the meal, and for once it wasn't too uncomfortable. Afterwards, when we sat nipping at the hot tea I thanked him for the food.

He looked at me with obvious skepticism.

"What? I can't be thankful now?" I smiled behind my teacup.

"You don't cook much food, do you?" he said instead, not buying my being polite. Or trying to be at least.

"What gave you that idea, Sherlock?"

"I mean...you're one of those people who only cook because you need nutrition. Tell me, do you make anything?"

I shook my head. No time in my life to sit still long enough. “It’s like some meditation for you?” I asked him, shifting my position a little, noting his eyes looking down at our thighs touching. I knew what he was trying desperately hard not to think about. He’d eased up on me a little after discovering the world I lived in. After realizing he had been wrong. That didn’t mean he was happy with the new truths, though.

He shrugged. “It’s relaxing, I guess.”

I put my cup down on the table as he drained his. I turned toward him as much as possible in the tight space on the couch. I knew what I wanted to know. Knew how to agitate him, to try and get at the truth.

“Soo...” I said, drumming my fingers on the top of the couch as he leaned forward to put down his cup. The dark polished wood created a hard tapping sound under my fingertips. “What is it about me that makes you hate me so much, only to turn around and want me in your bed the next moment?”

He lost his grip on the cup, making it slam down on the table. It barely managed not to break.

“Damn it, Evans,” he snapped. Any good mood he’d built up over the last hour looked like it drained from his face.

“What?” I asked. “It’s interesting.”

“No, it’s not.” He straightened up but was not relaxed in the least. “I told you. It shouldn’t have happened.”

“That was when you thought I was a criminal—”

“You still are.”

“Gray areas,” I said, waving it off.

“What?” he almost shouted, then composed himself a little. I watched him with interest. His handsome face softening as he drew breath, trying to remain calm. “It shouldn’t have happened at all. I’m sorry. Really, I am.”

I looked at him with curiosity. Not responding straight away. He really was trying to apologize. Like he’d done the morning after our night in the safe house. Still, it struck me as odd, since it contrasted so much with what I had learned about him that day at Rob’s.

“If you regret it so much,” I asked, “why do you want to do it again? We both know you do.” I had heard his thoughts. How could he deny it?

My words sparked something I hadn’t quite expected, though. There was fury in his eyes at the reminder of me reading him, the same dark look he’d had when we slept together. The sight suddenly made me aware of that night on a physical level rather than a theoretical one. I could feel my pulse quickening, saw his pupils dilating. Knew I was right. Knew in the same instant that it wasn’t only him this time, either. Gingerly, I reached a hand out to him but never had time to touch him as he grabbed me first, pushing me back on the couch.

“How dare you use that against me?” he growled, his face inches from mine. His breath smelled pleasantly of peppermint tea. “You might be able to read minds, but that doesn’t mean you understand everything you hear.”

“No it doesn’t,” I said, “it’s not your mind telling me this...it’s your body.”

Confusion flickered across his eyes a moment as he looked at our current position.

Pressed together on the little couch, close together, my legs around him for lack of space. I could feel the warmth of his body, heavy, yet reassuring as he pushed me back into the armrest. He smelled so good. I saw the anger returning to his face, anger at himself, I thought, more than me this time. I didn't want him to change his mind. I wanted him. I realized that without bothering to deny it anymore. The thought of the safe house not doing anything to diminish that want. I could already feel the pleasant sensations that would build and build.

I arched my neck, and kissed him. Light pressure against his lips first, my tongue searching his. He wouldn't back off then, and I sighed in contentment, relaxing a bit. Or trying to at least.

I broke free of the kiss, feeling him move on to my neck, lips both tender and fiery against my skin.

"Okay," I gasped, "this can't happen here."

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There came a muffled “what?” from him.

“This couch isn’t built for people like you,” I clarified. “There’s no room.”

He looked up then, a mischievous look in his eyes as he took in the couch. No doubt imagining what he could do to me pinned down there. At least he’d quickly come to terms with what he wanted as well.

“Bedroom,” I said, starting to push him back. He hesitated a moment, before getting up, smiling down at me as I followed. No, not smiling. That was a definite smirk. Oh yes...I had forgotten that part. I smiled back, moved closer now that we were standing and started to take off his jacket. He focused one moment on removing his gun, which was all the distraction I needed, my hands going around him, swiping what I was looking for. He wanted me at his mercy, but I wasn’t going to give him that. Not last time, not this time.

I let go of him and removed my jacket and top as I walked to the bedroom, dropping them on the floor, hearing his footsteps behind me. The room was cool, the floor for the most part covered by my bed. Only a small dresser in one corner. Before I reached the bed, I felt his hand close around my elbow, turning me around in one swift move. A hand on the back of my neck pulled me into a merciless and satisfying kiss; hard, deep, and still with the hint of the tea we had shared. My bra was unhooked without my paying attention until I felt his hand cupping one of my breasts, the gentle touch making me moan weakly, pleased he’d caught on to my sensitivities last time. It distracted me a while and I was surprised to feel the bed against my legs as he’d moved us closer. That wouldn’t do, I thought, maneuvering between clothes falling to the floor, so he had his back to the bed. He looked amused at this, going

along for a little while. I held back the smile waiting on my lips.

He lay back on the bed, pulling me with him. It was easy after that. Pinning his arms over his head, his continued amusement at this as I could obviously not keep him like that by sheer strength. I could see by the look in his eyes what he wanted to do to me, and I could feel my own treacherous body reacting to the mere thought. If I didn't act now, I wouldn't be able to.

In a quick motion, I grabbed the handcuffs I'd stolen from him in the living room. I had managed to keep them out of his sight all the way toward the bed. Not an easy feat, but manageable on account of his attention being directed elsewhere. The first one was easy, locking around his right wrist. His kisses were at this point focused on my clavicle area, moving downward, a sharp intake of breath the first sign he knew something was up. The muscles in his body tensed under me and the kisses stopped, leaving me momentarily disappointed despite what I was doing. But he was too late. The second cuff clicked as it fastened around his left wrist, effectively locking him to the curved and arching metal spindles of my bed's headboard.

"What the hell?" he blurted, instinctively pulling at the handcuffs trying to get free, his brain not caring that he knew very well that he was trapped. When this realization dawned on him, he shook violently at them, a growling sound escaping him. He, himself, though, did not escape. I sat back on my knees then, right next to him. He forcibly got himself under control, but his breathing had intensified. He looked angry—that wasn't new, though—but there was also something else. I could see the worry in him.

What was I going to do with this?

There were a number of things I could do, of course, including discrediting him or simply leaving him there like that, and he knew it. I could see for certain now that even though he didn't hate me wholeheartedly anymore, he certainly didn't trust me.

Not really.

I watched his now tense body, muscles taut under his skin, his arms still pulling at the handcuffs despite the futility. God, he was attractive. Absolutely gorgeous. A surge went through me as I realized I was, in addition to all kinds of feelings, also feeling a little power-hungry at the moment. I wouldn't do any of the things he now feared. Let's face it. I may not be the nicest of people, but petty and cruel I am not.

"Damn it, Evans," he barked at me. "Unlock them."

I smiled then. "No," I said softly.

"No? God damn it. Get the key and unlock the cuffs."

I tuned him out and put my hand on his stomach, feeling him twitch at the touch like he was trying to pull back. I looked into his eyes then, trying to hide the mix of lust and mischief I felt. I probably failed spectacularly by the uneasy look that now blended with his fury. He liked being in control, didn't he? Well, he wasn't the only one. All that anger, I thought. We had to do something about that.

Chapter 11

"This is torture," he claimed, though the noises that escaped him told me otherwise. I looked up at him, stopped what I was doing to a muffled protest, and started kissing my way along his stomach and chest. Very slowly, like I'd been doing a while now. My hands gliding along his long lean frame, touching him any way I liked.

"It's not torture," I said between kisses. "I think tortmentsuits the situation, though."

"Like that's better," he said as I moved on to his neck. I let my mouth hover near his lips a moment, knowing he wanted to kiss me, not giving him that. I ran my fingers

through his already tousled hair, slowly, seeing his half-closed eyes in reaction. All despite himself. I straightened up at that, careful not to give him too much now. I could almost feel his eyes boring into my body as I loomed over him, actually reveling a little in the feeling it gave me. I hadn't started to bruise from the fight on the ridge yet, but I still had the grazes from the bullets that had nicked me a few days ago. Still, he looked ready to devour me if I let him out of the cuffs. It was enough to give any woman a confidence boost.

"For God's sake, Evans," he managed to croak out. "You're killing me."

I smiled broadly then and moved to lay down beside him, my head resting on his chest. "There are worse ways to go," I pointed out.

"For crying out loud, woman," he said with absolute agony in his voice while pressing the back of his head into the mattress. His speech was becoming more strained. "...turn blue."

I couldn't help a soft laugh at that, letting my hand glide down toward his erection. He was hard, having been driven to the brink a couple of times already, though I hadn't let him cross. Nor did I now. I made sure to let my fingers stroke him lightly while passing, hearing him draw breath deeply. He made a half-choked sound then, as I moved further down, cupping him, caressing him gently.

"How long are you going to do this?" He managed to get the words out despite having problems forming a coherent sentence.

"Oh, I can keep this up indefinitely," I said. Which was a complete lie. The drawback of this thing was that I wasn't impervious to it all myself. The throbbing organ next to my busy hand wasn't the only throbbing happening in the room. I wanted him badly.

"Get...key..." he uttered.

I let go of him then, watching his eyes open in the brief respite. I positioned myself over him again, straddling him once more, bending down so my breasts rested on his chest, the warmth and tingling sensation at the touch making me sigh in content. His body was almost still under me. The sense of control in him surprising me, considering.

“What?” I asked as if I hadn’t heard him.

“Unlock. Cuffs,” he said, his words muffled by my sudden kisses. He responded automatically, his lips soft, tongue searching mine.

“Sure that’s what you want me to do?” I said as I came up for air.

