



Special Agent Joseph

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Category: Romance, Suspense

Description: Who the hell is he?

Joseph Marcus? No way. He detests everything he's been told about the loser.

Except the doctors, his FBI co-workers, even his housekeeper all agree that, in fact, he is the same dirty cop.

After surviving an accident, he returns to the living in the hospital with his face all torn up and his memories gone... so how can he argue? And yet everything inside his sentimental heart says they must be wrong. Hell, even the huge guard dog he supposedly beats regularly doesn't show tendencies to eat him like they said happened in the past.

Determined to show his superiors that he's a changed man; Joe offers to snitch on Vinnie Farina, the cartel boss who expects and has always depended on his information and loyalty. But this time, Joe has no intentions of breaking the law. Quite the opposite.

Undercover as a bodyguard for Vinnie's young granddaughter, Agent Megan Whittall is heartbroken when the girl goes missing and ends up in the drug pit with the rest of the druggies that gramps has been feeding. Turns out, it's okay to sell to the unknown weak, but if it's your family, things have to change. Terrified for his Lucia, Vinnie wants out. Only the Chinese crime syndicate have different ideas.

Tensions on both sides continually rise, and a battle to prevail cannot be prevented. Of course, both Joe and Megan are smack dab in the middle of the developing mess. Against rising tensions and unexpected corruption, they put aside their intensifying attraction to each other, and fight to win.

Sadly, someone has to lose...

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Chapter One

The sun shone down with a vengeance, heating the air and forcing Captain Joe Wyatt's lungs to work overtime. The golden globe of fire above scorched the ground so severely that he felt it through the bottom of his worn sneakers. He'd headed out early this morning, only to find that Mother Nature had declared yet another heat war on the Nevada world.

Sadly, having to park the rental he'd paid less than the usual price for, he realized now it was probably due to the fact that the car was a clunker, ready to fall apart, and the gas gauge didn't register properly. Leaving it on the side of the road, he gathered his gear and began trekking.

He spotted a clump of dried brush near some larger rocks close to the road where he could still see oncoming vehicles and decided to sit for a few minutes, catch his breath, and get out of the direct sun. Dropping to the ground he put his hands through his sweaty hair and kept his face hidden and eyes closed. While he called himself every sort of an idiot for trying to save money rather than renting a good car, he knew he'd do it again if given the chance. Which made him even more of a fool.

Suddenly, he felt eyes on him, a second sense he'd garnered from being in life-losing battles overseas. Stiffening, he slowly scanned the area and actually jumped when he spotted the nearby, bug-eyed gecko staring back at him, obviously statue-like because it hoped to fade into its background. The long grayish body highlighted with intricate tan bands remained still yet alert. Once Joe's heart slowed back to the normal rhythm, he couldn't help but chuckle at his reaction. "Hey, little buddy, what're you glaring at? Never seen a soldier lose his shit before?"

Surprisingly, the gecko stuck around long enough for Joe's hand to move so swiftly, that he was able to grab the creature, imprisoning him. Shocked he'd actually caught the small lizard; he carefully opened his fingers so the head and front paws could pop out. Laughing now, he stared back at his wrinkly friend. "Hey, partner, are you finding it hotter than usual? If it were me, I'd be hiding in the shade. Shit, look who's talking?" Grinning, he spread his fingers, expecting the little reptile to flee. When it just sat, opening and closing its curtain-like eyes, another laugh broke out and that seemed to prompt the reptile to turn tail and sprint for safety. Watching him disappear into a rock crevice, Joe muttered, "Stay safe, pal." Then he wiped his hands on his pants and copying his new friend, he decided to keep moving.

Humming the newest tune he'd memorized the words to; he kept his head down and walked in step. Bo Martinez, a good pal in the service had taught him how to play a harmonica in exchange for lessons from Joe on the guitar. To pass the time, he took it from his pocket and began playing the latest tune he'd become proficient with.

The fact that Bo came from Tennessee and played mostly country music only made the learning more fun. After a few minutes though, he had to stop, finding his mouth dried too quickly and remembering that his water bottle was only half full.

Taking a route toward the populated city of Las Vegas, Joe soon began to see that the desert-type vegetation didn't provide much chance of cooling off under a big old shady tree. Go figure... maybe he should have done more research before heading this way.

Recently, having taken his final leave from the army after three back-to-back deployments, the ex-military soldier thought about the reason he'd come to be walking along this highway, having only the money in his pocket from his last check.

Unable to access his savings account because of some glitch in the system, for now Joe had to stick to a small amount of cash and the couple hundred bucks he'd always

budgeted for having fun in his slush fund. Not wanting to stick around while the bank fixed the screwup, he'd decided to keep his travel expenses low and head out anyway. Deciding now he should've spent the money on a plane ticket came a bit late.

Appreciating the fact that he'd paid his dues to society, Joe remembered what had gotten him into the mess in the first place. Having been with his sister's new dolt of a husband the day Mateo had decided to rob a liquor store had probably been the dumbest thing Joe had ever done in all his twenty years of living in a boring small town in Oregon. Why he hadn't walked away when the idiot had drawn a gun on the clerk, he'd never know.

His conscience had cautioned that he needed to be the voice of reason... to stop Mateo from killing someone that day. After all, he'd known the lowlife had been riding some kind of high, making him stupid and not in his right mind. He should have left the scene when he saw everything blowing up.

He can still remember reaching out to Mateo, realizing the guy's head was screwy. He stood like some kind of moviecriminal, screaming and waving a gun at the clerk in the liquor store who admitted they didn't have the type of beer on the premises that Mateo demanded.

"Don't mess with me, fool. I'm in no goddamn mood. I'm thirsty, and I want my favorite beer."

"Mateo. Cut it out, man. The dude says he's out of Pliny for President, so we get the Elder brand." Joseph's heart dropped when he saw the clerk blanch from his words, knowing full well he'd suggested another type they didn't have in stock. "Or how about my favorite beer. I see some back there. I'll get it. Just cool your jets, bud. Put that fucking gun away."

Joseph almost ran to the back of the store where he knew they kept the alcohol he'd

mentioned. When a shot rang out, he sunk to his knees, afraid to look. That's where the police found him when they'd crashed in on the scene and captured Mateo. Later, he learned that the clerk had a hidden alarm, and when Mateo had first pulled his gun, the guy had used it.

The incident left his sister with her man jailed for ten years, an innocent shop worker in the hospital for almost a week, and him with a choice. The judge had been brutally clear. Either go into service or take a sentence of three to five.

Was he glad he'd chosen the army? Yeah, he was. Had it made a man out of him? Sure. Whatever. Would he deploy again? Not likely. Three tours, a license as a fully certified army medic, and three captain's stripes were enough. Now he needed to decide what he wanted to do with the rest of his life.

After that rental car's engine light had come on, his first decision had been to continue walking into Vegas, but with the twenty miles of heat staring him in the face, he sure as hell hoped someone would come along soon.

The sudden sound of an engine made him lift his hand, waving his thumb to show he could use a lift. Though they say that hitchhikers are dangerous, Joe knew the opposite could be a problem too. When the fancy Ford truck pulled over, he bent to look into the passenger window at the driver before accepting the ride. One never knew what kind of weirdos lurked behind the wheel nowadays.

Surprisingly, the man who stared back at him could have been a brother, their faces looked so similar right down to the full head of dark hair cut in a shorter style. He could see the dude had his own long and lanky build as well. Stranger yet, the crooked side smile had been one he'd seen often in a mirror.

Hmm interesting!"Hey, man. Thanks for stopping." He opened the back door to throw his gear inside and then settled into the passenger seat.

“Where ya headed?” The deep voice reminded him of his father’s.

“Just into town. Need to get some gas for the rental I had to leave behind. Go figure, when you pay for a car, they’re supposed to have the tank full. It registered that way, but the bloody thing only drove a hundred miles.”

“I’d be pissed too. By the way, I’m Special Agent Joseph Marcus. Heading back to Las Vegas also.” He pulled his badge from his shirt pocket and waved it negligently before it flipped from his hand and ended up falling under his seat. Leaving it there, he continued, “I’ve been traveling for hours and gotta tell you the heat is a bastard in this expensive toy. The air conditioner broke down yesterday, and the fucker is hotter than the halls of hell.”

Joe had sensed a problem from the moment he’d gotten into the vehicle but having a ride still ranked a lot higher than his earlier situation. “It beats walking any day, man. Thanks for picking me up.”

Wondering why his new buddy sat staring out the windshield and not driving so they could get cooler air, he hesitated to say anything more in case the driver had changed his mind. Thankfully, the dude’s next words cleared his concern.

“Yeah. No problem. Look, I’m about busted. Been driving for twenty hours straight.” Joseph looked at him with bleary eyes the same brown as his own and Joe could see him coming to a decision. “Hey, man, think you could take the wheel for a while? I’m having a hard time staying awake.”

“Sure.” Joe got out of the vehicle and went around to the other side. When he got behind the wheel, he saw that Joseph had stripped off his shirt. Deciding it was a good idea he did the same.

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Once Joe settled behind the wheel, Joseph started a conversation. “So... what’s your name?”

Joe grinned at his new acquaintance. “Same as yours. I’m Joe... actually Joseph Wyatt but everyone calls me Joe.”

Joseph’s head swiveled to look Joe’s way. Weirdly, his voice hardened, and he basically spit words toward him. “Never callmeJoe. My name is Joseph. My dad’s name was Joe, and he was a son of a bitchin’ asshole who I hated from the first time he beat me. Well... till I laughed at his bedside when he took his last stinking, cancerous breath.”

“Jesus. Sorry, man. Then Joseph it is.” Settling in to drive, Joe hoped the bitter-talking, hard-assed stranger would take a nap.

He didn’t. Instead he changed the subject. And his next comment surprised Joe. ‘You don’t have any tattoos. I thought all servicemen went nuts over body ink.’

“Not all.”

“Okay. Guess there are weenies who don’t like needles.”

Laughing at the remark, Joe turned only to see that Joseph was serious. That’s when the comment stopped being humorous and became damn rude. “What about you? You scared of needles too?”

“Hell, no. I just hate to mark up perfection.”

Scoffing, Joe turned away but not before he saw Joseph send him a strange nasty glance, his mouth pursed rudely. Christ the idiot was serious.

“Can I see your dog tags?”

Not understanding why the man asked to see the chain hanging around his neck, he nevertheless handed them over... after all, the dude had picked him up. “Sure.”

Joseph put them over his own head and looked at himself in the mirror. “They’re kind of cool, lets the women know you were a soldier. Bet these fuckers’ll get you laid.”

Even more uncomfortable with the way the conversation was heading, Joe changed the subject. “Do you work in Vegas?”

“For about a year now. Don’t like the people, but I sure love the city. There’s activity going on around the clock that keeps a cop on his toes. A man can make a lot of contacts in a place like this. Know what I mean?”

Not having a clue as to the agent’s inuendoes, he nevertheless nodded. “Guess that’s important in your job.”

“What about you?”

“Figured I needed a clean start after the three tours abroad. My sister moved here once her divorce became final. She likes the place and texted me to come and see her.”

“Do you have a photo of her?”

Not sure why the man wanted to see a picture of a stranger, nonetheless, Joe nodded. One-handedly, he took out his phone, clicked in his password, found Nadine on his

first page of pictures, and handed it over “This is the latest one. From this photo, Nadine’s a lot different than I remember. Her hair’s longer plus dyed blonde, and she’s lost a lot of weight. Looking forward to seeing her again.”

“I bet. I like studying pictures. Weird, I know.” Joseph kept scrolling through image after image, making Joe wonder about the guy’s bad manners in searching through someone else’s business. Guessing the snoopiness came with him being a cop, he let it slide for a few minutes.

Just as he reached out as a hint to get his property back, he heard Joseph yell. Turning quickly, from the corner of his eyes, Joe saw an out-of-control semi-trailer plunging through the barrier and heading straight for them. Instinctively, he hit the brake and swung the wheel. As they swerved dangerously, their truck’s front tire blew and after that, all hell broke loose.

Shrieking tires, fracturing metal sounds, and Joseph’s screams hurt Joe’s ears. Crushed behind the wheel while flipping wildly through the air, broken glass flying everywhere, the last thing he remembered was the scene changing from sky to earth to sky...

He never felt the landing.

Chapter Two

Joe’s head hurt so bad that opening his eyes couldn’t be born. And yet he had no choice. He needed to know if he were truly alive. Seeing an overhead light, he guessed he was.

The next time he surfaced, he heard the sounds of machines beeping all around his bed. He forced his eyes to open again and made out the many tubes connected to him. He tried to clear his mouth but something in his throat made it impossible.

In seconds, the nurses removed the horrible intubation tube and slowly shifted the bed to be upright, helping him through the subsequent coughing spell. The older, gray-haired nurse added supplementary oxygen to assist with his breathing. Eventually, she helped him take in a bit of water, staying close and watching him carefully.

Suddenly, a male voice nearby made sense... and yet it didn't. "Agent Marcus. Hello. Joe. Can you hear me? I'm Doctor Whittaker. Do you know where you are?"

"I – I – no. I'm... no."

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“It’s okay. Don’t fret. Everything will be fine. You’re in the University Medical Trauma Hospital in Las Vegas. We’ve been taking care of you.”

“H-how l-long?” He croaked out the words, his throat stinging terribly.

“Two weeks. You were badly injured, Joseph. But this morning, you turned the corner. Now that you’re awake, I believe you have a good chance to make a full recovery.” Smiling proudly, the doctor lifted Joe’s hand to check his pulse.

“I-I don un-erstan. I’m Mar-mar-cus?” His voice wheezed out the words, taking quite some time, but the patient doctor seemed to understand his questions.

“Yes. You’re Special Agent Joseph Marcus.”

“I d-don rem-ember.”

Suddenly, the doctor stiffened. While doing a swift examination, he spoke soothingly, “No worries. You’re head took quite a knock. It’s early days. Just rest.”

Slowly, Joe reached his hand to his face and felt bandages... the obvious reasons for why everything above his neck felt strange. The strenuous action became so difficult that his strength waned, and he knew no more.

At least a week later, after periods of lucidity but mostly black voids, Joe finally came back to himself. Overcome by the brain fog he’d experienced before, he knew things and yet he didn’t. Like he could describe every part of his body, but he didn’t know his own name.

When the doctors and nurses were with him, he'd question them anxiously. "What happened? How did I get here?"

The most they could tell him was the information gathered in the police statements they'd received at the time of his arrival. Eventually, a stranger appeared wearing a badge who appeared to recognize him. There was clearly something in his expression that Joe made out, and yet it wasn't put into words. This agent didn't like him. He felt it instinctively.

"Hey Joseph. Glad to see you alive, man... though your pretty mug seems to have taken quite a beating. Hell, with your luck, when the swelling goes down, leaving just the scars, no doubt they'll add to the rugged good looks your women go for."

Not knowing what to say in response, Joe kept it simple. "Ahh, hi."

"The office has been keeping close tabs on you, and the doctor's reports say you're doing better."

"Yeah. I've been getting up every day this week. Uuh... what's your name again? Sorry, everything's unclear, it's like I'm living in a fog. How do I know you?"

"We're kinda partners, well when they force me into it. You really don't remember me? It's Tom. I'm Agent Tom Kramer. We've worked together on and off."

"Jesus, sorry man. I-I... yeah, the doc says it'll come back in time, but I'm a mess right now. Funny thing, this getting bonked on the head. I can remember everything about the world, my body, even the foods I like or dislike, but I have no idea who I am, or how I got here."

"You mean in Vegas?"

“That and why I’m in the hospital.”

Tom shook his head, cleared his throat in a scoffing way, but peered closely at Joe, his disbelief clear in his sour expression. “Must be hard for a guy like you.”

“A guy like me? What do you mean?” Joe took notice now.

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, man. Give it to me straight.”

“Well, let’s just say you’re a loner, a first-class asshole, and no one likes you, but other than that, you’re an agent who works for the Las Vegas Federal Bureau of Investigation. You’re one of us.”

Joe peered at the man sporting thick reddish hair and rounded glasses. He could see by the other’s expression that Agent Tom Kramer meant every word he’d said. This tall, solidly-built man did not like him... not even a little bit.

Now why that bothered Joe, he had no idea, but it did. Jokingly, he asked, “So... is it just your opinion or is it an overall consensus of the others I work with?”

Tom kind of chuckled and then seemed to realize he was doing so and stopped. “Nah. We’re all pretty much in agreement. You’re a prick.”

Joe laughed. It seemed funny somehow. Why Tom stared at his reaction, he didn’t know, but Joe’s self-awareness had kicked in. Seems like he had a sense of humor.

He’d actually begun to notice this among many things over the last while with the hospital staff. Often, they’d come to his room to take care of their duties and strike up conversations with him. Many times, they’d leave after sharing jokes, cheering him

on, and lightening the overall mood.

He swore it helped with his recovery. Secretly, he'd been spending a lot of time exercising his body, walking around his room, and doing some calisthenics. From the look of his frame, he'd say the muscles that seemed weak now had at one time been strong.

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The innate need for him to get his health back drove him and wouldn't let up. He wished he knew more about what his life had been like before the accident. So far, other than Tom, he'd had no visitors, no one to answer his many questions.

"Tom, I need you fill me in on some things. You gotta understand, I have no memories of my past at all. I need to know about Agent Joseph Marcus. The truth from your perspective. Since you don't like me, I know you won't sugar-coat the details."

Tom gave him a hard look and finally capitulated. "Yeah, okay. I can try. Though I don't know a lot. You're pretty much a closed book, Joseph."

"It's Joe." Now where did that automatic response come from?

"Okay. Now see, that's one of the things you used to be belligerent over. You insisted we all call you Joseph. And you weren't nice about it neither. Said your old man was Joe, and you hated his guts until you laughed over his cancer-ridden corpse. Put the rest of us off if you want to know the truth."

"Jesus, sorry, Tom. Don't remember." Joe didn't like what he heard, didn't feel inside like the kind of man who thought that way. In fact, Tom's description shocked him. But still, he needed to know this stuff. "Tell me more."

"Hell, man, you didn't share much with us lowlifes. Well other than to insist we respect your superior undercover position, you refused to talk about your personal life. Christ, we only just found out that you live in a fucking palace and not in dumps like the rest of us fibbies can afford."

“A what now? A palace? Explain.”

Tom turned away.

“Please,” Joe urged.

Uncomfortable, Tom raised his eyebrows with obvious disbelief. “You really don’t know?”

“I really don’t know.”

“Okay, you asked for it. Recently, we found out that you live in MacDonald’s Highland.” Elaborating, he continued, “It’s like a rich man’s residential playground with homes that are huge... know what I mean?”

“Nope. Don’t recall any of this.”

“There’s a casita, a pool with a built in hot tub, and multiple garages behind your house and a large circular driveway in front. It’s like a god-damn movie star’s or billionaire’s home. What I wanna know is where’d you get the money for a place like that?”

Joe stared at Tom, his mind going in circles and finding nothing. Emptiness. Confusion. Finally, he admitted, “I have no idea. How come you just found out I live there?”

“You’d put the wrong address in your personnel file. After the first week you didn’t call in, they sent me there to find out what happened to you, or if you had any animals left alone. I went to the address you’d given us and realized you couldn’t be living there because there was no such place on that street.”

“Then how did you find the right house? Wait. Do I have any animals?”

“I never ran into any four legged ones... unless you mean the cute little housekeeper you have living in the small guest house behind the mansion. Guess someone’s gotta keep the place up.” Sarcasm obvious, Tom gave him a sideways look, a sneer covering his face. “She filed a missing person’s report on you, and I followed it up.”

Feeling under fire, Joe flipped back the covers of his bed and sat to the side, his flannel pajama bottoms barely covering the healing scars on his legs.

He stared at the man in the chair, the uncomfortable person who he sensed couldn’t wait to get away from him fast enough. How he knew Tom felt that way confused him, but he’d bet money on it being true. He also knew without a doubt that this agent in his cheap dark suit, crinkled white shirt, and crooked tie was a good man... honest and trustworthy.

Whatever he’d done to piss him off, Joe didn’t know. Yet one thing that stood out... it made him feel bad.

Chapter Three

By the time Tom Kramer left, Joe’s head throbbed with a number of questions. Lacking answers is what drove him crazy. The emptiness of his past made him feel sick to his very soul. Recollections of what Tom said spun in his overactive mind, keeping him awake, making the headaches worse.

Finally, some days later, his doctor came to see him, and in a firm voice, he growled. “Stop this nonsense, Joe. You need to relax. Let the memories come to you when they’re ready... and it will happen, trust me. Wracking your brain, pushing for responses, and straining your body to the point of exhaustion isn’t helping.”

