



Speak No Evil

Author: *Sue Ward Drake*

Category: Romance, Action, Suspense

Description: A former military special ops...

A shy medical researcher...

Both must safeguard a deadly virus.

Microbiology investigator, Gwen MacLaine, temporarily in charge of her research laboratory, is anxious to prove herself. But when she's followed across New York City to retrieve a book from Will Strongbow, she grows increasingly wary.

Will, ex-military intelligence officer, now marine engineer for Metadorakis Shipping, is immediately struck by smart, beautiful Gwen. Someone is obviously hounding her, though, and he's not about to let her out of his sight.

When they discover her stalker isn't alone, and her family is also threatened, they join forces to stay safe. But can they put their simmering attraction on the back burner to protect the lab and dodge the dangerous international criminals intent on owning the lethal germ?

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The clock behind the shop counter ticked off the minutes. So far, Gwen MacLaine had been waiting fifteen—no, wait. The clock hand jumped to the next digit. Now, she'd been standing in line sixteen minutes. Too much time when she didn't have any to spare.

She needed to meet Erin's colleague right this minute—miles away in Manhattan's financial district. He was going to think she'd blown him off. Again. Because she had no sense of shame, or ability to even tell time. She'd be even lower on his esteem meter.

Everyone in this skyscraper full of offices seemed to be sending a rush package this Friday afternoon. Outside the glass mail center doors, office workers already hurried past, anxious not to waste a second of the on-rushing summer weekend.

Finally, the customer in front of her took her receipt from the clerk and inched past and down the congested aisle. Gwen handed over her overnight envelope and within minutes was back in the lobby, pulling her cell from her tote. Elevators in the bay behind her pinged, and office workers surged toward the street exit. Several people bumped into her before she could move out of the way, and she tucked her tote tighter against her side.

Today was her last chance to retrieve the study book her roommate needed. Erin would be home early next week, maybe even Sunday night, and would want to start prepping for her final exam later in the week. Gwen threaded her way to one side of the building passageway, found the number she wanted and thought about what to

say.

Everyone had plans for Friday evening. She didn't know Will Strongbow personally, but he would likely be anxious to get on with his own, whatever they might be.

Here goes nothing. Gwen took a deep breath and tapped his contact.

"Hello?" A deep, sonorous male voice rumbled in her ear.

The sound flowed through her like warm brandy, and Gwen caught a quick breath the same as the first time she'd spoken with him. His voice suggested a ripped, master-of-the-universe type, but since he was an engineer, he'd be more likely to be skinny with glasses. And a pocket protector with a mechanical pencil.

"This is Gwen MacLaine. I got hung up—I know, I know. Again. Sorry about that. Same excuse, too, doing something last minute for my boss. He's finally left for vacation, thank goodness." A nervous giggle escaped her, but she plowed ahead, not giving him a chance to answer. "I'll catch a taxi and be there soon."

"Wait, Gwen." His deep voice sounded urgent.

Her finger hovered over the disconnect icon, but she put the phone back to her ear.

"You won't have to wait long. I'm leaving now."

"Why don't I meet you? Just tell me where."

She sighed. He would be nice about this. She'd noticed that before. But she was at fault here, and she felt bad about the delay. "We tried that before. Remember?"

Plus, she had no idea where to suggest for a meetup spot. She spent most of her time in the university neighborhood miles north of here. "It's my turn to go the distance.

I'm the one who wants the book. Well, Erin wants it, but that's the same thing right now."

Silence.

She was about to repeat what she'd said when he answered. "All right. I'll wait."

"Thank you so much." She hesitated as to whether to offer another "sorry," then decided once was enough. "See you soon."

She ended the call and stared at the screen. Should she call the ride-share she occasionally used? Considering the time of day, she'd be better off trying to catch a cab and joined the throng heading to the building's exit.

The late afternoon August heat blasted her when she stepped outside. Buses and cars clogged the avenue. Brakes screeched, and horns honked. She spotted plenty of yellow taxis moving south. Unfortunately, they all had fares and none of them seemed to be pulling to the curb to discharge them. She kept a lookout for an empty cab as she walked to the corner and waited for the traffic signal to turn.

A man with a briefcase talking ninety to nothing on his cell stopped beside her. A tall, well-muscled guy in a black tee with long hair stepped to the curb on the opposite side of the businessman. A logo or something—maybe that of a rock band—splashed across his shirt. Something about him...she glanced up and their gazes collided.

Oops! She quickly swiveled her gaze to the opposite curb, annoyed he'd caught her staring. The guy seemed vaguely familiar. Had she seen him on campus? Or maybe in the building lobby a few minutes ago?

Her chest squeezed. Lila, one of her colleagues at the lab, had recently been stalked for months. Was this guy following her? No! That was crazy. Thousands of casually

dressed darkhaired guys with long hair must live in a city as big as New York. He simply worked in one of these buildings and was headed home. She would not be paranoid.

Still, she'd stayed safe in New York City by paying attention to her instincts, and she hated to ignore them now. But it was also true she was more tense than usual. She'd been wrapping up loose ends for her boss all week. He'd put her in charge of the virus lab while he was gone, and the thought of all that responsibility for the team's medical research had her wired. She'd probably be herself again after a good night's sleep.

The signal changed, and she crossed the intersection with the others and scanned the traffic for a free cab. One of the characteristic yellow taxis pulled to the curb, but was immediately snatched up by the man carrying a briefcase. No rideshares around, either.

A bus lumbered toward her. She hurried to the stop down the block and stepped into the queue. When the doors wheezed open, she climbed aboard, swiped her MetroCard, and inched forward through the standing passengers. She grabbed the overhead bar when the driver pulled away from the curb. The back of her neck prickled. A glance behind her revealed the guy in the rock band tee had boarded along with what felt like fifty others. Nothing unusual, here, she reminded herself. She still threaded her way to stand near the side exit door, putting at least eight people in the aisle between them.

Just like on the subway, except not as hot. A young mother held a child in her lap and a baby in a sling. A grizzled older woman with shopping bags tied with string sat next to her. Next to her in the small space stood well-heeled clerks and businessmen on their way home.

"Can you reach the stop request strip?" the mother asked and stood.

“Sure.” Gwen pushed the inner strip in the bracket and stepped aside to allow her to pass, smiling at the baby as the mother ushered her toddler to the exit.

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The driver eased to the curb, one wheel hitting a pothole. The side doors slapped open. The woman descended and gestured for the little girl's hand.

The child balked, and the doors started to close. If no one did anything, the family would be separated. "Hurry!" The mom clapped her hands.

"Wait," Gwen called out, "Don't close the doors yet!"

The passenger in a nearby seat pressed the stop request strip, and Gwen took the little girl's hand and lifted her down the steps and out onto the sidewalk. The exit doors snapped shut behind them, and the bus pulled away.

The youngster's face turned red. Seconds later, she started bawling. Loudly. The mother cradled her close and shook her head at Gwen. "She insisted I let her go down by herself, but I shouldn't have listened. Thank you for helping me. I hope this is the stop you wanted, but I have a feeling it isn't."

"No problem." Gwen smiled. At least, helping the mother had gotten her away from the creepy, long-haired guy at least. "I'm glad to help."

"Mommy, I was so scared." The toddler swiped at her eyes.

"I know, sweetheart." The mother took her hand. "We will practice another time. Come on, wave to the friendly lady and we'll go home."

Gwen wiggled her fingers at the child and watched them walk away. She'd gotten off many stops before the one she wanted, but with the streets emptier she would

probably find a free taxi.

A perusal of the avenue and adjacent streets turned up empty. She squinted in the direction of Midtown, but the next bus looked a half-mile away. She swiped the screen of her cellphone and pulled up the subway map. Shucks, even the subways had abandoned this section of Fifth Avenue.

She really would love to skip this errand, but Erin had always gone the extra mile for her when the tables were turned. All she could say was Erin had better study the workbook and ace her exam.

Movement caught her eye. She tensed. Two men came out of the building halfway down the block the mother and children had walked. The neon sign casting them in shades of green and pink suggested they'd left a local watering hole.

The offices in the area must be closed for the weekend now, emptying the sidewalks except right outside the bar. The only noise came from the occasional passing car. She shrank into the shadows of the hi-rise office building behind her, not crazed about attracting attention. Their voices faded as they walked away from her, and she let out a held breath.

She didn't need to hang around, though, and glanced up the avenue again. No cabs were visible so she started walking.

Ten minutes later, she finally saw a free cab. Before long, the pinkish granite and glass facade of the Meta Hellenic Shipping building came into view. Lights shone in the vast lobby of the modernistic mid-rise steel and glass structure. She paid the fare and jogged inside, striding directly to the burnished elevators.

"Miss?" A security guard in a blue uniform rose from behind a circular desk she'd never noticed.

“Oh, hey!” She strode over.

“You need to check in here first.”

“Sure. I’m looking for an engineer with the shipping company. Is Will Strongbow still here?” She crossed her fingers.

“I’ll call.” The guard sat behind a computer and assessed a screen.

“Please.” She swiped away the sweat dripping down her temple and listened to the exchange.

Assured Will would be down soon, Gwen settled on a leather padded bench under the windows and waited. She crossed and recrossed her legs.

The engineering department occupied the twentieth floor, but the building had plenty of elevators, which were apparently locked since most of the workers here had left by now. Was that why Will was taking so long?

That didn’t matter. After the way she’d treated him, she pretty much expected him to make her wait. No doubt he was nicer to beautiful and smart Erin. She always seemed to put men on their best behavior.

Gwen stared toward the elevators. What did she care, anyway? She wasn’t looking to turn some guy’s head. Far from it. What she needed to do now was retrieve this cursed study guide and leave. Get to the train station and go home.

* * *

Will Strongbow stood at the floor to ceiling windows of the engineering department tossing a pen and watching the sun sink lower over the Jersey side of the river.

Below, lights already glowed along the darkening New York City streets. He didn't like the idea of a woman traipsing around in the deserted financial district alone, but he'd wait her out.

The cell on his desk rang. This could be Gwen calling again. He snatched up the phone and checked the screen. Nope, no such luck. "Hey, Charlie, how's the party going?"

"You need to get over here now! The birthday boy is treating everyone to more rounds." Charlie burped. "Ex-cuse me."

Will shook his head. Sounded like everyone was getting lubricated. "I'm still waiting for Erin's friend." Getting seriously worried, too.

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“Is she pretty?”

Will laughed. “I don’t know. I haven’t met her. Just talked to her on the phone.” But from the harassed way she’d sounded on that last call, he pictured her with a ponytail askew, tendrils of hair teasing her face, and a tote bag big enough to haul a refrigerator.

His friend sighed. “If she gets there within the next half hour, bring her over when you come.”

“Sure.” Will disconnected. He’d go if she wanted. After a week spent wondering about her, he admitted to being curious and wouldn’t mind getting to know her better before exposing her to a bunch of drunk engineers. She was Erin’s roommate, a huge recommendation that Gwen was someone worth knowing.

He lifted his windbreaker off the coat tree when the desk phone rang. This call came from Max at the lobby desk.

“Says her name is Gwen MacLaine,” the guard said. “You want to come down and sign her in.”

“I’ll come on down.” He grabbed the yellow envelope containing the study guide he’d promised Erin and headed out.

The elevator chimed on its arrival in the lobby. When he stepped out, a woman wearing a loose blue sweater over a halter top and stylish jeans rose from the bench by the windows. Correction: a beautiful woman with short black hair that fluffed

around a face where big blue eyes stared back, magnetic clear-sky blue eyes. A delicious floating sensation lifted his mood and made him forget how long he'd been waiting. Seeing her was worth the wait. Tonight was Friday. They had a whole weekend to play.

She clutched a huge bag to her chest. Her lips parted as if beckoning him, but she didn't move any closer. "Hi. I'm Gwen."

He couldn't look away. Max's radio crackled, and he blinked. How long had he been staring? Seconds? Hours? He needed to speak or she'd think him a mute. "I recognize your voice."

She seemed to startle and then frowned.

Could he make a bigger mess of this? He swallowed to moisten his parched mouth and extended his hand. "Will Strongbow. Pleased to meet you."

She gave him the sweetest smile he'd ever seen and a solid shake.

"I really am sorry I'm so late." She tugged her hand. He reluctantly released his hold, and she hitched the tote bag's straps higher. "Did you have to wait long?"

"I found something to do." Yeah, right, stare out the window and worry you might be getting mugged. "It's Friday. I congratulate you on getting here at all. You were coming from work and there's a lot of traffic between here and Columbia University."

She drew in a sharp breath and stepped back. "How do you know where I work?"

The tension coming off her stunned him, and his nerve endings tingled. Didn't she know she had nothing to fear from him? He shrugged. "I noticed your e-mail

address.”

“Oh, right.” She shifted her weight to one leg, relaxing. But he didn’t understand her reaction. She had to know her digital address would be a giveaway. “Actually, I was in midtown when I called. I had to pick up a document from the man giving a joint talk with my boss. Then I had to overnight the proposal to get it to a conference committee in time. I work for one of the research professors.”

“I hope you got it off in time.”

“Fingers crossed.” She tucked her fluffy, dark hair away from her face. “I hope I didn’t keep you from something?”

Will made a dismissive gesture. “A bunch of the team went off for beers. You and I could join them. If you want.” He raised his eyebrows.

She grimaced. “I need to collect the study guide for Erin and split. Is that it?” She pointed to the envelope he carried.

“Right.” He’d forgotten why this woman was here and hurriedly handed over the envelope with the course book. “Tell Erin my sister hopes this will help her do well on the exam.”

“Right. Thanks.” Gwen stuffed the study guide into her bag and glanced toward the exit doors. “Again, sorry you had to wait. I’m sure you’re the last one to leave.”

“I didn’t mind, but if you want to make it up to me, there’s a place we can get a drink a few minutes away.”

She tugged on the front of her loose sweater. “I’m hardly dressed for an evening out.”

She sounded like she might be open to this, and he gave himself a mental fist pump. He smiled. “Don’t worry. You look good.”

Great, in fact. Those sapphire blues really delivered a kick and made him snap to attention.

A little groove appeared between her dark eyebrows. She waved her hand as if to erase what she’d just said. “I don’t know why I said that. The real reason I can’t linger is I don’t have enough time.”

“Will you turn into a pumpkin?” He didn’t want her to leave. They’d only just met.

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She laughed. “No, but I will miss the last train home.”

“Almost the same thing.” Will nodded goodbye to the security guard and ushered her out into the early twilight, liking that she had a sense of humor.

An evening breeze blew in from the harbor, carrying the scent of the ocean. Very little traffic filled the streets at this hour, but a couple of yellow taxis streaked past them. Nothing unusual there.

“Darn, I should have hailed one of those.” Gwen stared after them.

“The subway’s close.” He touched her elbow. “Where are you headed? Jersey or upriver?”

“My train leaves from Grand Central.” Gwen frowned and walked to the curb.

He moved to her side. The Met Hellenic tower stood in knot of tight streets that dated back to colonial times, and she looked uncertain which way to head. He didn’t want her wandering around by herself. She sounded capable of handling the city on her own, but his mama had taught him a gentleman always escorted a lady to her destination. “Mind if I tag along?”

She stopped, looped windblown hair over one perfect ear, and gave him a look sharp enough to cut metal. “Why?”

Heck, what was going on with her? He wanted to tell her she could trust him, but how did she know? He was just Erin’s work colleague. “I’m headed toward upper

Manhattan myself.”

“You can if you want.” She glanced around, and her shoulders stiffened.

He stepped closer, alert. “Gwen, what is it?”

She clamped a hand on his arm and pointed to the glass-fronted deli café on the corner. “I-I probably have a little time, a-after all. Let’s go to the coffee shop down there. Looks like it’s still open.”

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Don’t look back. Gwen forced her gaze straight ahead, her heart pounding like a panicked horse. What she really wanted was to run away.

Instead, she clung to Will’s arm, soaking up the strength coming through his tight muscles. Behind her, lingering in the forecourt of the building, stood the guy with long, black hair who’d been staring at her in Midtown. And taken the same bus downtown. He must have gotten out of the taxi that had turned the corner a few minutes ago and now waited for her to be alone.

“What made you change your mind?” Will asked, his steady gaze focused on her. His body radiated an intensity typical of athletes, who always seemed wired for the next quick change. A lightning smile flashed over his face. “Not that I object.”

That sounded as if Will were angling for a compliment. She didn’t know him well enough to be sure about that, but he was male, after all.

“I figured I should grab a sandwich and a coffee while I could.” And she’d wanted company. She indicated the deli with its wraparound windows across the street. From there, she’d be able to keep an eye on her “stalker.”

This was the same guy as before, right?

She'd only caught a glimpse but now turned to confirm, remembering not to make eye contact. That had been her mistake earlier. But she needn't have worried. The guy in question sat next to a concrete planter full of petunias messing with his phone. She couldn't see his shirt but she'd seen enough to recognize him.

He could have gotten here by staying on the bus and now waited to meet someone like her. He wasn't even looking her way. She was letting Lila's recent experience make her paranoid.

She dropped her hold on Will's elbow and put a few more inches between them. She'd also been running on adrenaline, working late every day to prove to her boss he could trust her to supervise the research lab.

A large, warm, very masculine hand encircled her arm.

She jerked her gaze up and met Will's intense blue eyes. His chiseled features, not to mention the tan that couldn't quite camouflage a scar on his chin, gave him a slightly dangerous look, and one deadly serious. His gaze searched her face, a furrow cutting between his mahogany brows. "You okay?"

"Sure," she answered, maybe a little too quickly. Will didn't look convinced, so she smiled. "It's been one of those days."

"I know about those kinds of days." He pulled open the door to the coffee shop.

She flicked her gaze toward the bench again, only to see that the rock-band fan had vanished. Gone. He really must have been waiting to meet someone. That she and this guy were going to the same place at the same time was simply a coincidence. Those kinds of things really did happen. Her shoulders relaxed, and she forced herself

to breathe.

* * *

As soon as he'd exited the elevator, he'd been unable to take his eyes off Gwen, but now he let his gaze skate over the pots of flowers, the empty lobby inside his building, and the vacant benches outside. Nothing looked out of place or unusual. What had Gwen seen to cause her to stiffen?

She'd relaxed now, so any threat she'd sensed had vanished. She was so much prettier and livelier than he'd imagined, and he'd been totally distracted, taking in everything: her face, her voice, her slender body.

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He followed her into the coffee shop where the manager looked up from swabbing down the back counter. “Sorry, I’m closing in a few minutes.”

“If you’ve still got coffee, we’ll take two, please, Henry.” Will grabbed a tray off the stack. “Grab what you want, Gwen. I’ll get the coffee.”

She pulled a wrapped sandwich off the shelf, and Will added one of tuna for himself. She dropped some sugar packets next to the coffee cups, and he ran his card.

They settled at a table of her choosing. The little gold studs in her ears winked at him through her fluffy dark hair. This was a serious woman, and not one to draw attention to herself with big dangly earrings.

Because he’d eaten here so often, he’d probably sat at each of the seven tables. Which were all empty now except theirs. He swept a gaze over the sidewalk outside, searching for a clue as to why Gwen had tensed when they left the Meta Hellenic tower. Seeing nothing alarming, he draped his jacket over the back of his chair and sat.

She’d uncapped her coffee to add sugar, the rich, dark aroma drifting his way. He usually stayed away from caffeine this time of day, but sipped his own brew as if he hadn’t had a drop all day. Why? Was this his sixth sense at work urging him to fuel up for a long night?

It sure wasn’t looking that way. She wanted to catch her train, and he would escort her to the station and say goodnight.

The scent of mustard wafting from her turkey sandwich reminded him he'd last eaten hours ago. He glanced at her as he unwrapped his tuna salad.

She swallowed a bite and took another sip. "I only got a text from Erin. Did you talk to her?"

"Yes. Over the internet connection." He gestured to the envelope in the tote hanging from the back of her chair, set his coffee cup down, and unwrapped his own sandwich. "I was mostly discussing the freighter repairs with Nikos. Erin only spoke to me once I mentioned the workbook. Why? Do you have a specific concern?"

"Just curious. They're probably in Athens by now," Gwen said. "Erin was really looking forward to visiting there. What about you? Have you been to Athens?"

"When I was in the service. Before I joined Meta Hellenic." He watched the flash of light in her beautiful eyes for a second. Before he could become entranced again, he picked up his sandwich and took a bite. She drew him with a magnetism he didn't understand. But focusing all his attention on her might put her back on the defensive when she'd only now begun to relax. He chewed another bite and scanned the deli, alert to trouble. Henry hauled a full garbage bag into a short hall and propped open the service door.

"Which branch?" Gwen asked, drawing his attention back to her.

"The best one." He grinned, and she smiled in return. "Navy."

"That explains the naval engineering." She smiled and took another bite.

She'd wondered about him?

"I've loved boats since I was a kid." Will set his plate aside, more interested in their

conversation—and her.

“That explains both, then.”

Warm, humid air swept across them when the street entrance opened. Will slid his gaze to the tall, skinny guy entering the deli. He saw all types in this part of town, tourists returning from a cruise to the Statue of Liberty, harried businessmen needing a coffee after a long day. This guy with the shoulder-length black hair didn't fit—not here, not at this time on Friday night. He didn't know what to expect, and he braced himself to fend off any sudden moves that might come his way.

“I'm closing in ten minutes.” Henry lifted the coffee reservoir out of the dispenser.

The newcomer nodded, chose a cellophane-wrapped slice of pie from the display, and paid. Will looked for the telltale bulge of a handgun in the guy's pockets. He didn't see one, but his instincts still kicked into high gear.