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He croaked out an affirmation. I moved forward a little, touching his right arm. His muscles were strained under my hand, skin pleasantly warm. I slid my hand up, past his elbow, resting it on his wrist, feeling his pulse. Such a rapid beat, as treacherous in its revelations as his body was at this point. I kissed the little prodding spot, continuing with the palm of his hand, likely the most relaxed part of him.

“I can get the key,” I agreed, “or...” I moved my lips up a little, taking two fingers into my mouth, sucking a moment, tongue swirling before I let go, and moved back.

I saw actual desperation in his eyes now his options had been made clear. He wasn’t exactly desperate to leave the bed. The point had not been lost on him. “Come now,” I whispered softly in his ear. “We both know you could have kicked me out of this bed if you really wanted to.” I looked pointedly at him, saw realization dawn on his face. His hands might be stuck, but not the rest of him.

He sighed and looked up at me. “Okay,” he said softly. “You’ve made your point.”

I smiled then, in relief. For once seeing him not react to my smile with disdain.

“All you had to do was ask,” I said, equally softly, and moved back along his body. I noted the surprise in his eyes but didn’t pester him about it. Not with a word, nor with a look. Instead, I took hold of him, and finally, took him into me. The sensation of pleasure and fulfillment welled through me as I moved down his shaft, his hips instantly pushing against me. The sight of the relief on his face filled me with joy, and I pulled back, ready to ride us both to the crossing this time.

* * *

I lay on top of him, ear against his chest, listening to his slowing heartbeat. We remained like that a while, both exhausted from the prolonged “torture” as he’d called it. His breathing was becoming steadier as well, a soothing sound, which I could feel against my hair. I must have fallen asleep, though it didn’t feel like it. One moment I was simply lying still, and the next not so much. Like when you nod off and your neck jerking tells you it has happened.

I was moving forward on top of him, as he’d drawn his knees up a little while pulling himself up into a seated position by the headboard. He made a grimace at this effort and sighed as he sat back, his arms fastened to his right now.

“You fell asleep,” he said. He seemed calm, but then, he always did.

We were at eye level now and I rested my hands on his shoulders and shrugged. “It’s hard work to keep you from...uh...manhandling me.” I smiled at the thought and instantly felt a pang of want, my hips moving a little without my say-so. That’s when I noticed his returned readiness. I arched a questioning eyebrow at him.

“Why do you think I woke you?” he teased, leaning in, his mouth finding my neck.

“We have a meeting remember?” I said, making him freeze.

“What?”

“A meeting. To help us find the attacker.”

“Now? You want to go now? Are you serious?” There was incredulity in his voice as well as his eyes. This close, and with the daylight coming in from the window, I could see his light blue eyes had gray flecks. I made a mock move to get off him, the clink of the handcuffs making themselves known as he tried to get hold of me. “Oh, come on,” he exclaimed with a look of pure malice toward them.

I laughed with delight then. I couldn't quite help tormenting him, it seemed, but not now. I eased back to my former position, grabbing the headboard with one hand, feeling his breath on my neck as this time, I did not torment either one of us. The only sound in the room besides us was the metallic clink of the handcuffs every time his hands extended toward me, but couldn't reach.

* * *

"We really do have that meeting, though," I said afterward while breathing against his shoulder, my forehead pressed against the headboard as I'd caught my breath. I straightened up, ready to leave the bed, when on a whim, I kissed him, tentatively, this slow and gentle slide with his answering lips. Tender and gentle. Not like the intense kisses we'd shared so far. I couldn't decipher the look in his eyes when I pulled back, and I didn't stay to figure it out.

"Where're you going?" he asked as I headed for the door.

"Shower."

"Cuffs?"

"Yeah?"

"Hey!"

I smiled as I headed for the bathroom, not hearing whatever else he shouted.

I took a quick shower and found some clean clothes. I was tired, not only from the morning's activities, but from not sleeping all night. As I came back to the living room, I stopped as I noticed the plates and cups from the meal he'd made.

“Evans, key.”

I looked toward the open bedroom door, and nodded, then realized he couldn't see me.

“Yeah,” I said, grabbing the plates and cups, moving them to the sink. No point in placing them in the dishwasher as it was full of clean crockery from the last time I'd been home.

“This isn't funny,” he shouted.

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“Key, key, key,” I mumbled and grabbed his jacket. I hadn’t thought about the key when snatching the cuffs, and my hands fumbled through the pockets, a surge of relief hitting me as I found it.

I went back to the bedroom, where he still sat on the bed. No choice there, really. I stopped a moment, taking him in. He looked strong and vulnerable at the same time, naked and trapped, yet energetic and forceful. Oh dear, I thought at the sight, I’m starting to feel all kinds of things for him. That could not be good, especially since he didn’t think like that. He was actually looking at me with worry in his eyes, brows slightly creased.

“Why are you just standing there?”

Confusion hit me a moment before I remembered the key in my hand. “Oh yeah, this,” I said.

“Yeah, come on then.”

I nodded, took a step forward, and then stopped myself. “So, Annalise...she’s not the easiest of people.”

“Fine,” he said. “Let me get dressed and we’ll go.”

He’d noticed I was ready to leave, I could see he was tense, not trusting me. I wanted him to, but I couldn’t blame him. “Yeah...” I said letting the word hang there.

“Don’t you dare leave me here,” he warned, his eyes widening at the thought.

“Of course not,” I said, forcing a smile. “I’d never do that.” I stepped forward, and quickly placed the key in his hand before turning and leaving the room. I heard him calling for me to wait, but grabbed my purse, scribbled something on a note, and headed for the front door before he could free himself and catch up.

Chapter 12

“You’re late,” Annalise said as she opened the door, looking sharp in a red leather jacket I would have killed for. She must have slept well that night, and when that happened, both her mood and her health were better.

“Sorry,” I said and didn’t mention that we hadn’t actually set a time for our meeting. I had texted her as we left Gerard’s, knowing she always kept her phone in silent mode during the nights. That way she would see the text when she woke up.

“Well, don’t stand there like a garden gnome. Come in,” she said and stepped aside for me to walk in through the door.

“I talked to Gerard earlier,” she said as she closed the door and told me to sit. We were in her small den, the first room one entered in her house. Deep green-colored soft chairs surrounded a dark coffee table, and the walls were covered with shelves in the same color, filled with books. She had been a college professor in Ashdale before her illness had made her decide to retire to make the most of the time she had left. She wanted to spend it on the Community.

I sat down in the chair she guided me to, my back to the door. I didn’t like that. I nodded as she asked if I wanted coffee. I noticed she seemed very sprig indeed today. No tremors to be seen.

“So,” she called out from the kitchen. “Where is the police detective who knows too much about us?” Clearly, she didn’t agree wholeheartedly with Gerard’s approach in

dealing with him.

“He’s around somewhere,” I said, guessing he was on his way. With him not having a phone he could use at this point, I had left him Annalise’s address. I needed to talk to her about something without him there. He was likely pissed, though. I would be.

Annalise came back with a large mug of coffee for me, the familiar smell relaxing me. Quick as she’d been she must have made it before I showed up.

“I understand you have questions for me,” she said and sat down on the table, facing me. I nodded as I sipped the hot coffee, dark roasted, strong and energizing.

“The new identity,” I said, surprising her a little. She hadn’t expected that. Not from what she’d learned from her phone call with Gerard at least. She straightened her back a little, eyebrows slightly creased.

“What about it?”

“Is it done?”

“Not quite.”

I knew it took some time, and Eddie was thorough in his work. Very good at it.

“Where will I be going this time?” Things had been happening at an alarming speed the last few days, but my talk with Tegan yesterday had left me with a bad feeling. I had taken the news with a silent resignation when Annalise and Gerard had told me a couple of nights ago, but I didn’t feel like that now. I’d been through this before. Leaving friends behind. Friends who now could only guess whether I was alive or not, because I couldn’t contact them.

Annalise pressed her lips together a moment, considering my question. “As I understand it...this will be the third time in your life you’ll have to relocate.” She looked at me for confirmation she didn’t need and then went on. “Last time, because the FBI started hassling you. Wanting to use you.”

It was the same thing now, only a different agent. How had they found me? I gulped down some more coffee, not caring that it almost scalded me.

“You can do this, Maggie,” Annalise said and patted my knee. “You’ve done it before. You moved across the country last time.”

“That’s not the issue, though,” I said. “I’m tired of leaving friends behind. What am I supposed to do about Rob? Tegan? You?”

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She smiled a little, her eyes softening. “They will be fine. I will be fine.”

“But you won’t be fine, will you?” I said. It wasn’t to be cruel, and she knew that. Her nervous system would continue to break down. There was nothing to be done about that.

“My health will decline whether you are here or not, Maggie. Do you think you getting caught by either Yorov or this agent will help me?”

“No, but that’s not the point. I am so tired of them, in a sense, running my life.”

She nodded and then sighed. “I get that. You are, of course, free to do as you wish. To go where you choose.”

I’d only come to Ashport five years ago because the last judge I’d worked for knew Gerard. It had made it easier to settle here, continuing working as a mender. It usually took years to establish yourself as someone people could trust.

“I’ve never met or heard of anyone else with the same ability as yours,” Annalise continued. “I suspect that is because people like you are either taken and controlled...or simply killed.”

What was there to say to that? She was likely right. It was at least what certain people had tried with me throughout the years. I drained the mug and sat there, keeping it between my hands, feeling the last of the heat retained by the porcelain.

“Let me know when Eddie’s ready,” I said after a while. “But I’m not leaving until

I'm done with my work here." I could not leave before Andrea and the three young men were safe. I didn't have it in me to walk away. I also knew this likely meant one or the other of my enemies catching me. It was a chance I'd have to take, though.

"That's understandable," Annalise said. "I expected that."

She probably didn't like it, but she knew I wouldn't be persuaded otherwise, either.

"I won't like seeing you go, kid," she added, "but I'll be glad to know you're safe."

I shrugged. "For a couple of years, maybe," I began as we heard someone pounding on the door. Excellent timing, I thought. The detective must have gotten himself into a cab.

"Is that the cop?" Annalise asked as she got up. She didn't look happy.