Joe groused. “You gotta understand, Doc, I want my life back. It’s driving me nuts not being able to remember anything.”

“Give it time, Joe. Give it time. The more you pressure yourself, the harder it’ll be and will only make your recovery take longer. I wish you’d let me prescribe something to help calm you down.”

“No. I hate pills.”

“You do? How do you know?”

“I just do.”

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“See. There’s an example of what you think you know. Yet when I go over your medical records, you’ve been prescribed different medications, which I have no doubt you took.”

Joe listened and then questioned, “I have? Which ones?”

“Some antibiotics, different sleeping pills, and of course Viagra.”

“Viagra. Gentle Joseph, I use that stuff?” He felt depressed at the thought. “Tell me, have I been to the doctor’s a lot?”

Though the doctor laughed at his use of the personalized idiom, Joe’s sour expression and lowered head seemed to concern him.

“No. Actually, you’re a bit of a health nut. Which is what you’ve shown us here with your insistence on building your strength back. In fact, it’s one of the reasons I wanted to talk to you today, Once we take out the last of the stitches on your face, I see no reason why you can’t go home later this afternoon. The housekeeper who filed a report on your behalf has the FBI’s approval to come and pick you up. And I believe Agent Kramer will be joining her to see to everything on your behalf.”

Joe’s worries ramped up big time, and filled with misgivings, he couldn’t help feeling intimidated. Swell. I’m heading into the confusing world with a woman I can’t remember, a man who can’t stand me, and my memory lost in the empty wilderness. Oh, goodie.

A sudden flashback made him grip his head in both hands. Through the fog, he heard

a sarcastic male voice using those same two words to him while he'd laughed.

From the first moment the sexy, blonde, big-busted woman appeared, he felt out of place and totally sickened by her fawning behavior. She took liberties with him that didn't ring true. Yet the empty look in her eyes said she only did so as a part she played. And that turned him off even worse.

As soon as she'd strutted into his hospital room and approached him with the sweet-talking bullshit he knew she didn't feel, he hated the fake performance. Made him believe he held something over her, and so she acted in the way he expected.

As she approached, her eyes lowered, her voice theatrical, she pushed her boobs forward and wiggled toward him. "Mr. Joseph. I worry with you not home so long."

Hearing the strong accent, Joe figured she'd be Eastern European. He shied away from her boldness, saying, "Right. Agent Kramer mentioned you filed a missing person's report on my behalf. Thanks for that."

Eyes widening, she stuttered. "O-of course." For the first few seconds, she looked at him closely, then her glance darted everywhere but his way. "I didn't want you angry for me to call the authorities. I know how – how private you are. But I get worried. It wasn't right you don't contacted me such long time."

"Speaking of contacting you, I don't even remember your name. I'm sorry. Not sure they explained that my memory seems to have been affected from the accident."

Again she studied him closely before replying. "Maria. Maria Petrov. You hired me a year ago. I worked in the Mirage Casino, don't you remember? Before they destroyed it. You used to come to the lounge all the time. We hit it off, and you felt sorry for

me. You gave me a job to help me pay my ahh... debts.” Strangely, her English suddenly improved drastically.

Joe sensed there was something else to her story, something she wasn’t saying. Then he made a wild guess. “Have you been paid your wages?”

She slumped then, as if a weight had been lifted. “No. You take care of all the household accounts.”

Aha! Now it made sense. She wanted her money. Of course, she did. Rent free was one thing but having cash for expenses and bill payments was totally different.

“I’ll take care of that as soon as I get back into the swing of things. Guess I’ll have to deal with the bank and well... everything.”

Maria hesitated and then continued as if fearful of his reaction. “Mostly, you keep the household money in the safe.”

“I do? But, since I’ve lost my memory, I have no idea of the combination.”

“Don’t need to. Every other time, you just put your face close to the pad and the lock opens.”

Thinking of what she said, he realized it must be a safe that uses a biometric scan for his facial recognition in order to open. But with all the scars and swelling that hadn’t quite disappeared, would it still work? If not, he’d have to contact the company that installed it.

Overwhelmed with the mountains of crap and details facing him, he felt almost thankful when Tom entered the room. Someone he could trust to help him with all these necessary chores.

When Maria passed over a set of clothes for him to wear home, he couldn't believe the expensive, stylish garments were his. Once he'd changed, he saw that the clothes fit loosely but that made sense since he'd lost weight. What bothered him was the tight style of the slacks and the bright colors in the form-fitting shirt. Looking in the mirror, he didn't feel right. Instinctively, he'd disliked them immediately.

What he wouldn't give for a pair of well-worn, loose-fitting jeans.

Chapter Four

Special Agent Megan Whittall pretended to sleep while her earphones transmitted her latest best seller from her phone. Her dark-haired, curly wig had begun itching again... blasted thing. Knowing it would go to the goodwill first chance she got, she couldn't wait to get it off. She removed her headphones and cautiously scratched the skin on the back of her neck. That's when she overheard the start of a brawl in the seat across and two rows down.

"Hey, girlie, don't act like a brat. I just want to sit beside you." A man pushed at the teen, not happy for her to be blocking his right to a seat. "Behave, will ya?" The gruff male voice meant business, intending to get his way.

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The younger girl he was accosting ignored the danger, and rather than try to placate the stranger, she came across callously. “Leave me alone, you perv. Fuck off.”

Shit! Let it go, Megan. Just relax.

Praying the culprit would take the callous hint and leave the furious girl alone, she continued to eavesdrop. It was the alarmed scream that made her give up on the likelihood of minding her own business and convinced her things had gotten out of hand. Turning, she saw the male had hauled the girl to her feet and tried to force her to leave the vicinity. She also made out that the long-haired, scruffy looking victim didn't back down.

Stubbornly, Megan stayed in her seat. And she would have continued to do so if the ruckus hadn't ramped up. From previous experience, she recognized that the scary situation could get past the point of no return, and with her rotten luck, that's exactly what happened.

Of course... rather than apologize and calm troubled waters, the girl's badass temperament kicked in bigtime.

Another furious scream, but this time it resonated with fear.

Son of a bitchin' hell in a handbasket. Why me?

Standing, she couldn't help noticing that the others on the train had all fled to safety at the rear of the car. Rather than follow them, she stepped closer to the scuffle. Hearing more stupid threats that made her skin crawl, she flinched from the wide-

eyed teen's response. "You're disgusting, you pig. Leave me alone."

"Think your shit doesn't stink, do ya? I'll teach you to look down on me." The homeless-looking character moved fast. In seconds, he had the fleeing girl enclosed in an arm hold with her back against him. Dangling, her toes barely touching the ground, she froze and stopped fighting. In the same hand he clutched his knife close to her neck, threatening to cut. Megan saw the terrified glance the girl made, looking for a rescue. She'd finally realized her situation had become serious.

With his free hand, the crazy hopped-up idiot swept it over her chest, taking liberties with her breasts, fondling them without any care to his roughness. "You like that? Is that what you want? Still think you're too good to sit near me now?"

Hoping to calm the situation, Megan approached carefully. With her hands in plain sight in front of her, she spoke quietly but with enough force to be heard. "I think things have gone far enough, pal. My friend didn't mean to upset you. Let her go."

"Fuck that. This disrespectful bitch sneered at me, looking down her nose at my condition. Stupid brat deserves what she gets." Spittle flew from his lips. And his lank, dirty-blond hair stuck out in all directions from a face sorely infected with meth sores. Though his actions lacked coordination, he moved quickly. And his red-eyed, blank stare let her know there was little sanity lurking inside his crazy head.

Unfortunately, the threat couldn't be ignored. Like a wounded, stinking, ugly animal, the bearded idiot ranked among the most dangerous. Not only didn't he know what the hell he was doing... worse, he didn't care.

As if the girl took encouragement from Megan's nearness, she added fuel to the out-of-control fire. Wriggling again, demanding, belligerent, she sputtered, "You're choking me, you moron. Let go. You smell, and you're pathetic. Know that?"

“Hey, you little shit. I fought for our country... for you to live free.” He shook her cruelly. “While me and my bros were out there saving your lily-white asses, what were you doing, hey? Piss all. Turning the world into an even bigger garbage dump.”

Though Megan had tried warning the girl to stay quiet by holding her hand up, she realized this juvenile obviously didn't feel the need to listen to anyone.

“Shut up. You're a stinkin' disgrace to - to the military.”

Megan watched as the hurtful words sank in, and the already unruly man looked as if he'd explode. Thinking to calm the waters, Megan pointed at the skinny girl while exclaiming, “Hey, soldier, she's a stupid kid. What do you expect from this spoiled generation. You're right. We need to applaud you for your duty, and I for one truly thank you for your service, mine too if you wanna know the truth. I just finished a stint with the Navy. We're the good guys. She's an idiot and not worth going to jail for. Might as well let her go.”

Sensing that he needed to either take action or the party would be over, he hesitated, lowering his captive enough for her feet to be back on the ground.

But rather than stop provoking him, the girl kicked at his leg and screeched with fury, inciting him to further violence. He raised his hand to better utilize the knife, and Megan who'd been moving closer with each bit of conversation, flew into the skirmish.

Using her FBI training, she had his arm in a firm grip, knife flying to the floor. Though the area was small, the attacker still managed to get free and come at her. A round kick to his stomach forced him to back up by the doors where there was more room to move. Following that with another boot to his knee, she added a backhanded slap to his face. Unwilling to stop, he came at her again, and this time she pulled him over her back, flipping him to the ground. After a few more seconds of grappling, she

had the attacker face-down on the floor in a hold that wouldn't let him move without a lot of pain.

By the time the police had removed the culprit and taken her statement, Megan looked around for the victim only to find that a car had been sent to collect her, and she'd disappeared.

When her superiors first heard about her getting involved in a skirmish on the metro train, they weren't happy. In fact, they'd railed at her. Not for being a good citizen, but for starring as the heroine of a video that one of the terrified passengers had taken from start to finish. Having it go viral just hours after the incident really pissed them off. In fact, her immediate supervisor, Assistant Special Agent in Charge, Sheila Comer, lectured her non-stop, and it still rankled.

Her mind flew back to when she'd been called on the carpet and had boldly tried to defend her actions. "What would you have had me do, Sheila? Let the mouthy kid be killed? No one else had any intentions of helping her."

"Right. I get that. And I sympathize. A dangerous situation like that one would have pissed me off too. Flaming weirdoes have been running amuck on the metro lately, and so you know, I just had a conversation to that effect with the police commissioner and the mayor."

She visibly calmed herself before adding, "But I'm particularly frustrated that it went public. After a month of diligent work, your undercover case has been compromised. A bank accountant wouldn't have those fighting skills. Also, the background we gave to get you employed at that particular institution didn't have you serving time in the navy."

“Because I didn’t. You know I bullshitted my way to get in closer to the druggie.”

“Yeah, well, the public believed your lies. Plus, your skills prove you must have had some sort of training to be able to make the moves you did. Christ, you looked like a martial arts expert the way you handled that man.” Sheila chewed the skin by the side of her fingernail, a habit she had when angry. Then the tall, skinny, uptight woman slapped the desk before standing. “There’s no getting away from it. We’ll have to start all over again. Assign another agent to the bank to oversee the fraud case.”

Megan sat quietly with her wig in her hands, feeling like a rookie being called on the carpet. Dampened from the sweat still clinging to her scalp, her own red waves itched, making her rub at them and grimace. Christ, even her eyeballs felt irritated from the sapphire-blue contacts covering her own flashing green gems. “I guess I have to agree. I wished I had more to report on that job. I know where the folders with the damaging files are kept but never got a chance to get close to them.”

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“Just so you realize you’ll have to return tomorrow as if nothing happened and resign for personal reasons. Let’s hope they haven’t seen the video yet.”

Scratching her neck again, Megan muttered tiredly, “Okay.”

Pissed for messing up on her commitment, she threw the wig onto the desk. “You have no idea how glad I am to get this piece of crap off my head. I don’t mind the contact lenses but with the temperatures most days over a hundred, the hairpiece has been murderous.” Sheepishly, she grinned at the woman showing little sympathy. “Look, I’m sorry that I screwed up the assignment, but I can’t say I’m not relieved. I hated working in that stilted office atmosphere. So many of those white-collar stiff exist in an alternate universe and have no idea about the real world or for that matter, a sense of humor one might actually call funny.”

Sarcasm winding through her reply, Sheila murmured while heading to the wall of windows overlooking the vista of dry vegetation. “Right now, neither do I.” She turned her back to Megan. “Did you know that the kid you saved was Vinnie Farina’s granddaughter?”

“What? No. But I know the name. Isn’t he one of the men featured on our most wanted list?” While talking, Megan undid the pins from her own long red locks, and her fingers slid through the previously bound hair, freeing it to her shoulders.

Suddenly Sheila changed the subject. “Why don’t you cut that mop of yours? If it was short, it wouldn’t be so hot under the wig.”

“Hell if I know. Took so long to grow I guess. Tell me more. About Vinnie.”

“Right. Bastard’s been running his crime syndicate for years and never gets smeared with the shit his people go to jail for. He lives like a king and is a legend with many here in Vegas. Word is, he’s dealing in a lot of the potent drugs lately. We’re trying to get the lowdown on the prick but he’s more guarded than a flophouse in Vegas.” Sheila swiveled back to face Megan and picked up the file on the desk in front of her. Sighing, she said, “Go home and report back here on Monday. I’ll find a replacement for the bank job by then, and you can brief her.”

Chapter Five

Megan headed to her apartment which she shared with her best friend from college. When she walked inside and saw the mess, she knew Mikey must be home. “Seriously, dude, do you have to leave a trail of destruction everywhere you go?”

Her roommate showed himself, wearing nothing but a towel and a big grin. Normally, Micheal was the most masculine of men but when he wanted to goof off, his effeminate side would appear and make her laugh. “Cool your jets, sweetie. I’ll clean up. Don’t I always?” The light tone and smirking grin made her laugh, exactly like he knew it would.

“Sure you do.” Muttering her comeback, she added, “I won’t hold my breath.”

“I heard that.” Micheal smirked teasingly. “Bad time of the month?”

“Quit being such an ass.” She had to grin at his reference to her snarkiness happening during certain days. He loved poking at her about something she couldn’t change, yet he was always the most considerate friend when she felt the worst. “When did you get back?”

Micheal lowered his lean body onto the sofa arm and didn’t worry that his towel slipped enough that Megan turned away, self-consciously doing so to respect his

privacy.

Micheal picked up on her conduct and started laughing before he whipped off the towel and stood to reveal the silky boxers he wore. “Hey little prude, I’m covered.”

Megan swiveled back to him and slugged his arm.

“Ow!”

“Then stop being such an ass.”

“I will when you stop being such a prissy little miss.”

“So sue me because I was brought up to show respect. My brother kept his door closed and his body to himself.”

Laughing, Micheal reminded her. “You’ve met my sisters, all three of the nutcases who to this day walk around half the time with no clothes on, and the other half dressed in the style where they might as well have gone naked. I don’t have a shy bone in my body.”

“Well, since there’s only one bone I feel shy about, thanks for covering up for me. You know I appreciate it.”

Micheal walked over to give her a hug and a kiss on the forehead before adding, “I appreciate you too, honeybun.” He pulled her hair affectionately and started to head back to his room.

“Uh-uh. No you don’t. You take this stuff with you.” Megan laughing, skirted around, grabbing his towel and threw it at him, chuckling when he ducked and ran. She kind of expected him to do exactly that since it’s what he always did. Sighing,

her vexation more put on than real, she whipped around the living room and scooped up the rest of his belongings, clearing away the chip bags, pop cans, and wiping the table.

Calling out, she said, “Are you on furlough?”

“Just for the night. I have an early flight in the morning.”

“I suppose you have a date.”

“Nope. All yours. Figured to have a quiet evening and watch some TV with my favorite prissy little missy. I ordered a pizza. Maybe after wine and dinner we can make popcorn, fight over the cushions, and watch a chick flick.”

“I can’t wait!” The sarcasm came through loud and clear. “You know I hate those stupid movies.” Megan heard him laugh at her reply but knew in her heart that though Micheal made it sound like it was only her who liked the stay-at-home evenings, he chose them as much, if not more often than she did. Understanding that his job as a major airline pilot was stressful, she never ragged him, but whenever possible, just went along.

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Later, after dinner and their first comedy which had her grinding her teeth through many of the love scenes at the end, she looked down at his face where he'd laid his head in her lap. Gently, she smoothed the hair away from his face. "What's up, Micheal? You've sighed so many times that I suspect it's not the bullshit in the movie that's getting to you, although I noticed the tears in your eyes at the stupid finish."

Micheal pushed upright, swinging her way with a fighting grimace covering his face. "My dear girl, how can you say that? After everything they went through, the lovebirds finally found each other."

"Well of course they did. It's a romance for Christ's sake. Now stop hedging and spill. What's happened?"

Micheal formed fists, tightening and loosening them like a fighter preparing for a match, a favorite action of his when something serious came up. Then he began rubbing his hands over the knees of his flannel pajama bottoms he often wore when hanging out at home.

Knowing something important was coming, Megan sat quietly and refused to speak. Scared to say anything that might stop him from confiding, understanding how difficult Micheal found it to share a critical moment, she waited. Finally, her patience paid off.

"Jesus, Meggie, today was the worst yet. As we taxied the runway before takeoff, we came really close to getting rammed by another plane. Look, I'm as sick as the next guy of the FAA making excuses, yet I understand, it's not just one problem. The air-traffic controller skills are deteriorating every day, and that's not just their fault

either. With so many flights in and out all the time from LA, and the tower often being filled with overtime employees, not counting the newbies, it's amazing we haven't had more collisions. I just don't want to be the pilot of a plane crash filled with dead bodies. Imagine the nightmare. Keeps me breaking out in a cold sweat sometimes."

"I'm sorry, Mikey." Using her nickname for him, the one she kept for special times, she reached across and kissed his cheek, and at the same time she rubbed his hands to still them. Not used to showing affection, it being hard for her because she wasn't brought up like that, when it came out, it was sincere. "Shouldn't you talk to someone about this, someone high up in the company?"

"Trust me, Meggie; I did. More than once. After what happened today, you can bet your bootie, I'll be making a fuss again. These close calls have to stop."

Megan leaned her head on his arm, her soft voice encouraging. "You go get 'em guy. And remember, if you need backup, preferably someone with a gun to get them to listen, I'm your gal."

Chapter Six

A day later, on her way home from her final hours at the bank – after successfully carrying off her reason for quitting as being an emergency with her ailing mother – Megan hoped they hadn't discovered the trending video or the lies she'd told.

Still in her wig and banking attire, Megan sauntered toward the train station. Suddenly being approached and forced into a black SUV by two very large, severely grim men didn't bode well for her safety. If she hadn't seen the familiar young girl watching from the car's rear window, she'd have put up a fight rather than just a pathetic struggle and some swear words.

Instead, she followed their directions to get into the vehicle. Once there, she turned to the sixteen-year-old teenager she now knew as Lucia Farina and questioned, “Hey, you... what’s this all about?”

“My Nonno wants to talk to you.”

“Your grandfather?” “Whoa, what?”

“Yes. Vinnie Farina. I doubt you’ve met him, but I wouldn’t waste my time arguing. He always gets his way.” Her voice held a sad note that she tried to cover with sarcasm.

Having been a teen herself with a lot of parental complications, Megan sat back prepared to listen. She also allowed her trepidation to show. “What does he want to talk to me about?”

“A job.” Lucia stuck her sharp little nose in the air, her manner that of a person trying to appear as not to give a shit about the answer. “Because of that douche-nozzle on the train, Vinnie caught me running away and brought me back into his disgusting prison.” She faced Megan, her face tense and her brown eyes flashing. “I told him I’d just run away again first chance I got.”

“Oh-kay. But what’s that got to do with me?”

“He said he intended to slap me with a bodyguard to stop me from going anywhere, which for me means a prison guard. We argued. But he wouldn’t back down. So I told him I’d only stick around if it was you.”

Megan’s fake, sapphire-blue eyes widened. “Me? Why me?” Instantly, her mind flew from thought to thought, making her dizzy. One thing she accepted as a certainty. No one in her line of work had ever gotten close to Vinnie Farina before.

Lucia's words broke through her preoccupation. "Because you saved me yesterday. You didn't condemn me; I saw it in your eyes. You cared about what that monster was doing to me."

"Kiddo, I felt bad, yes. But I already have a job." No way would she admit to working for the FBI.

"No. You just quit. Oh don't look so surprised. My Nonno found out you work at the bank and just now gave your notice. He knows the manager. If you hadn't quit, he would have had them let you go anyway."