The dude chose a table next to the window and sat with his back to them. Tension sizzled off Gwen like before. Something about this guy scared her. He wanted to know why, but he wouldn't ask her here and now. Any conversation they had would carry easily in the quiet.

Her gaze swung from the wall clock to the other customer. Then her blue eyes landed on him, her jaw tightening. “You ready to go?”

Since she worried about the other customer, Will didn't want to leave before him, and checked on Henry's progress. Until the manager finished they could stay.

“Will.” Gwen reached across the table and tapped his hand. “We should leave.”

Her touch sent sparks up his arm. He squeezed her hand and caught her gaze. “Let's

sit a while longer.” Trust me.

A frown flitted across her forehead. She started to speak but then glanced behind him and gave a little shrug. “Okay.”

But she still pulled her tote into her lap, ready to bolt any minute.

“I’m closing now. Everyone out.” Henry came around the counter.

Will stood. The long-haired guy left through the front entrance but remained standing on the curb. He did not cross the street or move off. Gwen spun on her heel and made for the open service door in the back. Will reached for his windbreaker. “Gwen...?”

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“That’s the alley, miss.” Henry collected their discarded plates. “For the garbage and stuff. Not nice.”

She ignored them both and started down the short hallway, obviously wanting to avoid the other customer.

“I’m coming,” Will called. He had no idea what was going on with her, but he didn’t want her to be on her own. He glanced at Henry. “Lock the front door now.”

“Hurry.” She waited for him before rushing out the service door.

He followed her into the small cul-de-sac full of trash cans. “Stick with me,” he said. “I’ll keep you safe.”

“I’m more interested in losing him.” Her face turned grim as she charged ahead. “And I need to get uptown.”

“There a subway station only a few blocks away.”

“If I miss my train...”

“Don’t worry. I’ll make sure you get home.” One way or the other. He took her hand. “We need to be careful. This alley opens onto the block next to the deli and if the guy is still standing in front he will see us.”

They wove around the garbage cans and dumpsters in the narrow passage as quickly as possible. Shadows cloaked the exit of the alley. To his left, lay the deli—and the

lone figure standing outside.

At that moment, Henry turned off the lights, throwing the man and the sidewalk into darkness. Sweat trickled down Will's back. Now the dude would be harder to track.

They rushed down the block in the opposite direction and rounded the corner before stopping. Gwen clung to his arm, her body shaking. "I think he saw me."

"Put this on." He shed his jacket. "It'll hide your sweater."

She juggled her tote to push her arms into the sleeves and closed the zipper. "Uh-oh. I hear him coming."

The edge of panic riding her voice rocked him, and adrenaline poured through him. The sound of footsteps grew louder. They might belong to someone else, but that didn't matter. They would still take evasive action. "We can lose him."

Halfway down the next block he ducked into another office building through the door that remained accessible until midnight for patrons of the restaurant and bar on the top floor. Where his colleagues were now getting drunk.

Gwen tugged him to a stop. "Do you know where you're going?"

"This is a little detour to the subway station," Will explained. "The most direct route would have taken us past Henry's deli."

"Are you sure?" She swiveled to look at the way they'd come, holding her dark hair away from her face.

"Yes. I know this area well." He took in her doubtful expression and raised his eyebrows, needing her to trust him with this. "Okay?"

“Fine.”

He lifted a hand to the night guard at his desk. “Just passing through.”

They strode down the marble-tiled lobby past the art deco panels rising to a high, gilded ceiling and passed through the elevator bay. He pulled her past the grill closing off a concession and newsstand tucked into a narrow connecting passageway. A short hallway led to exit doors onto a cross street. He caught her elbow and steered her that way.

A sudden premonition had him drawing her into an alcove that once housed pay phones. Outside the glass front doors, he caught movement. The guy with the long locks pushed on the handle and then cupped his eyes to peer inside.

Gwen leaned into his back and whispered. “What’s happening?”

The press of her body threatened to distract him, and Will squelched his body’s automatic reaction. “I saw the guy you’re trying to avoid.”

He waited a beat for her to explain who and what this was all about. When she didn’t, he continued, “He doesn’t know the doors are locked this time of night.”

“So how do we get out?”

“They’re locked from the outside. Like fire doors.” He gave the cold hand resting on his sleeve a quick squeeze. “Wait here. Let me see if he’s gone.”

She clung to his arm. “You’re leaving me here?”

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“Just until I check the area out front.”

“Wait. I’m coming, too. Tell me now which way we’re going when we get outside. Please?”

“We’ll turn left and go to the corner. Come on. Stay right behind me.” Will left their hiding place and strode to the heavy brass and glass doors. A streetlight illuminated the empty plaza-like area in front of the skyscraper. “I don’t see him out there.”

“I doubt he’s giving up,” she whispered. “But it’s all clear now. Should we go?”

“Right.” There would be plenty of time for explanations later. He hoped.

They dashed out of the exit. At the end of the block, he glanced down the street that the skyscraper faced. Gwen’s stalker waited there. Before they could duck back out of sight, he saw them.

They’d lost their advantage. No point trying to hide now. They’d just have to outrun him and hope they could board the subway before he saw which car they chose. He pointed to the metal banister around the subway entry stairs on the next corner. “Hurry.”

Gwen kept up with him, panting hard as they reached the bottom of the stairs.

He pulled his metro card from his wallet and swiped her through the turnstile and then himself, nearly bumping into her as she looked up at the directional signs and shook her head. “This is the wrong direction.”

“Keep going. There’s a hallway up ahead.”

They raced past the grimy, graffiti-filled walls to another platform with two tracks. The rumble of trains filled the tunnel. Will raised his voice. “This will take us north.”

“Yeah, but this line doesn’t go to Grand Central.” She glanced around for options.

“There’s a connection from Penn Station.”

Hurrying footsteps thundered behind them. Will caught sight of the stalker, tugged Gwen into the shadows under the stairs, and held a finger to his lips. Gwen peered around him and sagged.

An incoming train on the opposite track swooshed to a stop. More rumbling intensified, and suddenly, the train on their track arrived.

Riders flooded the platforms on either side. The good thing was that the stalker had walked toward the opposite end from where they hid. Will didn’t think he’d seen them, but he’d get Gwen’s opinion. “Do you want to let him board and take the next train?”

“I don’t know.” The doors of the nearest car slammed open. “I doubt I have time.”

The dude following Gwen blended in with the others crowded onto the platform. He still hadn’t approached her, and Will couldn’t figure his motive. He would protect her, though, if things came to that, and reached for her hand. “Let’s go.”

He pulled her into the closest car seconds before the doors clamped shut and they lurched forward. With plenty of standing room, they moved away from the exit and clasped a pole. The train lurched over the tracks, the clattering wheels creating a din which intensified as they entered a tunnel.

Gwen studied the route map on the wall next to the doors and then looked at him. Her frown had taken up permanent residence, and he wished he could smooth it out. They were okay, doing good, in fact.

She grimaced. “We have to go to Penn Station to change.”

“The connection is quick.” He leaned close so she could hear him over the clattering of the train, catching a whiff of her fragrance. Spring flowers? “There was another line about five more blocks away, but I figured you wanted to get off the street as quickly as possible.”

Her lips quirked up at the corners. “You were right.”

One of the passengers seated on the bench next to them, a college-aged girl with curly blond hair, closed the book she’d been reading, stood, and moved past them to the exit.

“Go ahead and sit down.” Will nudged Gwen.

The student got off at the next stop. A passenger jumped up from beside Gwen, and Will slid into the seat beside her. She tugged her tote bag to her chest, tucked the straps under her chin, and swiped at a trickle of sweat running down her cheek.

The doors closed. Will braced himself for motion and leaned toward Gwen. “I can help if you want to take off the jacket now.”

“Let’s wait until we get off.” She let out a deep breath. “Thanks for coming along.”

“No problem.” Their gazes caught. He sank into her mesmerizing blue eyes, faceted like diamonds. The train lurched to the left and he shook himself mentally, focusing on the squiggly lines of the subway map. He knew this route by heart, but he needed

to keep alert. “We just have two more stops, but I think we’ve lost you know who.”

“I hope so.” Gwen tucked her tennis-shoe-clad feet close. He hadn’t noticed them before, but he liked that she preferred practicality over image. He wasn’t sure what that meant to him, except that everything he was learning about her made him want to get to know her better. Would she let him?

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At the next station, commuters swarmed the platform. Guys with dreadlocks in T-shirts with slogans. Kids wearing tees with Spiderman images. Couples off for a Broadway show. Gwen's shadow guy had vanished.

The train slowed to a stop. Will stood. "This is where we change."

Everyone on the train flooded onto the crowded platform. They followed the mob out of the car, up the steps, down a corridor, and down more steps where they only waited a few seconds before boarding the cross-town shuttle.

He barely had time to grab a pole before the train lurched forward.

"Let me see the time," Gwen, pressed against him, grabbed hold, her hand just below his.

He displayed his watch face and pushed a button. She took in the time, and he raised his brows in question. "How are we doing?"

"I'm going to have to run when we get to the station. But look—" She paused. "It was nice to meet..."

Gwen's words faded as the train filled with more passengers. Will froze. He waited for the man in his sights to turn slightly, but yup, that was the same black hair and Zeppelin tee. And he wasn't in this car by coincidence. Will's blood simmered, and he clenched his jaw. Who exactly was he following? Him or Gwen? And why?

He leaned in close to Gwen. "Stay here."

She glanced past him and her fingers gripped his arm as if he was a life preserver.
“Why?”

“I’m going to confront him because I want to know why he’s following us.”

“Please, don’t.” She shook her head.

The train thundered into the next stop. This was their destination. He’d have to let this go—for now. He wanted to stay with her until they could be sure they’d lost the stalker. Would that be sooner or later?

3

Gwen rushed across Grand Central concourse toward the northbound trains, not looking back. She almost didn’t care if the rock star fan followed. Her only focus was on getting home.

She reached the stairs to the tracks and pounded down, heading toward the Metro North train. On the platform, she panted to a stop, breathing in the smell of grease and hot metal as she stared at the receding lights disappearing into the tunnel.

Will jogged up beside her, not even breaking a sweat.

She bent over, pulling in a lungful of air before straightening. “That was the last train tonight. I missed it by seconds.”

Will trudged up to the main concourse beside her. “Sorry about that.”

“We tried, and the subway was probably faster than any cab. I’m sure the passengers on that train are glad the rail operator is sticking to their schedule.” In the ticketing lobby she hung back in the shadows and scanned the floor stretching the long length

of the hall. Her stalker didn't appear to be around. "I don't see him."

Could she relax or would he pop up again somewhere? She hitched her tote straps higher and looked up at Will. She hadn't wanted him to confront the guy on the subway and possibly get hurt, but maybe the long-haired dude was the one who should have been afraid. With his broad shoulders and ripped arms, Will certainly looked strong enough to take him on.

He dropped his gaze to her. "Me, neither. I wonder if it's me he's after."

Gwen shook her head. "No, it's me. I saw him when I was leaving the package shipping office in the Chrysler building. He followed me down the block. With at least fifty other commuters, true, and caught the same bus. I put it down to coincidence, but I was glad I'd lost him. Guess I didn't."

"Why is he following you?" Will propped his hands on his hips.

"I wish I knew." She huffed out a breath. "At first, I thought he looked familiar, like someone I'd seen around the campus. Why would he spend two and a half hours chasing me around Manhattan for no reason? That doesn't make sense." Did the creep find her attractive and didn't want to lose sight of her? She shivered.

"I think you can relax." Will squeezed her shoulder, his brow furrowed. "I don't see him around now, and I've been looking."

"Good thing because it looks like I'll be stuck sitting around here until morning." She would have to call Leslie and explain why she wouldn't be coming over tonight. Not a conversation she anticipated since she'd put her cousin off all week the same way she had Will. For the same reason: work.

Will, his blue eyes sharp under his straight auburn brows, reached up to swipe sweat

from his jaw-hugging beard. “You don’t really want to stay here and wait all night.”

“No, but I’ll be all right. Some of the restaurants here stay open late. There’ll be other folks around.” She gave him a smile and took a step toward the food hall. “Thanks for your help. I’m sure you didn’t plan to spend all this time delivering the book for Erin.”

“Wait.” He put a hand on her arm. A little fissure of pleasure rippled through her that he didn’t want to say goodbye. He was frowning, though. She chewed her lower lip, holding her breath. “I’m responsible for your missing your train. I can drive you home, if you want.”

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“It’s not your fault. I was the one who wanted to stop at the coffee shop. Besides, I don’t want to inconvenience you?” She raised her eyebrows. Single guys—and she did know Will wasn’t married because of something Erin had said—usually had big plans for Friday night.

“I’ve got nothing scheduled. Not until a flag football game on Sunday.” He steered her toward the street exit. “We can take a taxi to my car. Come on.”

The cabbie dropped them at the address of the Westside garage where Will had a monthly parking spot. They found his Jeep and on their drive down the ramp, she gave him directions. He wasted no time getting on the expressway north, and she sagged against the cushy seat in relief as the lights of the city faded.

They soon had to stop, though, as cars were backed up on the bridge across Harlem River.

“I guess this sort of traffic is usual.” She tucked her hair behind her ears. Not that she expected the strands to stay there, but she hoped she looked less of a wreck than she felt. “Not that I know since I’m usually on the train.”

“It’s a Friday before a summer weekend. A lot of people leave town.” The cars in front rolled forward, and Will turned his attention once again to the road.

She stared at his long, tapered fingers gripping the wheel. He drove with quiet confidence, the only sound the soft swish of cool air coming through the dashboard’s vents. She should find this soothing. She wasn’t one to have to talk to fill the time—usually. Right now, she mostly had questions. When she met someone new,

she had to have some background to find her own place in the conversation. It was probably the scientist in her, but she needed to know certain facts then she could proceed with confidence. Besides, Will intrigued her, and she wanted to know all about him.

He moved his right hand to rest on the gear shift only inches from her knee. The sensations of his palm pressed against hers during their mad dash through the streets returned. Now that she had time to think, she could acknowledge what she'd been feeling. The contact had managed to make her feel safe, though she wasn't sure why she'd been so frightened. Except that she hated being bullied, which was what that long-haired guy had been doing.

Will had glanced over at her occasionally—and was looking at her again now. She ignored the sizzle of awareness that ran through her and tugged her seat belt tighter.

“We'll be there in another twenty minutes or so,” he said, his deep voice almost intimate in the dark cocoon of the car.

“That's good.” She ran her fingertips over the smooth belt webbing.

She couldn't get the image of the guy with long black hair her out of her mind. And every time she froze up inside. He'd seemed familiar. That meant she must have seen him before. Somewhere. The fact that she couldn't remember proved she needed to pay better attention to her surroundings everywhere, every time she left home or the lab.

“You cold?” Will reached for the controls.

“No, I'm fine.” As far as the car's temperature was concerned, anyway.

“You're rubbing your arms.”

“This is the temperature you like. No problem.” She clasped her hands in her lap, picking at a fingernail. Just forget that creep. Think about something else.

“You want it warmer?”

She glanced at Will. “If you don’t mind, thanks.”

Anything to distract him. She did want to know more about him, even if she couldn’t let herself be pulled into a romance. Which was going to be hard. He couldn’t be more appealing, and she was starved for the nice guy experience. She wouldn’t mind hearing about his background but she didn’t need to know.

His gaze landed on her again. “What?”

Surprise spiked through her. She tensed. “How did you know I had a question?”

“Instinct?” He smiled. “What’s the question?”

She fiddled with the restraint’s loose webbing “Call me out if I’m being nosy.”

“I have no secrets.”

Oh, yeah, like she really believed that. Everyone had some, but until she had more information on Will she wouldn’t worry about his. “So.... How long have you known Erin?”

This wasn’t the first question she wanted to ask, but the real one would be too embarrassing—at least for her.

“I started at the company a few weeks before she did. What about you?” He rubbed the top of the gear shift.

Butterflies flitted inside her stomach, and Gwen forced her gaze back to his profile, neutral territory. Mostly. “Since grade school. We kept in touch even after my parents were killed and I moved to live with my aunt and uncle. We worked together in an ice cream parlor on the shore in the summer, too.”

“Did you stock Rocky Road?”

“You’re joking, right?” She laughed. “Every self-respecting ice cream parlor stocks that flavor. Is that your favorite?”

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“Guilty as charged.” He grinned.

“That was a leading question, as the DA used to say on old Perry Mason shows.” Where on earth had that reference come from? “My uncle used to watch those on the re-run channel.”

She sucked her lower lip, only now remembering how a former beau had complained about her constant questions.

The silence gradually expanded to fill the space, and any minute it would feel suffocating. Will moved his hand back to the wheel. “Any more questions?”

“No, I better not.”

“Why not?” His blue gaze this time sparkled with amusement.

“It’s none of my business.” She found her phone and listened to the four voice messages her cousin had left, trying to figure out the best response. She’d worked late all week, but knowing her boss would leave today, she’d promised her cousin she’d come to the house tonight. Except she was currently miles from her destination. She leaned her head against the seatback and pinched the bridge of her nose.

“You okay?” Will asked. For some reason in the dark car, his voice sounded deeper and warmer.

His concern wrapped her heart in snuggly blanket. “I’ll let you know after I finish this call.” Her finger poised over the icon. “That is, if you don’t mind me talking on the

phone now?"

He smiled and flicked his gaze back to the windshield. "I don't mind if you don't."

Gwen peered at him. Why would she care if he overheard? Then she understood. He might think she was calling a boyfriend. "This isn't private, and since I'm calling my very excitable cousin, our conversation is probably going to be broadcast loud enough for you to hear."

Leslie picked up on the second ring. "Gran and I have been waiting forever. Where are you?"

"On my way." Gwen caught Will's gaze. "Don't worry. We should be there soon."

"Who are you with?" her cousin asked eagerly.

Had she said "we"? Gwen squelched a sigh. "A friend is giving me a ride because I missed the last train." That was all Leslie needed to know. She hadn't asked Will if he wanted to be outed, and she wouldn't mention his name.

"It's a man."

"Yeah." Gwen glanced at Will. A man, and what a man. Leslie knew she was taking a break from men at the moment and knew why, but her whole family kept trying to set her up so she'd at least have a date for the wedding.

"How's everything going?" Gwen asked.

"I just heard today the flowers might not arrive on time," her cousin wailed.

"You've still got two weeks on that, right?"

“What if he doesn’t get delivery in time?” Her cousin continued to agonize, naming other possible florists in the area. “How am I gonna find someone else this late?”

“Bloomin’ Bouquets has been in business forever. They know what they’re doing. Listen, I have to go. I’ll see you soon.”

“Gran’s eating her supper now. I’ll tell Mom to hold yours until you get here. She made chicken and dumplings.”

“I’ve already eaten.” She would have preferred her favorite supper but had been starved at the deli.

Gwen ended the call and pushed her cell into the side pocket of her tote, sensing Will’s gaze. “I need to go by my aunt and uncle’s house when I get home to try on my bridesmaid’s dress. I’ve been putting it off all week for work responsibilities, and Leslie is getting frantic.”

Will chuckled. “Weddings are a serious business.”

She estimated him to be about thirty-five years old, and guys that age were usually about to be married or had been. Especially someone like Will Strongbow. Not only was he knockout handsome, but he was polite, too. She liked him. “Spoken like someone who’s been there and done that.”

Uh-oh. This topic was so not her business. She didn’t know him well enough to tease him and hurriedly angled the air conditioning vent to blast her face.

“I was an attendant at both my sisters’ weddings. That’s the closest I’ve come to being a participant.”

Oh? That meant he himself wasn’t married, but he was going to think she was

figuring out his marital status because she was interested. She knew she could be.
Easily.

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They'd turned off onto the Saw Mill River Parkway a while ago and were now closing in on home. "Thank you for sticking with me tonight."

"I could tell you were scared."

"Yeah, I was," she admitted. She took in his face with the dark beard along his strong jaw, the tight lines of his face and the blue eyes in such contrast. If she hadn't been with Will, would the stalker have accosted her? Or robbed her?

4

Will slowed now as they entered Gwen's small commuter town, passing the Metro North train parking lot. "Is your car here at the station?"

"No. I left my car at home and caught a ride with my upstairs neighbor this morning since there is little parking at the train stop." Gwen pointed out the windshield. "Keep driving this street and turn right at the next light."

"Okay." He did as Gwen instructed. The lights of the town center faded in his rear-view mirror, and they entered the hilly residential area with mostly large mansions and big two-storied homes.

Though only a little past sunset, the overhanging trees opposite the dwellings blanketed the pavement in darkness. He swept a glance over the thick foliage crowding the roadway on the left where the land apparently dropped away.

"See that two-story white colonial up there with the glowing second story windows?"

Gwen gathered her belongings. “The street continues around the corner. Erin and I are in the lower apartment.”

As Will made the turn, the street light glinted off something metallic in the shrubbery on the left. He looked closer and found a dark SUV in the bushes across from her house.

Right then, the faint red glow of a cigarette appeared and disappeared, confirming someone sat in the driver’s seat. From there, the smoker would be able to see anyone arriving or leaving the big, rambling house where Gwen lived.

Will straightened in his seat. The woods hid the car so well, other drivers might have focused on the turn or Gwen’s two-story residence, but his years in covert operations had trained him to always search his surroundings. After what had happened in Manhattan, he’d been especially vigilant. But which apartment was the driver spying on? Gwen’s or the folks upstairs?

“I should have left a light on,” Gwen said. “But I expected to be back before dark. You can park right in front of the side door.”