"I suppose so," I said, leaning forward and putting the now cold coffee mug on the table. I didn't get up or turn around for their awkward, and frankly speaking, a little hostile meeting. She didn't like him on principle, and he was pissed. I saw that after a few moments when he came into the room, eyes narrowed and looking at me. Yeah, he wasn't too happy about me leaving him behind. Maybe a little miffed about the handcuffs, too.

I simply shrugged and pointed at the coffee mug. "Needed some coffee," I said as a way of explanation.

"Since you've given my name and address," Annalise said as she came over, "I hope that means he's tame."

"Nope," I scoffed and shook my head. That's when I noticed her eyes widening in shock. I was up and standing before Hansen managed to finish his sentence.

“Wait, that’s what Rob asked when—”

I heard myself shouting “No,” but Annalise didn’t even flinch. She turned toward Hansen and raised her hand a little before flinging him against the wall. I had seen her do things like this before, but it was absurd seeing him fly over the coffee table and hit one of the bookshelves, face first, as books piled down around him.

“Annalise, what the hell?” I shouted at her. She turned back toward me, hand stretched out toward Hansen, keeping him in place a couple of feet above the floor.

“Clearly, he can’t be trusted,” she said, voice steady, but hard. “And you bring him here?”

“You guys told me to—”

“Not to do this,” she chided.

“Will you let me the hell down?” we heard Hansen say.

Annalise simply made a little flick of her hand and he was turned around, his back crashing into the bookshelf, a few more books dropping to the floor. I could see his face turning red. He was having trouble breathing.

There was little I could do. One step and she would do the same to me, no matter us being friends. She’d dealt with cops in her youth, and as far as I knew, she didn’t have particularly good memories.

“Annalise,” I said, trying for reason. “He isn’t here to make your life difficult. We’re here about those three men, remember?”

She looked at me and the disappointment in her eyes was unmistakable. The kind of

disappointment kids dread from their parents, I guess. I wouldn't really know, as all I could remember from my own was fright.

“The police need to be tame or somewhere far away,” Annalise said. At the same time, the look in her eyes became uncertain, like something was wrong. It took me a moment to realize her hand had started shaking. She tried overlooking it, but the small tremors manifested themselves on Hansen who started shaking as well. Then Annalise lost control and he fell to the floor.

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I exhaled, relieved as he landed on his knees, drawing breath. Annalise let him be, trying to steady her shaking hand with her other one. She looked furious, but now it wasn't Hansen that was on top of her list.

"Oh shit," Hansen coughed. He turned around, slumping down on his back, only his bent knees showing over the table. I silently and gently took Annalise's arm and guided her over to the chair I'd been sitting in.

"Now I get it," Hansen wheezed from the floor. "The active versus passive thing."

Annalise looked at me with scorn again. "Weren't you supposed to tell him these things?"

"Haven't had the time," I said, taking her shaking hand in mine. "He seems to figure these things out himself anyway."

Hansen put his elbow on the table before he eased himself up a moment later. "And I bet you used to be a mender," he said while looking at Annalise before blinking hard several times, trying to focus properly. She had not gone easy on him.

"How'd you know?" Annalise asked.

"Your equally pleasant dispositions," he said, pointing at us both with an unsteady finger, actually looking a bit drunk. That made Annalise snicker, though. A good sign, I hoped. He was, as a matter of fact, right. Before her academic career, she had done the same as me for years. It was one of the reasons we got along so well. We had a lot in common.

“See?” I told her and let go of her hand, walking around her chair, looking down at Hansen who was slowly getting up from the floor.

“Are you all right?” I asked, and got a thumbs-up instead of a verbal answer as he managed to get to his feet, before passing Annalise and collapsing into one of the other chairs.

Annalise turned in her chair, looking up at me, her eyes wide again. The feeling of dread managed to grow at record speed in me before she got a word out.

“My God, Maggie, you slept with a cop?”

“What?” I actually squawked the word out. Was she psychic now as well?

“Cops are to be avoided,” she said as if I hadn’t heard her earlier, and as if there wasn’t one seated three feet away from her. “You don’t do that by taking them to your bed.”

I simply gave up. Nothing got past her. “I think it was the other way around,” I murmured.

“Not the second time,” Hansen commented.

“Maggie!” Annalise exclaimed with disapproval.

“Oh, thanks for your help,” I snarled at him.

“You’re welcome.”

I sighed, exasperated, and sat down on the armrest of her chair. “How did you know?”

“I can smell your perfume on him.” She shook her head and patted my arm. “This isn’t good.”

“Calm down,” I said, looking down at her lined and worried face. “It’s just sex. And we have other problems, remember?”

“Seems we got a little sidetracked,” Hansen said, politely using ‘we’ instead of Annalise. He made a grimace of discomfort as he changed his position a little, causing less strain on his back. Other than that, he seemed fine. Not being able to breathe properly had likely been worse than the collisions with the bookshelf.

“Please, Annalise,” I tried again. “There are three young men trapped inside their bodies. I have no idea how to help them even if we do find their attacker.”

“And you think that this person will do this again?” she asked.

“Three victims is not a coincidence,” Hansen chimed in. “If there are more like them, I wouldn’t be surprised if they’re in danger.”

She gave him a stern look but considered what he said nonetheless. “Are you saying you need someone to be bait?” she asked and looked up at me again. There was something in her voice that told me her help on this depended on what my answer to that was. Something more important than the three men and their current situation.

“I’m not going to deny that. This attacker goes after affiliates with very dangerous abilities. If you know about someone in town that fits into that category, they’re going to be targeted whether or not I need them as bait.”

She didn’t say anything at first. She knew I was right, of course, but there was something holding her back. She noticed her shaking hand again and moved it under her thigh. Out of sight was better, it seemed. “There is one person in town that I think

might peak this attacker's particular interests," she said. "An affiliate who can embed images of such horrors in a person's mind it has the possible capability of...well..."

"Scaring people to death?" Hansen asked.

Annalise nodded.

“Yeah,” I said. “That sounds like something our attacker might be into.”

“Something odd strikes me about the person doing this, though,” Annalise said. “I think he believes he is doing good in preventing these affiliates in using their abilities. People like that are more dangerous than a deranged person doing the same.”

“I’ll take that into consideration. First, we have to find him, though. Who’re we looking for? And where? We need to get ahead of this.”

“Don’t you think I’ve already checked if this affiliate is safe?” she said, sounding a bit insulted. “Apart from abilities, the profile doesn’t fit,” she continued. “It’s not a he, it’s a she.” She still seemed worried about telling us, but she knew that not doing so could end up worse for this woman.

“Her name is Eloise,” Annalise said, “and she celebrated her eighth birthday last week.” She shook her head as my heart sank at the realization. You couldn’t use children as bait, but as it was, I saw no other way out of this. I guess it was a small comfort that Hansen didn’t immediately protest. Even he could see it. We had one chance at this. And we could not fail. If we did, this girl would end up in a living nightmare of her own. One that was impossible to escape from.

Chapter 13

“You know, there’s actually a bigger chance of us being noticed than the attacker

trying something here.” Hansen looked at his phone, now dead to the world. He put it back in his pocket with the battery and sim card still taken out. Smart choice. My guess was that Larkin wasn’t too happy with either of us.

I looked back at the gated school. High fences, lots of children and grownups outside in the schoolyard as it was recess at the moment. No way would the attacker be crazy enough to try taking a child from there.

“So you’re agreeing with Annalise?” I asked, despite doing so myself. There really was no point in sitting around until the kid’s school day was over.

“Sure. She’s a...peachylady.”

I snorted at that and then saw who I was looking for. “That’s her, isn’t it?” I said, pointing at a little girl who was engrossed in a game of tag with several other children. Dressed in purple pants and a yellow sweater, her light-colored pigtails didn’t exactly scream dream-monster.

Hansen looked at the photo of the girl that Annalise had printed for us and nodded. “That’s her. Doesn’t look like a killing machine, though.”

“Not at this age, no,” I said and started the car. “That usually depends on how these kids are raised and treated in life.”

Since Hansen didn’t have stashes of clothes around town like me, and his car with extra gear was still parked near Mona’s house, I followed his instructions and drove to his place. It was closer than Mona’s.

He lived in an apartment building about ten minutes from the town center, a nice area, but pretty much every area in Ashport was nice. That didn’t tell me much. I have to admit to curiosity as he unlocked and opened the door, but a bark and a flurry

of white fur caught me off guard as two paws landed on my shoulders. I looked straight into a sharp-toothed canine mouth that kept barking in joy as I staggered back a bit, trying not to fall on my ass.

“No, Kona,” Hansen yelled. “Down.”

The dog did as told, and let me go, her front paws now on the floor as she backed into the apartment. I followed and bent down to greet her better, seeing her happy movements, tail wagging at high speed.

“Hello, girl,” I said, guessing on account of her name. “You’re beautiful aren’t you?” She really was. Bigger than what I was used to from that breed. Her fur almost exclusively white though with some hint of a golden tone.

“I swear if someone ever breaks in here she’ll give them a guided tour of the place.” Hansen shook his head at the dog that was licking my face while I scratched her behind her ears.

“Maybe you should have trained her different,” I said, glad he hadn’t. The dog clearly liked people.

“I didn’t,” he said. “She was delivered fully altruistic.” He scratched her head absentmindedly.

“Well, good for you, Kona. If this guy had trained you from a puppy you would have been a total bitch, wouldn’t you? Yes, you would.” Kona gave a short bark at that. I laughed and saw him stare down at me, eyebrows raised a little before shaking his head.

“Okay then,” he said, “give me a second. Don’t steal my dog, and there’s probably food.” He headed further into the apartment. I sat with the dog a couple of minutes.

She calmed down after a while and enjoyed being petted.

“I’m so tempted to steal you,” I said to her, “but I think your owner would catch on as to who did it.” Kona double-barked at that. “Yep,” I agreed. “Not as stupid as he looks.”