Stunned, Megan wanted to play along but wasn't sure which direction she should go. Carefully, she confirmed her resigning by admitting, "I hadn't told them about the Navy. And it's not up for discussion. In fact, I'd rather not talk about it."

"Fine. Your fighting skills were what helped me talk Vinnie into letting you take the job. We're heading to the house now, and he's going to ask you to work for us. Would you?"

"Jesus, kid. I don't know. You're grandfather's a dangerous man. I won't pretend not to know a bit about him. I read the papers like everyone else. Plus, getting hijacked like this isn't my idea of good communications."

Lucia's face dropped, her shame obvious. "Blame me. I had to talk to you first. Look... I detest this reputation. I hate him for doing what he does. But he's my only family. And until a few weeks ago, I didn't know about his corruption. To me, he was just Nonno."

Megan could see the girl's discomfort with the subject, the abject misery she felt in having to admit to her grandfather's criminal background. "Hey, I believe every child has the right to be their own person and live by their own rules. Christ knows, I had

to. So, what he's done has nothing to do with you or the choices you might make."

As she talked, she watched Lucia's serious, dark brown gaze turn her way. At the end of her spiel, their eyes caught and held.

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“Do you really believe that? I mean, I truly hate knowing about the things he’s involved in. I’d never want anything to do with that world. But he reminded me recently that everything I ever had and still do comes from him. It makes me sick to think that’s true.”

“What about your parents?”

“They died when I was five, and Nonno took me in. When I asked him how they died, he said his son and wife had a boating accident. I never questioned it until a few weeks ago when I discovered his own activities. I Googled it then and found out the boat exploded under questioning circumstances. And that the police believed they’d been murdered by an opposing gang that since... unsurprisingly, have all disappeared.” Her rolling-eyes portrayed her opinion.

Megan ignored her insinuations and carefully thought about her words before answering. “Which makes you Nonno’s legal ward. Look, by law, every parent, or in this case guardian, is expected to provide for their offspring. Babies can’t choose in which fashion folks do that. Their role is to grow up the best way they can.”

“You believe that?”

“I truly do. Most likely, he has legal jurisdiction over you until you become an adult at eighteen. After that, it’s your choice as to how you want to live.”

“Or until I run away, and he can’t find me.”

“Right. So how did that work out for you last time?”

The dejected youngster lowered her head, her skinny body screaming defeat. Finally, she dropped her face in her hands, tears seeping through her long eyelashes. “I don’t know what to do. I hate him. But he’s my Nonno and before all this surfaced, I adored the man.”

“See... I don’t get it. You’re a smart girl. How were you unaware of his lifestyle?”

“Easy. The sneak had me living on a ranch in Montana with a governess and a staff of employees. He’d come home for visits all the time, but I never came to Vegas. Then Miss Stacy was killed by a fall off a horse, and the police sent me here to my grandfather. I know he tried to keep me from finding out about his business, and for all these years it worked. But the night I arrived, I overheard enough to find out about his lies. And to finally meet the man I never knew existed. I tried running away. I didn’t know what else to do.” She scoffed with disgust. “You know how well that turned out.”

Megan’s lips pursed to the side, and then she lifted her shoulders. “Yeah, sorry.” Her hand reached out to touch Lucia’s. “What do you want me to do?”

The girl whipped around to stare into Megan’s questioning gaze. Making up her mind, she spoke decisively. “I want you to be my bodyguard.”

After a very brief meeting with Vinnie Farina and Lucia, Megan still had questions. The man was the epitome of what she imagined a doting, older, Italian grandfather would be. He suited the part with his gray, good looks and short, stocky body. Even his accented, silken voice offering a ridiculous wage and basically whatever her conditions might be, kind of mesmerized.

“Megan, I hope you don’t mind if I call you by your first name.” His smile oozed

charm yet made her skin crawl. “Since Lucia refuses to go back to the ranch, I just want to keep her happy here with me until she’s ready to return.”

Right, weirdo. Happy but captive.

“Lucia mia, show Miss Wells the house and especially your quarters where she’ll be spending the bulk of her time.”

He turned back to her. “Megan, we live very quietly, but with all the amenities anyone could hope to have. There’s the stables, the pool, a huge indoor and outdoor garden area, plus the tennis courts and a trainer on-call where lately my Lucia likes to take advantage of her skills. I’ll have a car and driver at your disposal whenever you wish. Your suite next to Lucia’s is large and very comfortable, but if it’s missing anything, you need only to ask.”

Megan hesitated, knowing she couldn’t agree without first talking to her superiors. “Sir, would it be okay if I take a day or so to consider your offer?”

“Of course. But Lucia has been very specific about wanting you and only...” As if deciding his words gave her too much bargaining power, he hesitated before improvising with, “feeling comfortable if you were to spend this time with her.” He turned to his granddaughter then, annoyed at seeing her sitting on the floor, rather than any of the comfortable chairs scattered around his office. “Will you leave us, Baby Girl?”

She rose, a sneer on her face from his nickname. “Fine. But remember, this has to be her decision. No funny stuff, Nonno.”

He pointed to the door, “Go.” His features blank, but the ice in his eyes told Megan he’d never have taken this kind of backtalk from anyone else.

Once the door closed behind her, he turned to Megan and smiled pleasantly. “Teenagers. What’s one to do? She refuses to return to Montana, so I want her to be happy here. Unfortunately, she’s threatened to run away again.”

He steepled his fingers, the showy ring on his right hand gleaming with diamonds to match those on his watch. “Let’s not play games, Megan. No doubt, you read newspapers and might have worries about living here with me. And I can’t blame you. But know this. If my granddaughter were to fall into the hands of my competitors, she would be in terrible danger. I can’t let that happen. Please, think about my proposition. I can promise you that we’ll keep you safe.”

Megan nodded and hid her smile. If he only knew that going undercover totally thrilled her, he wouldn’t have felt such a need to dangle the bait.

Driving away from the huge, gated complex half an hour later, Megan finally felt able to breathe properly for the first time since they’d forced her into the car. As much as she understood the danger, she really didn’t have a problem with it.

In fact, it excited her being so close to the man every cop would love to arrest. What worried her was Lucia. When the kid had shown her delicate side, Megan sensed the faith she had in her, and it weighed her down.

Lying to the girl didn’t sit well. Truth be told, if she took the job, her main goal would be to capture her grandfather, the man Lucia both hated and loved. And the squirmy sensation Megan experienced let her know it wasn’t something to take lightly.

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With the final goal of putting him away for the rest of his life, she knew it would leave Lucia truly an orphan. And likely hating the person who made that happen. Getting her head around that fact made her stomach tighten with a sick feeling.

Chapter Seven

Later that afternoon, making sure not to be followed, Megan showed up at the Bureau, having replaced her undercover banking get-up with the dark, form-fitting pants and cream silken shirt she normally wore to the FBI office. Loving the feel of the slight breeze through her own golden hair, she flipped her head to the side, forcing the waves back over her shoulders.

To the delight of her superiors, she explained in detail about the conversation she'd had with the mob boss earlier. Excited, Sheila placed a zoom call to her own superior and together they encouraged Megan to take on the job working undercover.

The Special Agent in Charge had his own advice and direction. "You know that every jurisdiction has been on the lookout for Vinnie Farina for a long time. It's strange his name should come up at this moment, so I'll take it as a sign. You know that recently while searching through some new evidence against him, we found a dirty agent on his payroll, Special Agent Joseph Marcus. The man is rotten... pond scum. We need to put him out of commission too, hopefully with charges that will also hold up on Farina."

Rubbing his hands together, the middle-aged SAC lowered his voice, then turned his gaze on first one woman and then the other. His seriousness permeating the call. "Whatever you need, it's yours Megan. Sheila, I can feel us getting closer to an arrest

on the crafty bastard whose file is sitting on the top of my outstanding pile.”

“I’m with you there.”

“Okay, then. Megan, be careful. And Sheila, give her whatever she needs to catch the asshole who’s been getting away with murder, drug trafficking, robberies and a host of other charges for far too long.”

Days later, Megan had settled in at Vinnie Farina’s mansion, guarding his spoiled darling, and sneaking to find evidence of the boss’s underworld activities. Sadly, Lucia had been sticking to her room for days on end, leaving Megan frustrated and having very little to do.

Her one nemesis, another bodyguard called Jie, became the bane of her existence. The large Chinese dude took every chance he could to push himself on her and once again had caught her unprepared.

Megan slid out of the arms of the grabby asshole, her figure stiff and her eyes shooting warning signals. “Back off, Jie. Don’t make me hurt you again.”

Jie grinned, rubbed at his still sore chin, and stepped back.

With his American qualities overcome by his Asian features, he griped in an obvious southern accent, “Baby, you love it when I pay you attention. All chicks dig it. Some just like playing hard to get.”

She grinned yet spoke with conviction. “See... that’s the difference between me and other chicks. I’m not playing, asshole. Get it through that thick skull, I don’t dig you.”

The denier chuckled. “Like I said, hard to get.” Having the last word, Jie stomped away, leaving the door he’d been guarding unprotected. Which gave Megan a chance to slip inside the forbidden office she didn’t have access to and shouldn’t be in.

Finally able to place the specialized, untraceable FBI covert listening device she’d been holding onto since she’d arrived, she snuck under Vinnie’s old-fashioned wooden desk. Once there, she found a hidden corner to attach it where it wouldn’t be seen.

Done, she stood to retreat to the hallway before Vinnie and his sycophants arrived and found her in the restricted place. Feeling pleased that she’d been able to set the recording device where the FBI computer specialists had suggested would work best, she breathed a sigh of relief. That is, until she heard the sounds of male voices approaching.

Oh, oh! Not good. Swiveling in place, she decided the small balcony would be her best bet for hiding. Thankful the room was on the ground floor, she zipped around the gauze-type curtains just in time before the door swung open and Vinnie appeared, followed by another man.

Hoping his newest bestie, Chen Bao, who’d begun to appear at the mansion had surfaced again, she listened closely. The files she’d memorized on this man and his associates would make anyone sit up and take notice. The scope of organized crime Chao’s syndicate was involved with went far beyond fentanyl trafficking and money laundering. Internationally, this criminal group engaged in elaborate fraud scams, cyber crimes, plus people trafficking and enslavement. The dude was the worst of the bad ones.

Listening to the men talking, she soon realized her mistake.

From the morning she’d first started working, Megan had been on the lookout for her

secondary suspect... the dirty cop everyone in the bureau hated and who'd gone off the radar. Turns out, they'd recently located Agent Marcus in a hospital, recuperating from a car accident.

When she'd first arrived at Lucia's mansion, house gossip had revealed that the full-of-himself asshole had suddenly gone MIA. And according to the housemaids crushing on the dude, for him to go completely off the grid had surprised everyone... especially Vinnie. They'd whispered about hearing the older man yelling at his guards to find the idiot.

Unable to share her knowledge with the others about the missing agent and his mishap, she simply pretended ignorance and encouraged the others to talk while she listened to any bits of chatter relating to the man.

At one point, she'd thought to ask Jie about Joseph Marcus but soon realized her doing that would be totally out of character. Really... slapping him away for touching and then cuddling close for information would send mixed signals to the already brain-challenged idiot.

So... biding her time, she kept her head down and waited for something to break. And here he was, standing in front of her in the flesh, the missing special agent. Once Vinnie closed the door, he dropped his nice-guy attitude and let it rip. His voice slightly below a roar, he yelled, "Where the fuck have you been, Joseph?"

Megan peeked through the gauzy shield and watched the younger man switch from pleasant to angry. "Hey, man. No disrespect, but your clowns kidnapped me and brought me here. Why?"

"Don't play stupid with me, Joseph. What the fuck happened to you? And what's with the scars on your face?"

“Christ, I was in a car accident, and since then I’ve been recuperating in the hospital, trying to remember who the hell I am. More important, who the hell are you?”

Megan saw Vinnie fall back against the desk, his body stiff with rage. “What? Explain. Now. And it better be the truth or so help me God, you’re a dead man.”

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Chuckling without much humor, Joseph slid onto a seat and put his elbows on his knees, hands open as if he held a prayer book. “Look, man, I’m slowly getting my memory back, but for weeks I had no idea of anything. Who I am? What my job was? Where I lived? Nothing. Zip. You can confirm that with the hospital.”

Vinnie shot forward, pointing his finger very close to the front of Joseph’s face. “I don’t believe it.”

Joseph slapped at the hand as if annoyed by having his space invaded and leaned back. “I don’t really give a fuck, man. I still don’t remember much. The cops say I work for them. They tell me I’m Joseph Marcus, Special Agent with the FBI, and it mean’s piss all to me.”

Megan stifled her worried cry, watching this man diss the murderer everyone else bowed down to.

Visibly, Vinnie held back his seething anger. He stared into the other man’s face for long moments, watchful, scrutinizing his target before adding, “It’s true. You are a special agent.”

“If you say so.” Joseph put his hand into his shirt pocket and pulled out a wallet that flipped open. “I also have a semi-destroyed badge to prove it. Yet I have no memory of being a cop. Look, I don’t know who you are or why you feel you have the right to force me here, but I don’t like it.”

“Che diavolo!” Reverting to insulting Joseph in his own language, Vinnie added, “Listen, coglione, you work for me. And I pay you top dollar to do so. That’s why

you're here. And I need you to continue with passing along the information you've been feeding me. In fact, there's a shipment of nitazenes, potent drugs better and cheaper than even fentanyl, arriving from China in the next few days. And it's mine." Pointing his finger at his own chest this time, he continued, "Sought-after merchandise I want in my warehouses. But intelligence says the FBI are on it too. You need to tell me when they plan to attack and where, so we can get to the product before they do."

Unable to stop herself, Megan leaned forward to better hear Marcus's answer. Suddenly, she saw him look her way, his mouth tightening, and his eyes narrowing when their glances connected. She shot back into hiding, holding her breath. Would he squeal on her?

Jesus!

Should she jump over the balustrade?

Christ, the gardener would see her, and she'd be in big doodoo.

Fuck, fuckity fuck!

Nerves pounding, and her mouth dry, she waited and realized he hadn't said anything about her being there. Instead, he did his best to get out of whatever job Vinnie intended forcing onto him.

"You want me to snitch on the FBI? Seriously, man?"

Vinnie's voice turned mean as hell. "That's what I pay you the big bucks for...man." Calming himself by inhaling a deep breath, Vinnie continued in a less arrogant tone. "Son, if I didn't need this information, you'd be dead, and I'd be happy to ensure your mangy mutt takes his last breath too."

Standing now, Joseph stopped in his tracks. “I have a mangy mutt! Excuse me?”

Vinnie eyed the man closer. “Joseph, last time I saw you, you mentioned you’d hit your beloved guard dog with your car and spent a fortune on getting the vet to do surgery. I’m thinking he’s healed by now. But if you so much as try anything other than what we’ve agreed on, I will personally see to it that both you and that animal die... painfully and slowly.”

Joseph’s next words showed his surprise. “Ahh... now the banged up Lexus in my garage makes sense. But... I’m telling you the truth. I’m lost in a cloud right now. Things are coming back little by little. Yet I don’t remember you at all. You or the mangy mutt you’re planning to kill.”

The crime boss stepped forward, threateningly. Megan got to see the man who made others quiver in their boots... well, except for Joseph who seemed immune to the man’s alarming presence. When he spoke, his voice chilling, he spoke with clarity as if to a child. “See... I - don’t - care. I need that information. There’re people waiting for the product who like to kill relatives of those who don’t deliver on their promises.”

“Right. Okay, calm down. I was heading to the Bureau before your goons stopped me, forced me into their van and brought me here.”

“The day’s still young. You go into work and get me the data you promised me. Info I’ve already paid you for.”

Joe scrunched his lips toward his right cheek, a movement that made his mouth go sideways, giving himself time before speaking. “Look, man, I don’t know what business I have with you, but trust me, I just fought for weeks to stay alive, so dying isn’t on my radar. I will deal with this, I promise.”

Megan heard Joseph's sincerity and knew Vinnie did too. "Good. Get me that report and things will go back to the way they were. You'll be raking in millions."

Megan heard the older man grunt, stomp to the bar, pour two drinks, then pass a glass to Joseph before clinking them together. "Okay. Twenty-four hours to get your shit together. Otherwise, there's no place you can hide. You will die. Simple. Right?"

Those words made Megan take a chance to lean out to catch the expression on Vinnie's guest's face. The shuttered glare spoke for itself. Then Joseph downed the liquor and headed for the door. "Guess I'd better get moving then."

Chapter Eight

Most days, Joe had no idea what he was doing. His housekeeper Maria Petrov seemed to sense he didn't feel comfortable with her around. So after taking him on a tour of the house, she kept to her little casita behind his big place. Staying in the background as much as possible while still performing her duties made life more comfortable for both of them, although he often caught her staring at him like a lab worker might inspect a specimen or a caged rat.

Wandering around the immense house, he decided to try opening the biometric safe and wasn't surprised when it refused to unlock. Between the swelling and scars still visible on his right side, he accepted that the device couldn't take a proper read. Promptly forgetting about it, he called the special number in his phone for the assistant bank manager, explained his accident and memory loss, and made an appointment for an hour later. Once there, the youngish, nicely dressed, clean shaven businessman recognized Joseph and his pin number and promised to help him deal with his money situation, setting up new passwords, and showing him which of his keys would get him into his safety deposit box.

Back home a while later, he returned to his desk where he'd earlier located a small,

locked drawer. After trying various keys from his key chain, it finally opened. Inside, he found a book of passwords which got him access to everything on his computer. Scrolling through the data showed that most of his bills were automatically paid from his various checking accounts. It also revealed a number of overseas accounts and multiple investments that shocked the shit out of him. Being this wealthy freaked him out. How the fuck could he have so much money and not feel rich?

Then there was his huge closet full of clothes that turned him off. The shoes fit and so did everything else he found arranged in the walk-in that most men might consider utopia. Not him. Instead, he searched through the large collection for older, faded jeans and shirts that he felt comfortable wearing.

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Becoming more and more depressed with each new discovery into his past, it seemed simpler to play along with everyone who seemed to know him best, rather than fighting against his mind-blowing fog of ignorance. Therefore, he didn't resist when two strange men accosted him when he stepped out to his driveway. He even went along as they frogmarched him toward a black van.

Riding quietly, he decided to play along with them and find out what in the Lord's name was going on. Right from the beginning, back in the hospital, he'd sensed a disgust from Agent Kramer which made him uneasy. In his head, he constantly questioned the reason for this contempt with no answers in sight.

The queasy, unsettled feeling made him believe he'd never been subject to such insult before, and it ate away at him. Whathad he done to deserve this amount of disdain? Instinct told him that something in a man's soul would admit if he were scum, right? The inability to look at oneself in the mirror would haunt him. Or acid would eat away at his stomach lining. And most certainly, contempt would claim one's sleep.

Yet he felt none of these things. Since he'd thrown away the medication the doctor had given him, he slept like a baby. The aches his body still experienced periodically didn't interfere with him getting around whatsoever. Looking at himself posed no problems other than his need to know the man who stared back. And his soul felt lost... not damned.

Although, promising a virtual stranger he'd break the law on his behalf didn't sit right with him either. Something inside said he didn't do such things, yet everything else indicated it had been his way of life before the accident.

“We were told to leave you where we found you.” The van pulled over and the two large specimens turned to look at Joe. “Get out.”

“Right. Nice riding with you fellows. Have a lovely day.”

“Yeah, fuck off.”

Back in his driveway, standing next to the Lexus with the bashed in fender he’d been planning to drive before getting hijacked, he watched the black vehicle drive away. Before he could decide what to do next, Agent Kramer stepped out from the pillar he’d been hiding behind. “Who were those guys?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“Try me.”

“No.” Joe stood his ground. “Look, I was sent a message that the FBI expects me to show up today. I was on my way there before getting interrupted. You wanna maybe give me a lift and show me where they expect me to be?”

“Sure.” Kramer walked over to his mini van and got behind the wheel. “You know those men work for a crime lord called Vinnie Farina, right?”

“Do they? Didn’t know that. What do you think the FBI bosses want to see me about?”

“Seriously, dude? You’re on their payroll. Would it be so strange to think they might want you to return to work?”

“Not ifsaiddude knew what the fucksaiddude did as an agent.”

Unexpectedly, Kramer chuckled. “You know what Joseph, you really aren’t the same as before, are you?”

“Hell if I know. What I do know is the name Joseph still seems stranger to me than when the nurses began to call me plain Joe.”