Will kept driving, forcing himself to maintain the same pace rather than accelerating. They had driven past the house, heading up Tremont, when Gwen threw out a hand.

“Stop. You just passed my place.” She released her belt and cracked the door. “You can let me out here. I’ll walk back.”

“No!” He kept his foot on the gas, and lowered his voice. He did not want to frighten her. “Sorry, didn’t mean to be so abrupt. That’s not a good idea.”

“Why?” she asked, pulling her door shut.

“Someone’s watching your house. There was an SUV hidden in the woods across from your place.”

“Who?” She turned around to look behind them.

“I have no idea.” He glanced in the rear view but saw only the empty street. “I saw an occupied car trying to hide in the bushes. Back near the turn.”

Will drove another fifty yards, half a football field, found a shoulder wide enough and parked. “I’m going to pull over so we can talk about this situation.”

Gwen had gone along with him when they’d been rushing through the streets of lower Manhattan, but she might have latched onto anyone who felt safe. What about now?

He couldn’t protect her if she didn’t trust him.

Her seatbelt swooshed into the keeper device, and she turned to him. “You really saw someone watching my apartment?”

“Or that of the people upstairs. I’m assuming the car in the drive is theirs, and they’re home. Most people might not have noticed the SUV watching, but my training kicked in.”

“Your training?”

“For covert operations.” He released his own belt. “I want to see if I can get a license plate number.”

“Wait.” She tapped his arm, frowning. “What if he recognizes you?”

“I don’t think he will. He saw the Jeep, not our faces.” Will opened his door. “I won’t

be long. You stay here.”

“I’m coming, too.” She got out and closed her door before he could say anything else.

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Staying with the car was the safest thing she could do, what he wanted her to do. But he also didn't want to hang around any longer than necessary. He met her at the rear of the Jeep and lowered his voice. "We need to stay in the shadows. We don't know what or who we're dealing with here."

With no sidewalk or curb, she clutched his arm, pressing so close he again caught the floral scent of her soap or bath powder. The intimacy that scent evoked made his blood race. He stared ahead, squelching those urges and held aside a branch for her to go first. "After what happened in the city, we need to be suspicious of anything out of the ordinary."

She clung to his arm again. "You think they're related?"

"I don't know, but it's prudent to be careful." He stopped as the lights on the second floor of her house came into view. He took her hand. "Crouch down. We'll creep up but not too close. Look across the intersection and into the bushes. There's a solid black bulk."

They crept closer, hiding in the shadow of a tall oak. He caught the gleam of a hubcap now. "He's got a New York plate." Will squinted but the shrubbery made the plate number indiscernible. "I'm going closer."

"I'm going back." She let go of him and spun around.

He glanced back at the big SUV then followed her. Staying with her was more important than getting a plate, which he couldn't do if he had an encounter with anyone inside the car. When he caught up to her, he said. "You're right. We need to

leave.”

She dashed the last twenty feet and, as soon as he clicked the doors open, climbed in immediately.

“You okay?”

“Freaked out.” She laughed. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize.” He started the engine. “I think anyone would. This is creepy.”

“I’m going to call the cops.” She lifted her tote.

“Good idea. But I wouldn’t be surprised if they find nobody here.”

She pulled a band out of her pocket and caught her hair in a stubby ponytail before retrieving her phone. “W-Why?”

“It’s just a feeling, Gwen. I don’t know any more than you do, believe me. If, and that’s a big if, this guy is waiting for you, he knows where you live and can come back any time he wants.”

She stiffened. “Are you sure? We didn’t stop. I didn’t get out. We merely drove past, and there’s no reason he would know to be watching for your Jeep. Nobody followed us from the city, right?”

He nodded.

“Since I’m sitting in the passenger seat, I doubt he would have seen me. Especially, since it’s dark. He probably doesn’t even know what I look like.”

“You sure about that? He might have seen you somewhere that you didn’t notice.”

“Don’t say that.” She sagged against the seat. “I’ve been worrying whether that’s true about the creep who followed us earlier.” She straightened suddenly. “You realize someone could come after you because you were seen with me?”

“I can defend myself.”

“I have no doubt about that, Will.” Her gaze found his for a long second. “But it’s my fault you’re involved in this mess, whatever it is, to start with.”

Her look sparked something hot inside him, but he ignored his reaction. Now was not the time. “This situation is no-fault.” He faced her. “You are not to blame. I take full responsibility for coming with you.” Protecting you.

He reached across the console to squeeze her hand, but she slipped out of his hold and looked out the rear window at the quiet, dark street. Sweat glistened above her pretty brows, and the air in the car stretched tight like a rubber band. “I cannot believe someone is watching my apartment. This isn’t just some guy getting kicks from following me around the city. That’s almost understandable because New York is one of the world’s biggest cities, but Thornwood is a quiet suburb.”

Gwen swiped at her cheeks. Her cell phone slipped off her lap onto the floorboards.

Was she crying? Will pushed back his seat and reached for her. “Come here.”

He lifted her and cradled her in his lap. She rested her head on his shoulder. He smoothed back the lock of soft hair that had escaped her pony tail. “Hey, don’t let the situation get to you.”

“Easy for you to say. It’s not your apartment that’s being watched,” she protested, her

voice muffled against his shirt collar.

He pulled her closer, loving the feel of her against his body. His pulse revved, and his body tightened. He should let go and lift her back to her seat, but he wanted to hold her, wanted to soothe her.

She got to him all right, but good.

* * *

Gwen snuggled against Will's chest, breathing in his distinctive male scent, relishing the strength in his arms. She wanted to stay right where she was all night. She lifted her head, took the handkerchief he handed her, and blew her nose. "I hate this. I'm already acting as if the driver of that car is really after me."

He squeezed her hand. "I'm sorry to say this, but it does fit with that long-haired guy following you this afternoon. I don't believe in coincidences."

She shifted back into the passenger seat and groped in the footwell for her phone. "How can we tell exactly who that car is spying on? The couple upstairs... The husband's a lawyer, and the wife owns a shop in town. They might have enemies. Who knows?"

"Exactly." Will held her gaze. "But just because we don't know now doesn't mean you should stay here and risk finding out."

"That's what I was afraid of." She rubbed her arms, cold again.

Will cradled one of her hands between his two. "Take a deep breath, Gwen. You're not alone."

No, his deep voice, the wonderful heat of his palms, assured her of his very real and very calming presence. She looked into his blue eyes and coaxed out a smile for him. "Thanks."

“What do you want to do now?”

She rubbed her forehead. She had to stop reacting, and really think about this situation. Consider the ramifications. She was a good planner. Her boss told her that all the time, only he used the term meticulous, which is one of the first requirements of any medical researcher.

“Not sure.” She shrugged. “I’m afraid to go to my family’s home. Or stay with a work colleague—even if I could get ahold of one this late on a Friday night. There are some motels in the area. If I stayed in one, I wouldn’t be endangering anyone. That’s maybe not true, but I don’t know what else to do.”

Will seemed to consider that option, tapping a long finger again his lips. “You’d still be alone. And earlier I sensed you might be nervous about staying in your apartment by yourself. We can drive back to the city, and I can put you up if you want to stay with me.”

Gwen gawked at him. They barely knew each other, never mind the sizzle simmering between them. They had spent no more than three hours in each other’s company and he was willing to put her up overnight?

She rubbed her sweaty palms down her legs and glanced out the Jeep’s back window.

This was like being caught in a tornado with three seconds to decide whether to hide in the bathtub or a cellar. If only she had someone to talk this out with. Like Erin. Or Will Strongbow. Will sounded like he had experience surviving undercover operations, not that she believed that was what she faced now. But would it hurt to listen to him?

“You’re sure you want to be stuck with me?” she asked.

“It’s my pleasure.” A sparkle glittered in his gaze.

His deep voice rumbled through her, leaving in its wake a fissure of sexual awareness curling in all her vulnerable places. This guy was sex on a stick, though why he was attracted to her, she didn’t know. Erin was the beautiful one. She tugged on the bottom of her top, rearranged the sweater on her lap, and blotted the sweat on her upper lip. She’d never been in this sort of situation, and she had to get this right. “I need to know if your offer comes with certain expectations?”

“No strings.” He held up his hands. “No ulterior motives.”

The serious way he regarded her said he intended to keep his word, but inside, a stupid flutter still sprang to life.

“Thanks.” She stopped twisting her hands, smoothed her palms down her thighs and smiled at him. She would trust him on this just as she had earlier in downtown Manhattan. There weren’t any other good options, anyway. Thinking about her friend’s experiences with a stalker, she sure didn’t want whatever was going on to affect her work colleagues.

“That sounds like the best idea.” She wouldn’t call it the perfect plan, or even the best, but she could always change her mind later, if necessary. “Would you mind stopping for ice cream? There’s a Bailey’s not far from here.”

“Only if they have Rocky Road.”

A laugh escaped her. “All respectable ice cream parlors carry that.”

“Just making sure. I need to buy gas before we head back, and I wouldn’t mind grabbing some grub.”

“That sandwich...” Her thoughts flashed back to Henry’s deli. “I didn’t give you a chance to finish at the coffee shop. Sorry.”

“I didn’t have to follow you.”

“I’m glad you did.” She gave him directions that would take them to a casual restaurant in the next town. “In the meantime, I’m going to report the SUV to the police.”

Will pulled the Jeep back onto the road. “Give them the location but tell them you can’t stay at the scene to wait for them.”

“Do you think they’ll still check it out?”

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He glanced over. “Let’s hope so.”

The dispatcher answered, and Gwen took a deep breath. “I need to report a suspicious car outside a residence.”

The policeman took the details and told her they’d send a cruiser. Gwen finished that call, saw where Will was driving and swallowed a gasp. A vise compressed her chest. She always avoided going this way. The only other route would take longer, but they had time. “Take a right here.”

Will turned without question. She admired his handsome profile and looked out the rear window at the road he’d almost driven. Maybe she was being silly. A lot of years had passed, and she wasn’t a teenager anymore. Maybe she should drive that road again someday, but only when she was alone. She didn’t want anyone else to see her freak.

Minutes later, her phone chimed and her cousin Leslie’s number flashed on her screen. Gwen glanced at Will.

He slowed and glanced over. “What is it?”

“My cousin’s calling again. If I ignore the call, she’ll get worried and scare my uncle and aunt and grandmother. She could even drive by my place.” Gwen bit her lip. “I’m going to cancel.”

Gwen answered the call and raised her phone to her ear. “Hey, Leslie. I’m not going to be able to come tonight, after all. Sorry. I promise I’ll try on the dress before the wedding.”

“Wait. What?” Leslie demanded.

“I’ll call when I know my schedule.” She would not put her family in possible jeopardy.

“Whoa, wait a minute, Gwen.” She could almost see her cousin extending her palm in a “Stop” gesture. “You’re home now, right?”

How did Leslie know these things? Gwen squelched a sigh.

“Is your car on the fritz again? Do you need me to come pick you up?”

“No!” That was the last thing she wanted. Leslie could walk into a trap. If not for Will, she might have, too. She shuddered at the image of the SUV hulking in the trees. “No,” Gwen repeated more calmly. “Don’t come by.”

“Why not? You’ve been putting this off since last week.” Leslie’s voice rose closer to the hysteria level.

“Can you hold on a sec?” Gwen pressed the phone to her chest. Will pulled into a gas station and she waited until he stopped beside a pump. “She’s offering to drive by my apartment. I need a convincing excuse why she shouldn’t.”

“Are you still there?” Leslie’s voice came through loud and clear. “Unless you say something. I’m leaving now.”

Will laid a hand on Gwen’s arm. “Tell her we’ll come by right now, but we can’t stay

long.”

His touch sent squiggles dancing all the way down to her fingers. She took a breath, watching as Will got out, swiped his card in the pump, and began to fill his tank. “Don’t go anywhere, Leslie. We’ll be there in a minute,”

“Is this guy cute?” Leslie asked.

Gwen rolled her eyes. Will was much more than cute. Try dangerously handsome. Erin should have warned her, but she probably hadn’t had time to do more than make her request. “You’ll find out when we get there.”

She ended the call and studied the cars and trucks pulling onto the pump apron. So far, she’d seen no black SUVs or anyone looking her way. She checked her phone for any news from the police and wished her stomach would stop jittering around.

Will climbed back inside. She rubbed her arms through the loose weave of her summer sweater. “I take it you’ve changed your mind about us being in danger.”

“No, not at all.” He flicked a wave of auburn hair from his forehead, and his brow furrowed. “Something strange is going on here. I agree we don’t want whatever that is to threaten your family.”

“I’m sure there’s an explanation, but I can’t imagine what it is.” She rubbed her palms together. “I’m nervous waiting for the next shoe to drop.”

“I hope the police find that car and then let us know the situation.” He squeezed her hand and checked out the car pulling up to a pump—a red car, not black. “The good news is that the guy in the SUV didn’t come looking for us after we passed your apartment and turned the corner. No one’s followed us since we left the neighborhood.”

Gwen crossed her arms. “I heard a ‘but’ in there somewhere.”

“But—” He grinned, and a warm glint flashed in his blue eyes. Her breath caught at the transformation to his face. “We shouldn’t stay long at Leslie’s, and I don’t think your cousin needs to know about the car watching your house.”

“I’m not mentioning the creep who followed me around Manhattan, either.” She clutched her hands in her lap. “That’s going to be hard. Leslie and her mom and dad became my second family when my parents were killed.”

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Gwen caught her breath. This wasn't exactly a first date-type revelation. This wasn't a date at all, even if Leslie probably thought so.

Will reached across the console and squeezed her hand. "I'm sorry."

"Thanks." She shrugged. "It happened when I was a teen, ages ago."

"But you had to adjust. Also, you don't look old enough to be able to count your past in centuries."

She laughed as he doubtless meant her to, but she'd had plenty of time to make mistakes, especially where guys were concerned. "I need to tell you how to get there."

On the way, the cops called her back. While they'd seen where the vegetation on the shoulder had been crushed, they hadn't found any SUV, black or otherwise, in the area. She relayed that information to Will.

"They said the couple upstairs hadn't noticed the car, but I have their number. I can call." She flicked open her contacts list.

"What would you ask them? 'Are you doing something illegal, perhaps working with the Mafia?'"

She laughed. "Come on, Will. I'd be a little more subtle. But you know something?" She straightened as another thought occurred. "If it was the upstairs tenants' apartment the car was watching, why hadn't the driver of that car knocked on their

door or left once he'd seen they were home?"

Her phone chimed with an incoming call. "Speak of the devil. It's Margie, the wife who lives upstairs?"

"Hi. What's up?"

"The police stopped by a few minutes ago and asked if we'd seen anything unusual going on in the neighborhood. They said a car had been surveilling the house," Margie explained. "We said we hadn't noticed, but I wanted to tell you when you come home to be careful."

Gwen thanked her, said she was staying elsewhere tonight and disconnected. "The upstairs couple called to warn me to be careful."

In fifteen minutes Will parked at the curb in front of her aunt and uncle's brick and wood ranch house. She couldn't worry about the SUV now. Her relatives would pick up on her worry. She gathered up her tote. "You ready for this?"

"Sure." Will shut off the motor. "I'm looking forward to meeting them."

"You may be sorry." She stepped out and grabbed her tote.

Will came around and closed her door. "Stop trying to scare me."

Her cousin, Leslie, opened the front door before they even rang the doorbell. "What took you so long? I was getting worried."

"You know, this and that." Gwen waited a beat, but her cousin didn't invite them in or step back. "Can we come inside? Or are you going to make us stand out here?"

Leslie opened the door wider, gave Will a once-over, and sent Gwen a significant look.

Her cousin's look said she wanted to know all about Will, how they'd met, how long they'd known each other. All of that. Gwen merely raised her brows before walking inside.

She peeked into the living room where her uncle sat in an armchair positioned for viewing the large, flatscreen television, only his legs visible. "Hi, Uncle Tim," she called. His arm rose from the armrest and waved.

Her Aunt Kathy came in, carrying a beer and a glass, which she handed off to her husband. Her grandmother, apron still tied over her housedress, entered from the kitchen, and Gwen gave her a hug.

Her grandmother pushed her stylishly round-lensed glasses up her nose and regarded Will, who was closing the front door. "Well, well, well. Who is this?"

Her aunt propped her hands on her hips and peered at Will over the reading glasses resting on the end of her nose.

Gwen touched Will's arm. "This is Will Strongbow. He drove me up after I missed my train."

Uncle Tim set his beer aside and rose to shake hands. Everyone else made the appropriate noises. On the mantle clock, she caught the time and took a deep breath. She couldn't settle in and get too comfortable, all too easy to do with her family. Loose lips sink ships, and she'd rather jump overboard without a life jacket than cause them any worry.

"So—" Granny started.

Gwen could sense the questions coming and decided to head her off. She patted her gran's gnarled hands and turned toward the stairs. "Since I'm late, why don't I go put on my dress so we can get started?"

Gwen stopped after climbing four steps. "Come on, Leslie, show me yours. I haven't seen it yet, remember?"

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Her cousin pulled herself away from Uncle Tim and Will and followed her upstairs and down the hall. “Where did you meet such a hot ticket?”

One of the upstairs bedrooms had been converted into bridal dress central. Her grandmother joined them there before Gwen could answer. “It’s about time you found a nice-looking man of your own, Gwennie, dear.”

Leslie plopped onto the sewing machine chair. “Please don’t tell me he’s a professor like the last one.”

“What last one?” Granny looked from Leslie to her and back. “I don’t remember him. What did he look like?”

“You didn’t meet him. Neither did Leslie.” Gwen had never brought any guys over here, not since high school, anyway, but Leslie knew because Gwen had made the mistake of confiding in her. “I can’t even think about romance now. My boss is depending on me to keep the lab running smoothly while he’s on vacation. I can’t let him down.”

“But that’s only temporary. He’ll be back in how long?”

“Six weeks.” Gwen dropped her sweater on the arm of the armchair and shimmied out of her jeans. “But if I mess up, I could lose my job.”

“I don’t believe that. Your boss wouldn’t have put you in charge unless he trusted you.”

Leslie had a point. Her experience with the biology professor was the real reason she was currently off men, but she did want to do a good job. She also needed a little more time to put the bad experience behind her.

“He can still be a friend.” Gran meant Will. “Tell me how you met him?”

That she could answer without mentioning the strange men suddenly popping up all around her. She would also need to sidestep any of Leslie’s questions about why it had taken her so long to get home.

“He works with my roommate at the shipping company.”

“Really?” Leslie handed her the pale pink dress that had been hanging on the back of an open closet door. “What’s his job? Personal trainer?”

Leslie, who had a more than passing acquaintance with hot men, always noticed a guy’s muscles first. Her groom was ripped, but that didn’t mean everyone went gaga over a man’s muscles. All right, all right. She had, too.

“No.” Gwen fluffed the taffeta skirt with lace overlay on her bridesmaid’s dress, hoping to distract them from talking about Will. “This is a really lovely color.”

Her grandmother picked up the cue and chattered away about dresses and materials and sewing. Gran had always made all her own clothes, most of them right out of the pages of Vogue magazine, and so far, had made dresses for three family brides, including Leslie.

“I’m waiting,” Leslie said.

Her cousin was like a dog with a tug toy. “He’s an engineer.”

“And a friend.” She gave Gwen a knowing look. She and Gran and the rest of the family had taken finding Gwen a beau as a personal challenge. “Everything starts on the friend level.”

“I only met him tonight. I want to get to know a guy before rushing into anything romantic.” The way she had with the professor. But live and learn, and she planned to remember her lesson.

“You’re not getting any younger,” Leslie’s mom said from the doorway.

“I’m only twenty-nine.” A sudden thought nearly cut off Gwen’s breath. “Please, Aunt Kathy, don’t say anything about any of this in front of Will.” She’d die of mortification.

Knowing her family’s tendency to share her personal information, her uncle had probably already embarrassed her. The best course of action now was to focus on getting the dress hemmed so she and Will could leave. She dove under the dress’s skirt and tried to shift the bodice down without testing the stitches temporarily closing the back.

“I haven’t had a chance to ask a question,” Aunt Kathy said. “Tim’s picking his brain on the Jets playoff possibilities.”

“Leslie, help Gwen get into her dress so I can get this done in time to watch my program.”

Her gran never missed an episode of “Blue Bloods,” which meant she probably admired Will’s physique, too.

Gwen adjusted the garment’s waist.

“Oh, my. You look so much like your mother!” Gran clasped her hand to her chest.
“Doesn’t she, Kathy?”

“Especially your smile,” her aunt added.

Gwen stopped adjusting the dress. She wasn’t anything like her foolish mom. “I have her genes. That’s all.” She climbed onto a small platform normally used to display house plants on the sunporch.

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Her gran pulled over a chair and sat to begin pinning the hem.

Leslie crossed her arms. “So, Will’s a friend?”

Gwen recognized the tactic. “I probably won’t know him long enough to be a friend.”

“Does he live around here somewhere?” Gran asked. “Turn to the right.”

“Someplace in Manhattan, I think.”

All three paused to stare at her. “If you know that, it means you’re at least interested,” her aunt said. “Don’t get huffy. That’s good.”

This was such a predictable remark. Gwen squelched a sigh. “He gave me a ride up since I was running late, and we had to pick up the car from a garage.”

“But you’re still riding around with him?” Aunt Kathy asked.

“We’re going out to eat when Gran finishes and—” Gwen caught herself before she could say anything about going back to his city apartment.

“There’s plenty left from supper.” Aunt Kathy returned to the doorway. “You and you friend can eat here.”