I looked around then and sat on the floor for a moment. What I had expected was something off-white, neat and orderly, almost like a hospital. But the home I was in actually had colors in it. Light colors on the walls, yes, but blended with hardwood floors and mostly differing tones of blue. It gave off a pleasant atmosphere. Not as many knickknacks as I had. It was tidy, of course. If it hadn’t been I would have been shocked. With Kona by my side, I walked on into the next room, which was the kitchen. It was dominated by a big ass kitchen island, barstools placed on one side. White walls in there, but the stone counters and backsplashes dominated the room. They had a deep-gray color with lighter veins. It was all neatly put together, and I stared in surprise before remembering that cooking was this meditative thing for him. Of course, he would live somewhere with a large kitchen.

With nothing better to do, I opened the fridge and saw what put my own to shame.

“Probably food?” I mumbled. It was fully stocked, making me a little ashamed that mine had only contained expired milk and a few ingredients for scrambled eggs along with other things that might soon walk away on their own.

I was hungry but felt more like an intruder than anything. I had a glass of orange juice, enjoying the strong flavor, while Kona kept me company. I noticed that both her food- and drinking-bowl were filled. Her owner had not been the one doing that these last twenty-four hours. In fact, a happy, healthy dog like Kona, was one that was walked, fed, and talked to on a regular basis. I caught myself wondering who did that for him. Wondering if it was a girlfriend, then reminding myself that was none of my business. It would be weird, though, my treacherous mind kept on musing. He

really wasn't the type to be sleeping around with others if he was in a relationship. Although, you could never truly tell with anyone.

"Come on, Margaret," I mumbled to myself. I had told Annalise there was nothing to worry about. There wasn't. No one on this planet was without some curiosity. Perfectly natural.

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All in all, it took him about fifteen minutes to shower, shave and dress. Apparently, he was nothing if not effective. As he came into the kitchen, Kona forgot all about the new person in the room and ran around the island to greet her owner.

“No jumping,” Hansen told her and I could hear the pitter-patter of her paws moving on the floor as she couldn’t stand still, but at least remained on all fours. “Good girl,” he said.

“Why didn’t you become a chef or something?” I asked. Isn’t that what they say? The happiest people are the ones who have their hobbies as their jobs?

“What?” he said in response, straightening up. Then he scoffed at the thought. “Too stressful,” he said and added, “let’s go,” before leaving the kitchen.

I scrambled off the counter stool and walked after him. “That would be too stressful? You work for the police.”

“Yep,” he said, Kona running back and forth between him and the door. Apparently, she knew her owner was leaving.

I caught up as he found some shoes and a gray jacket and suddenly felt like I’d been caught in his orbit in some way. God, he smelled good. Whatever scent he used, blended well with what I guessed was soap and shampoo.

“Come on,” he told me while telling Kona to stay where she was.

I mumbled; “okay,” enjoying passing him in the doorway and then came to my

senses. What the hell? I felt like I was following the pied piper there for a moment, wondering who that made me? A rat to be killed or someone never to be seen again?

What was going on? It's not like I was stupid. Obviously, I was attracted to the guy, but this was getting ridiculous.

Luckily, he was oblivious as he kept asking questions about the Community as we drove back into the town center. At this point, I realized I kept glancing over at him in the passenger seat, annoyed at all he demanded to know and yet wanting to stop the car and climb on top of him. Seriously. Like some stupid teenager. This was not something that happened to me. Of course, I didn't usually bring men I had any kind of entanglement with around with me on my jobs, either. Nor did I bring anyone who didn't trust me. I guess it was new times all around.

I did, however, find a way to distract myself from any lascivious thoughts as we got to the police station. I didn't want to go there for obvious reasons, but also because of Agent Larkin. The station was his hub in town and I told Hansen as much as we walked over to the building.

"What's he going to do?" Hansen said. "Not like he's here on any official business, is it?"

"Doesn't mean he can't cause problems," I argued.

"No, but..." he trailed off and stared over at the police parking spaces. There was the gray sedan he and McAllen used—parked. Last I had seen of it was outside Mona's house. Hansen shook his head and got his phone out, reassembling it as he walked.

"And that is a good idea?" I pressed. I couldn't see the black car the FBI agent used, but alerting him to where we were, was perhaps not the best way to go?

“It’s fine,” Hansen said after I asked, while he seemed to be reading text messages that had come in during the phone’s little hiatus.

At this point, I noticed a familiar face heading down the steps in front of the large brick building that constituted the station house. Eddie Hays was as usual dressed in scruffy clothes, but his hair was unusually slicked back and tidy. For a moment, it reminded me of his brother.

As Eddie saw me, he changed his direction, heading over toward us. I suddenly felt Hansen’s hand close around my elbow, texts all but forgotten at the moment. It was the kind of possessive gesture only men who are stupid enough to think of doing, although I expect there wasn’t much thinking involved. I looked at my elbow in surprise, and he jerked his hand back as if he hadn’t realized what he was doing.

What now? I thought and then realized as Eddie came closer that he looked more like his brother than usual. Hansen probably hadn’t recognized the usually shabby and scraggly looking guy. But why would that bother him? It took a moment for my brain to click into place. I had told them about Jacques, hadn’t I? When McAllen and Hansen came to get me at the harbor. It had only been a few days, but it seemed so long ago.

“Hey, Maggie,” Eddie said, looking with uncertainty in Hansen’s direction, but nodding politely enough.

“Made an effort today, Eddie?” I said, smiling. The two brothers were, despite their stunning and similar looks, very different with Eddie not caring much about how he came off to others. At least, not usually, it turned out.

He shrugged. “Officer Leland wanted a chat,” he said. “thought a little charm wasn’t to be wasted on her.” He gave a dazzling smile. Hansen scoffed at the comment but said nothing.

“Anyway,” Eddie said, a short glance in the detective’s direction, but he made no move to step away. “I’ve got a message for you.” Eddie continued on, though I knew those words were for show. Knew what he wanted to tell me about and whatever message it was, it was from him.

“Oneday,” he said.

I nodded my understanding and actually felt my shoulders sag a little.

“And what was that about?” Hansen asked as Eddie went on his way.

“Nothing that requires me to answer you,” I said and headed up the stairs. “Keep your questions general, Detective.”

“Sure,” he said as he followed me. “Are were-animals and ghosts real?” His tone was sarcastic; no answer expected or wanted, for that matter.

“Not really,” I said. “And there are surprisingly few ghosts about. When people die, they seem to move on.”

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Hansen stopped with his hand on the door and looked at me like he didn't know whether to take me seriously or not.

"Come on," I said and pushed open the door.

"Wait, what kind of answer is not really?"

I never got to tell him as a smiling Maureen greeted us in what was an unusually empty reception area.

"Oh, Nate. There you are," she said. "Wait a sec." She almost ducked behind her large desk, coming up with a stack of papers. "Need you to sign these. And you," she said and turned to me, her dark curls swinging around her plump and friendly face, "need to sign in."

I did as told, realizing she thought I was there to help with an interview as usual.

"How's Bill?" she asked Hansen as he went through whatever papers they were and signed them.

"Better," he said, surprising me a little. This must have been what the texts were about. "Seems to be over the worst, but keeps going in and out of unconsciousness."

"That's good," she said with genuine relief in her voice. They were a small police department and everyone knew each other. "Rosita and the kids?"

"She's kept the kids away for the worst of it," he said, finishing the last of the papers

and handing them back.

“Thanks,” she said, and then looked a little surprised. “That was unusually complaint free from you,” she said as she put the papers down behind her desk again. “If I didn’t know any better I’d say you got—”

She stopped herself way too late, her cheeks turning red immediately as Hansen stared at her with those damn narrowed eyes. I couldn’t help myself as I started laughing at the sight. Yep, his being disconcerted was the best distraction from my own problems.

“Stop that,” he told me, which didn’t help in the least. I actually doubled over a moment, before straightening up and seeing Maureen’s shocked face as realization dawned on her.

“You two?” she said pointing a finger back and forth between us.

“Oh, for crying out loud,” Hansen exclaimed and walked away from us.

“Twice,” I said, holding up an equal amount of fingers, simply to piss him off. It worked like a charm.

“Evans,” he yelled back at me as Maureen broke into a smile as well.

“Gotta go,” I said to her. “That’s how he flirts.”

Her laughter followed me into the station as I ran to catch up with him. He went straight to his desk and told me to sit down. I did, sitting down in one of the chairs next to his and McAllen’s desks as Hansen logged onto his computer.

“Will you stop that?” he said without looking at me. I sat with my hand over my

mouth, shoulders shaking as I tried my best to suppress the laughter.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“No, you’re not.”

I shook my head. He was right.

The smile was wiped from my face a few moments later, though, as he found what he was looking for, and turned the computer screen in my direction for me to see.

Freddy.

His picture unmistakable, as part of the file the police had on him. Still marked as a fugitive.

I was suddenly aware of Hansen studying my face for any information he could obtain. My silence spoke volumes. He’d caught me completely off guard.

“Why are you showing me this?” I asked.

“You know why.”

“No. Can’t say that I do.”

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He didn't say anything a moment. Only looked at me, eyes narrowed, brows creased. "You know," he said after a little while. "If there's one thing I've learned about you people during the last few days, it's that you watch out for each other."

I shrugged, feeling I may as well have been in the interrogation room.

"Watch out for each other to an insane degree, I think." He sat back a little in his chair. "It struck me as odd at the time," he continued. "Mr. Miller seemed like a regular man. Some run-ins with a few of the officers now and then, but nothing on him, really. And then he's caught for a B&E and for assaulting a woman in her home." He paused giving me a chance to add something if I chose to, I supposed. I kept my mouth shut.

"And then this elaborate escape from the transport to Ashdale, just before they arrived in the city."

I looked at him, trying to keep my face in check. That woman had not been assaulted by Freddy, but by her boyfriend, who had terrible problems controlling his ability. She'd never seen it coming. She'd actually thought it was Freddy, and he'd protected the guilty party who we'd managed to get help after that. He'd gotten better. Why would I wreck that by saying something? And Freddy was safe. Not here, unfortunately, but safe.

"You misspoke," Hansen continued. "You and Liz. You both knew him. Knew about this. Didn't you?"

Hansen didn't even sound angry now. That was almost worse. At least you knew

where you had him when he was angry. He was right, though. I'm not denying that. He had a knack for collecting odd pieces of information and connecting them. But I couldn't tell him anything. It would put others in jeopardy. Those who had helped Freddy escape.