“Well Plain Joe, you’re about to meet the Assistant to the Special Agent in Charge, Sheila Comer. This lady has balls of brass and the personality of the Cocaine Bear. So you know, she doesn’t much like people. Chances are she’ll still believe you to be the same guy as you were before the accident, so be on your best behavior.”

“Way to put a guy at ease.”

“I try.”

Within the hour, they were sitting in the office of the ASAC, Sheila Comer who gave off so much frost, Joe felt his legs going numb. “You’re telling me that you don’t remember this place at all? Even after Kramer showed you where you worked, and you met the others you mostly dealt with?”

“Nope. Sorry.”

“Then what good are you to us here? Probably best to get you out of the field and find you a desk job... well, until we can arrest you.”

“Doesn’t sound appealing either.” Joe knew inside that he wasn’t cut out for a nine to five behind a computer or a life behind bars.

“No doubt. Wanna resign?”

Joe angled his lips over to the right, a habit he’d noticed he did often when needing

time to think. Then he shook his head. “Not really. Besides, I might have a reason for you to keep me working.”

“Go on.” Sheila’s look changed from a hard stare of dislike to one filled with sudden interest.

“I’m sure Kramer made a report about my drop-off friends from earlier. Men who work for Vinnie Farina.”

“Yes, he did.” The skinny woman glanced at Kramer before leaning back against her desk with her arms crossed.

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“By the way, isn’t there a law against having a person lurking around private property? And spying on a man’s guests?”

Kramer spoke up. “I do believe so. Wanna press charges?”

Joe grinned Kramer’s way. “I’ll let it slide this time.”

“Noted. You were saying about Farina.”

“Right. His goons forced me to go to his place, and the man threatened to kill me... oh, and some mangy dog I’m supposed to care about.”

Sheila’s gaze narrowed, her unblinking eyes demanding answers. “Now why would he threaten you?”

Playing along, Joe answered slowly. “Seems like he expects me to keep passing on illegal information he says he paid me to get for him.”

If she was shocked by his answer, he didn’t see it. The lady let nothing show. Rather, she came back at him in the same easy tone. “He did, did he?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“So what do you want to do about it?”

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to give it to him. The information I mean. Not fond of having a death sentence hanging over my head for either me or my phantom mutt.”

Sheila's mouth quivered slightly before she forced it into a frown again. "Uh huh. Understandable. And how do you figure we should handle this? Just pass over this information that would mean the rich asshole would walk away with millions of dollars and hundreds of pounds of one of the most highly addictive, killing kind of narcotic ever produced?"

"Well, when you put it that way." Joe's eyes crinkled. "I'm thinking it best I just give him what he wants... and then you stop him from getting it. Maybe arrest the prick and throw him and his goons in jail."

"Makes sense to me. Except, you've never been willing to be on our side before. What's made you change your mind?"

"See... that's just it. I have no idea. Seems like the right thing to do."

"Oh, it is. But can we trust you?"

"What do you mean?"

Kramer, who'd been sitting quietly all along, snorted loud enough for the others to turn his way.

Getting the nod from his boss, he sat forward before responding to Joe. "Say we let you find out what Vinnie wants to know. Then you pass it on to him. But double-cross us. The drugs go missing, and we're left with nothing. It's happened before. More than once."

Suddenly Joe understood. "Because of me."

"Right. We've been onto you since the last couple of shipments went missing, just waiting for the right time to arrest both you and Vinnie."

“The right time. Are you...? What?”

“Fine. So you played us and got away. Therefore, you can imagine why we’re kinda stunned that you might actually come clean and be willing to give us this... ahh, juicy confession.”

“Hey, wait a minute. How can I confess to anything I can’t remember? And I wouldn’t lie to you. What I’m saying is this. That scumbag thinks I’m a dirty cop. So you should use me to catch him, right? Isn’t that what’s important here?”

Joe saw Kramer’s astonished look pass to their boss who straightened, turned her back, and walked around the desk to take her seat. Then she slowly folded her hands on her desk in front of her, and Joe had no doubt that she’d taken this time to consider his words.

“You say hethinksyou’re a dirty cop, but Joseph, that’s exactly what you are.”

Stretching his neck sideways, the discomfort of her claims made him sick to his stomach. Joe felt everything inside become repulsed by her accusations. Knowing they wouldn’t be censuring him without proof, he suddenly didn’t know what to say. His mouth slid sideways... the dimpled grimace forming. Taking his time, he said the first thing that came to him. “I prefer to be called Joe.”

Stunned, Sheila passed a heated look to Kramer and then turned back to him. “Okay then, Joe. I’m going to admit I’m shocked that you’ve come to us with this. And you’re right in thinking we can use you just like you said. But it’s dangerous and could get you killed. If you can’t remember that you’re an FBI agent, how do I know you still possess the skills you attained at the academy, skills to keep you alive in the tricky situation this might turn into? You’ll be expected to be in close with Vinnie while our task force attacks.”

Joe nodded. “Makes sense. Look, after the accident, I worked at getting back into shape. Physically, I’m fine. As far as my shooting skills or whatever else you’re worried about, I can go to the firing range, and we’ll see if I can operate a handgun. Something in my brain says I can assemble and disassemble an M16 rifle but that’s only because I saw a program on TV about weapons and they looked familiar.”

Sheila nodded, her face showing no emotion whatsoever. “Sounds promising. Kramer will work with you. For now, the shipment that Vinnie is talking about has been delayed due to necessary repairs on the vessel because of bad weather. That’ll give us a week maybe longer. In that time, I want you to go back to his place and look around, gather any information that might help us figure out where he hides these shipments, and his distribution routes.”

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Kramer cut in. “Anything that could put this bastard away for good is preferable. But that means you have to get in close.”

“Yeah. Kinda figured that’s what you meant. Okay. I’ll give him a visit.”

“You’re serious about this.”

“Serious as a heart attack.” Joe looked from one surprised face to the other. “What? Why wouldn’t I be? This Vinnie dude is a badass, and I hate drugs. I’ll be in touch. But for now, I need to get back home and find out more about this dog I supposedly ran over.”

Chapter Nine

Megan became more and more frustrated as the days wore on. Princess Lucia was making life very dull for the agent who enjoyed constant action. Keeping herself occupied became a full-time job and to ward off boredom, spying on Vinnie kinda turned into an addiction.

So earlier, when she’d earned her FBI wages by placing the hidden microphone device, it felt good. Now safely back in her spacious suite of rooms, she thought about the dirty agent who’d made a sudden appearance. She’d seen pictures of the dude, and for some strange reason, even though the man looked the same, he came across as completely different from anything she’d expected.

When she’d read the files they’d assembled on the corrupt asshole, it didn’t feel like they were writing about the guy who’d pretty much just saved her life by keeping

quiet. In all actuality, she'd expected to see a full-of-himself criminal, a cheat and liar, and instead had witnessed a man who'd protected her and stood up to one of the most intimidating men in the country.

Even his appearance presented a problem. The shaggy-haired, jean-wearing stranger didn't strut or appear like the clothes model she'd scrutinized in the photos they'd taken of him carrying on with various criminals. In those hidden shots, the man looked to be the type who'd spend hours at a hair salon while flaunting elegant clothing from Tom Ford or Gucci.

Flummoxed, she decided to go into headquarters on her next day off. In the meantime, she headed for dinner, hoping that Lucia would be willing to take a break from her pouting.

Surprised to see Vinnie had decided to join them, she hoped Lucia wouldn't spoil the occasion by acting out. In fact, the girl could be a class A bitch when she'd a mind to. Often, she had a way of behaving that made Megan wish they'd smacked her diaper a few more times while she'd been throwing toddler tantrums. Surely, that would have curbed her tendency to believe the world turned just for her.

Megan understood that the fashion today meant not hurting a child's feelings, or to break their spirit. But to indulge their every childish whim or treat them like an adult was idiotic to say the least. Having grown up in a family that demanded respect, didn't tolerate fits or sulks of any kind, and treated her with the kindness she actually deserved, she had a hard time dealing with such unreasonableness delivered by a girl half her age.

She hoped that tonight might be different. That rather than long periods of silence, interspersed with unacceptable rudeness, she secretly crossed her fingers for peace at

the table. Because she didn't often get the chance to spend time with the boss, she wanted tonight to be an opportunity for her to get to know him better. Ask him questions. Get more insight into what made the man tick.

As soon as the three of them were seated, Megan understood that Lucia didn't care what Megan might like. She had her own agenda. Rather than greeting her grandfather nicely, she spat out a phrase that made Megan groan.

"What're you doing here? Slumming with us commoners?"

"Nipotina...granddaughter, don't be so angry. You are very important to me, and you know it. I would eat every meal here if I thought it mattered to you at all. Instead, you treat the occasion as if it angers you when you used to love—"

"Love?" Lucia's scream of fury interrupted his words. "Don't talk to me about love. If you loved me, you'd let me leave. I hate you." Pushing her chair away from the table, she threw her napkin down and swung at the dishes, sending them flying to smash on the floor.

Stomping from the room, she slammed against the woman rushing to clean up the mess and rather than apologizing, she pushed her too before disappearing from sight.

In shock, Megan watched the horror on the maid's face and felt sorry for her. Quickly rising to her feet, she began helping the woman clean up the mess all the while listening to Vinnie cursing in Italian.

Finally, he slammed his hand on the table, ordering her to leave the mess to the maid. "Stop that, Megan. Sit down. Let's eat. I will not allow that kind of behavior to intrude on our dinner. Once Lucia's calmed down, I will speak to her."

"And say what? That you'll buy her something to make it all better? She's angry,

hurt, feeling like everything in her world doesn't make sense anymore. Can you put it back together like it was?" Shocked at herself for speaking out, Megan couldn't back down from the truth.

Lost for words, Vinnie shook his head, finally admitting, "No, I can't." Then he picked up his knife and fork and began cutting into his Beef Wellington. After the silence became uncomfortable, he spoke. "So what's your suggestion?"

Megan sipped her wine, taking a few seconds before answering. "I don't know. She's too young to live on her own. And you say she can't go back to her old life. Maybe a private school where she can be away from what upsets her here."

"You mean me."

"Yes."

Vinnie's head dropped, making Megan think it might be shame causing his behavior. "I offered that to her when she first arrived, and she refused to talk about it. Said she wanted to stay with me. Guess that's all changed now that she understands my world more."

"Then maybe it's time to make the offer again. If you like, I can talk to her about it."

Vinnie smiled at her for the first time, showing real emotion. "I would be grateful. Thank you." His cell rang and after reading the name on the screen, he apologized. "I have to take this."

Megan pretended not to listen but couldn't help overhearing him tell Joseph that he was willing to meet with him in the morning. As soon as he finished his call, Vinnie stood. "Excuse me, Megan. Please let me know what progress you make with Lucia. I'm extremely concerned about the child."

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“Of course, sir. Should I come find you?”

Not really paying attention, Vinnie threw a reply over his shoulder before he left the room. “Of course.”

Yes! You’ve just given me permission to be in your part of the house.

Chapter Ten

Upon arriving back from FBI headquarters, Joe went through all his latest bank records looking for one thing, a charge from a vet’s office. Finding it, he read the name of the place and soon had the phone number.

“It’s Josph Marcus. I’m enquiring about a dog I brought in about a month ago.” Hearing from Vinnie that this dog was a beloved pet, he looked forward to meeting up with him again.

“Yes, Mr. Marcus. We’ve been expecting your call. Jack’s ribs are healed now, and he’s well enough to return home as soon as possible.”

“Thank you. I’ll pick him up shortly.”

“Please do.”

Whoa! That sounds ominous. Driving his banged-up Lexus sports car, he headed to the fancy facility where his animal had been kept, wondering all along if the dog would recognize him. Strangely, when he thought of dogs it made him smile, which

had him believing he loved these animals.

Though he had no recall of owning one, it made him happy to know he did. Once he arrived, the woman at the front desk did not repeat his greeting. Rather, she nodded sternly. Then in a harsh tone, she demanded he wait while she had his property fetched.

A short while later, a stocky, pale-faced vet appeared. “Hi there, Mr. Marcus. You must be here to pick up Jack. We’re all thrilled and relieved he’s better and leaving us.”

“Oh... why’s that?”

“You know him, in fact you warned us about him.” When the vet didn’t see any sort of understanding on Joe’s face he continued, “You told us he didn’t like anyone in his space, and you were correct. Seems to have a personality problem. Did you bring his muzzle?”

“Excuse me? A muzzle? I don’t understand.”

“Well, like you said yourself, it’s necessary because the dog’s a vicious killer. We’ve all had to be very careful when working with him. After the second time he tried to attack one of our workers, we’ve kept him sedated.”

Joe took a moment to acknowledge the words. Vicious killer? What the hell breed of dog was this Jack? In the meantime, the vet reached for a package holding a muzzle and held it up. “We’ll just add this to your bill.”

“Right. Fine. Do you want me to come and get him?”

“No, we have him separated. I’ll get him for you.”

While he waited, concentrating on the vet's words, he didn't pay attention when the door opened and a man entered, holding a leash attached to a huge, brown-colored Pitbull. Standing aside, Joe gave them room to approach the counter. Just then the vet returned with a large, black and tan colored German Shepherd wearing a muzzle, stumbling slightly, and looking dazed.

Before anyone knew what was about to happen, the Pitbull let out a ferocious growl and flew at the incoming dog with full intentions of attacking the animal. Without hesitation, Joe dove in between them, managing to grab the neck of the Pitbull and hold it away from Jack, taking the blow and getting slashed by the teeth meant to hurt the German Shepherd.

With blood pouring down his arm, he punched at the attacker's head, forcing it away within inches of the teeth digging into Jack's neck. By then the astonished dog owner managed to yank hard enough on the leash and haul the growling menace away.

"Bruno. Stand down. Oh my God, I'm so sorry. Bruno's never acted this way before."

The vet swore, his expression of fury meant to intimidate. Making a point, he shook Jack's lead. "This goddamn dog has been nothing but trouble since you brought him here."

Shocked at this reaction, Joe grabbed Jack's leash. "What the fuck? Are you blind, man? I'm the one bleeding here. That killer attacked Jack who you might notice can't defend himself because you insisted he wear a muzzle."

Sarcasm dripping, the furious vet shot back. "You don't know him like we do." Obviously trying to calm down, the middle-aged asshole bent over and put his hands on his thighs, taking deep breaths. "Don't come back here. Take that monster and leave."

Flummoxed at this behavior, Joe led Jack to the door, smirking when the Pitbull owner slunk away from their approach. Once outside, he got the dog into the front seat of the Lexus and reached to take off the muzzle.

When the low growl of warning sounded, he reconsidered... yet still followed through. While releasing the clasp, he looked into the eyes of an animal filled with hate, and that posed a question. What the hell did I do to this dog?

Upon returning home, he led Jack from the car into the house only to be met with an instantly hysterical Maria. "Mister Joseph, what are you doing with that monster? You never allow him inside. He stays in the enclosure next to the garage. You... you're afraid of him. Did he attack you? You're bleeding."

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“No. Another dog at the vet’s office did this. Never mind. I’m fine. What I want to know is this. Why do you say I’m afraid of my own dog? I don’t understand.”

Maria searched his features before replying. “When you brought him home last year, you told me that he’s only to be a guard dog. And when you let him free into the yard, he’s trained to attack anyone roaming the grounds.”

“Okay, let me get this straight. I bought him to be a guard dog. But why does he hate me.”

Maria looked away, obviously uncomfortable.

“Maria, I saw it in his eyes. He wants to eat me.”

Smiling slightly, Maria backed away pointedly, but she still answered. “That beast, he hates everyone. You train him that way. I think all the times you kick and tease him, makes him meaner and meaner. When I bring him his food, I have to slide it through the fence now. Otherwise he growls, threatening me. Like that.” She pointed to the animal who had suddenly stumbled to his feet, shook himself, and let out a low, guttural warning.

Unwilling to stick around, Maria rushed from the room. Joe heard the kitchen door close and had a feeling that Maria had fled the house, afraid for her life.

Not knowing what to do, reluctant to lock the animal away and yet not anxious to get mauled either, Joe led the dog inside. Jack instantly backed as far from him as possible and lowered his body against the wall. Dropping his leash and ignoring

him, Joe sat on the sofa and searched his phone for a number that had spiked his attention earlier.

“Officer Hardy speaking.”

“Hi. I’m Special Agent Joseph Marcus. Look, I have a dog here that I believe might have been with the K9 squad previously, and I’m thinking you might have been his handler.”

“Could be. What’s the dog’s name?”

“Jack.”

“Holy smokes. He’s alive. Yeah, right, he worked with me a few years ago. Unfortunately, he became stressed after one too many drug busts. That glorious animal was the best we had in the K9 squad. But after he was shot, he shied away from doing any sort of work. Instead, he moped around, refused to function normally, and became more stressed each time I tried to get him in and out of the van. Finally, I arranged an adoption for him, but I understand it didn’t work out, and they eventually sold him. You must be the man who bought him.”

“Looks that way. I’m thinking he’s got a new character flaw. I kinda get the feeling that he wants to eat me for lunch. Any advice on how to change his mind?”

Laughing, Officer Hardy said, “Just be patient. Treat him kindly, feed him his favorite steak once in a while, and for God’s sake, don’t piss him off.”

“Right. Easier said than done... but thanks.” Joe looked over at the animal laying in the doorway, watching and waiting.

“Agent, I’ve got your number here so I can text you a few links that will explain how

to deal with this behavior. Unfortunately, some dogs cannot be rehabilitated. Back in the day, Jack had a huge heart and was a true warrior. Don't know what's happened to him since."

"Weirdly, the vet just informed me he's a killer, so I'm slightly concerned."

Laughing, Office Hardy answered, his voice lighthearted. "Like I suggested, watch the videos. If you can't see any improvement after trying those methods, euthanasia might be your only answer."

Laying his phone on the table next to him, Joe looked over at the dog still crouched as far away from him as possible... his head now resting on his paws but his hostility still obvious.

"Looks like it's you and me, buddy. You want my leg for lunch or wanna share a steak?" Standing slowly, Joe made his way deeper into the kitchen, leaving the door open behind him. He reached into the fridge and brought out the big ribeye he'd seen there that morning.

Then he went to where the pans were hanging over the large island and selected the big cast iron one. After seasoning the meat, and turning on the gas flame, he soon had dinner sizzling. Permeating the room with pleasing odors he hoped Jack appreciated, he took his time to set out his utensils and two plates.

After letting the steak rest, Joe placed a good portion of the meat on his own plate, cut up another large piece into chunks, and slid them on a second one. Then he grabbed the salad already mixed from the fridge and filled a bowl. Finally, he put the dog's plate of food on the floor. Lowering himself along with his own dish, he called to the dog. "Jack, come."

When Jack stood but refused to step forward, Joe used his foot to push the dog's

portion closer to where the animal waited and said quietly, “Come eat Jack. And not me. The steak. It’s delicious, pal.”

Drawn by the command, the animal slowly inched closer until he stopped a few feet from the plate, his head hanging warily, eyes hooded, and a confused expression on his face.

Joe lifted a forkful to his mouth, always watching for any moves that might indicate the growling animal would attack. After some time and a few more urgings, the dog quieted, slunk on his belly toward the dish of sweet-smelling food, showing a wariness of everything yet daring to overcome his fear for his favorite meal.

Swiping a piece at a time and backing away with each bite, Jack revealed his unease. His gulping the food quickly made Joe believe that Jack wasn’t sure if the meat would get taken away... or he’d be punished for doing as ordered. This behavior showed Joe without a doubt that in the past, Jack had been horribly mistreated just as Maria had said.

Confused and sickened by the poor animal’s performance, he had to question the one thing that made no sense. By Jack’s behavior, Joe could have sworn that to this dog, he was a virtual stranger.

Chapter Eleven

“Lucia, stop it. I’m not your enemy. Neither is your grandfather. What he does for a living is his choice and none of your business.”

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Theatrically, Lucia threw the article she had in her hand at the wall, then flung herself across the bed, leaving the clothes she was stuffing into her backpack scattered on the floor.

The livid teen had created a hell of a mess in the time it had taken for Megan to finish her own food and follow the girl. Knowing it would make more sense to give her time to calm down, it soon became apparent that three-quarters of an hour hadn't been nearly enough to soothe her. Therefore, it didn't surprise her that Lucia still held a grudge and continued to act out.

Finally, Lucia turned to look at Megan... her face flushed and her eyes stormy. "I hate him."

"You didn't used to."

"Because I thought he loved me."

"He does."

"Then how can he be a-a crook and... a-a monster?"

"I don't know. But one thing I'm sure of, what he does has nothing to do with you. He wanted to keep you separate. And the opportunity is still there. Look kid, he's rich. Let him spend some of that money on you for a school where no one knows you, and where you get what you need... new friends and a great education."