Of course, her aunt would offer to feed them. For Aunt Kathy, food solved all problems, but she and Will needed to leave the house as soon as possible.

“Why don’t you save it for tomorrow? Will?—”

“Likes you, Gwen,” Leslie slapped the arms of the chair. “I vote for her to spend as much time as she can with him.”

“Sorry. Will needs to get back to the city.” Gwen ignored her cousin’s comment, but she hated making him the excuse.

Gran didn’t waste any time pinning the hem. When she finished, Gwen got out of her dress, pulled on her clothes, and went downstairs. Will had settled in the armchair next to her Uncle Tim. He leaned forward, elbows on knees, listening to her uncle. Both men stood when she returned. Will smiled, looking a little relieved. “You ready?”

“Yup.” She hugged her uncle. Will went outside, but Uncle Tim held her back to give her a thumbs-up and whisper, “He’s a keeper.”

6

No black SUVs followed them. At least, not that Will could tell.

He pulled into a parking lot outside the neighborhood restaurant Gwen had suggested. The scent of French fries and grilled meat wafting from Bailey’s made him think of hamburgers, but if Gwen wanted the ice cream, he couldn’t see any reason why she shouldn’t have some. Maybe sitting inside would help her relax.

“I saw you studying the neighborhood when we left Leslie’s house.” Gwen stepped out of the car.

She’d pulled the elastic from her hair, and the soft strands fell around her face. For a second he couldn’t tear his gaze away. But she seemed to be waiting for a reply. He

racked his brain for a moment before remembering. Will put a hand at her back. “You’re right. I was watching the street. Second nature, probably. Situational awareness.”

“Is that an intelligence operations word?”

“Military for being always aware of your surroundings. As a soldier in enemy territory, you always look for escape routes.” He locked his Jeep and led her across the crowded parking lot. Dinnertime had passed and they were well into the teenager Friday night dating scene.

“Well?” She stopped walking, her blue eyes wide. “Don’t keep me in suspense.”

He smiled. “As far as I can tell, we’re still good.” He held Gwen back from the entryway while a group of giggling teenaged girls pushed outside.

“You’re very thorough.” She gave him one of her sweet smiles.

He held the door open for her. “That’s probably the only reason I’m still alive.”

She slipped her hand through his arm and leaned close. “I’m glad you managed.”

Warmth flooded down to his toes. She’d been judging his every action since he’d met her, but her suspicion had finally vanished. Whether or not that was because he’d talked easily with her family, he didn’t know, but he still appreciated that no end.

“Are you?”

“You’ve been wonderful, and you know it.”

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“I try,” he said. Laughter rose from a booth of teenagers. A waitress, her blond hair caught in a hairnet, passed with a tray of filled soda fountain glasses. “It’s busy in here.”

The hostess greeted them, and they followed her to an empty booth.

Gwen turned over her menu. “This chain is famous for ice cream. That’s what I want.”

“You might want to get something to eat, too. We have a long drive back.” We. He liked the sound of that.

He studied the choices and then laid the card flat to scan the restaurant for a waitperson. Gwen had been watching him expectantly but looked away now. He leaned back and clasped his hands. “Go ahead. The floor is yours.” Color swept her cheeks, the contrast with her pale skin making her even prettier. “Ask me anything.”

“Anything, huh?” She raised her dark brows. “You’re not afraid of what that might be?”

“No.”

“Actually.” She clasped her hands on top of the menu. “I don’t have a question, but I was just thinking you’re not at all how I pictured you.”

“You mean I don’t have two heads and walk with a limp?” he asked.

“That’s not what I imagined and you know it!” She laughed. “I thought you’d look more like an engineer.”

He leaned forward. This could get interesting. “What’s an engineer look like?”

“You know.” She waved a hand. “Nerdy with glasses and a pocket protector.”

“I take it you’re disappointed?”

“No!” she exclaimed and then blushed again when she realized she’d spoken loudly.

“Glad I pass muster.” Will shared a smile with her. This woman continued to surprise him, and he didn’t think he’d ever met anyone quite like her. He signaled to a different wait person, but she also ignored him.

“What did you do while in the Navy?”

“I worked in intelligence. Covert assignments.”

“Like what the Seals do?”

“In a way.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Is that all you can say because it’s so secret?”

“Something like that.” A server passed them with a tray full of drinks. She acknowledged him before serving another booth. “My dad was a career officer, my uncles had all been to the academy, so the Navy was a given for me. I wanted to make the same contribution.”

“Now that I’m getting to know you, I can see that. Then you went to college for your

engineering degree so you could build ships. In fact, Erin says you motivated her to finish her degree.”

He shifted uneasily but decided to play this for laughs and slapped his cheeks. “I feel so exposed.”

She laughed, and he smiled inside, pleased to discover that not only was Gwen beautiful and smart, she had a sense of humor. He decided to use this to his advantage. “This is unfair. Now you know more about me than I know about you.”

She shook her head, her tiny stud earrings flashing in the light. “I’m not interesting.”

“Come on, give me something.”

“I work in a research lab studying viruses, most of them very dangerous. Sequencing genetic material, that sort of thing.” She raised her eyebrows as if to ask if he knew anything about that.

“I’ve read about it and seen photos. I frankly can’t imagine the patience that takes.”

The waitress with the tray stopped beside their booth. She pulled a pad from her frilly white apron. “You ready to order?”

He gestured to Gwen to go first. “I’m going to have a chocolate malt.”

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“That’s all?” he asked.

Gwen nodded, and the server turned to him. “I’ll have the BLT on wheat with fries.”

“They have BLTs here now?” Gwen raised her dark brows. “They didn’t used to.”

He pointed to the item on the laminated card.

“I’ve already had a sandwich, but with all the running around we did, I need something more.”

He nodded, knowing well how stress could deplete a person.

“Besides, bacon’s my weakness.” She turned to the server. “I’ll have a BLT on white. Chips instead of fries.”

The waitress nodded. “Anything to drink?”

“Water for me.” Will set the menu aside. The waitress jotted their order and left. Gwen sighed.

He folded his arms on the table, one part of his attention watching those around them and the other the cars turning in off the street. “I would have thought visiting your family would be relaxing.”

“Are you kidding? I was dodging questions right and left.”

“What kind of questions?” He slid the menu card behind the ketchup.

She said nothing for a moment. “The usual sort relatives ask single women.”

“I got it now.” He nodded. “When am I going to meet your girlfriend? It’s time you settled down. That sort of thing.”

“Ohmigod.” She leaned forward. “You really do know.”

“Same thing happened to me, but I didn’t mind. Your uncle and aunt were so busy asking me about myself they didn’t want to know why we were so late.”

Giggles erupted from the booth behind them where four high school kids sat. Will turned back to their table. “Were you serious as a teen?”

“I don’t remember, but it’s not bad to be focused.”

“It’s admirable. A skill I’m sure you use as a research assistant, whatever that means.”

“I work for a professor studying viruses. I’m his senior lab assistant.”

That didn’t give him much more information. Was she being intentionally vague? Or merely modest? “I’m not clear what that entails. Can you share or is it a secret?”

“I get my name on the research papers he writes along with some of my other lab colleagues. I get to help present our findings at conferences and local seminars. We gave one at the university a few weeks ago, very well attended, too, because my boss is famous.”

“You’re a science star.” Will had trouble reconciling that with his own preconceived

notions about her as a frazzled woman with a messy ponytail.

“No, Dr. Hepler is. I like the work and knowing that maybe we can create a vaccine to cure some of the world’s worst diseases.”

“That’s impressive.” He clasped his hands on the table.

“Not really. I’m just his lab assistant.”

Will didn’t believe a lowly lab assistant would be listed on the publications. But again, he appreciated her modesty, which was rare these days. “I’ll bet you have an advanced degree.”

“I do. A masters.”

And scientists theorized ahead of time about their expected results. This went a long way to her having preconceived ideas about him. But knowing this beautiful woman had given him enough thought to visualize him stirred a strange awareness inside. Strange, because he couldn’t remember ever feeling this way before.

Their sandwiches arrived, along with Gwen’s malt. By mutual consent they concentrated on eating. He had popped a fry into his mouth when high headlights swept the parking lot outside. He stilled, pretending to be studying the menu card while keeping an eye on a large, black SUV entering the restaurant lot.

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“Do you want—” Gwen stopped speaking. “Will?—?”

As he watched, the vehicle disappeared past the row of parked cars. He’d noticed earlier that the lot wrapped around the restaurant to the other side. This place seemed popular, but, if the driver found a space, he would come inside any minute. What were the chances this person would be the driver they’d noticed earlier surveilling Gwen’s apartment?

* * *

Gwen sank back against the red vinyl seat. She’d been practically clinging to the windowsill, following the progress of the big black SUV as it rolled out of sight. Her throat tightened. “Did you see what just came into the parking lot?”

“Yeah.” Will swiveled to stare at the restaurant entrance.

“Shouldn’t we get out of here?” Gwen set her BLT on her plate and pulled her tote up onto the seat beside her.

A frown puckered his forehead, and when he looked her way that wave of dark auburn hair flopped over his brow. “This is a public space. We’re safe.”

He chewed and swallowed, keeping hold of the half sandwich in his hand. A slice of tomato slipped to the plate, which he ignored. His brows lowered, and the edges of his eyes crinkled. He set down his meal. “Do you want to leave?”

Wow, Will wasn’t going to boss her around, a trait she hadn’t encountered very often

in the male species.

“Not really. I’m loving my malt.” She smiled. “Thanks for stopping here.”

“Only because you wanted Rocky Road.” His lips twitched. “If it had been chocolate or strawberry, I might have driven past.”

“This has ice cream in it.” She tapped a fingernail against the glass.

He picked up his sandwich and then put it down again. “We can get some Rocky Road to go.”

“No, really. This is enough. Stop teasing.”

He took another bite and caught her gaze. She couldn’t look away. He lifted the last of the sandwich half. “This is great, by the way.”

“Because it’s got bacon.” But she ignored her food to tear a strip off her paper napkin. She’d been debating actions if they spotted the car again. Sitting still and waiting to see what would happen next didn’t feel like the right thing to do. “Have you had experience in this sort of situation before? Being followed?”

“Not in the U.S., but yes.” He picked up a fry.

“Did you see who was at the wheel?” She tore another strip.

He wiped his mouth and moved his plate aside. “The driver just now?”

She nodded.

“A man. That’s all I could make out.” Will chewed another fry.

“We don’t have a clue what the guy parked in the bushes looked like.” She balled up her pile of napkin strips.

“You’re right. But I think we’ll know if it’s the same guy.”

A gust of warm air accompanied by noises from the street traffic, swept inside. Gwen straightened and peered toward the entrance. The hostess held the door wide, and a gray-haired woman with a cane tottered inside, followed by her equally senior citizen husband.

“I doubt that couple came in a black SUV.” She pulled the toothpick from her sandwich and took a bite. What on earth had she ordered? It tasted like sawdust. She switched to her malt. “It doesn’t seem like a senior-citizen-type vehicle.”

“They might like the protection of all that armor.” Will stood and tossed a couple of twenties on the table. “Finish my fries if you want. I’m going to check around outside. Stay here.”

“But what if—” Will’s long legs had already taken him halfway to the exit. What if the mysterious “driver” does come in? I think we’ll know if it’s the same guy. Will probably meant was that if the man surveilling her apartment came inside, he’d stalk right up to their table and take Will’s seat.

Maybe she should hide? Or ask the jerk if he knew a tall, skinny guy with long black hair?

“Everything all right?”

Their waitress stood beside the booth with her empty tray propped on her hip. She scooped up the little pile of napkin pieces and slapped a new one beside her. “Can I get you anything else?”

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“A doggie bag for the rest of my sandwich, please.” She lifted her malt glass and handed over the bills. “And do you have a cup for this?”

The waitress took the money and returned with to-go containers and change.

Gwen had boxed up the rest of her food by the time Will came back inside, his hair windblown. His gaze landed on the carry-out containers. “You’re ready to leave.”

“I am. Is it going to be safe?”

* * *

“This is as good as we’re liable to get.” Will lifted a few dollar bills from the tip tray and left the rest for the waitress. He wanted to ask Gwen if she had figured out yet why the guy in the rock band tee seemed familiar. That would possibly give them a lead to track, but he wasn’t going to bother her with that right now. What he needed to do now was get them back to the city and his apartment before she collapsed from exhaustion.

She dragged her tote off the bench seat and rose, hooking the straps over her shoulder. “Did you see the black SUV that passed our window?”

“Probably. There was one in the lot.” Will reached for the foam containers and extra napkins. “No one was standing around nearby, as if waiting. I even ran up and down the block to double check the other businesses, but didn’t see any cars that looked like the one outside your place. Those senior citizen customers must be driving the sports utility.”

“I’m glad I’m going home with you.” She followed him outside.

He stilled. She sounded eager, and heat rippled along his nerves.

Don’t get excited. She doesn’t mean what it sounds like. She had only agreed in the first place because she didn’t want to be alone, and that was probably the emotion behind her words. But he would have her to himself a little longer, which suited him fine.

He opened the passenger door, waited for her to settle, and handed over the take-home containers. After he climbed in and started the engine, he said, “I think I can remember how to get back to the highway, but feel free to give me directions.”

Between the two of them they reached Henry Hudson Parkway without trouble and headed south.

“Do you mind if I eat my sandwich? I’ll be careful not to drop any food in your car.”

“Go ahead.” He was glad she’d relaxed enough to feel hungry. “You’ll feel better. I know I did.”

Soon the heavenly scents of bacon, tomato, and mayonnaise drifted to him, but he focused on the road. Ten minutes or so later, a soft sigh came from the passenger seat. “That was so good.”

Suddenly, he envisioned a warm and naked Gwen sighing in his arms, and his pulse quickened. Jeeze. He rubbed a palm over the top of the steering wheel. He’d promised her no strings, and he didn’t need to torture himself.

Will stared at the taillights ahead of them. He should simply concentrate on getting home. He wouldn’t mind hearing her voice, though, but they needed a neutral topic.

Before he could think of anything, she shifted in her seat.

Eyes front, Will. What was it about this woman that her every word and movement etched itself in memory like a groove laid down on a 45-rpm record?

“Were you okay with my uncle and aunt? I sort of bailed on you,” she asked.

“You did not abandon me.” After checking his mirrors, he merged with the traffic flowing over the bridge. This was the second time she’d mentioned her relatives and their visit. “We’d already agreed we didn’t want to stay long and you took care of what you had to do right away. I enjoyed meeting them.”

“You really did?”

He glanced over to see her twisting her hands in her lap. Why? “I enjoyed talking to your uncle.”

“What did you talk about?” She leaned toward him.

“Ships. His military experience. Who will win the Super Bowl next year. We found out we had a lot in common, including rooting for the Jets.”

“I was afraid you’d be bored.” She rubbed her hands down her jeans.

“Not at all.” Will smiled as he remembered. “I can tell your uncle and aunt are fond of you from the way they spoke of you.”

“You talked about me?”

Was she upset? “Come on, Gwen. You did bring me there. I told them I was a friend of your roommate, Erin, and about the workbook you picked up.”

“That’s good.” She settled back in her seat, her relief evident.

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He smiled because he could understand her relatives' interest. Gwen was smart, pretty, and working in an important job. He glanced at her. He'd meant what he'd said to be a compliment so why was she fiddling with her seatbelt?

Gwen was a mystery he wanted very much to solve.

7

Gwen checked behind them at the other cars as Will pulled into his parking garage near Central Park. "I don't think we were followed, not by a hulking, black sports utility."

He drove them up to his parking spot and turned off the motor. She didn't look over at him as he expected, still sitting with her hands clutched tightly in her lap. He cracked open his door. "You okay?"

"Sure." She sagged against the seat. "Are we taking a taxi or walking from here?"

"It's late, let's see if we can get a taxi." He went to her side, took the empty to-go containers from her, and tossed them in a trash receptacle on the way to the elevator.

"That's good." She still didn't make eye contact.

Was it him? Or simply that she didn't make a practice of going home with guys. He didn't know if she did, but he suspected she didn't. Either way, he would have to do what he could to keep things low-key.

* * *

Outside the garage, they took a taxicab over to Broadway and up into his neighborhood.

Will lived on the twentieth floor of a new building. A subtle glow from the ceiling molding lit their path down a hall from the elevator. He pressed his thumb against a pad near his doorbell, and his apartment door unlatched. Will held the panel open. “Welcome to my humble abode.”

The foyer, painted a muted gray, contained a black lacquered console and a tree stand. She smoothed her palm over the granite kitchen counter and dropped her tote on the floor beside the microfiber sectional, heading for the floor-to-ceiling windows in the living room. The night skyline of skyscrapers across the river rose like a glittering curtain. “There’s nothing humble about this view.”

Will came to stand beside her. She studied his honed profile. He posed an intriguing puzzle she’d love to unravel—navy intelligence, marine engineer, two married sisters. Maybe, someday.

Uncle Tim liked him, and he wouldn’t have told her if he didn’t trust Will. She liked him, too, more than she should considering they’d only met. He was handsome, sure, but there was something else, something that drew her like metal to a magnet. But she couldn’t get involved.

Not yet. Supervising the research lab for the next few weeks would need her complete focus. She knew from the past that a new relationship with a guy, any guy, would distract her.

Will caught her watching him. He raised his auburn brows. “What?”

Had she been quiet too long? She shrugged with a smile. “Just taking in the scenery.”

“Is that so?” His voice teased, and his gaze seemed to sparkle.

A flutter sprang to life in her tummy. Oh yes, they could easily move this acquaintance to the next level. “More or less.” She surveyed the open plan of his apartment. “This is nice place.”

“I can tell what you’re thinking.”

“What am I thinking?” He thought he could read her mind, did he? Not good, when she was trying so hard not to notice how being around him made her feel so feminine, so...so...desirable.

“That I’m loaded, but I was broke when I finished my degree.” His deep, rich voice rolled over her like a soothing wave lapping a shore. “I was lucky, too. The mother of one of my classmates is a realtor and she got me into the lottery for the last apartment in the building, which had been reduced.”

“You made a nice buy.” Upper Westside building with a doorman, beautiful finishes in common areas, floor to ceiling windows. No wonder he protected this place with the latest technology. She should suggest security like this to her boss for their research lab.

In the street below a yellow taxi traveled up the street. In a few more blocks the cab would pass the university and her lab on campus. Had she seen the T-shirt guy at the school? Maybe in the union at lunchtime? If only she could figure out where, and that place made sense, she’d feel less threatened.

Will returned to the kitchen and switched on the lights. “Are you hungry?”

“I finished my sandwich on the way home.” She joined him there. “Remember?”

“Definitely. The smell of bacon was driving me crazy, even though I’d already had plenty.” He smiled.

She was again struck by his physical attractiveness. Not that she’d ever be likely to forget, but she couldn’t get used to being around a knockout guy who wasn’t fixated on his looks to the exclusion of other positive traits. To her, Will’s poise and kindness were much more appealing.

He opened the fridge. “I have cheese and deli meats in the fridge, if you want more.”

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“I’m fine, thanks.” She sank onto a stool at the breakfast bar.

“I’m having a glass of wine.” He placed a half-full, corked bottle on the counter.

“There’s enough here for two. It’s Friday night.”

“Finally.” Gwen read the label. She’d love to taste this, but she was here alone with a guy she liked, a guy who appealed to her, a guy who seemed to be attracted to her. Things could get intense between them very easily if she let down her inhibitions. She rubbed her palm across the cool marble breakfast bar. “I’d better pass.”

She handed back the bottle. “Are you always prepared to entertain?”

He chuckled. “Not usually, but my older sister and brother-in-law stayed here earlier this week to take in a show for her birthday. He brought along the wine.” Will lifted the bottle, ready to pour his glass. “You sure you don’t want to try some?”

“Maybe I’ll have some after all. Just a tiny bit.” She slid her fingers down the cool stem of the second glass.

He poured less than a swallow and raised his gaze to hers. “More?”

She laughed. “That’s barely a taste. A bit more, please, but save some for yourself.”

“I will.” The edges of his mouth curved up, and she again got lost in his warm gaze.

He filled a glass for himself and clinked against hers. “I know this isn’t your place, but I hope you’ll feel at home enough to relax.”

She took a sip of her wine and rolled her neck against a hand. “I’m definitely more relaxed than I would have been in a motel or my apartment.”

“You don’t feel safe now?” A furrow cut between his brows.

“With your security system, I feel untouchable.” But... She picked a fingernail and caught his skeptical expression. “I keep trying to remember where I could have met the rock band fan who followed us. I think I’d seen him somewhere before tonight, like in passing. When I wasn’t paying attention, but should have. Maybe I even encountered the driver of the black SUV, too.”

That she couldn’t recall any specifics worried her. But neither of them had attacked her. They’d simply been mysterious presences, and she should let it go. “I’ve worked in the city since I graduated from college. I can’t believe how shaken I am by what happened tonight. It was too much. I used to be good at ignoring disgusting people.”

Will braced his palms on the marble. “What he was doing qualified as harassment.”

“I guess. Leslie is always saying I’m too tough to let things like this get to me.” Mostly though, her supposed toughness was all a bluff.

“Tough, huh?” Will slapped one of his cheeks, his eyes glinting with amusement. “If you hadn’t told me, I never would have realized.”

“Oh, you.” She shook a finger at him. “You’re going to get it.”

“I can hardly wait to find out what that’s going to be.” His gaze darkened, sizzling through her, and every cell in her body stood to attention. He came around the counter, pulled her to her feet and wrapped his arms around her waist. He lowered his head and murmured, “Gwen...”