"I can tell you this," I said, keeping my voice level. "If I go across the street and rob the deli...I will have to face that." No one would help me out if I committed a crime like that. The Community would be okay with the police dealing with it. "But if...say...little Eloise kills someone by literally scaring them to death because she can't control herself...well, that's a different matter altogether." We would do everything we could to help her. If she was an adult and did it on purpose? Not so much. We might actually have to stop her ourselves. Not a type of job I appreciated.

Hansen sat still, drumming his fingers on the desk while thinking. He did not look happy. Seemed he couldn't get the answers he most wanted about us. It dawned on me that if it turned out we couldn't trust him, then he might become a job like that himself. I also realized that I didn't want that to happen. Nothing so asinine as my attraction to him being the reason. No. He wasn't a bad person despite us all hating his job. He was trying to help. It was only that he went about it in a different way.

"Listen," he said. "I'm trying to make some sense of this. And Mr. Miller here"—he indicated Freddy's photo with his thumb—"he was like you, wasn't he?"

I kinda saw where he was going. At least, I thought I did. It didn't seem like he was out to gather evidence, more like he wanted to understand. But I couldn't know that for sure.

"Don't know what you're talking about," I said instead of giving a proper answer. I got a bad feeling in my gut, but I'd said it now. Him looking let down didn't sway me. He shook his head, then glanced to my right and pressed the escape key, Freddy's file and photo vanished from the screen.

I turned to see Chief Mulligan descending on us, her long dark hair gathered in a tight bun at the nape of her neck, making her look more severe than she was. Still, the look on her face didn't exactly radiate daffodils and bunnies.

"Good to see I'm not two detectives down," she said by way of greeting Hansen. "Routledge found your car parked in a random street last night...oh, and no phone." She folded her arms and looked expectantly at him. Apparently, they'd tried calling him.

"Well, you told me to go investigate her," he said and pointed at me as if she didn't see me sitting right next to her. "Didn't turn out like expected."

I looked up at her, which made us both uncomfortable, and smiled. "I broke his phone," I lied. "Dropped it in my coffee."

For some reason, she could believe that. "Okay," she said. Hansen did not contradict me. That was something after our interrupted conversation. Or interrogation. Whatever that had been.

"Well," she continued, "since she's sitting here I guess I was right and you were wrong?"

An almost invisible twitch fluttered across his mouth. "She wasn't involved, no...she was the intended target."

Mulligan looked down at me and then averted her eyes. Like Hansen, she had assumed I listened in all the time. I had never corrected her. I had helped with her kid, and to do that I'd had to convince her I could. After that, she had managed what the FBI could not—make use of me.

Still, she didn't trust me, nor I her, for that matter. She was a cop after all. I wasn't

surprised that she had told Hansen to investigate my involvement in the kidnapping. What had surprised me was that she'd kept this away from the detectives who were actually on Andrea's case.

"Why was she the target?" the chief asked.

Hansen looked at me, and I shrugged. "She knows."

"Because of the...thought thing," he told Mulligan, looking like he couldn't believe he was saying those words to his boss, let alone to any other human being.

"Oh," was Mulligan's answer. Very eloquent. Funny the effect you have on people sometimes. Making the police uncomfortable has to be considered a bonus, though.

"Okay," I said, impatient to be out of the station. This conversation was going too slow. "They're after me because they want to use me." I deliberately looked at Mulligan at that. She was, after all, doing the same thing. "They took Andrea by mistake."

"How are Mel and Rick getting on with the case?" Hansen asked.

Mulligan shook her head. "They're not. No traces other than what was found on the farm. Nothing. It's like they disappeared from the face of the earth. And that FBI agent doesn't seem very invested in the case, either." She sighed at this, lowering her eyes a moment. "We may have to face facts soon. It could be that we won't find her."

I couldn't help folding my arms and looking down myself at that. Her words stung me more than I liked. I had failed Andrea so badly.

"Unless you two have something to share?" Mulligan continued. "If they were after you?" She glanced at me.

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I shook my head before Hansen could say anything. We couldn't start talking about the Community and what they were doing. Or Yorov's involvement. She didn't know anything about that, and it wouldn't help the police anyway. It certainly didn't seem to be helping us.

"You must at least know who's behind it?" she pressed. "How else would you know they're after you?"

Damn cops, using their thinking boxes.

"A foreign company looking to further their business with corporate espionage," Hansen said as he decided to give her something. "Wouldn't you use her for that, too?"

"She already is, in a way," I volunteered.

"I need to know whether or not to take this to Kaye and Bowman," Mulligan continued, ignoring me. Maybe that wasn't just Hansen? Maybe it was a police thing?

"If you do that, they'll have to know everything," Hansen said, glancing over at said detectives' empty desks. "God knows I've been spending too much time running around blind." He looked at me but said nothing more. The underlying jab about my secrecy was not lost on me.

"Please don't do that," I said and turned to look at her. "It has led us nowhere and won't help them, either."

Man, was she uncomfortable under my direct stare. I couldn't blame her. But I didn't want to be exposed to any more people, let alone cops.

Mulligan looked at me with clear skepticism, lips pursed sideways a little as she considered my plea. Finally, she turned to Hansen. "What do you think?"

Apparently, I was not to have a say in this. I could try and run away, of course. I turned back in my seat.

"Let them live in ignorant bliss if you ask me," Hansen said to my utter surprise. He'd wanted to involve his colleagues the whole time. "She's right. Knowing she's the intended target won't help them any, and they will want to know why."

"We can convince them easily enough," Mulligan said. "That is...you can," she told me.

Hansen suddenly tried hard not to smile. "I bet you she's already thinking of escape routes out of here to avoid that."

I didn't deny it. Only sat in silence, pondering how the hell Hansen had known that, while hearing the chief exhale. She couldn't force me to prove I could listen in. If I didn't cooperate, she would look like a fool. Worse, actually. She would seem like she'd lost her marbles. Not a good way to keep your job. At that point, I couldn't help but smile a little, noticing Hansen giving me a sideways stare. Only because he'd helped, didn't mean he agreed with me.

"Fine," I heard Mulligan say, though I had lost interest by now. "But if you find out anything—"

"You'll be the first to know," Hansen agreed before she took her leave of us and headed for her office.

So, he'd helped me. But why? Because he knew I was his way to find Andrea? It had to be. He knew I wouldn't cooperate with any more cops. This was the only way to keep tabs on me. Well, judging by Eddie's time estimate, no cop in Ashport would be keeping tabs on me for much longer.

"So?" he asked, interrupting my train of thought. I looked at him, raising my eyebrows.

"You sure you have nothing to share regarding Freddy Miller?"

Oh, so we were back there again. Not one to let things go, this one. Nope. He was like a dog with a bone when on to something.

"You might have given me a hand with Mulligan," I said, "but that doesn't mean I'll start sharing information I didn't have before."

He gave me an absolute blank stare for a moment before he logged off his computer and stood up. "Come on," he said. "School's almost out."

I practically jumped out of the chair, having momentarily forgotten the little girl we were supposed to look out for. Normally, that would have made me feel guilty, but my head was wrapped up in too many problems at that time. One of them showing its smug face a couple of seconds later.

Chapter 14

As I followed Hansen toward the entrance, our way was blocked by an impeccable dark suit, with a seemingly unhurt agent inside it.

"Going somewhere?" Agent Larkin asked as we were forced to stop.

“Agent Larkin,” I said, smiling wide. “How're your balls? Come down again yet?”

I wondered how it must have been waking up on Highfield Ridge in the middle of the night, hurting and confused. The agent's eyes did not look kindly at me.

“A word?” he simply said and indicated the closest interrogation room with a nod of his head. The tone of his voice told us we didn't have much of a choice. Not if we wanted to avoid any attention.

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“Sure,” Hansen said and headed in. I followed him and stepped into what felt like a well-known stage for me. I’d been in these rooms enough times by now, always playing a role that wasn’t quite true to what I could really do.

In silent agreement, Hansen and I stepped over to the table, taking the cops’ side of it, leaving Larkin with the other side. I saw an amused smile on his face as he simply sat down there, making no fuss about it. No handcuffs for him, though.

Now that I saw him in a lighted room, and not the darkness of night, I could see the muscled body hiding under that suit. He was strong, I’d experienced that myself, but he was quicker than he looked as well. I was suddenly aware of the bruises from my second meeting with the man. They still hurt, a dull ache in my shoulder and back, and had to be starting to show by now.

Larkin didn’t seem in a hurry to say anything, which bothered me. We had an hour until Eloise would leave the school. The plan had been to be there well in advance of that. Now, of course, that might all go down the drain.

“Seems I was mistaken when I thought you were investigating her,” Larkin finally said, looking at Hansen.

“No, you weren’t,” he answered.

“What did you find out then?”

“She’s not guilty of what I suspected,” Hansen said, not looking at me. Interesting way of putting it, I thought.

Larkin smiled a smile I didn't like. Knowing and condescending.

"And what did—" he began, but I was tired of them both now.

"I'm right here, you know. Unless you want me to leave so you can speak for me?"

Larkin only smiled wider. "You're as pleasant as your file indicated, Ms. Evans," he said.

"Yes, well, the last agent sent after me was also a fucking asshole. I don't like those."

"That agent was to persuade with words first...and I am not that agent," Larkin said. There was no shame to trace in him. I was not surprised. He'd attacked first and was now talking. No, he was sent to take me in. Make sure they didn't lose sight of me like last time.

"It's been five years since we lost track of you. Not one person suspected of knowing you in Seattle said a word. Admirable in its way, I suppose..."

Hansen tensed beside me. He had not known this.

"How did you find me this time?" I had begun to think I was safe in Ashport during the last couple of years. It had been five years altogether with no agents coming for me.

Larkin shrugged. "Yorov."

I nodded. They had found me somehow, and the FBI had gotten knowledge of this. Whether they had spies or they had intercepted some information, well, it didn't matter to me. They had found me. The damage was done.

“So you know Yorov has taken Ms. Kirby?” Hansen asked Larkin.