"Right. Using dirty money he's taken from addicts and hookers. No thank you."

“Okay. That I understand. But from the portraits scattered around the house, I’d bet my last dollar your family has always had money. There’s too much proof of an ancestry of rich relations in this place.”

Thoughtful, Lucia sat up. “That’s true. He told me our family made scads of money years back in Italy bottling and selling wine, and that wealth set him up here. In fact, we still own a winery in Southern California that produces lots of different varieties.”

“There you go. Just set your mind to accepting that those funds are your true inheritance and break loose from him. Hell, if I’d have had your opportunities, I promise you this, I’d get myself one hell of a good education and never look back.”

“So what happened to you? Why didn’t you do it?”

“Single mom. Worked a lot. Ignored me and my brother when she was around. We pretty much brought ourselves up.”

“But at least you had a brother to share those times with.”

“Yeah... not so much. Dean was older than me. Got into a lot of trouble and ended up getting killed in a motorcycle accident. Didn’t view the world in the same way I did. Mom might not have been the best mother, but she taught me one thing. Life gives you what you deserve. Work hard, and you’ll get ahead. Till the day she died, she held her head high because she knew she’d done the best she could with a grade ten education. Never wanted that for me. Made sure I understood. Guess, in her own way, she loved me. And so does your grandfather.”

“You figure our money is my ticket out of this mess.”

“If your wealth is all that matters to you – now that you know what he does – then, yeah.”

Lucia swiveled to look at Megan. “Use the money and screw him, right?”

“Exactly. You don’t owe him anything. Make your own way. Educated women have many more opportunities in the world today. Start your own business or go wherever your dreams lead you.”

“Hey, maybe I can attain your glory and be a nanny or a bank clerk. Yippee!!”

Megan pulled her head out of her ass long enough to realize she was being played. The girl was good at it too. She chuckled and said, “Fine. You can’t say I didn’t try.”

“Did he promise you a raise if you could get me to behave... be a nice girl and listen to reason?”

Grimacing to show Lucia had it right, Megan admitted, “He’d have been pleased to have you safe. Don’t look at me like that. It’s true and you know it. Be as pissed as you want, but you can’t argue with the elephant in the room. You know what happened to your parents. He doesn’t want to take any chance of the same happening to you. He loves you. And you love him.”

“Loved him. No More. Now I just want to show him that he’s everything I detest.”

Understanding that she wasn’t going to get through to the girl that night, Megan stood. “Sleep on it, Lucia. Think about everything we talked about. And understand one thing, I’ll help you all I can.”

Lucia made a rude noise as she turned away, letting Megan know the discussion was over.

Chapter Twelve

Lucia split?Goddammit!

The next morning, Megan looked all over the property, and everywhere in the house for her charge, but found no trace of the teen. How the hell could she just disappear? Finally, she went to find Vinnie with the bad news.

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Concerned and not thinking, she knocked on his open office door and stepped in without waiting for a response. “Sir, have you seen Lucia?”

Two men rose, Vinnie and Agent Marcus. “Miss Whittall, come in. Explain what you mean. Where is Lucia?”

Megan ignored the younger man, giving Vinnie her attention. “I hoped she was with you. I’ve looked everywhere else for her. She’s nowhere to be found. You remember she was very upset last night, even after we talked but she gave me no indication she would bolt.”

Megan chose not to mention the backpack Lucia had been filling, deciding to cover for the girl until she knew for sure that she had left the estate.

Vinnie shouted for the guard. “Jie. Check with security and see if anyone saw my granddaughter leave the grounds.” Turning to Megan, he asked, “You say she settled down after our spat?”

“Not completely, but she was certainly calmer. Like we talked about, I suggested she choose a private school and get her education. At first she hated the idea, but I hoped it would sink in as another way to escape rather than just running away and hiding out somewhere dangerous.”

Joe suddenly spoke. “I can get out an alert through my FBI channels.”

Vinnie held up his hand. “Not yet. Let’s check everywhere on the grounds again before we bring in the law.”

Jie suddenly appeared, his face expressionless. “We scrolled through the security tapes from last night. She hitched on the back of one of the gardener’s trucks leaving the grounds after their shift. Don’t know where she jumped off.”

“Bring him to me.”

Megan interrupted. “Chances are, he didn’t even know she was there. I’ll go and see if I can find any trace by the corner where he’d have had to stop. She might have jumped off before he could spot her.”

Vinnie waved her away and again frantically grabbed the house phone before yelling after her, “Get her back, Megan. I mean it. She’s in danger out there alone.”

Megan nodded and left the room, her heart thudding from sensing the anxiety Lucia’s grandfather didn’t try to hide.

Meanwhile, Joe waited until Megan disappeared before interrupting Vinnie on the phone. Using common sense, he pointed out, “I can help Megan. With the ship being delayed for God knows how long our business is on hold, right?”

“Not by a long shot. We have more to discuss. But I can’t deal with that right now.”

“I understand. How about in the meantime we put Lucia first?”

Vinnie stood with the receiver still in his hand. After listening to Joe’s plea, he slowly nodded his agreement. “Yes, you’re right. And use those FBI connections. But keep your eye on that Megan girl... there’s something about her I can’t quite put my finger on. And Joseph, remember, I need Lucia back home as soon as possible, capiche?”

Joe's yeah rang in the air as he ran to catch up with Megan near the outside door. "Hey, wait up, Miss Whittall. I'd like to come with you. I'm thinking two pairs of eyes are better than one."

Agreeing with a quick nod, Megan hurried from the house and began to run toward the now open gate. She passed the security post and headed for the closest corner where virtually all the traffic would have to pass by. Joseph was right behind her, letting her have the lead. Appreciating his consideration, she slowed when she got to the stop sign where she figured Megan might have split from her transportation.

Both with heads lowered, they scoured the area for any traces of the girl. It was Joseph who picked up the wrapper from the gum Lucia often chewed. He held it out to Megan. "Not sure if this might be a sign she was here, but it's fresh."

Megan took the wrapper by the corner and nodded. "Lucia's favorite brand. She chews gum all the time. So, this means she's probably on the run again. Son of a bitch."

Joseph turned to her, "You sound upset. Scared you'll lose your job?"

Her serious blue eyes turned his way so fast it made the mass of dark curls swirl around her shoulders. "Fuck you. I care about the girl. She's young and hurting... a rebellious sixteen-year-old making stupid choices that can lead to a whole lot of trouble." The lack of humor gave her statement that much more impact, and he accepted her honesty.

Stepping back, his expression changed from sarcastic to thoughtful. "You care about her." This time it wasn't a question.

"Of course. Unlike some who don't give a shit about what they do or who they hurt."

Megan stomped away from the man and headed back to the house, her legs flying, trying to outrun the mantra in her head.

You were supposed to protect her. You dropped the ball.

Before she'd gone far, Joseph caught up to her and ran in front to stop her. "Wait. I can help. Do you have any idea of where she might have gone?"

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“Maybe. Look, all I know is this. Up to a short while ago, the kid lived on a ranch in Montana, totally oblivious to everything about her beloved Vinnie... except that he was her hero. It’s just this past few weeks she’s found out her grandfather is a crook, and that knowledge has rocked her world. Being devastated is making her reckless. And in that kind of a mood, she’s out to hurt him. Make him pay for shattering her illusions. The kid is a powder keg ready to blow.”

His gaze sharpened. “Jesus. You honestly believe she doesn’t care what happens to her?”

“See, you’re not as dumb as I figured. That’s exactly what I believe.”

Joe’s expression hardened, but his tone stayed calm. “I only talked to Lucia once for a short time on my first day back, and she didn’t give me the impression of being a silly girl unable to take care of herself. In fact, I got the opposite opinion. But from your attitude and Vinnie’s fear, I’m thinking maybe in that kind of a state, she could get herself in a load of trouble.”

“You think? Las Vegas sure as hell isn’t the kind of place you want an angry, spiteful young girl on a rampage looking for payback. There’s more places in this bloody city for a pretty minor like her to find trouble than I care to dwell on.”

Joe sensed their discussion had come to an end. “I’ll get my car, and we’ll head into town.” His tone didn’t give her room to argue, which she didn’t want to do anyway. Since one of her objectives was to find out more about him, she decided to use this time sensibly.

“Good. I’ll search out some addresses for teen shelters we can check out in case she went looking for a place to stay.”

“Good idea. And I’ll let Vinnie know what we’re up to.”

Once Joseph reported to Vinnie, they headed to town. Curious, Megan asked, “What did the old man say?”

“He was on the phone with some of his associates, passing out the word for them to get a search going.”

“No. I meant... what was his reaction to you and me teaming up? Didn’t you have some other business with him?”

“Sure. But we’d concluded it.” He continued to fib. “I was actually about to leave when you showed up.”

“Oh, good. I felt stupid breaking in on your conversation. Sorry.” Hoping he’d say more, she waited, except he didn’t take the bait.

He glanced over at her, surprise showing. “No problem. Like I said, we were finished.”

Megan took that to mean subject closed. So instead of dwelling on the issue, she began peering from side to side along the road, thinking the girl could have hid in the woods for the rest of the night and might be making her way to the city now. Once they got closer, she admitted to wishful thinking. Sharing her thoughts, she said, “If Lucia got a ride, no telling what kind of people picked her up.”

“Who wouldn’t be willing to pick up a young girl in this furnace? Most folks are decent and would do so to help her.”

“Right. Most are. It’s not those ones I’m worried about.”

Soon they arrived in town and spent the next few hours going from one shelter to another. In each place, they showed photos of Lucia that Megan had purposely taken her first day on the job. It happened to be the one and only time the two girls had gotten along and hung out together. Of course, the background in those images were part of her surveillance and had been forwarded to headquarters.

After heading for a drive-through and eating on the go, they pulled up to a ratty looking place known to be a grim hangout for street kids. As soon as they stepped out of the car, four large, leather-vested, bald-headed, tattooed, attitude-slinging gang members stepped in their path, blocking them from getting close to the door.

“Hey, we don’t allow no cops in here without a warrant. Get lost.” The negative tone matched the words and meant business.

Megan stepped forward before Joe could do so. With her hands held up to prove she didn’t intend there to be a problem, she used a consolatory, respectful tone. “No problem. We’re not here to make trouble. We’re just looking for this girl, Lucia. Have you seen her around?”

Having no intention of creating a scene, Megan hoped the deference she showed worked both ways. Sensing Joe stiffening, she didn’t anticipate him backing her up but felt less alone when he actually moved in behind her.

Sneering, the talker’s pock-marked face, gleeful from showing off his antisocial arrogance, pushed in her space. “Look, sister.” His mouth came in a mite too close, stopping just inches away from making her gag. Later, she could have sworn his garlicky breath melted her makeup. Still, she didn’t show fear. “We don’t – talk – to – cops. I said once to get lost. I won’t say it twice.”

Again, Megan showed respect but not quite so much this time. This time, she let her head drop as if her patience was wearing thin. Even her sighing voice held an edginess he couldn't miss. "Buddy, you don't want to piss me off. See... it's this way. You don't answer me, or you mess with us in any way, I'll arrange for a SWAT team to show up here and raid the place, That way, everyone loses. So... just do me the curtesy of answering my fucking question. Please."

One of the men who'd stayed in the background pushed dough-boy out of the way and stepped into his place. Not surprised to see bigmouth back away, she sensed leadership and authority instantly. This man's cold blue eyes didn't so much as flicker, his stare ground into her, drilling her with the knowledge that she faced a killer... one who didn't flinch from danger.

Not letting him see her suspicions, knowing that to show fear would be her downfall, she just said, "Hi there."

He ignored her and turned to Joe. "Who're you?"

"Special Agent Joe Marcus. The lady asked a question. Can you give her an answer or are we just wasting our time?"

A flicker of something passed in the gang leader's eyes that Megan thought might have been recognition, yet Joe's expression hadn't changed. After a few more tense-heavy seconds, the prick shoved his hand out to her, without letting his eyes leave Joe's. Once he held the photo, he finally let his glance drop to the picture. "She's not here. Don't know the kid. What's her name?"

Interrupting the man's play... his obvious attempt to instill fear, Megan spoke with authority, "Lucia Farina. Vinnie Farina's granddaughter. You see her, let me know." Megan slid out one of the business cards she'd used at the bank, and again the lowlife held out his hand without turning her way... his eyes never leaving Joe's.

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Joe held the stare without flinching or looking away. What made her take notice was the whole time during this byplay, Joe's body stayed loose, his attitude light, and his eyes clear.

Christ, even Megan had to admit to a certain amount of trepidation, but Joe appeared cool, calm, and collected. Once the question had been asked and answered, he'd moved aside for Megan to go in front so he could cover her back.

Jesus.

Legs slightly weak, she walked to the car and got inside, never once looking at the four mobsters whose dark glares drilled holes into both her and Joe.

"Well that was fun. You do this all the time?" Joe's joking voice held humor.

Shrugging, Megan answered without thinking. "It's the job."

"Excuse me? I thought you were a bodyguard?"

"I am. Like I said. It's the part of the job when a person guards folks like Lucia who's family runs with those types of criminals." Praying he'd accept her answer and not delve further, she breathed a sigh of relief when he just chuckled. "Could have fooled me. You sure did remind me of a cop... just like that scumbag called you."

"Yeah? Thanks." Deciding they needed to change the subject, she asked, "What now?"

“Hell if I know. Not sure if you heard when you were crouched behind the curtain the other day, but my memory is on the blitz. Honestly, Vegas is a puzzle to me. I don’t have any recollection of the place. Guess I’ll leave it to you to decide where to next.”

While Joe drove, following Megan’s directions, she thought out loud, sharing with Joe in the same way she’d do with a partner. “I’m pretty sure that Lucia didn’t look online for places to go or she would have come across one of the youth centers we’ve covered. I’ve called the hospitals and nearby clinics just to be safe. Since none of them have any helpful information, I’m betting she doesn’t want to be found.”

“I agree. So you know, I reached out to a friend at the FBI, agent Kramer. He just got back to me. They got nothing either.”

“Yeah, me too. I have a friend who works for the LVPD. I figured it was time to check in with the local authorities to be on the lookout for her.”

Heading out onto the highway, Joe spoke, his disappointment obvious. “Let’s return to Vinnie’s and find out if he’s got anything. See what he’s decided to do next.”

Chapter Thirteen

Earlier, Joe had lied to Megan Whittall. The conversation she’d interrupted between Vinnie and himself hadn’t been finished. In fact, he knew he had to return to Vinnie’s estate to continue discussing their plans. The ASAC and Kramer were depending on his intel. And since they already had a poor opinion of him, he didn’t want to give them more ammunition. For some reason, in his heart, he still had a hard time believing he could have done the things they had proof of.

In fact, it made him feel queasy inside whenever he thought of the crimes they’d revealed. How the fuck could a man break all the rules of decency and not feel it? Wouldn’t that person have to be filled with hate or at the very least a darkness of the

soul that would enable him to cheat others, steal, and break the law?

Yet, he had no way of knowing the truth other than to try and prove to everyone he'd changed. And to do so, he had to get the goods on Vinnie and his crew and help take them down. Because if he didn't find a way to redeem himself, a jail cell in his future looked promising.

He glanced over at Megan and wondered how long she'd be sticking around with no Lucia to protect? Her whole demeanor gave him a feeling of well-being which was pretty silly when one thought about it. After all, he was the bad guy in this picture. He snuck another glance her way and saw her on her cellphone, her profile stunning. A smooth complexion of peaches and cream with full lips of cherry red intrigued him. Her dark hair seemed off somehow, too stark for such a fragile complexion but the curls were appealing.

Jesus... what the hell was he doing? Mooning over stuff he had no business thinking of. Yet... for such a beauty, she seemed unaware of her looks which made him feel drawn to her in more ways than he cared to admit. Hell, maybe she'd stay and help them find Lucia. Losing the young girl didn't sit right with him no matter how one looked at it. And he'd swear she felt the same way.

Shaking off the retrospection, he accepted that the kid had to take priority right now. He'd seen her at a distance the first time he'd visited the estate. Didn't know who she was. She'd been out walking, and he'd caught up, slowed down, and offered her a ride back to the house. She'd stopped to refuse and right from the first her demeanor had been rude. After staring him down, she seemed to come to a decision. Probably that he meant her no harm, which of course he didn't, and so she'd backed off a little with the sassy bullshit.

“You a friend of my grandfather's?”

“Actually, I’m an FBI agent. Seems we’re working together on some things.”

“Right. You’re the dirty cop I heard them talking about. Vinnie’s got you in his back pocket, helping him break the law.”

Uncomfortable now, he shot back. “Where’d you hear that stuff?”

“They made a mistake when I first arrived, giving me the run of the house and then leaving doors open.”

“Aha. A sneak. You’re mother ever tell you that’s not a nice trait?”

“My mother’s dead, and what’s not nice is selling drugs, dealing in prostitution, and gun running to name just a few of the things they mentioned.”

Gun running? That was news to him. “You got me there.” Joe felt his face redden.

Seeming to know she had made him uncomfortable, the kid got nastier. “You’ve been MIA and – and pissing my grandfather off. Did you know that? He’s been looking everywhere for you.”

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Distressed for being called to task by a kid half his age, Joe found himself getting a bit testy. “Yeah? Well I’m here now. Want a ride or not?”

“No thanks. I’d rather melt in the heat and die of exposure.” She turned her back to him, leaving him feeling sad. To be truthful, the exchange had devastated him. He took offense to being called a crook. So what was up with that? Completely discombobulated, he drove on slowly to finally meet the man who had begun to haunt him.

Now, with Megan beside him, once again he had to return to that same room and pretend he knew what the fuck was expected of him. And... agree to filling the role.

Only this time, he had a bit of an upper hand. He’d seen Vinnie’s face when Megan had burst in on them about his missing granddaughter. The older man had been truly alarmed. Mixed in with worry had been an enormous love Vinnie had for this runaway. Seeing that small hint of the man’s humanity had registered with Joe.

Once he knew there was a point of pressure that could be used against Vinnie and his group of lawbreakers, he filed it away. One never knew when they could use that very information to save lives and bring the criminals to justice.

Christ, what the hell am I thinking? Fuck’s sake... I’m one of those bad guys.

Vinnie was on the phone when they approached his office, but he hung up as soon as he saw them. “Did you find her?”

Joe answered. “Nothing. We put in a call for backup with the local authorities and stopped at all the centers and a few of the drug houses where teens often end up. Unfortunately, no sign of Lucia anywhere.”

Vinnie sat down hard, his fancy leather chair creaking from his weight. “I’ve put out the word that my granddaughter is not to be harmed. But that only works for the people who know me or work for me. Others don’t give a rat’s ass about my orders. In fact, one of my associates has a brother living on the streets, and he says there’s a large group of women who are always on the lookout for runaways. They befriend them and coax the youngsters to come home with them. Then once they get their hooks into the kids, they have a way of indoctrinating them into one of their houses and selling them to the tourists who come to town looking for a good time.”

Suddenly, Vinnie slammed the desk with his fist, his face flaming with anger. “I’ll not have my Lucia become one of those - those nasty, street-walking hookers. I won’t have it.”

Megan, who’d held back, stepped forward. “Did they happen to tell you the name of any of these women stalking girls or where they hang out? Maybe I can work my way inside and get close to one of them who might know of Lucia.”

Vinnie spit out his reply. “You’re too old. They won’t be looking for someone like you.”

Not taking offense, Megan frowned as if she were thinking. Knowing that the wig she wore, plus the dowdy clothes made her look different than usual, she suggested, “I can wear a wig, dress like a kid, add some makeup, and pretend I’m hiding out. They might be fooled.”

Joe said nothing while the conversation happened. But now he pointed out, “We don’t even know for sure that’s where she is. But I do think Megan has a point.

Maybe we should be following Lucia's footsteps, and if Megan could carry it off, she could ask around, say as Lucia's sister so that it wouldn't seem strange for her to have questions. She could say they got separated. Show her picture, stuff like that."

Megan jumped on the idea. "Mr. Farina, I feel terrible about Lucia. She was my responsibility. I don't want to walk away from this without doing everything I can to bring her home."

Vinnie stared up at her, his hands forming a temple for his lips to rest on. Megan had a feeling he did this to control his temper and hoped it would work. "Fine. Go. You and Joseph work together and find her." He pointed at Joe. "Our business is on hold for now anyway. Right?"

Joe just nodded.

"I'll still expect you to get back to me with the info you promised but until then, Lucia is our top priority."