Any minute he would kiss her. She should back off, do something radical. Instead, she turned in his arms as if this were the most natural thing in the world. With two fingers he lifted her chin, and they gazed at each other for a long moment. One of the appliances shifted into a louder hum, breaking the moment. She stilled. What was she doing?

He released her. He didn't move away, though, and his body heat held her captive. She swallowed to moisten her mouth. "Are you trying to seduce me?"

"I think it's the other way around."

She tilted her head. "I'm seducing you?"

"From the moment I met you." He stepped away.

She straightened her sweater and tucked her hair behind her ears. "But I must look like a wreck."

"On the contrary."

Warmth rose to her face. "I-I," she sputtered.

He touched a finger to her cheek. "It's true, but don't worry. I remember what I promised."

What had he promised? Oh, yeah. No strings. He held her gaze as if challenging her to say that's what she still wanted or to rescind her request.

Should she? They'd already spent more time together tonight than they would have on several dates. She'd told herself she didn't want to rush into another romance, but would she be rushing when the way she felt with Will seemed exactly right? Why not

be one of those dynamic people who went after what they wanted?

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He divided the last of the wine between their glasses and tossed the empty bottle. “Everyone’s allowed a little down time from being tough.”

She sank down onto the stool, glad to have a change in the topic. “You sound like you speak from experience, but I don’t believe that.” He came across as interested and focused. Was that because she’d been in what could have been a dicey situation? And he needed to step in and help?

“Eventually. Back at base.” Will finished his wine and braced his hands on the countertop.

“Could have fooled me.” They shared a smile, and in the moment of stillness that descended, she reached over and touched the back of his hand. “Will...”

He turned his hand and linked his fingers with hers. “Hmm?” he said in a rough, sexy voice.

That little flutter inside settled down to stay. She looked up into his smoldering gaze. Before she could overthink this, she went around to his side, cupped his face, and brought his mouth down to hers—where he belonged.

And had forever. She was certain.

He broke the contact and lifted his head to stare down at her.

Why was he stopping? She clasped her hands behind his neck, sinking her fingers into the soft hair at his nape, and kissed him again. He drew her even closer, aligning

their bodies. Everything about him, the strength in his arms, the scent of his body, intoxicated her.

She seemed to be falling into a dream. The world vanished, all those external trappings burned away in the heat of his kiss. She lost herself in sensation as he took the kiss deeper. When he finally broke the contact, they were both breathless.

He tucked her into his shoulder and leaned his cheek against her hair. “Wow.”

She had to wait for her heart to stop pounding before she said, “I wasn’t expecting that.”

He stilled.

Uh-oh. Had that been the wrong thing to say? No, she wouldn’t second guess. She would go for what she wanted.

One corner of his mouth rose. “You had preconceived notions of how a naval engineer would kiss?”

She smiled back. “Not exactly. Certainly not before I ran into your office this afternoon, unforgivably late.”

“I’ll take late any time if it means...” He broke off what he was saying and led her into the living room.

“Means what?” She was about to sink onto the sofa when he scooped her up and sank down with her in his lap.

He pressed his forehead to hers. “Meeting someone like you.”

“You are sweet.” And so hot you’re driving me crazy. She rubbed her hand up one strong arm.

“I can be dangerous, too.”

“Like how?” she teased and unbuttoned his shirt.

He cupped her face and took her mouth. He swept his tongue over the seam of her lips and dove deeper. When they finally came up for air, they stared at one another. “You know I want you, but we can take things slow. If that’s what you want, we don’t need to rush.”

Oh, but they did. “I don’t want to wait.”

He’d already rolled his sleeves to his elbows earlier, and now he made fast work of completely stripping off the shirt. Swirls of auburn hair covered his pecs.

She traced the pattern until he caught her hand. Undeterred, she moved on, pressing kisses along his shoulder blade. He bent his head, and kissed behind her ear before trailing kisses down her neck. “Hmm. If we’re going to get serious, we?”

“We are.”

He ran his hands over her breasts and around to the back of her athletic top, cocking an eyebrow. She laughed. “My top comes off over my head.”

She reached for the hem, intent on pulling it up, but he stopped her. “Let me.”

His fingers brushed against her skin, and she shivered deliciously. He inched her top higher, a hand on either side of her ribs, and her nipples beaded before he pulled the top free. Bending his head, he dove in close to take her breast. His beard brushed

against her sensitive skin, setting tingles running wild.

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She lay back, and he stretched over her, caressing her with both hands and lips. Her insides melted. When he braced himself on his elbows, licking down and over her breast, her pulse galloped. The brush of his beard sparked unexpected shivers. His fingers popped the button on her jeans and slid the zipper lower. He slipped his hand down to caress the center of her desire before giving her a devilish smile. “You want me.”

He didn’t bother to ask, but there was no denying the truth. She smiled back. “We still have on too many clothes.”

He pushed her hands away, whispering roughly, “Let me.”

Bending his head to take her mouth again, he rose and discarded his own clothes.

She looked up at him, letting herself feast on his long, hard body, a body without an ounce of fat, a body very eager to get on with what they were doing. She wanted to be close to him, skin to skin.

“You’re so beautiful,” he said, his voice nothing more than a rasp. He planted a knee on the cushion and slowly peeled off the rest of her clothes, kissing each newly exposed inch.

She gasped. “If you don’t stop, I’m going to explode.”

“Good,” he murmured against her upper thigh. The brush of his breath tightened her skittering nerves. She fought the urge to both push him away or pull him closer. Then he touched her core with his fingers. And his tongue. She moaned, unable to keep

from slipping into a vortex of sensation. He moved up to kiss her just as she came apart.

The heat rippling through her finally subsided. Will cradled her, and she teased her fingers down on muscled arm. “This is not fair. I’m getting all the attention.”

“We’re not through, are we?”

“No, but?—”

He pressed his fingers against her lips. “I’ll be right back.”

Will left the room and returned with a foil packet and a chenille blanket. He set them both conveniently at hand. “In case you get cold.”

She smiled “I doubt I’ll be getting cold anytime soon.”

“Not if I can help it.” He came down beside her again, and before she could count to five, his mouth was everywhere, urgently kissing and nibbling. The sweet pressure built all over again. She closed her eyes, intent on holding off until he could join her.

“Hurry.” She urged.

He sheathed himself and braced himself above her, his fingers tangling in her hair. “Look at me, Gwen.” He held her gaze, easing himself inside her, watching her expression. “This okay?”

She nodded and then lost herself to the exquisite tension building between them.

Sometime later, as their bodies cooled, Will spread the blanket over them. She snuggled against his chest under the spread. She wanted to relax, enjoy this moment

of togetherness, but perverseness urged her to set the record straight immediately.
“Will...”

“Hmm.”

She should probably move to a chair to say this, but his embrace and his hard muscles pressed to hers felt so good that she couldn't resist resting her head on his shoulder.
“I don't want you to get the wrong idea.”

“What idea would that be?” His brows lifted.

“Thinking I'm playing with you.”

He stilled then stroked his fingers down her arm. “Why would I think that?”

“I'm coming off a bad experience with a guy. A romantic relationship,” she tried to clarify, but probably none of this was making sense to Will.

“I'm sorry.”

“Me, too. Mostly because it's destroyed my confidence.”

A frown rumped his forehead. “You seem self-assured to me. How else would you have gotten that research job at a world-famous university? You insisted on meeting me tonight and took the necessary steps to get there.”

“What I meant was, I fell for this other guy too soon, and I guess I idolized him to some degree. He could do no wrong, but whenever I wanted him to meet Uncle Tim and Aunt Kathy, he invented an excuse. When he kept stalling, I confronted him and discovered he was dating me simply to make his quote one-true-love unquote jealous. He didn't want to leave the city because he needed to finesse meeting her when I was

with him. He wanted to make her jealous. His former girlfriend had apparently refused to continue seeing him because she thought him self-centered.”

“Sounds like he proved that true, Gwen.” Will smoothed her hair off her face and cupped her cheek. “No one likes being used, but I met your family.”

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“True, but I rushed into that relationship. I don’t want to repeat that mistake. I like you. I like you a lot.” And I could fall for you so easily.

“Shh.” He pressed his fingers to her lips. “There are no timelines here. We just see how it goes. Right?”

She chewed a fingernail. “You won’t feel that I’m playing with you the way my ex did with me?”

“No. Because we’re talking about it.” He tucked the blanket around her shoulders. “If we’re confessing, I’ve got one to make, too.”

Her stomach jittered, but she looked into his glittering ice blue gaze, torn between wanting to know his secret, good or bad, or pretending he hadn’t said anything. “Please don’t tell me you have a girlfriend you want to impress.”

“You don’t seriously believe that.” His gaze searched hers. “Do you?”

“No.”

“Good.” He kissed her quickly. His Adam’s apple moved as if he swallowed hard. “I never thought I’d feel this way about someone. I’m thirty-four so it’s been a long time coming. I feel as if we fit together. Belong together. It’s a strange feeling. I’m pretty sure I won’t change my mind about this, but I can wait as long as you want.”

He spoke as if her response was a foregone conclusion, but she wasn’t sure. Tonight might be a one-time thing. Who knew what could happen tomorrow?

“Your usual?”

Will glanced up from the displayed muffins and pastries to find the pretty barista hovering with her tongs. “Yes, the pumpkin muffin. Thanks.” The Corner Coffee Club made the best pumpkin muffins. Or had a secret supplier of them. He could always count on them having his favorite on Saturday mornings.

Gwen liked bacon and chocolate malts, but the bakery didn’t have a bacon muffin. “Let me have two pumpkin.”

The server got a bigger bag and pulled the muffins. “Is that all?”

“And a blueberry.” Gwen might not want a pumpkin muffin, but everyone liked blueberry. The steamed milk machine hissed, and the aroma of coffee made him salivate, but he could brew some at home and he didn’t want to be gone too long. “No coffee today, thanks.”

A smile tugged his mouth at the memory of last night. For someone so sweet and modest, Gwen’s lovemaking had set the sheets on fire. A sharp contrast to how she’d played her cards close to her chest earlier. For a good reason, it turned out.

He hoped she didn’t plan to take the next train home this morning. Not until they’d figured out why someone in a black SUV had been staking out her place. But she might be feeling pressured after he’d confessed his own certainty. Still, he couldn’t retract his words now, and he didn’t regret baring his feelings. The truth seemed too important to keep inside. Hopefully, that would count as a point in his favor. At the shop’s cashier, he pressed his phone app to the reader and collected the muffins.

The line of customers now stretched to the front windows. On Saturdays, neighbors

who frequented the Corner Coffee liked to congregate outside and visit. He recognized a few of the regulars, his gaze snagging on someone else nearly as familiar and his pulse revved. What the hell was Gwen's rock fan stalker doing here?

"May I get by, please," a female voice said behind him.

Will retreated to the cool, dark shadows along the front of the store, tensed and ready for action. The man must have visited a barber last night. He no longer sported long, stringy black hair, but a razor-cut. Still, Will could swear this was the same guy. In fact, he wore the same jacket today, even though the mercury promised to climb fast. Suspicious.

The dude hardly noticed the people around him. Was he waiting for someone?

A bad feeling lodged in his gut. He'd left Gwen all alone in his apartment. Yes, the building had a doorman, but anyone could pose as a maintenance workman and come up from the basement. His apartment was secure to anyone but him, but Gwen might open the door if someone misrepresented themselves. He'd used that ploy himself a few times when he'd been on a mission.

If he wanted to leave and get home—and he did—he would have to walk right past T-shirt slash Rock Fan. Something told him that was exactly what the guy expected. Will pulled his phone and took some photos of him before leaving.

* * *

Gwen glanced at her watch and back to Will's expansive living room window view. Surely, this was why he'd chosen the apartment, plus the ability to put in his own security. Considering the shadows pedestrians below cast, the sun had already climbed high enough to shine over the surrounding buildings.

Will had been an amazing lover, and she was glad she'd taken the dare she'd given herself. But going to bed together had changed the dynamics of their relationship. They could never undo or forget what had happened. Not that she wanted to, but their relationship had just grown more complicated. Heck, they hadn't even known each other sixteen hours ago. Thinking about being a couple so soon made her feel edgy.

That declaration of his had both stunned and warmed her. He'd sounded smitten, and no one she'd ever met had said those sorts of things to her. Even months into a relationship. Even if he didn't need time, she did, and she had no clue what she would say to him when he returned.

She placed his note back on the kitchen counter. Based on the time he'd jotted at the top, he'd been gone thirty minutes already. She must have awakened when he'd left and had already showered in his sleek, modern bathroom and given her hair a vigorous towel dry. He'd suggested she make some coffee if he wasn't back when she found his comments. She'd discovered the beans and was studying the complicated-looking coffee maker when the apartment door opened and Will entered.

She stepped into the foyer. "Where'd you go?"

"Coffee shop on the corner." He placed the white bakery bag on the counter and pulled her close to nuzzle her neck. "Hmm, you smell good."

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“I’m clean, anyway,” she explained, shifting out of his reach. “Washed off all that sweaty subway grime.”

He’d showered, too, and the scent of his soap tickled her nose. Though the water would have long evaporated, his sexy beard looked darker. He wore a green polo tucked into jeans that rode low on his hips. “Sorry I took so long. There was a long line.”

She peeled open the bag and inhaled the sweet, spicy scent rising from the muffins inside. “There are three.”

“Your choice. If you don’t like pumpkin, you can have the blueberry.”

“But I love pumpkin.” How could he possibly know?

“You could have made yourself a cup of coffee.” He retrieved the slip with his jottings. “Did you read this?”

“Yes, thanks for letting me know you were out. I only just now saw it.” She rubbed her arms. Should she say something about last night? But how could she when she didn’t know herself exactly what she wanted. She’d told him about her ex, so he should be fine with her taking her time.

He walked over to the coffee maker and looked over his shoulder at her.

“I know I’m a scientist, and I do like puzzles.” She shrugged. “But I’m only an expert at a drip pot or a percolator, nothing fancy. Do you have a manual?”

“Somewhere around here.” Will laughed and stepped in to take over, pouring fresh beans into the top and filling the carafe with water. “I’ve actually got milk and sugar thanks to my sister’s visit.” Once he set the machine brewing, he took plates from a cabinet. “Did anyone come to the door while I was gone?”

“No.” She chose a pumpkin muffin for herself, peeled back the wrapping, and took a bite. “Hmm. Wonderful.”

When Will didn’t explain, she glanced up, startled by his frown. She tightened inside. Something was wrong here, but she didn’t know what. “Were you expecting someone?”

“Not at all.” He touched her cheek. “But I was worried.”

She crossed her arms. He’d told her last night she was safe. “What happened?”

“I saw your stalker at the coffee shop.” Will took his cell from a pocket and swiped to the first photo. “This is what he looks like today.”

She took his cell and studied the image. Her long-haired creep had cleaned up. “He got his hair cut and sure doesn’t look like a band groupie.”

“There are more.” He reached over her shoulder and swiped to the next photo.

The coffee machine pinged, and Will poured them both a cup. She sipped her brew, chewed and swallowed another tasty bite. As she shifted between several more photos, a realization slammed her.

She set down her muffin. “I know where I’ve seen him before. I don’t know his name, but I’m pretty sure he attended the seminar my boss and I presented on the preliminary results of our research. At the university. It was part of an annual

conference on our field. There were scientists from all over the world. About a hundred, hundred and fifty people in attendance.”

“That’s a crowd.” Will studied her, his dark, auburn brows still drawn together. “What made you remember him in particular?”

“He was with the group of men who clustered around my boss afterwards asking questions.”

Will had already demolished his muffin and was leaning forward, the long fingers of one hand wrapped around his cup. “Did you notice anyone else in particular?”

She sipped her coffee, considering. “I saw T-shirt guy speak privately with a stocky older man with slicked-back dark hair. He wore a dark three-piece suit when most of the other attendees were in short sleeves.”

“Did you hear what they were asking?”

“No, my boss gave me his presentation notes to stash in the safe behind the hospitality desk. He didn’t have time to take them back to his office because he worried someone would follow him and discover where we worked. He didn’t want to leave them lying around, either. We try to keep information private and have codes and swipe cards for entry.”

“Sounds like solid security to me.” Will sipped his brew.

“I guess something about these guys raised my boss’s concerns. We have a responsibility to keep these organisms safe and out of the hands of the public. I got his presentation locked up and then went to another room to help with refreshments. According to Dr. Hepler later, these two didn’t circulate and kept him from doing so himself. He’s going to lodge a complaint to make sure no one besides researchers and

government officials be allowed to attend these seminars.”

“Sounds like a good plan.”

Gwen walked to the windows. “Can people on the street see us standing at the window?”

“I doubt it. This is the twentieth floor.”

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She shielded her gaze and studied the sidewalks. “I don’t see anyone loitering below.”

He joined her there, mug in hand. “I don’t see him now, but he was there.”

“We didn’t see any cars following us last night. You would have told me.” She bit her lip. “Right?”

He put his arm around her shoulders. “Of course.”

Some guys kept their thoughts to themselves, but Will had been open about his. She had to remember that. She grimaced. “Sorry, Will, I was just shifting through possibilities.”

“Good to do.” He took another sip. “I expect that’s because you’re a good research scientist.”

He was sweet. “I guess, but here’s the thing. When T-shirt guy started following me, he couldn’t have known I was planning to meet you. Plus, he didn’t follow us here. How did he know where you live?”

“I have an idea.” Will walked into the living room, set his mug in the sink, and came back into the big room, looking around. “Where’s your big bag?”

She retrieved her tote from beside the couch and showed him.

“Do you mind if I search this?” he asked.

“I’ll do it.” She walked to the breakfast bar and immediately set out the small bag with cosmetics and hairbrush. To that, she added the envelope with the accounting study guide, a paperback mystery, a folded rain jacket, and other odds and ends. From the side sleeve she pulled her cell.

Will tapped a finger against his lips. “That’s all?”

She frowned. “Should I have something else?”

“Have you ever heard of an air tag?” Will took her bag. “May I?”

“Sure.” She followed him over to the couch where he upended her bag and picked up the little square object that fell out. “Is this yours?”

She shook her head, frowning. “I’ve never seen it.”

“This is how he’s finding you.” Will showed her the tracking device. “He planted this on you, and you’ve had your tote with you constantly. We should get rid of this thing now.”

Will took out a chopping board and smashed the device with a rubber mallet.

“He knows I’m in this building, maybe even this apartment.” She leaned on her elbows and studied the shattered bits of the tag. “I’m sorry, Will. I’ve dragged you into this.”

He rubbed her back. “Don’t worry. I wonder why he didn’t approach us last night.”

“Probably because I was with you.” She tapped her lips. “I’m trying to think when he could have planted this on me.”

“It’s got to be before you met me since your stalker was already following you by then. Do you remember anyone standing close to you earlier in the day? Anyone who bumped you?”

“Let me think.” She reeled back through yesterday’s events and swallowed against the bile climbing her throat.

“Friday night. Outside a package delivery office.” She held his blue gaze, gradually gaining more confidence in the memory. “I’d just mailed an overnight envelope for my boss and was getting ready to call you. Office workers were pouring out of the elevators heading for the building’s lobby. It was really a crush. And that’s where I noticed the T-shirt guy.”

“Then not at the university?” Will asked.

“That was the first time. That’s why he seemed familiar.” She stowed her raincoat, her stomach twisting. Last night the harassment had scared her, and all she’d wanted was to escape. “I don’t understand why he cares where I’m going?”

“He wants to talk to you?” Will speculated.

She shuddered. The fact that the T-shirt guy might have an agenda terrified her. How long would this keep up? And what could she do in the meantime?

Will threw out the shattered device, clasped his hands on the counter and lifted his gaze to her. “This is just a theory, now, but if they’re crooks, which I suspect, they might want to get hold of that virus you work with at the lab.”

“What makes you think they’re bad actors?” She so did not want to hear this.

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“Instinct.”

Her only instinct was to run and hide. “This is going to sound naive, but I have to ask. Did you ever run into this sort of thing before? In the military?”

“Nothing that had to with biological weapons, but let’s just say the men I had to deal with weren’t very nice.”

O-kay. She huffed out a breath. “I’ve probably still got records of the attendees of that seminar.” She set her repacked tote aside. “If I went into work, I could look for them.”

Will held up a hand. “Don’t bother. They probably used fake names. I’ve already sent these photos to a friend who works in counterintelligence and terrorism with the FBI. He and I served together and mustered out about the same time. He might be able to identify your stalker. Then we’d have a name.”

“What will that help?” She watched him send a message.

“With that information, we can find out who he is and how dangerous he might be. In the meantime, I think you should stay here until this situation is resolved.”

And how long would that take? A week? A month? She wasn’t sure she wanted to know, but they both had their own lives. “I’ll be in your way. Throw your whole weekend out of whack.”

He tugged her to her feet and wrapped his arms around her. “I think you’ll find I’m

very accommodating.”

“I do appreciate that.” They shared a look, and her body swayed toward his. This relationship was happening whether or not she wanted it to, and all she could do now was to be careful not to let herself get swept away.

Will let go. He opened the fridge and set out juice and a carton of eggs. “In my role as host, I’m prepared to make you breakfast.”

“I feel like royalty, but if you’re serious and making scrambled eggs, I’ll take some.” She kissed him quickly on the cheek and cleared the breakfast bar, wrapping her fingers through the tote’s handles she was ambushed by a sudden thought. “I carried my bag everywhere yesterday, including into my aunt and uncle’s house.”