The agent nodded and then gave Hansen an astonished look. “Yes. I’m surprised you do. Your colleagues don’t.” His eyes swerved back to me. “You told him. Huh...I understand that you people are notoriously hard to get information from.”

I didn’t answer him. I realized it kind of proved his point, but what was there to say?

“And you’re here under the pretense of investigating a kidnapping and you’re not doing anything?” Hansen continued.

Larkin shrugged. “This is more important,” he said, sounding like they were disagreeing on football teams.

His words made an impact, though. We had seen Andrea. Seen how terrified she was. Hansen, who’d been resting his hands on his thighs, clenched his fists at this. The skin turned white before he got himself under control and forcibly relaxed his hands.

“What’s she wanted for?” he asked Larkin, indicating me with a sideways tip of his head.

I snorted at this. “Nothing. Not a damn thing.”

Larkin nodded. “That’s true. My superior wants her under control, though. Do you know what she can do?”

Hansen nodded but said nothing.

“Well, imagine her working for the wrong side. Imagine what she could bring to the table for us.”

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“You could find out about a lot of crimes before they happened,” Hansen said so matter-of-factly it gave me shivers. “Of course,” he continued, “that would expose her to the wrong side, as you put it, as well as other...interested parties.”

Yeah, not something I wanted. Not in the least.

Larkin looked at me. I realized he wasn't afraid of me listening in. He was convinced he was right. He had nothing to hide in that regard. “Sometimes personal wishes can't outweigh duty,” he told me. I knew this was his asking me in a reasonable way to go with him. He'd tried forcing me with him twice, and that had failed.

“I know that,” I said. I meant it. Did I not set aside personal wishes all the time? Did I not have to leave a place where I wanted to stay in order to protect both myself and my Community? All because of people like him.

“Enough of this,” Hansen said and stood up. “You have no reason to arrest her, so we're going to walk out of here now.” As on cue, I got up as well. “And you are going to do nothing about it.”

Larkin didn't move. “I can make trouble for you,” he said and added, “both.”

“How? The way I see it, you've tried to kidnap her twice now. Who do you think my colleagues and friends are going to believe?”

“Well, you're not trying to arrest me, either, so it seems neither of us has any warrants or...evidence.”

Hansen actually smiled at that, though I knew him well enough by now to know he had to be boiling on the inside. “In that case,” he said. “Buckets of putrid chicken will do.”

The agent’s eyes widened a little before he nodded. “That was you.” It was not a question.

“Yep,” I said. “That surprised the hell out of me, too, but now that I’ve seen you properly I totally get it.”

Larkin sighed, making me think of a disappointed teacher. “Allegiance is an important thing, Ms. Evans. It can make your life easier or very, very difficult.”

“My allegiances lie somewhere else I’m afraid, Agent Larkin,” I said and quickly headed out of the room, Hansen following me.

Turned out he was right. The suit did not come running after us. What could he do in the station without anyone asking questions? It was not lost on me, though, that Detective Hansen once again disassembled his phone as we left the station as quick as we could.

Chapter 15

“Seattle, huh?” Hansen said as the kids were getting on the school buses. It was the first thing he had said since we left the police station. At that point, I would have welcomed awkward silence, but that had not been the case. No, he was angry, and it was directed at me.

“What can I say?” I turned the car engine on. “I like the ferries.”

“Could you just, for once—”

A knock on the window next to his head cut him short.

“Sometimes you have the best luck in timing, don’t you?” he said as he lowered the window.

A blonde woman, around forty, dressed in a dark blue trench coat with a beige bag on her shoulder, peered in through the window past Hansen as she looked straight at me.

“Are you Maggie?” she said with a worried voice.

I nodded, not quite able to hide my confusion.

“I’m Amy Boudreau, Eloise’s mother. Annalise called me.”

I nodded again, a little relieved. “Get in,” I said. The buses were almost full. We couldn’t risk being stuck by the school talking to her.

Her getting in, however, involved Hansen getting out so she could climb into the backseat, via the same door.

“I’m starting to hate this tiny matchbox,” he said as he got back in.

“Really?” I said, patting the dashboard for show. “I’m liking it more and more.”

“Are you an affiliate?” Amy asked Hansen.

He scoffed at the question, then seemed to remember that he wasn’t mad at this woman.

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“No,” he answered, as he looked back at her. “My name’s Nate. I’m here to help.”

Amy nodded, likely too worried about her daughter to consider a non-affiliate with knowledge of the Community, let alone her family. I noticed then that he’d hidden his badge again somewhere between here and the station. Smart. He was learning.

“Okay,” she said and then pointed at one of the buses that were leaving. “She’s on that one.”

I started driving. I knew very well which bus her daughter was on. I wasn’t losing sight of that kid.

“When we get home,” Amy began and scooted over to the middle seat so she could better hear and talk to us, “please don’t scare her with this, okay?”

“We’ll try not to,” I said. I got why she wanted her kid to take the bus home like any other day. No need to scare her unnecessarily. “What can you tell me about her ability?” I added. I was actually glad Annalise had called her. It had been enough for Amy to wait for us at home. But to not have to explain myself always saved time. I got why she’d come to the school, though. This was about her child, after all.

“She’s doing very well,” Amy told us. “I’ve been teaching her. We started early and she’s getting better at controlling it.”

“You have the same ability?” Hansen asked.

“Yes.”

“You can plant images in people’s heads?”

“Give me your hand,” she told him.

“What?”

“Do what she says,” I said, taking a right as the bus in front of us headed in that direction.

Hansen obliged our passenger and raised his left hand for her. As she grabbed it, it didn’t take long for him to snatch it back.

“Holy shit,” he cried out, looking like he was trying to move out through the closed car door.

“What did you see?” I asked. It was clear to me Amy did it by touch, not eye contact. Hansen looked at Amy with awe more than horror as the initial shock gave way.

“What did you show him?” I asked Amy instead. She was more relaxed about it, telling me how he’d seen her swing a knife straight into his neck, blood spurting all over the car. Apparently, when she did this, the person experiencing it couldn’t distinguish it from reality.

“Glad you didn’t do it to me then,” I said when she’d finished explaining, “I’d have driven us off the road.”

“Yeah,” Amy said. “I can give off quite a fright. Give me your hand again,” she added to Hansen. From what I could see out the corner of my eye she got a fool me once kind of look.

“No, seriously, come on,” she pressed. Hansen, reluctantly, did as she said. This time,

though, he didn't react like he was about to be killed. Instead, he sat still, closing his eyes a moment.

"Why did you do that?" he asked when she let him go.

"Do what?" I asked and started to regret being the one driving. I wasn't getting much from glancing away from the road now and then.

Amy didn't answer me. "When you do what I do," she told Hansen, "it pays to take note of people."

He didn't say anything at first. Didn't seem angry, happy, embarrassed, surprised, terrified—only thoughtful. "This makes you a target, too, doesn't it?" he asked. Sometimes I wondered how his brain worked. Whatever she'd shown him didn't sidetrack him. I had a sudden urge to listen in at this point. To both of them.

Try to be a decent person, will you?

I couldn't help scolding myself. It was a slippery slope if I started listening here and there. Soon the boundaries would become blurry. I knew that from experience.

"She's not a target," I said, stopping the car as the bus did the same further ahead. "If that was the case, Annalise would have told me."

I saw Amy nodding her agreement in the rearview mirror. "That's true," she said. "I've known Annalise for years. From what she told me, I'm not who this guy's after."

"But...with what you can do?" Hansen protested.

"I can only transfer images for...fifteen seconds? No more. That's certainly not

enough to kill someone. Eloise, though...she can do it for a prolonged amount of time.”

“How long?” I asked.

Amy sat back in the seat. “Hours. Don’t really know how long. She’s never grown tired.”

That shut both me and Hansen up. This kid had the potential of torturing people if she so chose. No wonder her mother had started training her at a young age.

We followed the school bus all the way to the Boudreau home, a nice little blue house on the outskirts of town. We watched as Eloise exited the bus and went into the house. After that, we parked in the driveway and entered ourselves.

It was a nice house. Lovely, actually. With its warm, yet light colors, tidy décor, photos, children’s toys and drawings all around, it practically screamed family home at any who entered.

Eloise herself looked like the epitome of innocence up close. This smiling little girl with her pigtails that got a little shy as she noticed two strangers as well as her mother in the house.

“Do you work with Mama?” she asked us after establishing that her mother hadn’t been home as usual because she’d gotten a ride with us.

“Yes,” I lied, thinking that was a better explanation than the real reason for us being there.

“How many have you sold in the last month?” Eloise asked, quite serious.

It dawned on me I had no idea what Amy did for a living. Before I could make a fool of myself, though, she luckily stepped in.

“They’re part-time realtors, Elo. And it’s rude to be nosy,” she told her daughter.

“Sorry,” Eloise told me, looking down at the floor.

“It’s okay, kid,” I said, getting distracted as Amy took her trench coat off. A definite baby-bump made it clear Eloise would not be an only child for more than a few months.

“How far along are you?” I asked moments later after Amy had told her daughter to stay where she could be seen. We followed her into the kitchen where she gave us the offer of waiting for dinner or heating up leftover Chinese food. Lack of sleep and little food in the last twenty-four hours made us go for the latter. I had no shame in accepting food and drink from affiliates I was helping. If I didn’t, I would have starved ages ago. It was one of the few things I was allowed to accept in terms of favors. So, we ate kung pao chicken while Eloise remained in the living room, drawing or doing homework on the table. I couldn’t quite tell.

Her mother was twenty-two weeks along. Apparently, they’d never had more children because of Eloise’s difficulties. That wasn’t unheard of among affiliates with the more dangerous abilities. Now, with her daughter doing all right, and Amy’s age, it had been the last chance for one more. Her husband, who worked in Ashdale, was only an affiliate by marriage. Chances were that the new baby would end up with the same ability. Or perhaps not. Maybe it would be weaker. Hopefully not stronger than its sister. One could never know in advance.