Chapter Fourteen

Megan waited for Joseph show up. Having promised to escort her to where she guessed she could make contact or be picked up by the same people who might have taken the girl, she'd decided to let him take lead.

Once back at her place, she removed the dark wig, thrilled to give up the constriction and then added pink streaks of color to the long, golden pigtail she fixed on the left side. Hedging, she ended up deciding not to give up her total disguise and kept the sapphire eye contacts to retain that slight concealment.

Next, she'd robbed her closet to find just the right outfit of snug, ragged jean shorts, an off the shoulder, drapery black t-shirt that had seen better days, and then wiped

away all her makeup, leaving her looking years younger. Adding just some lip gloss, the type she knew was Lucia's favorite, she slipped thick-soled flip-flops on her feet and stood in front of the mirror.

Not one to leave home without her face on, she had to admit that this lack of makeup gave her a more youthful image, taking her back a lot of years. Back to when life hadn't been all that wonderful. Back to when she'd first had her heart broken.

Stella, her mother had been good in many ways but her caring only happened when she was around. Which wasn't often enough for a girl who needed her. Not that Stella had been out on the town having a good time. No. The woman worked two jobs for as long as Megan could remember, and when she wasn't working, she'd be cleaning their shabby place and doing all the chores to keep a household thriving. From as far back as Megan could remember, Stella had given up on men. Not knowing all the facts, Megan often thought of her as the perfect martyr. One who not only didn't understand a teenage girl's needs, but a buzzkill who intended to ruin her life.

Around that time, her brother Dean suddenly died in a motorcycle accident, shocking the family. The night they'd buried his ashes, mother and daughter slumped on the couch together in tears. That's the day the normally sober Stella finished off the left-over half bottle of wine from the small celebration of life event they'd held for his friends and close neighbors. For a woman who never drank, stories began to emerge, and the truth came out.

In pain and with the lock loosened on her determination to keep her past to herself, Stella explained a lot of what Megan most needed to hear. Being dumped by her husband had the most to do with Stella's attitude and behavior. Drunkenly she told Megan about how she'd met Jason, Megan's father, and how she'd fallen madly in love.

On this sad night, it all came pouring out. About how her father's main pastime was

cheating on Stella and using her hard-earned money to do it with. The loser seldom held down a job more than a month or two at a time. The rest of his drinking, gambling, and whoring, he did on her dime and bitched about there not being enough of it.

Over the years, Megan had heard some things about Jason. But from the way Dean would talk about their dad, she knew he hated him, so she remained skeptical about his grumblings. When she'd ask him what he remembered most, he'd told her about the yelling and getting slapped when their mother wasn't around. "Dad was a good-for-nothing prick, Meggie. And he didn't like kids, especially his own."

Seeing her mother waiting for a response, she admitted her lack of memory. "Dean lived with him more than me. I don't remember him much."

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“Probably because shortly after your first birthday he took off.”

Knowing that wasn't the full story, she didn't admit that she knew her mother had run him off with the threat to call the cops after he stole money from her purse... their rent money. Dean had shared that story on one of the rare times when he was babysitting, her and he'd been talkative. Rather than ignoring his little sister like he usually did when forced to stay with her, he'd been in a good mood that day.

“Why'd you ever marry him, Mom?” Megan had wondered this many times.

“Look in the mirror, Meggie. You got your good looks from him. That red-headed man was a handsome devil with sexy ways for a country girl like me who never had any self-esteem.” Half-smashed, she leered toward Megan, holding up her glass crookedly and waving it in the air. “Truth is, I never could figure out what he saw in me. At the beginning, he treated me like a-a princess and life was pretty sweet.”

“Then what happened?” Megan held her breath and hoped her mother wouldn't shut down.

Instead, Stella reached out to touch her daughter's golden-red mane of hair, running her fingers through the thick waves. Expecting Megan to pull away like she usually did with affectionate displays, she smiled happily when the girl laid her face in her hand... a rare show of vulnerability. When Megan stayed in place, Stella smiled lovingly. “You're so beautiful, Meggie... both inside and out. After all the hard work life has handed me, I'm pleased for accomplishing one thing to be truly proud of.”

“Thanks, Mom. I'm sorry about Dad and what he put you through.”

“Know what, sweetie. I’m glad you don’t remember him. You weren’t much more than a baby when he took off for the last time. Guess having a son was acceptable, but me getting pregnant the second time and birthing a colicky daughter, well that seemed to be the last straw. One night he stole all my wages and that was it for me.”

She gulped back a sob and continued. “And no matter how hard I tried to stop it happening, Dean became more like him every day. I loved that boy more than I can ever say, but I could see him heading down that same dark path.”

Megan sat up, pulled away, and hurt anger erupted. “Is that why you loved Dean more than me? Took his side all the time?”

Stella glared toward her daughter. She banged her glass on the table and reached out to take Megan’s hands in hers. “Baby, no. You’re not like them, weak and selfish. You take after me and thank the good Lord you do. You’ve never been afraid to work for what you want. I know I’ve been tough on you over the years, but this is a hard life for us women. No one and nothing owes you a living. Anything you want, you have to achieve for yourself. In today’s world, you need a strong work-ethic, a strong back-bone, and you can’t let any man take advantage of that soft heart you try so hard to hide.”

Then she’d pulled Megan back into her arms, and they stayed that way until they finally fell asleep together. That night had always remained one of Megan’s favorite memories of time spent with the woman she’d be losing within the year.

Thankfully, her mother’s warning had stayed with her right up until she enrolled in Quantico. Hanging out in gangs of mostly girls, she hadn’t met a boy who made her want to give up her independence. It had been easy for her to turn down sexual advances and there were a number of them. Hanging out with scads of friends, safety in numbers, had been her mode of entertainment all through high school and even college.

It had taken a martial arts agility trainer in Quantico who'd finally been her downfall. His name had been Callum O'Neil, an Irish sweet talker who melted the hearts of all the girls, including hers. At first, she'd held out, kept her distance, worked his routines, acing most of them. But the more she'd push him away, the more determined he became to win her over.

He'd call on her more than anyone to be his role player in a number of fighting maneuvers and each time, he'd have his hands on her legitimately. At first, it had pissed her off but after getting teased by the others for being so lucky, she began to look forward to the attention and enjoy those times. The more he called on her, the more she got used to him in her space.

He'd hold her back when the others cleared out of the gym and ask her to either practice with him or help set up the gear for the next class. While they worked together, he'd tease her about everything from her grades to her attitude... calling her a hardass. As she softened to his playful ways, he finally asked her to meet him after classes for extra training for a special badge and she agreed. That's when she fell for his tactics of pleading brown-eyes and hands combing back her curls. His soft words pleased her as did his incredible body. "Megan, you're the best student I've ever worked with, a natural. I really want to spend extra time with you. What do you say?"

"I don't know. Why me?"

"I told you before. It's because you're special. A natural. Your beautiful body was built for these actions. Say you'll let me teach you."

As his voice put a spell over her, she nodded in agreement. "Okay. Should I come back here after class?"

"Yep. We'll start off by going over some of the more advanced blocking techniques. Then I'll take you to the officer's club for a drink so we can get to know each other."

And so began a relationship that started with a blast and fizzed out with her catching him using the same appeals on another of the pretty students. Unfortunately, when Megan finally succumbed, she fell hard and all the way.

Remembering her mother's cautioning, she learned her lesson fast and dumping him became easy. Getting drunk after her last meeting with the jerk – where she let him know what a slimy creep he was by using one the techniques he'd taught her – left her wallowing in a morose pity party. Finally, she admitted that she could be conned just like any other female. A sweet-talking Irishman won her heart, broke it, and moved on, leaving her devastated. And she deserved exactly what she got. After all, hadn't she been warned?

Chapter Fifteen

Joe knocked at Megan's door and didn't recognize the red-headed beauty who answered his summons. "Is Megan here?"

"Don't be an ass." The girl shoved her backpack into his chest before stepping forward to close her apartment door.

"Excuse me?" He stared into the narrowed blue eyes, and it dawned on him that the young teen in front of him was the same woman he'd hung out with earlier. Except now she looked to be sixteen and made his mouth water. Her eyes and red hair suited each other as did the outfit that took off twenty years.

"Sorry. In my defense, this is quite a change. I'd never have recognized you."

"Is that meant to be a compliment? Because if so, you need to brush up on your technique. Your style stinks."

"Well, that's okay then since I don't have a style. I say what I think. You look

different.”

“Hey Sir Galahad, back off.” The man dressed as a pilot, who laughingly broke into their conversation, approached with his travel bags. Heading for Megan’s apartment, he stopped to visit. “Our Meggie here doesn’t like men who flatter her. I’d suggest you treat her rough, but she’d break your face, so it’s best to just be honest.” After saying this, he bent over Megan and kissed her forehead, ruffled her hair, and then chuckled before adding, “Be home by curfew pumpkin or you’ll be grounded.”

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Joe looked from the man back to Megan and saw her trying to hide the grin the pilot's words had provoked. "Mikey, back off. This is business."

"Of course, my love. Looks a bit like monkey business to me but what do I know?" He dropped his grip on his suitcase and held his hand toward Joe. "I'm this pretty chimp's roommate, Micheal Freon. And who might you be?"

Smiling, Joe reached out gladly, enjoying the man's upbeat character. "Special Agent Marcus. Call me Joe. I'm working with Meggie for the next little while, trying to track down a missing teenager."

"Your name's Joseph." Megan spoke up cutting their visit short. "And don't you call me Meggie."

"Then stop calling me Joseph. I hate it."

Shocked at his vehemence, she still didn't give in. "It's your name."

"No. It's Joe." For some strange reason the difference in names meant a lot to Joe. He didn't want to be Joseph. Not to her.

"Stop being weird both of you. I need a drink." Mikey turned away to go into the apartment, leaving them alone. Since Joe didn't understand Megan's sudden bitchy manner, he dropped the topic and stood back to let her go in front of him to the car. "So... where is this place you're supposed to be hanging out... where you hope to get approached?"

Chapter Sixteen

Megan's snit lasted for as long as it took for them to settle into the car and then it faded. She needed Joe to drop her off on the corner near the bus station where she could go inside and then out the other door as if she'd just arrived. Reading reports from other agents, she knew kids had been approached this way before. Once there, she turned to him. "I'll hang around out front looking lost and wait to see what happens." She handed him a gadget. "Here's an earpiece."

He held it in his hands, turning it this way and that until she huffed and took it from him. "Quit fooling around. You know it's so you can hear me talking. I have one too." She pulled hers from her ear so he could see it. Then she replaced it and watched as he did the same. "Can you hear me okay?"

"Yeah. It's clear. So you know, I'm kinda nervous for you to be out there alone. I can see a lot of iffy characters nearby. You sure it's safe getting picked up?"

"I can take care of myself. Just be my backup in case I need you. Otherwise, stay away and let me do my job."

Megan reached for her grubby backpack and got out of the car. She passed through the building and once outside again, she pretended to be waiting for someone. Adding a wiggle to her walk, she strolled around the area for some time before heading over to a bench where a younger girl sat alone. She pulled the picture of Lucia from her pocket and held it out. "Excuse me. You ever see this girl? She's my stepsister. I'm looking for her."

The other girl's glassy-eyed stare didn't seem to focus at first but eventually she shook her head as if to clear it. She looked to be about eighteen or even older but not by much. Her blonde hair had been tortured into a bundle held together by a large clip on top of her head with strands hanging every which way. "No. Don't know her. You

must be new around here. Don't know you either."

"Got off the bus a couple hours ago. Lucia was supposed to meet me, but the little witch didn't show up. I came all this way on her say-so. And I'm pissed."

"Don't blame you. It's tough coming to a strange city alone. Do you have a place to stay?"

"No. Lucia promised she'd deal with all that. She has our money. Probably spent it on shit for her nose. Jesus."

"Don't worry. I know a place. You can come with me. Maybe your sister is there too."

"I ain't going anywhere with you. Hell, I don't even know you."

"It's okay. Look, I'm in the same situation as you are. I'm Francine... Franny. I came to this fucking city to make a fortune and ended up in the worst mess you can imagine. Now I'm working off my debt for Mrs. Lydia. She's a good person. She'll give you a place to sleep and food."

"Yeah. And what do I have to do for this generosity?"

"She's got a club with customers you have to be nice to... if you know what I mean?" When she saw the effect of her words on Megan she backed off. "Just waitressing and maybe a lap dance once in a while. She won't let anyone take advantage... well unless you're willing."

Considering that at first Franny appeared to be messed up... surprisingly, she seemed fine now. Also, it soon became clear to Megan that Franny's job as a recruiter had kept her on the bench in an area close to the bus terminal... exactly the type of person

Megan wanted to meet.

“You work for this Lydia person very long?”

“A few months now. Best to have someone looking out for you in this hellhole. Girls can get really fucked on their own. Trust me. I know.”

Considering her voice rang with truth, Megan had to believe her. Pretending to hedge, she asked, “Do you think Lucia might be there with Mrs. Lydia?”

“Could be. There’s a lot of young girls coming to the city alone and getting into trouble. I know for a fact we have a number of them at the club. Hey, you can check when we get there.” Franny stared into Megan’s face and appeared to be contemplating saying more.

With a sigh of regret, she actually voiced her thoughts. In a tone filled with candor, she spoke low, her anxiety showing. “Look, Megan, my best advice to you is to get your ass back in that bus depot and go on home... but you’re already shaking your head. Okay then, girlfriend, don’t say I didn’t warn you. Let’s go.”

Watchful for where Franny was taking her, Megan joined the girl in the taxi and after listening to Franny nattering BS the whole way, they arrived on Freemont street in twenty minutes. There, Franny led her to an older club that had seen better days. Making sure to point out the address as if she were a star-strucknewbie to the city, Megan hoped that Joe had picked up on her message and would be within calling distance should she need him.

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Soon, Franny had her in front of a stunning-looking, middle-aged woman of indeterminate age who greeted her like a friend and a sister all rolled up in a person Megan would never trust – no way, no how. Her youthful appearance both in her style of lowcut dress and loads of thickly applied makeup was belied by the wrinkles on her neck and hands.

Once Lydia went through her spiel of pretending to give a shit about Megan's situation, Megan showed the woman the picture of Lucia. "She's my stepsister and the bitch promised to meet me at the bus station. Except she never showed. Do you recognize her? She probably arrived in town yesterday."

"Nope. She never came here. And many of the young girls who come to Las Vegas need help. I get to meet a lot of them and she isn't one. But some of the others might have come across her while on the streets. You can ask around. In the meantime, we're short on girls and I need both of you to hang out with the customers. Franny knows the ropes and she can show you." Lydia turned to Franny. "Give her a pick-me-up to help her relax, then show her your room. She can bunk with you girls... oh, and get her a uniform."

"So soon?"

"Yeah. I need everyone out there. The Harley Davidson convention is in town, and we have to keep the boys happy. Don't argue, just do as you're told. Megan can serve drinks for tonight, ease her in." Lydia winked at Franny and left the girls alone.

"What does she mean – ease me in?"

“It’s nothing. Just that some of the girls get freaked out if the men get a bit touchy-feely, if you know what I mean. They don’t mean no harm, just want to be liked. So go easy and pretend to enjoy the attention. Trust me, you get a lot better tips that way.”

“Hey, Franny be straight with me. Is this a-a brothel?”

Laughing, Frannie said, “A what? If you mean a strip club? Yeah, we have pros who like doing that sort of thing. What did you expect? It’s a special kind of club for men. But there is a back area where things get a whole lot more intense. The girls who work there also walk away with a lot more money. You want to hang out there, just let Lydia know. But basically anything goes back there, and you need to know that going in.”

Megan shook her head. “Thanks for being honest. I’ll stick to the front for now.”

In a short time, Megan had changed into a costume she normally wouldn’t be caught dead in. The silky black skirt measured about two inches past her butt cheeks, the camisole-type glittery pink tank top didn’t cover much, and the G-string thong was ridiculous. Swallowing the bile that gathered when she saw what they expected her to wear; she dressed and joined Franny.

“Here. Drink this. It’ll loosen your... ahh, inhibitions.”

Grinning without feeling in the least bit lighthearted, Megan answered dryly, “I don’t want my inhibitions loosened, thank you very much.”

Franny grinned back at her tone, making Megan think she’d appreciated the sarcasm. “Fine. Have it your way. Just don’t blow your chance by getting all righteous. It’s not as bad as many of the other places I’ve been in.”

Franny led her into the dark, smelly bar and took a bottle of water from a stash in a small side fridge they had put separate from the others. “Want a bottle of water? These are for us girls.”

“Sure.” Megan accepted the opened bottle and drank. After that, things got really weird.

She followed along as Franny showed her how they filled the beer glasses, then left her working the taps. At first, although woozy and a bit light headed, she kept busy. Still searching for Lucia, she took a few minutes to pass around the photograph she’d stuck in her pocket, but no one had any knowledge of the girl.

Eventually, another girl came to take over her job. Then they passed her a tray loaded with glasses of beer and pointed her to a round table filled with leather-vested men ranging in every age and every size, both blacks and whites, bearded and clean-shaven, bald and hairy men all hanging together. When she approached, many of them whistled their delight in fresh blood. A tall, skinny dude covered in tattoos and a braided tangle of hair hanging from his chin reached out for her. “Here darling, let me take that. Uncle Jamie likes to help little dollies like you.”

Woozier than before, Megan grinned at his playful manner and joked back, “But I’m a real girl. Get it? Not Pinocchio... who’s a doll.” She giggled like she’d made the funniest comeback.

Jamie laughed along with the other six men watching, took her in his arms, and plastered a sloppy kiss on her lips.

Megan sensed something wrong, but her body had it’s own ideas. She felt relaxed, happy, and giggled at his playfulness. Franny grabbed her arm, saying, “Hey guys. She’s new. Give her some time to get the feel of the place. I need her to help with the food. You all wanted the hamburgers and fries, right?”

Though her kisser didn't seem to like the idea of losing his play toy, he took it in good spirit and nodded. "Bring my baby back to me. I'm thinking we need to have a session in the back rooms before too long. Whadaya think, honey?"

"Okay." Megan nodded happily and stumbled along with Franny. Once they got to the back, Franny led Megan into the kitchen area where trays of greasy food sat waiting to be delivered. "Megan, how many bottles of water did you drink?"

"Lots. They were good. I was thirsty. Why?"

Franny shook her head. "Never mind. Just stay away from that table. In fact, stay in the bar for a while. And quit drinking that water. Drink a coke or something."

Megan listened to Franny for a little while but soon forgot her warning and headed for their special water fridge. A few minutes later, her skinny, motorcycle-driving hero approached and got her attention. "Hey sweet cheeks, wanna come to the back with me for a little while? Make your lover happy?"

"S-Okay. Whish way?" Megan stumbled before taking his hand to be led from behind the bar. As soon as she came close, he draped his arms around her and led her away, supporting her body while kissing her neck and fondling her butt at the same time. Giggling, she almost fell before they made it to the curtained area where a long hallway with doors on each side came into view.

Once inside one of the dimly-lit rooms, Casanova brought her to the bed and pushed her down, following with his body covering hers. "Ah baby, you're as yummy as a sugar cookie. And I love my sweets." Just before he could do more than plaster his lips over hers, another person entered their room.

From the corner of her eye, Megan saw an arm rise and the handle of a gun strike her motorcycle man on the back of the head. Unable to move, she laid there entranced,

watching as the striker dragged his victim into the bathroom where he left him. Once alone, Megan curled into a tight ball, both hands massaging her genital area where all kinds of hungry energy had been loosened. As her body vibrated with an incredible sexual appetite, she called out. “Hey. Come here.”

Chapter Seventeen

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:50 pm

In seconds, Joe crouched down beside her, “Meggie? Are you okay?”

“Why did you hit him? He liked me.” Megan looked at Joe, her eyes unfocused, and her face flushed. Suddenly, she reached out for his neck and pulled him over her, aggressively winding her body around his. “Kiss me.”

Joe had a good idea what had gotten into Megan but mistook it for alcohol. “Hey Meggie, it’s me, and you’re drunk. Stop.” His arms pushed down on each side of her to force himself away.

Stretching up to pull him back, she focused on his face before adding, “Be nice to Meggie. Not drunk. Don’t drink. Only water. Need you.” In a begging tone, she pleaded, “Come ‘ere.” Forceful and wanting her way, she gave him little choice, especially since he didn’t want to hurt her by tussling.

In her agitation, the strap on her tank top broke, and the material hung loose, showing most of her breast. Seeing her ripe body close up, his needs jumped to attention. Stupidly, he closed his eyes. Lord have mercy!