She powered up her cell and found her uncle’s number in her contact list. “I need to warn them, Uncle Tim, anyway.” She stared at Will, her mind suddenly blank. “What am I going to say without telling him the truth?”

Will didn’t have time to answer before her aunt picked up. “Hi, Aunt Kathy.” Gwen put the call on speaker. “Is Uncle Tim around?”

“He’s in the garage,” her aunt said. “Why? Is something the matter?”

“Not really.” She rolled her eyes at Will.

“Oh, here he comes,” she said, saving Gwen from further interrogation. “Talk to Gwen, honey. I need to take the biscuits out of the oven.”

“Saved by the biscuits,” Gwen murmured. Will grinned. “Hi, Uncle Tim. I need to ask you something, but you need to keep this on the down-low. Will you watch out for any unfamiliar cars cruising the streets around there? Specifically, a large black

SUV with tinted windows.”

“What’s going on, Gwen?” Her uncle’s voice turned gruff and no-nonsense.

“Sir, this is Will Strongbow.” Will bent closer. “There’s been some strange activity in the area where Gwen lives.”

“Tell her to come over here, for Pete’s sake,” her uncle said.

She stifled a grown. Of course, he’d tell her this. “I can’t right now, Uncle Tim. I’m back in the city.”

“With Will?”

“As a matter of fact, yes,” she paused. Uncle Tim could assume they’d slept together. They had, but her uncle might have strict opinions about that sort of thing. She didn’t know because she’d never tested them.

Will traded glances with her and jumped into the conversation again. “Anyway, Gwen’s worried this strange activity might overflow to your neighborhood.”

“A black SUV?”

“Yes, sir. Have you seen anything like that on your street?”

“Not yet,” her uncle answered. “I’ll keep my eyes out for it and call you if I see one.”

“Please,” Gwen said. “Thanks. It’s up to you if you want to tell Leslie or Aunt Kathy, but I hope there won’t be any need. And if a stranger comes to the door, call the police.”

“Yes, yes. I’ll handle them. Don’t worry. Take care of yourself. You, too, Will.”
Uncle Tim ended the call.

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Gwen stared down at her phone and then looked at Will. “We’ve warned him, but I really hope he doesn’t see anything.”

“Me, too.” Will lifted the carafe. “Want a refill?”

She nodded and extended her cup. “What did your FBI friend say?”

“I haven’t heard back yet.” His cell chimed. Will read the caller ID. “It’s him.”

Will listened for a few minutes and glanced at his watch. “We’ll be there,” he said and set down his cell.

“Where are we going?” Gwen asked.

“Clay’s in town for a training seminar at a hotel here in Manhattan.” He checked the time “We need to meet him for lunch.”

9

“The hotel café’s off the lobby upstairs.” Will pushed open the street door. The hotel contained a Broadway theatre as well, and shoppers, guests, and people attending the matinee streamed through the doors with them. Will steered her toward the elevators.

Upstairs, Will’s friend, Clay LeBlanc, tanned with short dark hair waited for them where the restaurant merged with the lobby in the open plan layout. He shook her hand, his dark eyes serious. “Nice to meet you, Gwen. I’m expecting a call back from a colleague with more information about who you saw. Let’s grab a sandwich while

we wait.”

They took a table with a view of the lobby, and Gwen stowed her shopping bags at her feet. Delicious smells drifted from the buffet at the end of the room. Guests filled other tables, the low murmur of their voices a steady background soundtrack.

After giving the waitress their order, Will leaned toward his friend, lowering his voice. “Were you able to discover his name?”

“He’s used several, but the one that’s lasted the longest is Evan Winston. The guy’s elusive. He’s never turned up in New York, but we’re pretty sure that’s the identity of the guy in your photos.”

The waitress returned with their drinks. Clay sipped his coffee and set the cup aside. “He’s a former soldier and now does special jobs for anyone who will pay him.”

“Sounds like a mercenary,” Will added, his voice equally low.

“That’s exactly what he is.”

Gwen shuddered. She’d been followed by a soldier of fortune, a man hired to kill, who would always carry a gun. That probably explained his wearing a jacket during the worst heat of the summer.

“We don’t know who he’s working for right now, unfortunately,” Clay said.

Gwen told him about the businessman she’d seen with Evan at the university seminar.

Will’s friend leaned forward. “You have a photo.”

“No, sorry.” She shook her head, and the conversation drifted to different topic.

She looked around. Was that alcove beyond the nearby circular bar a bathroom? Probably. Drinkers would want a restroom close. “Excuse me for a few minutes, please.”

Will jerked his gaze her way. “Do you want me to go with you?” Clay rubbed a finger under his nose and looked away. Will pushed back his chair. “I can wait outside.”

“You said no one followed us when we were shopping this morning.” Gwen moved to the edge of her seat. They’d stopped by a drug store and a sporting goods store to buy an extra set of clothes for her, and Will had hung around on the sidewalk both times to keep watch. “We know what Winston looks like now, but you told me you hadn’t seen him.”

“I didn’t.”

“The restrooms look like they’re over there. You can see that from here, right?” Will frowned in the direction she pointed. She stood. So did the men. “I won’t be long. Stay and visit with your friend.”

Gwen made a beeline around the circular bar. What she found was a service area for waiters, not a restroom entrance. She looked over her shoulder, but Will and his friend had their heads close together. No one was looking her way. She still quickened her pace, passing a gift shop, before finally finding the women’s restroom. From here, she couldn’t see their table, but she’d hurry.

A few minutes later, she washed and dried her hands and returned to the hall, ready to head back to the restaurant.

A large hand locked around her arm. She tried to tug free, but the grip tightened like an inflating blood pressure cuff. Her pulse spiked. “Let go, please?”

She glimpsed the face of the hand's owner, and her heart stuttered.

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Facing her, nearly standing on top of her, was Evan Winston. The hired killer. She'd never looked at the guy carefully yesterday, mostly as a defense tactic, but today, after studying the photo on Will's cell earlier, she recognized his features instantly. She stiffened, and a stab of cold nailed her to the spot.

Will had called this guy a bad actor, a mercenary, a hired killer. With his muscled body he definitely looked the part.

Before she could move—or even speak—he tugged her in the opposite direction of the restaurant, past a crowd of women guests and around a corner into an empty alcove. A couple of house phones rested on a shelf with cushioned chairs in front. The stalker steered her past these and into the corner, and then took up a position blocking her escape.

“We need to talk.” He crossed his arms.

Even with her stomach jittering around, Gwen somehow found a calm voice. “Please step aside and let me leave.”

“You’re not going anywhere,” he said, his voice low and full of threat. He braced his feet on either side of the narrow space and reached under his jacket.

She stared at the small black and chrome automatic clutched confidently in a hand covered in scars. A recent cut on one knuckle glowed red. Her pulse escalated, and her throat grew parched. Another chill stalked her spine.

Low female voices, probably women on their way to the restroom, barely filtered to

her even though they would be passing less than fifteen feet away. This alcove appeared to be used very little. She'd be extremely lucky to have anyone interrupt. If she screamed, someone would hear her, but the mercenary might do something ugly and painful.

Will had been in the military. He'd know how to handle a man with a gun, but not the tourists staying in the hotel. Should she stall Evan long enough for Will or his FBI friend to come looking?

"Don't tell me you don't know who I am," Evan said.

Should she pretend not to know? What point was there in that? "You're Evan Winston."

"Yeah. Sometimes I use that name." He narrowed his gaze at her and raised his gun, leering. Or was that his version of a smile?

She needed to steer him out of here and toward the restaurant where her companions could see her with him. She started to gesture before stopping. "Could you step back and give me a little more room?"

"Flattered you remember me," he continued, ignoring her request.

"I was busy but yes, I remember you from the seminar my boss gave last month. Now that you look the same." Was this her speaking so calmly? "Why wear a black wig yesterday?"

"It made a good disguise. Didn't you think?"

The wig had proved effective, but Gwen didn't intend to give him the satisfaction of a reply.

He extended his free hand. "Let me have your bag."

Had she inadvertently clutched her bag? She allowed the straps to slip off her shoulder. Impatient, he yanked the bag free of her hands and swung it into the chair behind him. He tapped the muzzle of the gun against her cheek. "I want the virus."

She suppressed her reaction. Come look for me, Will. Please.

Winston jerked his chin toward the chair where he'd dumped her bag. "Is it in there?"

"No." This man had no idea what he was talking about. "It's too dangerous to carry around unsecured. Viruses are microscopic organisms." She slid her gaze to his. This was serious and she had to make him believe her. Everyone she worked with knew their lab was under lock and key because of the highly infectious nature of the virus.

"I don't carry it around. The X-13 virus has no known antidote. There are special protocols for transporting it anywhere outside of the laboratory."

"But you work there. You're in charge now."

"How do you know?" This information hadn't been made public.

"It's my job to keep up with these things." He raised a dark eyebrow. "If your boss had agreed to play ball with us, we wouldn't even be bothering you."

"I don't believe that." Her boss would have told her, especially if he thought she might be endangered. But he'd said nothing. She glanced at Winston's gun and swallowed hard. He'd probably intended to hit on her all along in hopes she'd be easier to convince.

"Believe whatever you want, but I'm not going away. Not until you give me the

virus.”

She said nothing, but the chill inside seeped into her bones.

“To sweeten the deal, you’ll be paid for your help, enough to make your student loans go away.”

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Shock hit her like a sledgehammer. How did Evan Winston know about those?

“You could pay them off and have enough to buy a nice house or apartment in Manhattan like your lover boy.”

Winston had followed Will from the coffee shop, or already knew she was upstairs in Will’s apartment. Because of that blasted air tag. If she hadn’t been in such a rush to pick up the book and catch her train, she might have realized something had to be behind the way he kept reappearing. Too late for that now.

She gulped. How had he found her here, anyway? Was she carrying around another tag somewhere?

Evan raised an eyebrow. “So how about it?”

“Nothing you can pay me would be enough.” If the virus left the lab, it could spread and wipe out many people—within days. She couldn’t allow that to happen. “I could even go to jail.”

“I doubt that.” He braced his free hand on the back of the chair with her tote. “Come on, we’re leaving now.”

No way was she going anywhere with this guy. She needed to get away from him without getting shot. Would that really happen? Would Winston discharge his gun in the hotel? He was an ex-soldier. He’d been in war zones. He wouldn’t let his surroundings deter him from violence.

Her hands started shaking, and she hugged herself quickly to hide her fear. Don't let him get to you. Keep stalling him. "I have to have a reason to open the lab doors."

"Invent one. Think of the money. You would never have to take another commuter train home."

He had been at the train station! No, Will would have seen him.

But maybe the driver of the mysterious black SUV outside her apartment was part of the 'us' Winston mentioned. Maybe they both knew where she lived. "That's not the issue. I'm not go?—"

Voices neared outside in the hall. He slapped his hand over her mouth. "Shut up. We're wasting time." He raised his brows. "Are you going to be quiet?"

At least until she could escape. She nodded.

"Now, we're going downstairs. A car is waiting to take us to your lab." Winston jabbed the gun into her side, impatient. "Unless you want to be shot, you're going to stay quiet, walk in front of me, go down the escalator and out to the curb. Get in the open car door."

"Or else?" She stalled one more time. She had no idea how long they'd been talking, but Will should be worried by now. He wouldn't see her, though. They could reach the escalators without passing the café.

"Don't tempt me because you'll be sorry."

In one way or the other. She had no doubt that once he got the virus, he'd kill her. There'd be no reason to let her live. She reached for her tote, but he yanked the bag up first. "I'll take this."

Guests filled the main corridor outside. Winston kept a hand clamped to her arm and the gun at her back. Maybe when they passed the restrooms, she could duck inside?

The hand on her arm tightened and a harsh whisper close to her ear said, “Don’t even think about it.”

Tourists flowed past them, and Evan led her toward the escalators that would take them downstairs. A swarm of teens flooded off the up escalator and smacked into him, knocking him off balance.

The escalator would take her down, but he’d come running after her if she didn’t incapacitate him somehow. Now.

Her kick went awry. She slipped and went tumbling down the moving stairs.

Shouts and yelling came from above but she could only lie at the bottom, stunned.

When she regained her breath, Will was crouching over her. His fingers lifting her chin. “You’re bleeding.”

He handed over the white handkerchief from his hip pocket. She grabbed his arm. “Evan Winston’s still here. He’s got a gun.”

10

Will kept watch over Gwen and pulled his phone. Head wounds bled a lot, and his handkerchief pressed to her forehead fast became red. He should have met Clay alone. His chest pinched. Now, Gwen had paid the price.

“Hotel security, how may I help you?” a woman answered his call.

Will explained the situation and where he was. “The gunman may still be in the hotel. Have someone bring a first-aid kit. The woman he was holding hostage is hurt.” He covered his phone and looked at Gwen. “Do you need an ambulance?”

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She gazed at him with those beautiful blue eyes, which thankfully weren't dilated. "I don't think so."

"She's mobile, just has a bleeding cut." He smiled and gave her a thumbs-up. He would be sure to get her checked out at an ER, though, when they left. Which would take a while.

He called Clay, and the FBI agents at the training seminar helped comb the hotel with the in-house security, but nobody could find Evan Winston. A staff member bandaged Gwen's forehead and suggested she get stitches. All this had happened in the last hour, and now Will tucked the shopping bags under his arm and waited for Gwen to finish giving her statement.

When she reached him, he put an arm around her and pulled her close. She asked, "Did anyone find the car Winston said was waiting?"

"No. No cars idled at the curb. Or at the back of the hotel. I expect Winston told them to leave."

"After I fell, why didn't he come after me? Don't get me wrong, I'm glad he didn't."

"Too many people noticed. He wanted to save his own skin so he disappeared." Clay checked the time on his watch. "I've got to get out of here. You guys stay safe."

"Will you let me know when you arrest him?" Gwen asked, frowning.

She couldn't be more worried than he was. Will didn't like loose ends, and Winston

wasn't just loose, he was dangerous.

Clay shook hands. "That goes both ways. If you discover an ID on the man in the business suit, let us know."

Will watched him get lost in the lobby crowd then studied Gwen. "How's the head?"

"Okay." She sighed. "I'm glad that's over. This was totally my fault. If I'd let you come along, this wouldn't have happened. Then I was in a hurry to get back to you and not paying attention."

He tucked her hair behind one ear. "I'm not letting you out of my sight from here on out."

"At least I didn't fall apart like yesterday. I stayed calm, like you did when we were hiding in the subway." She gave him a soft smile. "You've been a good influence on me."

"I need to get your cell phone number."

"My phone!" She eyes went wide. "Winston ran off with my tote. The phone was in the side pocket."

"None of the witnesses who recognized his photo mentioned Winston having a bag."

"Then he must have ditched the tote somewhere around here." She scanned the lobby in the area near the escalators.

Will did a slow three-sixty. A trash canister clung to the wall near the store selling souvenirs and drinks. The handles of a blue tote bag hung out of the top opening. He steered her in that direction. "I see it, I think." He pulled her bag through the hole. "Is

this yours?"

"Yup." She showed him the side binding. "See where this is fraying and the red spot on the bottom from Leslie's lipstick? This is mine, all right."

He led her into the lobby bar area, stopping on the way to a table to ask the waitress to bring them two ginger ales.

"And a couple bags of peanuts, please." Gwen turned to him. "How'd you know about the ginger ale?"

"That's what you were drinking for lunch."

"You don't miss anything." She sank onto a stool.

"I try to pay attention." He stowed the shopping bags at their feet.

Gwen sorted through the contents of her bag. "Yay. He didn't take my cell."

"Be careful." Will scowled. "He might have planted a tracker on that."

"While he was running toward the exit?" She stared at him. "I sort of doubt that."

"All right, probably not, but let me check to be sure? For my own peace of mind?"

She handed him the device. "I'd be indebted."

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He ran through the apps and settings. He couldn't find anything but he didn't like her using this. "You should probably get a new one."

"Maybe." She sagged and continued to search her bag. "When he appeared, I thought we'd missed a second tracking tag, but I don't see one. He did take my wallet. That's no big loss. I was only carrying some small bills."

"After hearing what you told the cops, I'll bet he'd been after the lab keys."

"They aren't metal keys, but cards. And I don't carry them in a big tote bag. That would be tempting fate. I carry them on my person whenever I leave the building. I need to know exactly where they are at all times. When I visited Ireland with Leslie, I discovered underwear with hidden wallets." She ran a finger under her breasts. "I expect you didn't notice last night."

He cocked an eyebrow. "You sure you're not a spy?"

"It's not listed in my job description, but my boss is entrusting me with the security of the lab and the virus. I'm willing to go the extra mile."

After resting a few more minutes, they caught a cab to urgent care for an X-ray and a better when his cell rang. He pulled Gwen back into the clinic's waiting room and found his cell. "Strongbow."

"Will? Is that you?" a breathy female voice asked.

He hadn't had a relationship in a while and had no idea who this could be calling.

“Who’s this?”

“Leslie Black. You met me last night? Talked with my dad?”

Right. He relaxed and glanced at Gwen. Her cousin must have gotten his number from her father. “Of course, I remember.”

Leslie sounded breathless. Will stiffened, automatically alert to a problem. “Is Gwen with you?” she asked. “She’s not answering her phone.”

“I’m standing right beside her. “You want to talk to her?”

“Yeah. If you don’t mind.”

“Don’t mind at all.” Will covered the microphone and leaned closer to Gwen. “You up to talking to Leslie?”

Gwen reached for his phone. “Hey, Leslie.”

“Where have you been?” Her cousin demanded. “I’ve been sending you messages all day.”

“Why?” She glanced at Will. No way was she telling Leslie she’d been detained by a mercenary. That word would conjure photos of a guy in camo, draped with guns. She picked at a fingernail. “Is there something wrong?”

“Not that I know of. Dad and Mom wanted to know if you wanted to come to dinner. You and Will. I’m assuming you’re still seeing him.”

Gwen smiled at Will. “You could say that.”

“What’s that mean? Never mind. So do you two want to come over for dinner tonight?”

“Tonight?” She glanced at Will and mimicked eating, raising her brows.

“That’s fine,” Will whispered. “Get them to meet us somewhere away from their house.”

“Good idea.” Gwen put the phone back to her ear. Voices and music came over the connection. “Leslie?” She paused, waiting. “You there?”

“So, are you coming?” her cousin asked.

“Let’s meet somewhere.” Gwen rubbed her palm down her hip. At some point she’d have to come clean about what was happening, but not now. “I don’t want to put Aunt Kathy out.”

“She loves to cook, you know that.”

“She cooks all the time. I’m sure she could use a break. What about the Cheese Barrel? Aunt Kathy and Gran like that place, don’t they?”

Gwen heard Leslie talking with the others. “Okay,” she told Gwen. “Uncle Tim says that’s fine, but can you get there early? Like five-ish? He wants to get be here to watch something on TV.”

“Five o’clock?” Gwen looked at Will.

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He gave her a thumbs-up. Gwen spoke to her cousin and disconnected, catching sight of the blood on her shirt. She wouldn't mind stopping by her apartment first. "When do you think we can leave?"

He checked the time. "If we leave now you can stop by your apartment if you want to change clothes."

He read her mind again. "I'd appreciate that. I can pack a bag, too."

"While you're doing that, I'm going to check around the area where the black SUV parked. You never know." He pushed open the exit door and led her into the warm summer night. A siren, far off at first, grew louder. "There might be something useful."

* * *

"Nothing," Will muttered to himself. He'd been looking for discarded trash or a receipt in the matted weeds across from Gwen's apartment. They were no closer to identifying the man in the vehicle. Uneasiness settled in Will's gut. He had to be prepared if that dude showed up again.

Will crossed the street to Gwen's apartment and rang her bell. After confirming who he was, she let him in. He slid his gaze over her red shirt and the white pants that showed off her legs to advantage. She wore strappy sandals as well. "You look nice."

"Thank you." She walked to the window and looked out at the street. "What did you find outside?"

He'd checked her window and door locks before going outside and confirmed everything was secured. "Nothing helpful as far as the identity of the driver or passenger. I could only tell a heavy vehicle had parked there, nothing else." He looked around the living room. "Where's your case?"

"Still packing. Do I need work clothes?" she asked, and he nodded. "We're going back to your place then."

"Actually, no. My building is already known to Winston."

She heaved a sigh. "I hate that you're involved in this."

I want to be involved. "Don't worry." He stuffed his hands in his pockets. "We don't want to stay here, either. How's the forehead?"

"I can tell I've got a bandage there, but it only hurts if I press close. Hey, don't look so distressed, Will. I take full responsibility."

That was something else he liked about Gwen.

She crossed her arms. "What are you going to do about clothes if you avoid your apartment?"

"I'll cross that bridge when I get there. Tomorrow's Sunday. With luck, you won't need to worry about Winston after that. If he's caught, the FBI can get him to cough up the name of the man in the dark suit."

While she gathered a few other items, he studied the bookcase where biology college texts and finance books shared space with novels stuffed in here and there.

She reappeared with a small carryall. "I need to be careful nothing I do will

boomerang on the safety of my workplace.”

Will took the bag from her and pulled aside the window curtain. He hadn’t heard a vehicle pass and everything looked as it had been. “Don’t the university cops provide that?”

“They have to cover the entire campus. I’m concerned about leading someone to the lab.”

He cupped her shoulders, rubbing his thumbs in the hollows beside her collarbone. “I don’t see what you could have done differently. We can find a motel after dinner or maybe your aunt and uncle know of one.”

“They’ve arranged for out-of-town guests to stay at a hotel in Mt. Vernon for Leslie’s upcoming wedding, but I don’t know the name and I don’t want to ask. Leslie will give me a hard time until I tell her what we’re doing and why.”