“I don’t understand why this man is targeting my daughter,” Amy said, watching Eloise go into the backyard. We could see her all the time through the large windows connecting the outside garden with the living room as well as the kitchen. The kid

had a cage with a black rabbit in it. I saw her picking dandelion leaves and feeding the little animal through the chicken wire. For a moment, as I watched her do this, it was very hard indeed to answer Amy's question. It didn't seem personal, though. This man was going after affiliates who could be threats to others. So far, there had been no indications they had ever done anything wrong in that manner.

"I understand that," Amy said after I explained, holding her hands around a cup of lemon tea as she leaned back against the kitchen counter. "But Eloise is at least ten years younger than the others. How does he even know about her? It's not like she's been spending time with them."

I nodded and then shrugged. "Don't know that yet. It has to be connected to this guy's ability, though."

"How so?" Hansen asked, chewing around a piece of chicken.

"Not like any of them have been announcing what they can do, is it?"

"Unless it's a local who knows about them?" Amy asked.

"I don't think so," I said. "Surely Gerard, Annalise, or any of the other seniors would know. They would have told me."

"Seniors?" Hansen asked.

"Not now."

"Okay," Amy said, putting her teacup down. "So how do we go about this?"

"I say we make it easy for him to break into the house when he comes."

“And you’re sure he will?”

“Not a hundred percent, but pretty sure, yeah. We know his M.O., so we use the darkness to our advantage.”

“The best thing would be for you and your daughter to go to bed early. That way we can lure him into the house quicker,” Hansen chimed in. “He’s bound to be staking out the house for some time before he comes in.”

I could see Amy shiver at our words, but she kept it together.

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“He won’t come near Eloise,” I said and hoped I sounded reassuring. “We won’t let him.”

“Never mind that,” Hansen suddenly contradicted me. I turned to correct him, an unhappy temper building up in me, as I saw him leave the kitchen at a run.

I blinked once. Saw the takeaway box he’d eaten from fall to the floor as his hand dropped it, food and chopsticks spreading out on the tiles as I heard his footsteps vanish into the living room. Heard Amy’s sharp intake of breath as I turned my eyes to the little girl in the lovely garden, and saw her blissfully ignorant while feeding her little bunny. A man wearing a ski mask came climbing over the fence. In broad daylight.

I remember shouting something, but not what, as I started running myself. Through the living room, through the sliding doors that led outside. I saw Hansen ahead of me as he ran to intercept the masked man, who was headed straight for the oblivious girl. Saw the detective reach for his gun as he ran, then luckily discarding the weapon. Not like he could look at the attacker and not fall victim to the man’s ability. Saw that the masked man was bigger than me. Depending on his skill, he could be hard to subdue. I was already in pain from my last violent interaction. I noticed all of this in the few seconds it took me to reach them. Saw the masked man grab Eloise by the shoulder, heard her scream at the sight of the black mask in her face. Saw Hansen go for the simplest solution as he came as a surprise to the masked man. I could see the man’s eyes widen as the large detective simply ran into him, pulling him with him as they both slammed into the ground a few feet away from Eloise. Grass and dirt flew around them, and I heard the masked man cry out in pain as he crashed, Hansen slamming into him at the same time. The detective had both height and weight on

him.

I ran past the girl, prioritizing as I went. The masked man needed to be restrained first before we all fell victim to him.

I reached the two men and saw the struggle. Saw Hansen be overpowered as he kept his eyes closed, fighting blindly and viciously on the ground. I didn't stop to watch, though. As the masked man started getting to his knees, I ripped my jacket off and jumped onto his back. I threw it over his head and pulled it back, like I was reining in a horse. The man shouted something, but I couldn't understand. Didn't care, either. I clamped my legs around his waist and hung on for dear life as he started fighting me, trying to get hold of me. He managed to grab my hair, making me cry out in pain as he pulled at it. I didn't let go, though. Knew that if I did, he would be able to see. To entrap us all, if he wanted. I pulled hard on my jacket as he grabbed it with his free hand. It was pulled too tight for him to rip it off. I felt myself falling backward, taking him with me. He hit at my legs with desperation now, trying to get free from my hold on him. The subdued thumping noise seemed to reach me seconds after the blows.

Shit, it hurt.

I cried out in pain, but I couldn't let go. Heard muffled words from inside my jacket. Breathing didn't come easy for him now. He tried rolling over to the side to lose me, but I managed to keep him put. Saw Hansen move toward us, eyes open now. He grabbed the man by his shirt collar and simply hit him in the face, fist clenched. The soft, sickening sound was dampened by my jacket and the ski mask. It took three strikes before the attacker slumped backward, pinning me to the ground.

For a moment, I could only hear my own heightened breathing. My heart was pounding in my chest.

"You can let him go," Hansen croaked. He'd been hit repeatedly in the upper body

before I'd managed to intervene.

I did as he said, and he pulled the man off me. I had no doubt he was unconscious. I'd felt his muscles relax. And I'd seen Hansen hit someone in the face before. One of the kidnappers at the farm. There were some advantages to being a pissed off giant. I had actually been surprised the kidnapper had been walking afterward. Luckily, this guy wasn't.

I got up on my knees and grabbed my jacket again, holding it in place, just in case. I turned toward Eloise and saw, to my utter relief, that the girl was awake, dandelion leaves still in her hand. Her mother held her arms around her, while she stared at us with big eyes. So much for not scaring the kid.

"You're not realtors," she decided as her mother hushed her.

I managed a bleak smile before I told them to go into the house. They did as I said without question, and I scanned the garden, or more specifically, the fences. No faces and prying eyes. No neighbors watching. It was nice to have some luck, I thought darkly as I staggered to my feet, my legs hurting.

"We need to get him inside before someone sees us," I said. I removed my jacket from his head then. Hansen bent down and pulled the ski mask off him as well.

For a moment, we stared at him.

Lying at our feet, unconscious and with a cracked lip and bleeding nose, lay a tawny-haired man we'd both seen before.

"That's one of the kidnappers," Hansen said.

There was no doubt in my mind that was the man who'd threatened us with a gun

when we'd searched for Andrea at the Kreutz farm. The same man we'd seen in the police station a few days before that.

What was this? I stared in continued disbelief as Hansen grabbed hold under the man's arms and began dragging him into the house. I noticed, as I followed, that the man's eyelids started fluttering. I moved to Hansen's side and pulled his gun from the holster under his jacket. Thankfully, he did not argue. He might have been a total newbie to this, but he clearly understood the threat this man posed.

As the man's feet were dragged past the sliding doors, he started moving a little. I cocked the gun and let him feel the weapon pressed to the back of his head. He might have been dazed, but he got the message. Hansen let go of him and took over the weapon.

I turned to see that Amy had sent Eloise into another room. Not only that, she came with a gray pillowcase and handed it to me without a word. I placed it over the tawny-haired man's head and tied it around his neck so that he could breathe, but it would be a hassle to get off fast.

He wouldn't answer any of our questions. It wasn't a language barrier. He'd spoken in English at the farm, and he told us in no uncertain terms to "fuck off" now. Nope. He didn't want to cooperate.

"Maggie?" Amy said, a hand on my shoulder. "Does he need to be here?"

I turned to her and saw she was about to break down. She'd kept it together this long for her kid, but with the attacker in her house, it was getting a bit too much. I understood. No, we did not need to be there. We needed to be somewhere else I decided and grabbed my phone, texting Dr. Morris.

"Maggie?" I heard from under the pillowcase. I stopped texting and looked at the

kneeling man. “Maggie Evans?” he repeated.

“What’s it to you?” I asked, though I knew very well he was part of the group who had kidnapped Andrea. Who had wanted to kidnap me. This guy worked for Yorov.

He didn’t answer me, and I was beginning to lose my patience anyway.

I was glad Hansen simply followed my lead in all of this. We got the man into the car, no small feat considering the tiny space in it. We were helped by the fact that the tawny-haired man didn’t resist us. He knew there was a gun near him, despite it not being flaunted in the Boudreau’s driveway. If any neighbors saw us, we never noticed. Maybe Amy got some visitors after the fact, but she would have to handle that. No one called the police at least, as we were not pulled over on our way to the hospice.

“Why there?” Hansen asked. He sat in the passenger seat but was halfway turned around, watching our prisoner, gun ready just in case. The tawny-haired man sat slumped in the backseat, not causing any trouble.

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“What’s your name?” I asked him, raising my voice a little to make it clear I was talking to him.

He seemed to consider it a short while. Then, finally, “Thomás.”

“Well,” I said, to Hansen this time. “We might need some medical assistance with Thomás here.” I was not comfortable saying more than that. Hansen had become a little easier to work with when he’d stopped wanting to involve his colleagues and simply helped instead. But now? I knew what might have to be done. Knew the choice I might have to make at the expense of Andrea, maybe even the three trapped men. It would mean severely overstepping any rules he went by. I didn’t have the luxury of those rules. It would be best if he wasn’t part of this now, but Thomás was our only clue to Andrea’s whereabouts as well as to freeing his prisoners. No way was Hansen going to step aside. I got that. I gripped the steering wheel tight and drove on. I saw no other way than to deal with this as I went. I certainly couldn’t do nothing. The consequences would be worse to live with.

Chapter 16

“Bet you’re glad there are no cameras now,” I said to Hansen as we got out of the car at the back entrance of Ashport Hospice. Dr. Morris stood on top of the stairs holding the door open for us. It took some time getting Thomás both out of the car and maneuvered up the few steps. He walked in blindness after all, bloody pillowcase covering his head. The blood had dried at this point. I looked at the lining of my jacket. The blood there was also dried and I put it on again. This was not the time to be fussy. We all followed Dr. Morris up to the room where Michael Phillipson lay in the same bed as the day before. He lay a little on his side today, though, having been

turned a little. I could only imagine the pained muscles and bed sores that would at some point make themselves known to the poor trapped souls in that hell. Even the boredom had to be torture.

Hansen made Thomás stand in front of the bed, facing the dead-eyed kid in it, while the rest of us positioned ourselves behind him. With a gun aimed at him, he didn't make any trouble. It was the only good thing I had to say about him. I carefully loosened the pillowcase and removed it. What more harm could he do to Michael?