That’s when her lips crushed his, asserting her wishes. Again, he tore his mouth from hers, trying to be the good guy in this weird situation he found himself in. Unfortunately, she used the opportunity to wrench his shirt front open, and began kissing his skin and pleading, “According to office gossip, you like women, Jos-seph. Lots of women. I’m a woman. So... don’t stop.” Again, Megan pushed her lips to his and bit at his mouth teasingly. “I really want this.”

She knows it’s me. That mattered. Before he could stop himself, Joe followed her

down and let himself get carried away. His brain might have no memories, but his body sure as hell did. And the betrayer let him know it had been a long time since it had felt this good. Hunger rushed throughout and every muscle and nerve ending woke up, ready to do as the lady asked.

Still, he knew it was wrong. He had to stop her from making a huge mistake. If she had been in her right mind, he'd be all in for letting it happen. In fact, he'd be delighted. But every still-working cell in his muddled head said there'd be hell to pay when she sobered up.

Again, forcing his lips away from hers and trying to get away from her strong legs clinging around his hips... her crotch rubbing into him until he could barely breathe, he tried making sense yet again. "Megan. Stop."

"Don't wanna."

"We can't do this. You're stoned on something, you're not yourself. You'll be sorry tomorrow, trust me baby. I want you so much, I can barely stand it, but we can't. Come on. Let me help you up." He tried prying her legs from around him, rolling to the side to get away, but she followed, pushing him over, now more in charge and determined to get her way.

While he'd tried explaining everything to make her see sense, she ignored him, working at his belt, undoing the buckle, and easing her hand inside his pants to hold him in her hot grasp.

"Goddammit, Meggie. Stop. Lord help me here... I don't think we should."

"Shut up. I'm burning, Joe. I need you." Wriggling against his hardness, she tried forcing his pants open even wider so she could angle him to where he could enter her body. Giving up when she couldn't get her way, she muttered, "You do it." Then she

pulled at her thong, ripping it off so she would be ready for his entry.

Afterward, he admitted it was her calling him Joe that made him lose reason. Like she knew who he was and still wanted him. Or maybe he weakened when he smelled the erotic wetness of her body and like a dog in heat, he lost all reason.

Working fast, he quickly lowered his jeans and entered the paradise waiting for him. Megan cried out with glee, calling his name over and over, pushing him toward the heaven he knew hovered above them both. Sweating, panting, ecstasy in sight, he took over, covering her body with his while he plunged into the most beautiful abyss of tight, hot, mind-blowing delight he'd ever experienced.

Both bodies stiffened as they orgasmed together, and her scream of happiness ignited the same feeling in him.

“Oh – my God. Joe. I love you. Again, please.”

Hearing those words woke him from his happy little dreamworld. What the hell did he just do?

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Chapter Eighteen

It took a lot of convincing, slow stroking, and soft kissing, but eventually Joe was able to calm Megan and trick her into falling asleep. As soon as she faded, he dressed her and carried her out through a back alley the same way he'd gotten inside.

Then he took her back to his house where Jack raced from around the side and met him at the front, growling his disapproval at seeing Joe with a body in his arms. “It’s okay, boy. I didn’t hurt her. Quit messing around.”

But Jack didn’t like the scenario and wouldn’t stop his aggression. Worried his barking might wake Megan and scare her, he swore and then commanded. “Goddammit, Jack. Back off.”

Not sure what he said that made the dog listen, he still took it as a win. Whatever magic he’d used, the noise stopped. Careful not to jiggle Megan too much, he forced his way past the threatening beast and carried her to the front door. There, he fiddled to push in the combination, went directly to the livingroom sofa, and gently lowered her. Leaving her, he went to a hall closet and found a blanket.

Watching all this happening from a distance, Jack suddenly stepped toward Megan and sniffed, then sat, his nose aimed toward her face. Joe could have sworn the dog was telling him something. Not knowing what to do, but understanding Jack waited

for his input, he approached carefully and tried saying, “Good boy, Jack.”

As if he’d heard the words he expected, the dog relaxed and laid down on the floor next to the body. When Joe approached with the warm throw to put over Megan, Jack suddenly shot to his feet and unmistakably delivered a warning. Stay back came out loud and clear.

“Hey, idiot. I just want to cover her.” When he forced the issue, Jack’s guarding of the passed-out woman turned violent. Basically, he let Joe know if he approached, it would be at his own risk.

Stunned and furious at the same time as being stubborn, Joe decided this would be the hill to fight on. He would cover that woman or get chewed to death trying. Ignoring the warning, he stomped right past the hound, ready for the coming attack.

When it happened, he wound the blanket he had ready over Jack’s face and neck and wrestled him to the ground. Wrapping his legs and arms around the creature, he used brute force to get his way. Seconds later, laying with his dog in his arms, the canine body rigid, the growls nonstop, he froze and waited. Finally the dog’s struggling slowed. During this whole procedure, Jack spoke softly. “Jack, it’s me boy. It’s Joe. I won’t hurt you. But Megan will get cold. I need to cover her, man. Stop fighting me, dude. I’d never hurt you. We’re buddies, right?”

As if the words were finally getting through to the animal, Jack quieted. Now they lay together, both exhausted. Joe felt like he’d just wrestled an elephant, and Jack seemed limp from his workout too. After a while, the quiet easing of the tension took over and Joe loosened his hold to see what Jack would do. During the whole time, he still whispered, praising Jack over and over. “Good boy, Jack. Good boy. You got it buddy, right? I would never hurt you. Never, dude. We’re friends. You okay now?”

By this time, he’d pretty much lowered the blanket enough that their faces were on

the floor angled toward each other with Joe's arm still under Jack's neck. "Hey. You good?"

Jack's rigid form slowly began to relax, his muscles no longer tense. His stare seemed calm but watchful, as if he wanted to believe the man was his friend but wasn't sure he should lower his guard. They stayed that way for some time, both observing the other, neither looking away. Joe swore later it was in that moment they formed a connection... a bond that involved his heart.

Eventually, he began to run his hand over Jack's side, gently but firmly. Thrilled to be petting the beast he hadn't been able to touch for days, he smiled. Remembering how the skitzy animal had begun to take food from him but only if he left it and walked away, he knew it would be different going forward.

A huge shift in their dynamics had happened, and it thrilled Joe. Somehow, deep inside, he just knew he loved animals, and all this nonsense about the horrible treatment of his own dog had never rung true. How could any man purposefully abuse an animal and still call himself a man? It was just fucking wrong.

Chapter Nineteen

Megan woke up on the couch with the warmth of a blanket making her feel cozy, and her body more relaxed than usual. But then she opened her eyes and unrelenting nausea hit hard. Where the fuck am I? Lifting her head took more strength than she could believe, but she needed to look around. Seeing the large, spacious, obviously expensive surroundings didn't help whatsoever.

The dog that approached, easing his way close to her couch, didn't ring any bells either. Moving hurt but she still reached out to pet the beast's head close to her and whispered, "Hey, pal. Where are we? And where's the truck that hit me?"

Whining, the German Shepherd's reply made her grin but even that movement caused trouble and didn't solve her immediate dilemma.

Then she saw the man standing in the doorway, leaning against the frame, watching her from a distance. Joseph... no. Joe. There was something strange about him, something she should remember, but it fried her brain cells when she tried to concentrate. Instead, she fell back against the pillow and said, "Ow."

He stepped closer and presented her with two pills and a glass of water from one hand and a steaming, delightful smelling cup of coffee from the other. "Hey. You're awake. How do you feel?"

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“You’re FBI, right? Did you arrest the asshole that thrashed me last night? God, I feel like I went ten rounds. What happened?”

“You don’t remember?”

Still holding onto the blanket, she slid her feet to the floor beside the dog and after taking the pills, she took her first sip of nectar and groaned with joy. Finally, she said, “It’s all fuzzy. Wait. I do remember going to the bus station and walking around. Then a girl and I, what’s her name... Franny, we went to a club. I showed Lucia’s picture to everyone there, but no one had seen her. After that it gets hazy.”

Joe sat on the chair opposite and waited. She could sense he wanted to talk but didn’t seem to know how to start. Something about his nervous behavior warned that it was probably big. Wracking her brain only tortured her, so she ignored everything except drinking the delicious coffee. When her bladder gave it’s final warning, she put the mug on the nearby table. Throwing aside the blanket, she went to stand only to notice the flimsy skirt and her lack of underwear. Screeching, she grabbed the blanket and covered herself again. “What the fuck am I wearing... or-or should I say not wearing and what happened to my - my clothes?”

Joe had been shocked to see his attack dog sitting next to his visitor, looking as if butter wouldn’t melt in his huge jaws. But when Megan’s explosion sounded, he watched Jack sprint for the door.

Coward!

Sure... run, leave me alone with this madwoman. The one who's about to kill me with her bare hands. Last steak you get from me.

About that time, Megan stopped yelling, stiffened, and demanded, "Where's the bathroom?"

Joe pointed to the hallway and added, "On the right. First door." Thank you Lord... reprieve. In her absence, his mind spun over all the different ways he could tell her about the previous night, but his brain refused to work.

She reappeared looking more unhappy than she had earlier. Snarled hair stood out every which way, and her mascara and blue eyeshadow covered more of her face than her eyes.

Woefully, she looked his way. "I was drugged, wasn't I?" Still draped in the blanket, she went back to the couch.

Man up, Joe. "Uh... yeah."

"I had sex."

Christ... what do I say? "How do you know that?"

Glaring his way, she yelled, "Dude, are you insane? I haven't been with a man in a long time. I mean a really, really long time. Of course, I know. Who?"

He felt his face grimace, his smile arcing to the right, nerves eating away his smarts. "Don't get mad."

"Excuse ME?" Her voice reached a higher octave. "Don't get mad? Are you insane?"

Hoping to give her an out, he tried using a calm voice. “Look...they gave you ecstasy. Not your fault. It must have had an intense effect on you.”

She replaced the coffee mug on the table and ran both hands through her hair, forcing the long strands behind her ears. Every motion clearly showing her distress. “Jesus. I can’t take drugs. I’ve always had strong reactions to any kind of mind altering medications.” Now her head dropped into her hands. Her voice horrified, she questioned. “I let some stranger have sex with me...? Oh my God. I can’t believe this.” Tears escaped through her fingers, and she looked beaten. Joe’s heart couldn’t handle her pain... or his guilt. “No. It wasn’t a stranger.” Before he could add more, she shot him a glare, and seeing his hangdog expression, she jumped to the right conclusion. Shouting her sudden realization, she said, “It was YOU?”

“You wouldn’t take no for an answer.” Now why did his voice have to sound so weak?

“Fuck me... you should have tried harder.”

“Believe me, I did. But you wouldn’t listen to reason. The drug made you... ahh... well, really horny. Trust me. I was there.”

Glaring her contempt, she shook her head as if trying to make sense of the picture. “You were there? How did you even get into the place?”

“Broke in from the back alley. Saw some tattooed dude getting ready to have fun with you and stopped that bullshit—”

“Only to take his place.” She interrupted him, her voice soaring. “Is that what you’re saying? You saved me from him, and then had your own fun?”

Getting annoyed now... being made to be the bad guy didn’t sit well with him at all.

In this mood, he spoke without thinking. “Trust me, lady. It was no fun.”

Silence like what happens in the middle of a category four hurricane took over the room. She stiffened. He slunk back against the chair. When he went to apologize and explain, she threw off her blanket and held up her hand. “Don’t. I couldn’t care less what you have to say. I need to get home.”

“But I—”

“Shut up. I don’t care.” Standing, she paced back and forth, making it possible for him to see more of her legs than she probably realized. “Get me a pair of pants, anything.”

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Peeling his eyes away and feeling like the biggest piece of shit because he knew he deserved her anger, he went to the kitchen to ask Maria if Megan could borrow a pair of her yoga pants. When he approached, the housekeeper shook her head at him, her gaze in one way condemning and the other weirdly sympathetic. Before leaving to do as he asked, she muttered words like idiot and a Russian favorite she'd used more and more often... *n'?*... a demeaning word that basically meant the same but had more oomph spoken in her accent. After hearing it more than once... aimed at how he let the dog run free in the house, he'd looked it up.

Fearing another argument he'd lose, Joe let her bring the clothes to Megan while he stayed in the kitchen. Not wanting to get into more of the brown stuff he was already up to his neck in and with no idea how to remove himself, he took the easy way out. Jesus, when he let his dick take control, and his brain have time off, see what happened?

Now he had to reopen the subject and explain that she had everything wrong. That his senses told him he'd never before experienced anything like that incredible night. Maybe it hadn't been exactly fun because of his remorse for taking advantage, but he'd do it again in a hot minute. Whether his memory had been erased or not, he absolutely knew it to be true.

After Maria had their breakfast spread on the table, she'd scurried out to her own little house, hiding no doubt. Therefore, he waited alone, his stomach in an uproar, and his hands clammy. By the time Megan joined him in the kitchen, he'd thought up at least a half dozen ways to approach the subject, not sure that any would work.

Ignoring him as if nothing happened, Megan sat at the table. Clearly not willing to

reopen their earlier conversation, she helped herself to a slice of toast, spread it with peanut butter, and poured another cup of coffee. Seconds later, in a voice stilted with pissiness, she opened the conversation. “I need to call an Uber so I can get home and pick up my car. Can I borrow your phone?”

“No.”

Shocked by his response, her head swiveled to look at him. “What’s with this ‘NO’ bullshit? I’ll walk if I have to, but we’re done.”

“Not gonna happen. I need to speak, and you need to listen.” He swallowed hard before starting. “We both know I have no memory of my past. And from what I’ve been told, I’m an asshole... one who should be in jail. Obviously, I don’t deserve a wonderful woman like you. That’s what I meant by saying what I did. So now you know.”

“Huh!” Stunned, Megan stared at him. Her expression went from... what the fuck? To eventually grinning at the stupidity of his remark. But all she did was nod like the crap made total sense. “Fine. Now will you drive me home, so I can get my things?”

“Yes. But so you know, my informant just messaged me. He thinks they might have a trace on Lucia.”

Chapter Twenty

In all her sixteen years, Lucia had never been this happy. The sensation of being free from her worries felt incredible. Every one of her senses registered extreme joy. Pleasures that made her feel safe and carefree seeped throughout every part of her body. She leaned her head on Raphael’s shoulder, sharing her sense of well-being. Acknowledging a sudden deep connection to him and her surroundings, she let herself float. While love drifted between them, her trust in him became absolute.

When he began to take off her clothes, she helped. When he had his way with her body, she laid back and allowed him to do as he wanted. She soared with him and wondered why she'd never had such an experience before. After all, it wasn't her first time having sex, but it was the most pleasurable. When they finished, he wrapped her in his arms and told her about all kinds of plans he had for their future.

"You're my girl now, Lucia. We belong together."

"I'm glad we found each other. I was scared being in this part of the city alone. You saved me. I trust you."

Raphael nodded. "Those other creeps wanted to steal from you. They would have raped you, taken your money, and left you in the alley. Not me. I'll take care of you. Since I left the army and my family kicked me out, I've been on my own. It's lonely."

Lucia looked into the face of the man who'd scared away the others earlier and then led her to this back room where he lived. At first, the squalor had bothered her, but he'd been kind. "Don't be worried, little bambino. I stay here because I can lock the door. But I'll be moving to a better apartment soon. Come, I have food." He'd heated a can of spaghetti, shared the meal, though he hardly ate, and then offered her one of the blue pills he himself had taken. At first, she'd refused, questioning what it was. "I've never taken any kind of drugs before. What is it?"

"Pyro. Es pretty, si? And makes you feel good, baby. Real good. Try. It won't hurt you."

Lucia looked into his dark brown eyes and saw only his eagerness to be her friend. And she needed as many friends as she could get. Everything she'd left behind had stunk to high heaven of corruption and sin.

Here, with him, she felt good. Now that they'd had sex, she felt even better. Grown

up, able to make her own decisions, she took the next pill he offered and once again lost herself in his arms, his searching lips, and the surrounding clouds of murky joy.

Chapter Twenty-one

Megan hated her dependence on Joe, having to accept his hospitality when she knew he was a loser, a no good abusing son of a bitchin' crook. And the thought that they'd had sex made her cringe. Well, until she let her mind uncover some of the fog from the night before and found only a strange eagerness for a replay of their physical encounter.

Girl... seriously?

Whatever magic he'd woven, however he'd behaved, her body craved more of the same. She'd never felt quite so loose, so physically hmm... satisfied as she did today.

In his shower, washing away the haze of last night's happenings, her body tightened in memory of having been taken. When she closed her eyes, flashes of the passion broke through, and whenever it did, her body's delight and her brain's eagerness to repeat the performance made her crazy.

All she wanted to do was to stay away from that lunatic, but she also wanted to find the kid, and he had a lead whereas she had nothing. Even the earlier phone call to the FBI, speaking to Sheila herself, brought no results. It was like Lucia had fallen off the face of the earth. And that made no sense. Las Vegas was a small town... well, the areas where one might figure on finding a runaway fell in that category.

Megan knew that all the airports, train station, and buses had been searched. Knowing the teen had cash, they'd even checked out rental cars and private planes on the off chance she might have chosen methods she'd used in the past with her grandfather. Nothing. All the while, they scoured cameras from every departing area where the kid

might have gone, they found zilch. She'd vanished and from everything they'd learned, she hadn't left the city.

Therefore, if Joe truly had a lead, she needed to stay with the man. Drying her tender body, spending longer on certain sensitive areas than usual, she again let her mind wander back to the night before. When she closed her eyes and drifted, all kinds of heated passion took shape until forced, she tightened her body, removed her hands, and pushed away the memories.

By the time she'd finished with her ritual and reappeared, Joe stopped pacing in her living room and turned to look her way, his eyes lighting up when he saw her.

“What?”

“Nothing.” He moved away.

She followed. “You looked funny.”

“You mean appreciative. You’re beautiful. But then you know that.”

“I do? I mean... yes. I do. Thanks. Now will you quit messing around and tell me what your snitch said.”

Joe’s quirky half smile caught her eyes, forcing her to turn. Goddamn that man was handsome. He’d dressed differently today, his outfit of black slacks clinging in all the right places topped with a black cashmere sweater highlighting his muscular frame, reminded her more of what he used to look like. Before, when she’d see him from a distance at the Bureau.

Whenever they’d been in headquarters at the same time, he’d stand out. Sure, she’d heard the appreciative comments from the other female agents and periodically found her gaze following him. But she’d never given much thought of having anything to do with Special Agent Joseph Marcus.

Considering him above her station in the FBI hierarchy, she’d ignored the strutting fool. And recently hearing the rumors about his dishonesty had only added to her discomfort whenever he’d been nearby.

Now, here he stood in all his glory, waiting there like a prince as if he had no shame in any of his deceptions. How could she forget about that part? They had proof the man was bad to his core. And she’d slept with the son of a bitch. And... wanted to

again. Jesus! “Quit watching me.” Her tone equalled her bad mood.

“You were staring at me.” Joe obviously tried to sound logical but came off as a petulant child instead. Seemingly to realize it, he turned away, his manner weirdly uncomfortable. “Okay, let’s go. Geoff said he’d meet us at our regular place.” He actually stomped toward the door.

She finished her coffee, slammed the mug down on purpose, and caught up with him. “First to my place so I can change, then we’ll meet your guy. Where at?”

“Hell if I know.”

“Give me a break. You don’t remember.”

“Shit, no. I’ll have to call him back and tell him somewhere else. You know the city. What’s a good place that someone like him would be okay with?”

Megan stopped walking toward the Lexus and stared at Joe. “You’re serious. You don’t remember.”

“Lady, that’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. Look, everything about my life seems foreign.” He pointed to the huge dog that followed them outside. “Take Jack for instance. Maria said I’d kick and beat the dog so badly that he wanted to eat me... like, hated my guts. But I know inside myself that I couldn’t hurt any animal... not that way. Funny thing, he seems to like me now. Look, he’s ready to jump in the car with us. Go figure, he wants to stay with me.”

“Hell, maybe it’s me he wants to stay with. Ever think of that?”

Joe made a funny sound between a groan and a grunt. “Okay. Granted. But what about my clothes. They aren’t me. It takes me forever to find something in the

goddamn closet I wanna wear and let me tell you, Joseph has the clothes. It's like a Brooks Brothers outlet in that place. Christ, he has more ties than any one man could ever wear and don't get me started on the shoe racks."

Megan laughed, couldn't help herself. "You finished?"

"Sorry. It's just so blasted confusing."

"I get that, but you have to know... it's like you're talking about someone else when actually, you're talking about yourself."

Joe's deep sigh of frustration resonated. "See, I know that you're right, but it all just seems so wrong." He chuckled a sigh and added, "Moving on... about that place."