“As far as I’m concerned, we’re not doing nearly enough.” He slipped his arms around her and gave her a long, thorough kiss.

* * *

Another day, another restaurant in Westchester. Will studied the lot before pulling into a spot. Before too long he’d know all of Gwen’s favorite places to eat. Which was terrific. Not complaining.

He’d been so focused on building his engineering career, he picked up food here and there, usually taking the carry-out back to his office or his apartment.

He turned off the motor and smiled at her, doubting he’d ever get tired of looking at her. bandage or no bandage. “Are you recovered enough to face the interrogation

squad?”

“As I’ll ever be.” Gwen smoothed the dressing. “That’s what family is for.”

“Right. Probing until you reveal all your secrets.” He pulled the key.

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“Their first question is going to be what happened. I need to come up with an explanation that won’t worry them.” She pressed her fingers to his arm. “Hey, you don’t happen to have a hat I can pull down to my eyes, do you?”

“Sorry, I don’t pack around my hiking hat.” Will put on the overhead light and turned her face. “Be aware that you’re getting a bit of a bruise now just below the cut. Your story had better be a good one.”

Her seatbelt rewound with a click. “I’ll tell them I ran into a door.”

“Or some jerk slammed a door in your face,” he offered.

“That’s a good one.” She pointed a finger at him. “Puts the blame on someone else.”

He leaned close, inhaling her sweet scent. Was it lilac? Something like that. He kissed her quick. “Whatever you say, remember you are not to blame.”

Turned out, they arrived a few minutes before Gwen’s family. Smells of French fries and grilling beef tormented him while they waited. Will studied all those entering, not recognizing any of them. “We’ve probably lost Winston.”

“I’m not missing him.” Gwen stared out at the lot. “I see them parking now.”

After hugs, her aunt snagged the hostess and asked for a big, round table. There was one being cleared, and they took that one. Gwen told them part of the truth, explaining she’d tripped going down a hotel escalator. That was enough to distract Leslie. “You’re going to look terrible at the wedding.”

Gwen shrugged. "I didn't do it on purpose, but you can always find another bridesmaid."

"This late?" her cousin wailed. "Gran would kill me."

"The nurse thought any bruises would heal in two to three weeks, and there's always makeup."

Aunt Kathy nodded. "So true."

Several hours later Will folded his napkin and pushed the edge under his plate. Uncle Tim nudged him and leaned close to whisper, "Follow me outside."

Gwen sent him a nervous glance. He squeezed her hand under the table. "Be back in a minute."

He followed Gwen's uncle outside and off the sidewalk to the entrance. Uncle Tim pulled his cellphone. "I saw a car you might be interested in." The older man showed him a photo. "He stopped in front of our house."

"Did anyone get out?"

"There's a stop sign on that corner." Uncle Tim swiped through several more.

Will stared at the photo. "There's a person sitting in the back seat."

Uncle Tim stared at it. "Swipe the screen. I've got more. I caught the person in back looking out the window."

Will's pulse quickened. He didn't recognize the rider, heavysset with thick dark hair and a moustache. He looked a lot like an actor who'd played the bad guy in many

gangster movies, but the important thing was that Clay could enlarge the photo and pick out facial details. “Can you shoot all of those to me? These could be helpful.”

Uncle Tim sent him the photos and propped his reading glasses on the top of his head. “Do you know who he is?”

“No clue, but he’s definitely someone to avoid. Don’t confront either him or the driver.” Will’s cell pinged and he saved the photos. “Is this the only time he drove past?”

“Yup, that was it. As far as I know, anyway.”

“Thanks.” Will went ahead and forwarded the shots to Clay. “I’m hoping a friend can identify him.”

“On the police force?”

“No, FBI,” Will explained.

Uncle Tim’s face sobered. “This is getting serious.”

11

By the time she and Leslie had finished their shared brownie ala mode, Will and her uncle had returned and ordered themselves dessert. Now, twenty minutes later, Gwen hugged her family and nodded to Leslie’s beau, before climbing into Will’s Jeep. She glanced at him. “That’s your phone I hear.”

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“Will Strongbow here,” Will answered and studied her while he listened.

Seconds later, her cell rang. The caller’s number was a university exchange. Since she was the supervisor of the research lab for the next two weeks, her phone number had been passed to campus security for any emergency. She took a deep breath. “Hello, this is Gwen MacLaine.”

“Officer Starnes here. We received an alarm from your lab and checked it out. Looks like someone tried to break in.”

Her pulse sprinted. She took another deep inhale, but to no effect. “Okay.”

“We want to make sure nothing’s been stolen. Considering the high-risk value of the lab, we’d appreciate if you could come in to campus as soon as possible.”

She glanced at her watch. Seven-thirty. It would take at least an hour to get there. Maybe more since tonight was Saturday. “I’m up in Westchester County. It’s going to be a while before I get there.”

“Try to come tonight,” the campus cop urged. “I left a man guarding the scene, but I’d already started the shift a man short.”

“Yes, I understand. I’m on my way.” She hoped. She glanced at Will, who’d ended his own call by now. How was he going to feel about driving back to the city tonight?

Sterns said, “Let me know when you’re close and someone from security will meet you at your building.”

“I will.” She disconnected and dropped her hand and phone into her lap. “Guess what?”

Will turned in his seat, and from his expression he seemed to already know what she would say. “You have to go back to Manhattan.”

“Yeah, work.” She explained about the attempted burglary. “I need to handle this. I can drive down myself, if you’ll take me over to my place to pick up my car.”

“Let’s leave your car where it is for now.” Will rubbed the back of his neck. “Someone may have put a GPS tracker on it. You shouldn’t drive it until I can check it over. Do you particularly want to take it?”

A tracker? She shivered. “No, but that was the university police. I need to go on campus and check that the lab is secured. Could you take me? I hate to ask you another favor.”

“Not a problem.” He squeezed her hand. “We’re a team now.”

“Thanks.” Gwen sank back against the seat, liking the sound of his “team.” Her last boyfriend used to get huffy when she even seemed on the verge of asking for a favor. “I didn’t want to assume. I know you have your own life.”

“Not until this situation is resolved and Winston and whoever else is harassing you are out of the picture.”

She looked down at their joined hands. “Thanks.”

He let go and started the Jeep. “It’s the least I can do. I still feel bad about asking you to come downtown to my office.”

“I volunteered, remember? I’d been putting you off all week.”

“I noticed you put the study guide on Erin’s bed.” Will put on a blinker and merged onto the expressway.

“I want to be sure she sees it right away when she gets home. Ohmigod, I should probably warn her about the car in the bushes.”

“Good idea. Just tell her to be careful.”

Gwen sent a message to her roomie. “Done.” A breath swooshed out. “I really hope we get a resolution soon. I’m sure it was Evan Winston who tried to get into the lab.”

“I think so, too.” He rubbed the gear knob, and Gwen flashed back to last night and how his hands had felt on her. “You want to tell me the best way to get to campus?”

She jerked her thoughts back to the task at hand. “I will. The good thing is that you won’t be called on to rescue anyone who’s fallen down an escalator. My building only has stairs. Tell me what Uncle Tim had to say.” She paused. “Unless it’s private.”

“You should know about this, too.” Will joined the flow of traffic. “Your uncle gave me the photos of the car he saw cruising his neighborhood. He got a portrait of the man in the back seat. I sent those to Clay and he just called back.”

“What did Clay say?”

“The man who was sitting in the back seat is named Jacok Caruceko. He’s a Romanian arms dealer wanted by Interpol. I’ve got your uncle’s photos on my cell if you want to look at them.” He handed her his phone from off the dash.

She studied them. “This is the businessman who came to my boss’s seminar presentation with Evan Winston. They must be working together. If Winston’s a mercenary, this is probably who hired him.”

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“That’s what Clay thinks, too.” Will gestured out the windshield where green highway signs glowed in the distance. “Which way now?”

She told him to head to Riverside Expressway. “And Winston wants the virus.”

“Use my phone and call Clay back. Tell him what you just now told me. And that we’re going over to your lab now because of the attempted break-in.”

Gwen did as he requested and hung up. “The agent who’s working all leads on the arms dealer is going to call you.” She settled Will’s phone in the center console.

Almost immediately, his cell chimed again. Will grabbed it up and identified himself.

Gwen nibbled a fingernail, anxious what he might be finding out. He suddenly glanced at her. “What building houses your lab?”

She told him. He spoke a little longer and then disconnected. “Clay and the other agent will meet us at your building.”

“It’s always locked over the weekend, and locks automatically when someone exits. I have a key, but I can’t see how Winston got inside.” When they were close, Gwen called campus security and directed Will to the parking lot nearest her building.

Officer Starnes met them at the outside door with a man from maintenance. After making sure the entrance closed and locked behind them, they proceeded to her lab. The alarm had been shut off, and their footfalls echoed in the silence. “We searched the building earlier. Didn’t find anyone.”

Upstairs, she led the way to their lab, where yellow crime scene tape crisscrossed the lab's entrance. A junior officer straightened and detached one end of the tape so they could enter. "No one's been back."

Good. Her shoulders relaxed. "I hope it stays that way."

Cracks riddled the wire-enforced window in the corridor door. She rubbed her finger over the scrapes and gouges around the lock and the keypad.

Starnes pointed out the smashed-in-but-intact window. "We think he ran off when the alarm sounded."

"Sounds like a reasonable assumption." She keyed in the four-digit combo, turned the knob, and entered the lab's outer office. Nothing looked disturbed. The burglar hadn't gotten through the door. The knot between her shoulders loosened.

Will and Starnes followed her inside, but the maintenance man stopped to access damage to the entry door.

Four desks with computer workstations and filing cabinets filled the office. Everything looked as it should. She peered through the window in the first of the two card-protected doors leading to their laboratory. The first door led to the small room where techs suited up. The second opened to the lab with the isolation units where they worked with the virus.

"These are still locked." Starnes tapped on the door's window. "We're assuming the lab hasn't been tampered with."

"They each require a separate card for entrance." She tried the handle, reassured the entrance to the first room remained secured. A glance through the window revealed an undisturbed interior.

Replacing the hall door would be a hassle, but not the disaster she'd been imagining. "Do you have any idea how the burglar got into the building?"

"We're not sure. But the alarm on the side entrance has been flukey in the past."

While the maintenance man propped open the hallway door with a chair and took measurements, Will pulled his cell which must have been on vibrate, and turned away to answer the call. He disconnected and leaned close. "Clay and another agent are outside. I told them to wait, that they don't need to come up here. Right?"

Gwen nodded. "We should meet them downstairs." She made sure the maintenance man had her phone and office numbers. He promised to return with enough plywood to patch over the window and then he left.

A call crackled on Starnes's radio. "Emergency, Chief. Gunshots reported in one of the residential halls."

Everyone standing in the office heard the alert.

Starnes headed to the door. "I need to take Officer Simmons, if you don't need him. You'll be able to leave, but let me know you're ready, and I'll send him back here to reset the alarm."

The officers disappeared, their boots soon thudding on the stairs. Gwen went around the office to confirm all desks and workstations remained locked down. Reassured, she started to follow Will out, but a figure rushed through and slammed him against the opposite wall.

Were the cops still in the building?

"Help!" She yelled and bolted toward the door.

Winston tried to block her path, but she sidestepped him and lunged into the corridor. A long hallway stretched to the stairs. She only managed two yards before a figure in black blocked her path. She stumbled back, hitting the side wall. A large, powerful-looking automatic pistol gleamed in the light. She gasped. A big hand pointed a gun straight at her. She lifted her gaze to the bulky man with black hair in a bespoke business suit holding the pistol.

She recognized him instantly from her uncle's photos, Jacok Caruceko, the criminal wanted for illegal arms dealing as well as the older businessman with Winston at the seminar. She couldn't catch a breath, couldn't—She pressed a hand to her chest where something pinched hard.

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“Do not speak another thing,” he said in accented English. “Or I blow the head off.”

She stared at the man’s gun, sucking in air as a strange sense of calmness drenched her panic. He didn’t really want to kill her. He wanted the virus, and she was the only person who could hand it over. “Where did you come from?”

“We come back from side door. Easy-peasy when you think to prop it open. Then we creep the stairs while you are all shooting the breeze.”

He motioned with his gun toward her lab. “Go back.”

The sounds of scuffling and grunts came from down the hall Will was in there. Her chest tightened as if in a straitjacket and her heart pounded. She retreated, Caruceko and his pistol keeping pace.

Evan pressed Will to the floor with a knee. Even facedown and with his arms twisted behind him, Will caught the other man’s leg and flipped him. Both men scrambled for Winston’s loose gun.

“You!” Caruceko thrust his gun at Will before he could grab the other weapon. “Do not move.” He jerked his head at his mercenary. “Take him downstairs and finish him off.”

“No!” Gwen cried as Evan hauled Will out the door.

The gangster closed the hallway door. “Now, we get down to business.” He gestured with his pistol to the first of the doors to the lab. “Open the door. Hurry. Give me the

virus.”

“It’s very dangerous if disbursed.” Would he understand that word? “If it’s scattered around.” She would explain this to any untrained individual. Convincing Caruceko of this would buy her time. And then what? The police were gone. The maintenance man was gone. And Will—? She bit her lip.

Perspiration ran down her temple, but she didn’t dare move for fear Caruceko might overreact and shoot her!

“Do not worry. I do not plan to release here,” he said. He probably planned to sell the virus samples to the highest bidder amongst the bad actors who made up his customers.

He spoke so calmly, she doubted he really understand the consequences of letting this virus loose in the world anywhere. Gwen watched his hands. “What I meant was you should wear protective covering before handling it.”

Now, if they entered the second room where the virus was stored without suiting up like CSI techs at a crime scene, they would contaminate the lab.

“It is in container, no?”

Gwen had transferred the office key and the card to the passageways to outer pockets before she and Will had met the officers earlier. She found the access card for the first room, the room where they suited up in the jump suits.

Something hard pressed into her back, and the man’s strong garlic breath made her ill. “Why you no answer?” Caruceko’s voice rose. “Is in container?”

She squelched the urge to gag and tried without success to stiffen away from the gun

barrel. She blanked on what he'd asked and then remembered. "Y-Yes, it's in a container. Can you step back so I can insert the card?"

He shifted away, and she swiped the card, still trying to come up with a solution to get rid of him. Would that even be possible? Her throat threatened to close, but she forced herself to calm down.

"It is open, no?" The arms dealer stepped on her heels in his effort to get inside the room.

Pushed off-balance, she staggered, searching for a handhold to stay upright. Her fingers closed around the handle of the refrigerator. Why not use the cultures of harmless bacteria inside this cooler? She tried to turn that way, but the gangster crowded too close. "Move back, please."

He barely retreated, but she managed to pry open the door. He looked past her at the tray of vials and then at the maximum-security room where they kept samples of the deadliest strains. He reached past her to rap on that door. "The virus is not in there?"

"I'm the one who works here and I know where it's stored." She eyed him, but her ruse must be working because he didn't seem suspicious. She removed the tray with the common cultures. "This is the virus, but you must carry them in this."

The air in the tiny room grew stifling even as cold air flowed from the open fridge and chilled her feet. With his gun trained on her, she packed the vials in a molded foam box with a fitted lid, continuing her deception. Something made her look up. Behind Caruceko, outside the shattered hallway door, an indistinct form loomed. Was this Winston? Coming back alone because he'd killed Will? The vise in her chest squeezed tight. No!

No. Will had to still be alive. The shadow could be him. Or the FBI agents. She thrust

the lightweight box at the gangster. “Go. I need to close the door.”

The arms dealer barreled into the main office. Loud popping noises burst forth. Gunshots.

Gwen ducked out of sight. Scenes of bloody carnage on the other side of the barrier spun through her mind. Suddenly, everything stopped. Silence descended. After a few minutes, the ringing in her ears faded.

Someone was standing on the other side of the door. She crouched lower, her heart pounding. It could be?—

A male voice called, “You can come out now, Gwen.”

Was that Will’s voice?

“It’s safe.”

12

“I was so worried about you.” Gwen clung to Will, resting her cheek on his chest.

“Me, too.” His voice rumbled beneath her cheek. “I don’t know how you survived, but I’m glad.”

Clay and the other FBI agent had subdued Caruceko and hustled him out of the laboratory. Winston had never returned. Once able to draw in a breath without shaking, she drew back to study his face and touch the trail of dried blood down his swollen cheek. “We’ve got a first-aid kit in the cabinet.” She crossed to the storage cabinet. “You got that fighting Winston?”

“Yeah. That guy must have been a boxer. He dragged me to the front entrance and slammed me against the door. The pressure bar released, and Clay and the other FBI agents poured inside and subdued him.”

“I was so worried Winston would take you to the side entrance. Caruceko told me they’d come inside that way but there would have been no one to help you. I’m surprised Clay came ready for action. Didn’t they only want to talk to us?”

“They probably keep equipment in their vehicles. I know I would.”

Will spoke as calmly as if the last half-hour had been a walk in the park. She wiped the perspiration dripping down her temple and found the medical kit on the bottom

shelf. Will sat in a chair, and she tore open a wipe and doctored Will's cut. "Why did they want to meet us here, anyway?"

"To find out what we knew about Caruceko's whereabouts."

"And they found him." She pressed a bandage pad to his cheek, tossed the trash and tapped an icon on her cell. "I should call the campus police with an update."

"You've got them on speed dial?" His blue eyes sparkled.

"Remember he called me earlier." Gwen lifted a finger when Starnes answered. She told him what had happened and disconnected. "He's coming over. The incident at the dorm was a false alarm."

Will nodded. "Probably set up as a diversion."

"The situation got scary so fast, but I've learned a lot from you. Staying poised in an emergency is a very attractive trait of yours, you know." She smiled.

His face flushed. "I can assure you I was a heap of nerves on my first missions." Will lifted her chin. "You, on the other hand, absolutely faked out the villain and saved the day."

Several hours later, well after midnight, Will let them into his apartment. The glittering skyline rose beyond the windows like a million diamonds glittering in the dark. "I for one am glad to be here."

"Me, too. I'm making an ice pack for you." Gwen dropped her overnight bag and tote beside the kitchen island.

"I've got one of those reusable freezer packs, but I got hit hours ago. Applying cold

now probably won't do anything to reduce the swelling."

"Don't you think it's worth a try?" She opened the freezer and pulled out the frozen pack.

He held out his hand, settled on a stool, propping his elbow on the counter and the cold pack on his jaw. "A little wine might go down nicely right now. There should be a bottle of merlot chilling."

Gwen found that and two glasses. "You have a corkscrew?"

"In the drawer next to the fridge."

She handed the opener over and, holding the bottle between his knees, he managed to twist the screw into the cork and handed the bottle back. "Now you can slowly lift the cork out by pressing down on the handles slowly."

Soon, she had filled two glasses.

"Cheers!" Will clinked his against hers. "We've survived the last two days."

"Yes." She carried her wine over to the windows. "Less than two days. We didn't meet until Friday night. They say you get to know a person's real character when they're under stress."

They'd spent every waking moment together in a pressure cooker. Will was no longer a stranger and fast becoming so much more. He'd proved she could depend on him, but they'd been busy reacting to the threats against her and the lab. Neither of them had talked about their relationship or their feelings. She didn't know hers, not for the long term, anyway, but tonight had proved that life could be cut short at any time. Shouldn't they simply enjoy each other's company while they could?

Will turned his head, the cold pack still pressed against his cheek. “We definitely had enough to turn coal into a diamond.”

She sipped the very good merlot and sank onto the sectional. “Or drive us crazy.”

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He tossed the cold pack back into the freezer and walked over.

She rubbed her palm over the soft microfiber fabric of the couch. "I'm glad we didn't try to drive back to Westchester tonight."

"As you pointed out, I needed to ice my jaw."

She laughed. "Hope it helped, but you can't have used it more than five minutes."

"That's all it's getting." He set his glass on the coffee table and stretched his arms along the back cushion. "Tomorrow is Sunday. You can sleep in with no worries."

"You mentioned a flag football game tomorrow in the park." She took a sip, letting it work its magic to loosen her muscles. The exhaustive aftermath of the adrenaline rush faded. His body so close to hers energized her, every cell in her body swiveling like a satellite dish homing in on a signal.

"The game isn't required attendance."

Playing along, she teased, "You have other plans?"

"Depends on you." His deep voice seemed to wrap around her, banishing the city lights outside to another planet. She shifted closer to him and traced a design on his thigh, her gaze never leaving his.

He was giving her that look, the one that awoke the little flutter inside. "I'm flattered you're planning your weekend around me. What's left of it."

He took her hand. “Earlier you said I was a good influence on you.”

The delicious heat of his body soaked into her. “I’ve definitely got my confidence back.”

“I’d like to influence you in a different way.” He cupped the back of her neck and bent close, hesitating a breath away.

“Is that so?” she teased, and her lingering exhaustion vanished into thin air. He kissed her neck, working up to her ear which he nibbled, and then across her cheek.

“Are you going to give me a real kiss?”

He pulled her into his lap. She straddled his legs and smiled. “You’re just pretending.”

“No. Doing it right.” He cupped her face and kissed her. She slipped her hands over his shoulders and down his strong arms. “I need a little more convincing.”

“Is that so?” He repeated her question in mock surprise. His hands found her hips. When he settled his mouth over hers, she opened to him, and he dove deeper, stretching the kiss out so long she gasped for breath when he raised his head.

But not too far. His warm, wine-tinged breath caressed her mouth, and shivers coursed through her all over again. “Is that better?”