"Let the kid go." Thomás didn't move at the sight of the unmovable young man in the hospital bed, nor at the command I gave him.

"Are you listening?" Hansen chimed in. "You've done enough damage."

"Do you know what these people can do?" said Thomás finally. His accent was difficult to place. Not Eastern European like the other kidnappers. That wasn't a surprise, though. Yorov got the people they needed no matter where they came from. The south of Europe, maybe? His English was very good.

"How do you know?" I asked, feeling my patience run ever shorter as he dragged this out.

"I know," Thomás began, unaffected by my tone. "Like I know you can indeed read thoughts, that your friend with the gun can do nothing, and that the doctor here should not be allowed among other human beings."

"You sense it?"

He nodded. This information told me a lot. First of all, that he needed to be close to people to sense their abilities. If not, he would have known about Dr. Morris already. He must have met all his victims beforehand by pure accident. But two abilities in

one person? That was rare. No wonder Yorov had recruited him...or more likely, acquired him as a child.

“Is it Yorov who’s ordered you to do this?” I asked.

He gave a short chuckle at that but said nothing.

I exhaled sharply and realized my fists were clenched. “Let these kids out of whatever prison you have trapped them in,” I told him, but he only shook his head.

“The world is safer without them,” he added.

“They have never hurt anyone,” Dr. Morris protested.

“They will.”

“For crying out loud,” I said. “You don’t know that. And anyway, if they do, we have ways of dealing with that ourselves.”

“This way they won’t even make that first mistake,” Thomás argued, completely missing my warning. He might think he was doing the right thing. It certainly sounded like it, but he was no better than what he claimed his victims were.

My patience had run out.

I asked him one last time to free them. He refused.

I set my eyes on Dr. Morris, who looked down at the floor first, but then nodded. She didn’t like this, either. But she knew what was demanded of us.

“Give me a second,” she said and left the room.

“Second for what?” Hansen asked. I didn’t answer him. Only looked around the room and saw the vases with flowers on a table by the window. I grabbed a bouquet of various lilies, daisies, and greenery and pulled them out of the white vase. Discarded them on the table where the water dripped down onto the floor. I stepped over to Thomás and simply clouted him over the ear, the porcelain breaking against his head as he grunted and fell to his knees.

“What the hell?” Hansen exclaimed somewhere to my right.

I didn’t care. I glanced at Michael who lay motionless, not even reacting to the noise. At least on the outside. No fucking way was I going to let him lay there like that if I could help it. I pushed any thought of Andrea out of the way. This guy wasn’t talking, but I might be able to help his three prisoners despite that. I hit him over the ear again, using my elbow this time. Thomás slumped over, trying to steady himself on his hands, broken porcelain cutting into his flesh. Small droplets of blood mixing with the water on the floor.

Dr. Morris came back into the room as I grabbed hold of tawny-colored hair, controlling where Thomás could turn his head and see. Dr. Morris sat a large basin of water in front of him on the floor, carefully avoiding his gaze. Carefully avoiding mine as well.

“Torturing me won’t help,” Thomás wheezed as he tried to regain some momentum.

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“I’m not going to torture you,” I said, dragging him the few feet to the basin, the slippery floor helping me as I got him into position. “I’m going to kill you,” I said, my voice level, the pure fact-based statement scaring me a little. Before he could respond, or think about it even, I forced his head into the water. You don’t need an ocean to drown someone, only the right incentive, a few inches of water and a well-placed knee on their back. He instantly fought against me, arms flailing and trying to get hold of me. I punched him in the kidney, hearing his muffled voice in surprise as the pain shocked him.

“No,” I heard Hansen behind me.

I shook my head, trying my best to ignore him.

“Don’t do this,” he continued. I heard him step closer, knew that he was perfectly able to drag me off Thomás. Water splurged everywhere, but not enough of it to give the man under me air to breathe. I turned my head to Dr. Morris, silently imploring her for help. I had enough trouble holding one man down, and he was decidedly smaller than the one coming to interrupt me.

“Stop, Detective,” she said as she grabbed his hand and at the same time the beautiful bouquet I had laid on the table.

“Let her do her job,” she commanded as she held the bouquet out. It withered and rotted in front of him. The flowers crumbled and fell between her fingers to the floor, landing as dirt. “Let her do her job, so I, in return, can do mine.”

The threat was clear. If she had to choose between Hansen and her three helpless

patients...well, there wasn't a choice.

He remained where he was. I couldn't see his face, but I could hear him. "Please don't do this," he said, barely audible over the thrashing man under my knee.

Panic had set in now. I turned my head away from both the doctor and Hansen. There was no doubt in my mind. I didn't think ahead. No what-ifs. That would only weaken my resolve. Yet a small part of me hoped I was right.

Thomás' body started convulsing, thrashing under me. No thought of escape now. Only his lungs screaming for air, using his whole body as a mouthpiece. I held as hard as I could, my only advantage being on top of him, pressing him down, every second weakening him.

Then he stopped moving.

His body forced water down his lungs.

I didn't let go, though. It could be a ruse.

It felt like I held him there in silence for an eternity before Dr. Morris' voice broke through.

"Maggie?"

I jerked a little, then nodded. With my free hand, I checked his pulse, finding that little place under the ear. There was no throbbing to feel. I let him go then, got up on my feet and stepped back. I realized I was shaking, but I turned to the bed as I noticed Dr. Morris going for the lifeless body of Thomás, getting his face up from the water.

I stared at Michael, who in turn stared right past me, toward the door. My heart was

pounding in my chest, overpowering any sound in the room. I gripped the railing on the hospital bed, trying to calm the incessant thudding in my ear. The smell of disinfectant almost made me gag a moment. And I didn't dare look at Hansen. Could sense him standing there, but I kept my eyes on Michael.

He stared straight ahead, eyes bland, and I thought I had seriously misjudged this. Thought that Thomás' hold on his prisoners would be broken if he died. It had happened before. I knew very well that the doctor might not be able to bring Thomás back. It didn't always work.

And then...shaking and weak fingers found my hand.

I gasped and looked down, seeing Michael's hand trying to cling to mine. I drew breath then, making my lungs hurt a moment as I looked up and saw the kid meet my eyes. He was weak, and couldn't speak, but it didn't matter. He was moving.

I heard what had to be a defibrillator behind me but didn't turn to look. For Andrea's sake, I hoped he would be brought back, but I kept my eyes on Michael. He managed a relieved smile.

At least it had been worth it. I could only hope the same had happened to the rest, and God knew how many others out there. This had not been Thomás' first time.

I don't know how long we stood there listening to Dr. Morris trying to resuscitate him. The loud pops of the portable defibrillator sent jolts through me every time. I both wanted him to wake up and to stay wherever he was.

Still, as we finally heard the coughing and wheezing of the recently brought back, I sighed in a relief that took me by surprise. It wasn't only because of Andrea, I realized.

I turned then and saw Dr. Morris getting him into the recovery position before she leaned back on her heels, breathing heavily, eyes closed.

“Michael,” I finally said. “Are you all right?”

He nodded at first, then croaked out a “yes” that made me smile. I looked over at Hansen then. He was standing in silence at the foot of the bed. There was a sympathetic expression as he looked at Michael, which changed as his eyes met mine. He looked sad. It wiped the smile off my face. I knew bringing him along for this had been a bad idea. But this was how it was done with us. Would it have been better for these men to be trapped like that until they died? Which would likely have been long before they should have. I couldn’t even muster the anger I wanted to at the sight of those blue eyes and what was very nearly pity at the sight of me. I turned my attention to Michael again.

“Good,” I told him. “Dr. Morris will look after you in a minute. You’re going to be all right.”

Dr. Morris didn’t come to his side, though. I turned to see if she needed help with something. She did. She lay on the floor, staring at the ceiling with blank eyes, her hair and white coat soaking up water from the floor.

Thomás sat halfway next to her. He didn’t look good—pale, wet, and breathing hard and painfully. A rasping sound escaped him.

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Suddenly my heart was beating faster again, thundering away in my chest. I thought we'd had some time. The man had been dead, for God's sake.

He was staring past me, and I realized he was looking at Hansen. My head snapped in that direction, where I saw the detective looking back. His long frame then buckled under him and he fell hard to the floor, head flopping as he hit it.

"Oh fucking shit," I shouted as I realized what had happened. I ran over to Hansen, grabbed his head between my hands. His eyes were open, and I was in his line of vision, but it was as if he didn't see me. His neck as lifeless as the rest of him. I gently let go of him.

"They belong to me now," Thomás said behind me. There was no glee in his voice. It was a simple statement of fact.

"Then I'll kill you again."

"How many times do you think I'll come back?" he asked.

"I only need you to die once," I said as I ran a hand through Hansen's hair. He might not agree, but this was not up for negotiation.

"And what about Ms. Kirby?" Thomás asked, the words so casual it made me want to spit at him.

"What about her?"

“She might be useful to my employers, but I’ll trade her for you.”

I sat still for a moment, glad I couldn’t hear the protests that had to be flying around Hansen’s head. This was not how you dealt with kidnappers. On any day, I’d agree with him. I knew Andrea could be useful, but I also knew my own ability would be too tempting for them. I heard Thomás grunt as he slowly got to his feet behind me.

“I’ll go with you on one condition,” I said. I didn’t move. Only looked down at Hansen’s face. He looked so non-caring at the moment. His expression utterly bland as he looked at me. It was so unlike him.

“I’ll free them,” Thomás said. No clarification needed. “When I know you’ll hold up your end.”

I nodded then and got up from my knees, my legs still hurting from his punches earlier. I turned around and looked at him, bright blue eyes staring back at me. He didn’t use his ability on me, though. He didn’t need to, did he?

I was trapped.

“I’ll need to see proof you’ll hold up your end,” I told him.

He clutched one hand to his chest and winced in pain, but indicated the door nonetheless. “You will. You simply have to trust me.”

I sighed and started walking. I had to step over Dr. Morris and pass her dead stare a moment. I didn’t trust him in the least, but he was right. I had no choice. And so, I walked through the door, escorted with an awkward and cold wet hand clamped around my neck, as my now kidnapper led me down the stairs and away from any allies I had.