She caught her hands behind his neck, the tickle of his dark hair broadcasting waves of wildfire down her arms, over her shoulders and down through her core. This man really did it to her, but she wanted so much more.

His fingers found her buttons. Seconds later, cool air on her bare skin sent

goosebumps skittering over her skin. He planted kisses over her shoulders, and she leaned into him.

His hands moved up over her ribs, slowly, slowly, making her breasts tingle in anticipation. He whispered in her ear, the brush of his beard making her insides shivery. “Do you want what I do tonight?”

“I think so.” She did. Being here with Will felt right.

“You sure? You’ve had a rough day.” He lifted his sexy, dark brows.

“A day in the life, huh? And what a day.” But she’d survived, and she needed to feel that in every fiber of her body.

If this led to complications, so be it. Tomorrow could take care of itself. She let her blouse slip down her arms to emphasize the point. “Yes, I’m sure.”

He scooped her up and carried her down the hall, stopping once to kiss her deeply.

13

A MONTH LATER

“Oh, no. Is that what I think it is?” Gwen peered through the blurry windshield. A fine mist cloaked the view, what she could see, anyway. The woods bordering this twisty back road blacked out most of the daylight, but no one could miss the flashing yellow light on the barrier. “The road’s closed?”

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Will rolled nearer before stopping. “‘Use alternate route’,” he read aloud.

“But this is the way we have to go.” She glanced at her phone. Her cousin had called to tell her they were all ready to surprise Uncle Tim for his birthday. She and Will needed to get there as soon as possible. “The road crew could at least tell you where to find that.”

“We passed an intersection twenty yards back.” Naturally, Will had noticed his whereabouts. He called that skill situational awareness, which she obviously needed to improve upon herself. This part of the county had a lot of twisty roads that circled large estates. “It wasn’t a driveway?” she asked.

“Not that I could see.”

Gwen looked behind them. The tail lights caught little of the dark, drenched landscape between swipes of the rear wiper. Coming from her apartment farther south near the thruway, they wouldn’t have taken this route. But they were coming from a party at one of Will’s sisters, who lived across the river.

“If we’re going to go that way, I need to reverse now, before the car coming up behind us blocks us.”

She gripped the cold door handle. “I can get out and hold up my hand to stop them.”

“That’s okay. we’ll manage.”

We will. Will always included her. He didn’t need to claim credit the way her

egocentric ex-boyfriend always had. “They’re stopping, but be careful.”

Will began reversing down the road. “You know I am.”

In her book, this wasn’t entirely true. He’d put his life on the line for her already two or three times. She’d never experienced that sort of protectiveness before from a guy. He had stepped up to help her only minutes after their meeting each other.

Maybe that came from his being former military ops, but how he could feel so invested in her after such a short acquaintance, she didn’t know.

The rain had stopped by the time they’d reversed to the intersection with the side road. “There’s no working light on the barrel, but I see a detour sign half way off the pavement,” he said.

She peered past him. The arrow pointed down a road which ran under a commuter train trestle at the bottom of the hill.

Her chest tightened. Quickly, before Will could follow the arrow, she grasped his arm. “Turn left,” she urged, gesturing madly in that direction.

He glanced at her with what in the dim interior might be a frown. “I’m pretty sure that way will take us back to Briar Cliff and the bridge.”

And they’d lose a lot of time. Gwen checked the time on the phone clutched in her lap. If they were going to make the party, they couldn’t waste any more time.

“Never mind.” A half-laugh escaped her. She’d be fine. It had been years, after all. “I don’t know what I was thinking.”

She did know, of course, and clutched the arm rest with one hand and the edge of the

seat with the other. She wanted to close her eyes, but the dread kept her staring straight ahead as the road neared the bridge supports. As the pavement narrowed, her breath clogged her lungs. No visual evidence remained now, but?—

“Are you all right?” Will’s concerned voice overrode the swish of air from the vents.

With her heart still thudding, she could barely speak. “F-fine.” She rubbed her sweaty palms together. “But would you mind stopping for ice cream? I think we can squeeze that in before visiting.”

Will massaged the gear shift knob and lifted an eyebrow in question. She knew what he must be thinking. She’d been rushing to get to her aunt and uncle’s, but now she’d changed her mind? He’d be curious, but she couldn’t explain. Not yet.

* * *

“I’m assuming we’re going to Bailey’s?” Will kept his tone light and teasing.

“Right.” Gwen said and clenched her jaw.

“No problem.” He threw her a smile. Taking that detour had made her tense up for some reason. Once she relaxed, she’d probably tell him what had spooked her. Or else he didn’t understand her at all.

“I’m calling my aunt. I’ll tell her we’ll be delayed.”

“You still want to go visit?” He turned off the wipers. His sisters were important to him, and one of the things he appreciated about Gwen was that she remained close to her own family. So far, he’d been to their house five times in the month he’d been seeing her, and each time they’d welcomed him with open arms.

“Definitely.” She tapped her phone and lifted the device to her ear. “Let me talk to Aunt Kathy and find out what’s going on.”

Some fifteen minutes later, he parked in an angled spot at the old-timey-styled ice cream parlor and restaurant. He’d been so focused on watching for a black SUV the first time they’d come, he’d barely noticed the décor.

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“I used to come here a lot in high school.” Her seatbelt swished into the retractor spool. Her door cracked open. “Especially after final exams. My reward for all that stress from studying.”

He slid out of the driver’s seat and went around to help her out. Since that first weekend, nothing dangerous had happened. The FBI had locked up Winston and Caruceko, the renegade arms dealer, so whatever had shaken her must be something else. He’d learned Gwen had to do things on her own timetable, though. If she wanted to reveal her secret, she would. If she never did, he would have to deal with having misjudged her, walk away, and lick his wounds.

The thought nearly paralyzed him. He didn’t want to lose her, and everything that had happened since that first weekend only strengthened his certainty.

A car door banged shut and Gwen came around, her gaze already focused on the windows along the booths. “It looks really crowded.”

“We could sit at the counter if need be.” He took her hand.

“Stools are for losers.” Her smile showered him with sparkles. “We’ll find a booth. Have faith.”

Warmth and cheery voices greeted them when they stepped inside. The enticing smell of grilling hamburgers and toasty French fries filled the air. He ignored his grumbling stomach as Gwen had assured her aunt they’d still want supper.

Will held up two fingers to the hostess.

“I’ve got a table in the back.” She took menus from a bracket, pausing while a foursome vacated a booth.

“Can we take this one?” Gwen pointed to a pile of dirty dishes on the booth beside them.

Did she really want to sit here? This was the same one they’d occupied the first time.

The woman frowned. “It needs to be bused.”

He opened his mouth to say they didn’t mind the table in the rear when a bus boy appeared and began to fill his tub.

He let Gwen slip in first, and he sat across from her. He glanced at the menu. Gwen stared at hers, so he flipped through the songs on the vintage juke box mounted on their table. Finally, she lifted her head. He smiled before he noticed she wasn’t even looking his way, but instead staring over his shoulder, her expression pinched.

She gasped and looked at him. “This was where we sat when we were watching for the black sports utility five weeks ago.”

“I know. Do you want to find someplace else?”

“We might as well stay here since we’re not going to be here long.” She took a napkin from the holder and tore off a strip, frowning.

The whole point in coming here, for him anyway, was to get her to relax and tell him why she’d gotten so upset about the detour. Was it the road? The train overpass? Something else?

Their first night together she’d revealed her trust issues, but he must have proved

himself. So far, she hadn't run screaming into the night. Something troubled her now, something big because she'd looked more shaken than he'd ever seen her. Something he wanted to know about. Now, before they wasted any more time.

She tore another piece from the napkin. "I know the FBI arrested Caruceko and Winston, but revisiting Bailey's still feels a little creepy."

He needed to get her thinking about something else. "Some couples have a favorite song." He patted the music selector box. "We have a favorite booth at Bailey's."

"We're a couple?" Gwen's startling blue eyes pinned him. And that blasted groove cut between her brows again.

"I think so." He nodded, holding his breath for her response.

Their malts came before she said anything more. She didn't even look as if she would. While the sweet coldness sliding down his throat tasted wonderful, it only seemed to deepen the black void filling his gut.

They discussed plans for her cousin's wedding, but she never mentioned what had frightened her about the train trestle. Would she ever trust him enough to confide the cause of that...trauma? Or had he already lost her?

Later, when they left, Will slid his hand down to hers as they crossed the lot to his Jeep, the crisp autumn air a relief after the warm restaurant. Her shoulder brushed his. Their hands weren't a lot of bodily contact and he wished they were in a bed—hers, his, didn't matter, so he had access to all of her.

He caught her intoxicating scent and wanted nothing more than to bury his nose in her hair and fill his whole being with her essence. Didn't she know that?

She'd questioned his description of their relationship as a couple, and he needed to do something to show her they were. Irrevocably.

She reached for the passenger door handle, but he unwound her fingers and pulled her hand away. Her eyes widened and he swooped in close, covering her lips with his. Her surprise made her hesitate, but then she opened her sweet mouth to his, trusting him. And he took the kiss deeper.

He pulled her close, splaying a hand across her back so that her body fit against his. Finally, she reached up and slid her fingers through his hair. He kissed her cheeks, her ears, her neck, and his body grew hard and hot.

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A car door banged close by. Laughing voices blew away the remains of the delicious fog of the kiss. He lifted his head, pressing his forehead to hers a moment before releasing his hold. He'd never done something he mostly considered private out in the open like this. Gwen seemed private, too, and the muscles in his shoulders knotted as he waited for her to respond—or not.

She stared at him for a beat, retreated a step. “What was that for?”

He couldn't read her reaction, but he decided to play this light. He pulled up one side of his mouth. “Do I need a reason?”

14

Gwen hardly noticed the tidy streets and neatly landscaped homes they passed on the way to her aunt and uncle's. Her thoughts reeled with the effects of Will's kiss. No, not his kiss. Their kiss. Because she'd definitely participated. In a public parking lot. Her cheeks still burned at the thought.

Why be surprised? Guys were physical, and boy, Will sure didn't shy away from bodily contact. He'd been special ops. Even though Will had tried to tell her the job was mostly mental, he obviously had needed to be very fit physically.

She peeked at him from under her eyelashes. Was there something more than a display of desire here? Had he been trying to shake her out of her moodiness?

Because she'd sure been terrible company. Seeing the train trestle after so many years of blocking the memories had sent her mind whirling back to the time of the accident.

She studied Will's strong hand resting on gear shift knob. He gazed at the road ahead, not speaking. That wasn't unusual, but most of the time they were so attuned they knew each other's thoughts. Right now, she had no idea what he was thinking, and he wasn't glancing over at her the way he often did when driving. A strange tension floated between them. This was her fault, but she didn't know how to close the gap.

They continued to ride in silence. Will parked at the curb and came around to help her down.

Uncle Tim exclaimed over his present and hugged her close. "You're my best niece."

He held up the fishing fly she'd bought from a guy in Vermont who made them and sold them on the internet. "How did you know just what I wanted?"

"A little bird told me." Namely Aunt Kathy who had seen him pouring over the guy's website.

"I saved you both a plate," Aunt Kathy tugged her toward the kitchen. "You, too, Will. Let me just heat them up."

Her uncle told Will to come back to watch a football game with him.

"We could have served ourselves," Gwen said, once Will took his plate into the front room. Every time she stopped over, even if for only five minutes, her aunt would force-feed her. Now she treated Will the same way.

"Do you want to eat in the dining room?" Aunt Kathy asked as she opened the microwave to heat Gwen's supper, which wasn't merely a plate, but a feast. As usual for her uncle's birthday, her aunt had made turkey pot pies.

"Let's sit in the kitchen." Gwen said. The kitchen would be a bit more private.

“Leslie and Brian just left.” When the oven shut off, her aunt removed the wrapper. After setting dinner in front of Gwen, she filled a mug from the warming coffee carafe. “She’s been a nervous wreck getting all the details organized for the wedding. I offered to help, but she wants to handle the preparations herself so everything is perfect.”

“Sounds like a nervous wreck all right.” Gwen poked a hole in the pie crust and inhaled the mouthwatering scent. “You’re the one I want to talk to. It’s about my parents’ accident.” She raised her brows and forked up a bite of hot turkey and carrot. “I didn’t really ask you much at the time it happened.”

“Understandable.” Her aunt patted her arm. “No one can know exactly what happened in their car, but what do you want to know?”

“After I came to live with you, I remember overhearing Uncle Tim say he bet they were arguing the night they crashed.”

“Tim didn’t like your dad, and his opinion didn’t improve after the police found alcohol in his blood stream after the accident. They’d been to a New Year’s Eve party, so your mom might have been tipsy, too.”

“I remember they argued a lot. About little picky things, in my opinion.” Gwen broke off a piece of crust and scooped up more savory vegetables. She and Will didn’t get into arguments, but she’d known him only a month. Would their relationship eventually dissolve? Was it happening already?

“My sister was impetuous and it was impossible to give her advice. She’d been ‘stuck on’ a few guys before your dad. She married him after only a few months, and I don’t think she really knew him.”

Aunt Kathy rose and cut two pieces of Uncle Tim’s birthday cake. “Why are you

asking?”

Gwen lined up the fork and knife on her plate. “I’m wondering if I’m infatuated with Will.”

Her aunt drew back and looked at her as if she were crazy. “You’re nothing like your mom. Too methodical, too analytical, and much smarter. You would never throw yourself at a guy like she did.”

“That’s what I did with that biology prof.”

“No.” Aunt Kathy put a piece of cake on a plate and changed out her plates. “I could tell that fella had dated you under false pretenses.”

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Gwen stared down at the German chocolate cake in front of her, completely stuffed after the malt and the pot pie. The cake smelled wonderful, and she wanted to sit here a little longer while she had her aunt to herself, so she would eat a few bites, anyway. She savored her forkful, pondering what to ask in order to eliminate once and for all the possibility she might have inherited her mom's reckless behavior.

"What?" her aunt asked. "I can see the question in your face."

"Did you and Uncle Tim ever argue?"

"Not like your mother and dad. Tim and I have our disagreements, but staying together means enough to us to work things out."

Will walked into the kitchen. "Supper was delicious."

Her aunt took the tray from him and handed him a plate with a slice of cake. Will sent a look her way as if checking on her. She shook her head and smiled. "Enjoy."

Aunt Kathy waited for him to leave and then whispered, "Tim and I think he's wonderful, if you want to know. You two make a perfect couple."

Gwen stared at her. Didn't people need to be in love to get that far?

Aunt Kathy cupped her coffee mug. "I can also see how he looks at you."

"How does he look at me?"

“Like he might be in love with you.”

Was that true? She had wound up in his bed most weekends, true. But?—

“How do you feel about him?” Aunt Kathy watched her. “Do you love him?”

Did she? “I think I might.”

“Love’s not something you need to think about, Gwennie. It’s something you just know automatically.”

“When did you know? About Uncle Tim?”

“Maybe from the beginning when I first met him. He was coming in off the football field, and I was one of the opposing team’s cheerleaders. Neither of us said as much, but the way he looked at me. It was like I had to get to know him better or I’d be sorry.”

Will had said something kind of like that the first night. And the kiss they’d shared outside Bailey’s an hour ago? He didn’t seem one to demonstrate his feelings in public like that, but he’d kissed her as if...he loved her?

“There you are, Gwen.” Her grandmother came in and set her dinner tray on the table. “Are you finished? I want you to try on your dress one more time.”

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The ushers seated the last of the late arrivals. The flower girl started down the aisle, tossing handfuls of rose petals. Gwen straightened her gown and took her bridesmaid bouquet of daisies and pink roses from an usher. The wedding consultant cued her and she began to walk, focusing on the group of men standing with the clergyman.

Halfway down the aisle, she passed Will, more handsome than ever in a navy suit that contrasted with his short auburn hair and beard.

Their gazes met. He winked. She closed her mouth before she could gape, but missed a step and had to concentrate to get back in rhythm. They'd only been apart six days, but seeing him now made her want to throw herself into his arms.

He stood in the same pew as Erin, who held hands with her ex-boss, Nikos Metadorakis. She had accompanied him to Greece intent on getting over her secret crush but instead came home even more in love. The surprise was that Nikos had loved her for years.

Gwen took her place opposite the groom and best man, and the organist began to play the bridal march.

* * *

Leslie pulled Gwen over to the side of the parish hall after the ceremony. "Stand on the right. I'll throw you the bouquet."

"You can't favor me. That isn't fair." Gwen shook her bouquet at her cousin.

She glanced at her new husband. "I'm hurrying. Gwen, this is a good time for you. You've already got a guy on the hook."

Gwen wasn't sure. She and Will had talked every night this week, the same as the past three weeks, but Will had kept to neutral conversation about their everyday lives. There had never been a good time to discuss her reaction. Before she'd still been processing and hadn't been able to explain face to face. That seemed to be the best way, though. If she could work up the courage.

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Leslie peered at her. “Are you all right?”

“Never better.” This was Leslie’s day, and she wouldn’t ruin it with her own problems. She lifted her yellow roses. “I’ve already got a bouquet.”

“It’s not mine.” Her cousin walked toward the rear of the reception area without looking back. Gwen stepped back to where Erin stood with Nikos. Will arrived with two glasses of champagne and handed her a flute.

“Thank you.” She sipped the bubbly. He was always so attentive in an understated way, but private with his feelings. Except for that amazing kiss outside Bailey’s. He’d caught her off guard and then he backtracked into teasing to deflect her attention. But she remembered. “According to Leslie, I have a duty to stand for the bouquet toss, but I don’t want to catch it.”

Will took her glass and set it on the table behind them. “You realize most bridesmaids would be eager.”

“But she shouldn’t be rigging the tradition.” Gwen took in the eager women standing in front of them.

Up front, a giggling Leslie raised and lowered her hands.

“Come on, babe,” her groom said. “Just throw it.”

The white lilies sailed toward them and smacked Will before he could step out of range. He automatically caught the flowers before they hit the floor.

“Leslie, wait,” one of the waiting women called. “You need to throw it again. A guy isn’t supposed to catch it.”

Will set down his drink and jogged across the floor to the newly-married couple, who stood frozen in the doorway.

“Take two,” Leslie called. “All men stand clear.”

Gwen grabbed Erin’s arm. “You need to be in here.”

They stepped into the cluster of women guests. “I saw how Nikos was looking at you,” Gwen whispered to her best friend. “Be sure to catch the bouquet.”

This time Leslie had perfect aim, and the flowers dropped right at Gwen’s feet. She retreated “Hurry, Erin. Pick it up.”

Erin didn’t move fast enough, and one of the bridesmaids scooped up the flowers.

“You didn’t even try,” Gwen shook her head at the best friend.

“I didn’t want to lose an eye.” Erin laughed. “Nikos and I are already engaged. His parents are giving us a party.” Nikos put a hand on her shoulder, and Gwen couldn’t miss the shared smile.

Didn’t she want that closeness with Will? She’d already proved she could handle whatever came her way, why be afraid of the future?

The four of them chatted a bit longer, and Erin and Nikos left. She and Will drifted over to the table they’d shared with her family. She drank the last of her champagne and set the flute on the table with her bouquet. “That’s the end of my official duties as bridesmaid.”

“Then I can ask you to dance.” He tugged her toward the dance floor, spun her into his arms, and pulled her close.

The song ended. Uncle Tim and Aunt Kathy stayed on the dance floor and Gran, relocated to chat with relatives, caught her eye and grinned. Gwen smiled back. “Gran seems to be enjoying herself.”

Will took the seat beside her and took her hand. “It’s good to see you laughing and smiling, too.”

“I’m happy for Leslie.”

He rubbed his thumb over her knuckles. A deep warmth filled her from her toes up to her heart. “What about you? Are you happy?”

“Sure.”

“Good. I was concerned about you.”

“Why?” She stared at him. The arms dealer and his hired muscle were out of circulation. Her boss had returned from vacation and praised her actions. Nothing else... Realization dawned. He would be thinking about last weekend and her unusual reaction. They were so attuned to each other, of course he’d noticed.

“I’m sorry.” She pulled her hand free. “I know I wasn’t forthcoming about my freak-out when we had to take the detour. I simply couldn’t talk about it then. On top of that I was also worried.”

Will moved her roses and leaned closer, resting a strong, tanned hand on the tablecloth. “What were you worried about?”

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“You. Us. Being a couple. My parents died in a car accident at that train trestle. I never go down that road, so being there made all my impressions flood back. Like a tsunami.”

“I’m sorry.” His blue eyes crinkled at the edges.

“I needed to work through those and think what it really meant to me—us.” Gwen touched his hand. “My aunt told me my mom married impetuously, and I was afraid I might be rushing into our relationship and making the same mistake. That was what worried me.”

Will leveled a concerned gaze on her. “Do you still feel that way?”

“No. Not anymore.” She smiled at him. “But I didn’t exactly react positively to your comment about being a couple. Later, I was afraid you’d think I didn’t have real feelings for you. But how can love be a mistake?”

“Beats me.” His frown vanished. In fact, his gaze seemed to sparkle. He squeezed her hand. “I told you that first night how I felt.”

“You did.” Her heart did a little jig. She hadn’t ruined things. “I figured you just wanted sex.”

“I did want that.” He grinned. “But that wasn’t all. I felt we were destined for each other. All the days since have only confirmed that, and I’m anxious for us to be together. I love you, Gwen MacLaine.”

“I love you, too, Will Strongbow.”

Then he was pulling her into his lap, wrapping her in his strong arms and kissing her in a way she'd never been kissed before. Because before now, she'd never been in love.

* * *