An hour later they were behind a sleazy bar on Freemont Street with a youngish, stringy-haired skinny guy who's online gambling addiction yielded only to his need for cocaine. Thankfully, he'd recognized Joe and approached them. At first, he kept his head lowered, but when he finally looked up from under his hoody, his bloodshot eyes appeared pinpointed and weirdly out-of-focus. Their puffiness and the rest of his pale skinalong with his stick-like shape made him appear as if one of the walking dead tentatively approached.

"Hey man, you okay?" Joe reached out his hand to guide the poor guy in the right direction. "Let's go inside, and I'll get you a coffee."

Shocked at the invitation, Geoff pulled away and almost fell. Antsy, he muttered, "Who's this with you? We always meet alone, and you've never wanted to be seen with me before."

Self disgust caught Joe unexpectedly, making him sound harsher than he meant to. “Things change, bud. And Meggie’s my new assistant. We’ll be working together from now on. She’s cool.”

Joe ignored the glare Megan shot his way and continued to sweet talk Geoff into the bar where he led them to a booth and ordered them all coffees and a muffin for the undernourished man. “You got something for me.”

Geoff sat as far from Megan as he could, his fingers continually fiddling and scratching at each other, and his right leg in constant motion. Whining, his voice low, Geoff muttered, “I’m real sick, Joseph. You need to help me.”

“I will. After you help me first. Lucia Farina. What have you got?”

Geoff’s head swung this way and that as if he had to keep it in motion to get the words out of his mouth. “She’s pretty.”

“Okay. So you saw her.”

“Not really. But I know who did. There’s a-a new gang. Selling China junk in the hood. Deadly shit, man.” Once started, Geoff seemed wound up. “I heard them talkin’ about a cute chick they wanted bad, but she got away. Ran with some other dude. Betcha it’s her... that Lucy girl you all been lookin’ for.”

“Where did this happen?”

Geoff thought hard but shook his head. “Nah. I got nothing.”

“Who’re the boys in this new gang?”

“Don’t know that neither. Hey wait. One of them called another dude Bear.”

“Bear? You sure?”

“Yeah. Maybe cause he’s huge and walks like that. Cool, right?”

“If you say so. Anything else?”

“Nah.” Geoff slurped his coffee, dropped the mug onto the table and slipped the muffin into his dirty shirt pocket. Slyly, he held out his trembling hand. “I’ll keep watchin’.”

“You do that. Call again if you get anything else.” Joseph pulled out his money clip, peeled off two fifties, and handed them both to Geoff. “Get a meal and a bath man.

You stink. And clean your teeth.”

Shock worked magic on Geoff’s expression. Those same coated, stained teeth beamed when he saw the amount. Quick like a rattler’s forked tongue, he snatched the bills and pushed his way out of the booth. Doubling over, he basically ran out of the place, chortling his glee.

Stunned, Joe looked at Megan. “Is it me or was that strange?”

“You’re the one who’s strange. I need to know... how did you contact Geoff if you didn’t remember him?”

“I told you. He reached out to me. I have a burner phone that I’m guessing we used to keep our stuff private. I found it in my things and kept it close. Earlier, I saw a text and followed it up. That’s when I saw Geoff’s message that we should meet. That he had some news on the missing girl I’d want to hear... for the usual price.”

“Which is?”

“Fuck if I know.”

“You know what, you’re weird.”

“Yeah? Thanks.” Joe took it exactly the way she’d meant it... as an endearing insult.

Shaking her head sadly, she stared at him to see if he was serious or not. “Unbelievable.” She blurted her thoughts outloud. “You know you won’t be seeing him again for a long time, right? A hundred dollars? Are you crazy, man? He’ll be blasted for a week on that amount.”

“Too much?”

“Uh, yeah.” She held up her fingers and started, using them to make her point. “First of all, he’s terrified of you, even if you didn’t notice. Second, no doubt he expected a tenth of what you gave him. And third, his info was pathetic... and he knew it. But he needed to score.”

“I felt sorry for him. He’s an ex-marine.”

Megan stared at Joe. “How do you know that?”

“His tattoo – basic boot, military style. Lots of the guys had that done.”

“And you know this... how?”

“Hell if I know. I just do. And actually, the kid did give us a good tip. In fact, a couple. If the girl he saw was Lucia, we know she’s around, hanging with some guy she met up with. And we also know a fellow called Bear saw her. Guess we have to find him and ask where they saw her last and if they know the dude she ran away with?”

This time Megan did laugh. “And you figure we’ll be able to just stop the next person on the street, and they’ll be happy to share what they know? Jesus, Joe. The folks down here don’t talk to people like us.” When she saw his confusion, she added, “Cops.”

“Geoff just did.”

“Because you paid him. And who knows if he told the truth.”

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“He told the truth. He was too scared not to. And I’ll pay more if necessary.”

Again, shaking her head, she groaned. “You’re a baby. You start flashing that bankroll around here, and you’ll end up with a shiv in your back and your money gone.”

“So what do you suggest?”

“Plain old common sense. “We’ll stop as many people as we can, pretending to be worried relatives. Show Lucia’s picture, tell them who’s granddaughter she is, and hint at a reward. If we give them a place where we’ll be at a certain time, we go there and wait for them to come to us.”

“You figure it’ll work?”

“Got nothing else to do, right?”

The rest of the morning and after a quick lunch at a casino they stopped a lot of the street people, being careful not to hook onto tourists. Many ignored them at first and a few walked away. But others heard the Farina name and that stopped them in their tracks. No one who survived in the hood was ignorant of one of the biggest suppliers who kept them provided with their elixir. Many crafty souls were bloody interested. Just didn’t want anyone else to see that they were.

At the designated hour, Joe and Megan waited on the street where they’d said they’d be. This time, Joe had Jack on a lead beside him. The dog appeared nervous and Megan mentioned it to Joe. “I don’t think it was a good idea to bring the dog. He’ll

deter anyone from approaching.”

“You figure? I kind of thought that these folks liked animals. You see a lot of them on the street with pets.”

“Sure, for protection. But Jack isn’t like the ones you see around here. He’s a monster, and he’s intimidating as hell. I’ll put him back in the car. You talk to the guy who’s been hovering around across the street, looking this way for the last fifteen minutes. I think it’s Jack who’s stopping him from approaching.”

Joe swung to look where she motioned and though he heard her groan, he didn’t know why she made the noise until her words ‘don’t look you idiot’ registered but too late. Ignoring her irritation, he spoke with authority.

“Good idea. Take him.” He handed over Jack’s leash. “But stay with him at the car. It’s dark. You shouldn’t be out here alone now. It’s dangerous.”

“Lord above! Is the moron even aware I usually carry a gun and know how to use it?” Megan’s grouchy words floated back to him as she swiveled away.

Chapter Twenty-two

Rather than getting the exit she planned, Megan kept pulling at the leash, giving Jack an order to come which was ignored. Trying again, she yanked a bit harder, petted the dog’s head which reached her waist, and turned to go. Still, he wouldn’t leave with her.

Joe watched, enjoying seeing the dog bring her down off her high horse. Then he issued a command, secretly hoping that the dog’s training would kick in. “Go with

Megan, Jack.”

Instantly, the dog began loping along beside her, showing that he followed orders, but from only one person. Instantly filling up with pride and affection for this incredible animal’s loyalty, he tried not to let his face beam his inner pleasure.

When he heard the tsking sound from Megan, and saw her head shaking, he figured he hadn’t pulled it off. But she did eventually smile and that more than made up for her earlier trash-talking. Considering he was a trained FBI agent, he sure as hell didn’t act like one. Sensing someone looming, he tried acting cool, waiting to be approached rather than starting the exchange.

A black man in his fifties – maybe forties, poorly dressed but not in the same category as Geoff, inched closer. He didn’t look at Joe nor appear as if he wanted anything to do with him. Joe sensed the man didn’t want to be seen carrying on a conversation yet he had information to sell.

Waiting, pretending to be checking out something on his phone, Joe stayed alert. Finally, he heard the man speak from a couple feet away. “You looking for Lucia Farina?”

“I am. Do you know where I can find her?”

“Maybe. Depends. How much you payin’ to find out?”

Remembering his earlier screwup, Joe muttered, “Depends on what you got? Give me an address. That’s worth more than if you just saw her on the street. Know what I mean? I need to find the kid. She’s only sixteen, and Vinnie is frantic. He wants her back asap.”

“I know Vinnie. He’s a prick. Can’t say I feel bad for him, but the girl’s a different

story. She's a baby, and they eat babies alive around here."

Joe listened to the man's speech and heard an intelligence that surprised him. "You sound different from the usual folks in this area."

"I'm a father myself. Lost my baby girl to drugs many years ago. Used to be on the roller coaster back then myself, but I found the Lord. Now I hate the filthy shit, and I'm here to help these kids whenever I can. Started a church so's they have a place to come. Get them to safehouses, try talking to them about Jesus. How they souls can be saved if they believe in the power of the Almighty."

Not sure what to do about this stranger, Joe spoke truth to decency. "Good for you, man. These poor lost ones need all the help they can get. So you know, the reason Lucia ran away from her grandfather was because she'd just found out what he does, and it broke her heart. Now she's alone in this freaking desert storm, and she needs to be saved. Please, give her a break."

"She was here. The boys who run with Bear chased her, but another dude stepped in, and they ran away together."

"His name?"

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“Don’t know. He changes it a lot. The prick lives nearby in a small room.”

“Address?”

“Don’t know that either. Just know he keeps a place. One of my girls used be his roomie. In those days, she called him Juan. The bastard’s not a street dealer but he is a user. Dude picks up the strays and cons them into believing he’s in love. Gets them to solicit for him, steals their earnings, and keeps them needy for the product themselves. Sum-ma-bitch uses them up and eventually throws them away like trash. Then he moves on, changes his name and address so they can’t find him and does it all over again. Guess this time he hooked up with the Farina girl.”

“I’m taking it that he’s an addict himself.”

“Oh yeah. But that Mexican freak is one of those who can maintain control. Know what I mean? Uses different product so his sneaky animal brain hasn’t fried yet. Them bastards be the most dangerous kind around here.”

Joe took out his clip and peeled a couple of hundreds off, rolled it into a small portion and wedged it into a wall crack behind him. He then dropped an FBI card accidentally on purpose and before strolling away, he said, “Thanks, man. Call me if you hear anything else. And... I’d like to know the name of your church group. Came into a bit of extra cash lately and need somewhere to make a donation.”

Listening to the sputtered thanks following him, he lifted a hand as if brushing away a bug but meaning it as a motion of ‘noproblem’ and left the corner to head back to his car. He walked the two blocks, his head in constant motion, looking through the night

wanderers for a dark-headed girl called Lucia.

By the time he got close enough to the vehicle to hear the growled warnings, he started to run. Jack had a giant of a man pinned against the wall, his hands clutching his testicles, while blood streamed down his sweaty face. What hit Joe hardest was seeing Megan laying in a heap on the ground nearby.

Chapter Twenty-three

Walking back to the car, Megan sensed being followed. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw three youngish males, two coming up on each side of her while the third, a big dude, passed her by on the other side of the street. This area lacking the normal Vegas lights didn't give one a feeling of safety, and she found herself glad to have Jack by her side.

Jesus, where's my side-arm when I need it?

Pulling the pepper spray from her purse pocket, she palmed it close and continued ignoring those around her. All was fine until the two behind her began to close in. That's when she heard Jack issue his first warning. If she'd only had to deal with the two losers, between her and Jack, they'd have had no problem. It was the big dude who suddenly began to cross the street that overloaded the playing field.

Releasing Jack's lead, she was ready when the couple sprinted forward, getting too close for comfort. Rushing her in their attack, one had a long stick he began wielding at the dog while the skinny asshole focused on her. Just when she sensed him reaching out his dirty hands, she swung around and sprayed him in the face, stopping him from doing the damage he'd intended. Unfortunately, she didn't expect his lunge at her to continue, bringing her down so hard that she dropped the canister and it rolled away.

Pushing the screamer off of her while shuffling to get the spray back in her reaching

fingers, a foot came into view that kicked the fucking thing out of reach. Big hands descended to her shoulders and hauled her to her feet as if she were nothing heavier than a bag of groceries. Taking aim at the stomach of the cussing man who'd witnessed one of his gang clutching his face, she shoved her fist as hard as she could into his belly only to hit concrete. Christ that hurt. The dude was huge with multi layers of fat that blocked her from making any damage.

“Hey, stop that.” His voice came out sounding perturbed and whiny.

He held her back so she couldn't do much damage. Her mind frantically searched for a way out of her dilemma while struggling and wriggling to break his hold. Finally, he swung her around like a puppet on a string, shaking her and grunting words like “Cut it out, bitch. Be a good girl, and Bear'll treat you right. Don't wanna hurt you. Come on now, stop messing around. Behave.”

Fed up with her fighting him, he threw her against the wall behind her, holding her upright with his arm in her throat. This seemed to provide him pleasure, knowing she was in his power. Panicky now, she tried to call out for Jack. From the corner of her eye, she saw the man using the stick to fight off the dog lose it. Jack had grabbed it between his teeth and ripped it from the man's hands. That's when the idiot took off running, screaming as the dog took a chunk out of his backside, chasing him a good distance.

Seeing as she was on her own with dumpy, she tried bringing her knee up, hoping to make contact where it would hurt the most, but the asshole expected that move and shuffled aside, his white teeth gleaming in the dark of the night. “Oh, no you don't, princess. Bear's already had that treatment. I don't play that game no more.”

Still pinning her in place, he pushed his face in close to hers and stared into her eyes. “You're pretty. You and me, we're gonna party for sure.” Before he could even expect her next move, she wrenched her face close to his, opened her mouth, and bit

his bulbous nose, clenching it with her teeth like a rabid dog with a ham bone. He screeched his pain and tried to pull away, but she wouldn't release her hold. Well, not until he used his fist and awkwardly hit her in the stomach, which made her catch her breath, thereby releasing her jaw.

Just as she hit the ground, she saw a flash of fur fly past her through the air, the raging growl making her smile before the blackness descended.

Breathing hard, running full out, Joe's heart flipped over and ended up in his throat. Seeing Megan lying so motionless, his first thought was that she'd been killed. But then his brain kicked in, and he rushed to her, ending up on his knees next to her body where his shaking fingers checked for a pulse. Thankfully it was strong. Stay cool man, she's not dead.

Actually, being thankful didn't begin to cover his emotions. The joy of finding her alive overcame him, which meant that his legs didn't work for long seconds. Weakened and choking back unexpected heart-wrenching fear kept him kneeling beside her. He searched her body for signs of wounds but only noticed blood near her mouth and cheeks. When she groaned, he leaned closer to hear over the loud sounds of the turmoil in his head.

"You're okay, baby." Before he could help himself, he scooped her close and rocked back and forth. "You're not dead. Thank God."

"I'm fine." She began to struggle. "Let me go. Help. Jack."

The dog's noisy fury mixed in with the screaming entreaties of a man fearing for his testicles finally sunk in. Joe whipped around to see his monstrous pet intimidating a fat man, basically holding the guy in place against the wall. Obviously, the dude was

in fear of being ripped apart if he moved.

Helping Megan stand, he supported her weight until she pushed away from him. Both moved closer to the sniveling fool with a mess of blood and tears on his face, rivers of sweat mixing in. With the whites of his eyes standing out, fear shining like a beacon for anyone to see, he begged for help. Joe finally called to the menace. “Stop, Jack. Get off him.”

The first few words made no impact, but the word ‘off’ seemed to be the magic command for Jack to step back, his snarling still in full throttle but his threatening force now under control.

Bending, weak and shaken from his close call with Jack’s jaws, Bear looked traumatized. And in this condition, his size appeared not nearly as intimidating as earlier. With his hand cradling his bloody nose, he glared at Megan, shooting daggers of blame her way for the damage he felt. She moved in close before Joe could stop her.

Wiping her mouth and cheeks, she looked first at the blood on her hand and then at the prisoner, her understandable gesture clear to them both. Then she turned to Jack and back to Bear, again letting him see a meaning in her behavior. By the time she spoke, she had his full attention. “You want for us to keep the dog under control, then we’ve got a few questions that need answers. If you help us, I promise we’ll walk away. What do you say?”

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Warily, Bear's eyes first shifted from Jack to Joe before he finally nodded at Megan. "Whatcha wanna know?"

"We're looking for a girl called Lucia Farina. You know her?"

"Hell, no. How I know a girl like that?"

"She's here in the hood, runaway from her grandfather Vinnie. Bet you know him?"

Bear stiffened. "Maybe. Like I heard of the prick. Don't know him personally." The last part of his answer came out filled with sarcasm not unexpected. Bear was gaining back his usual spirit. Well, until Jack inched closer, his low-throated growls increasing.

Megan pulled out the picture of Lucia and held it in front of Bear. "This is a recent picture."

Suddenly, Bear's manner changed. Shifty as hell, he first stared at the worst threat and then at Joe before swinging his scowl back to Megan. "Okay. Yeah. I seen her a few days ago. Ran away from me and the boys. Didn't like us neither."

Joe asked, "Who'd she run with?"

"Hell if I know." Joe stepped forward, with Jack next to him. Bear's answer changed. "A dude who hangs around sometime. Changes his name whenever he gets tired of living with one handle. Used to call himself Casper – you know – like the ghost. Dun know what he calls hisself now. We leave him be."

“Why’s that?”

“Cause... he’s ex military. Fought for our country. We respect that around here. Lots of us lost family in the forces.”

“You figure he’s nearby?”

“Maybe. Dude comes and goes. Gets himself a woman and disappears for a while. Guess him and Vinnie’s girl are an item now.”

Megan took back control. “Bear, it would really help if you could give us any identifying details. Is he white, black, Latino, tattoos, weight, height – you know. Things that can help us find him. We don’t give a rat’s ass about him, but Vinnie wants his Lucia back. And anyone who stops that from happening or steps in our way of finding the girl... well Vinnie’s not gonna be happy with that person. Bad things could happen to them. If you get my meaning.”

Bear nodded and his voice sounded hesitant but truthful. “Dude’s Mexican. Speaks with a Spanish accent and has a tattoo on his arm. Dat’s it... all I know. Can I go?”

“Go. But if I hear you been messing with any more young girls, we’ll be back... and we’ll bring Jack with us. He’s got your scent now.”

Bear’s color paled. Sliding along the wall, forcing himself as far away from the menacing canine as possible, he finally broke into a run and left the scene.

On the way home, Joe suffered through moments of introspection. Somehow he had a hard time believing he’d been completely unaware of the dangerous situation around him. Jack holding Bear against the wall, waiting for Joe to release him. And the terrified big guy begging for help. Yet none of that mattered.

All because Megan's condition had taken central stage. The emerging memory unwound slowly like in a dream... or a nightmare. Seeing her sprawled on the ground had sparked a small explosion of his past, and the scene of injured bodies he remembered... had horrified him.

Chapter Twenty-four

Joe automatically drove toward the hospital, taking it for granted that Megan should be checked out. For the third time, he forced her from her doze. "Hey, Meggie, wake up. You all right?"

"What. Yeah. Of course. Just resting." She noticed the direction they were headed. "Where are you going?"

"Hospital."

"What? Absolutely not. I want to go to my place."

"No can do. You were unconscious when I found you. I know enough about concussions that you can't be left alone."

"Don't be silly. I'm fine."

"Sure you are. Is your roommate home tonight?"

"Mikey? No, he had an overseas flight yesterday which means he'll be gone until tomorrow at the soonest. The airlines are so understaffed, they're flipping pilots to different routes now, trying to keep the flights going."

"Then it's either the hospital or home with me. Your choice."

“Boiling water or the burning stove. Gee thanks. Girl’s got a lot of choice. How about you let me decide? Take me home. I’m fine now.”

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“Sure you are. The fact that I have to stop you from napping... nope, not a worry. Or the bruise I see blooming on the side of your head... no biggie. Seriously?” He let out a loud hissing sound that she thought might have been the word Jesus. “You really believe I’d let you take that chance? Then you don’t know me very well.”

Frustration made Megan attack. “Really, Joseph? Nobody seems to know you well. One minute you’re the bad guy, only out for yourself, cheating the law, and making lots of money. And the next, you wanna prove to the world that you’re a respectable citizen, helping mankind from the goodness of your heart. Who is the real Joseph Marcus?”

“Damned if I know, Megan. And quit changing the subject. Hospital or Joe’s?”

“What do you think?”

Joe turned the car around and began heading to his house. He looked over to see Megan rubbing at her head with a trembling hand, and he heard her choke back a sigh that came unexpectedly. Seeing her vulnerability made him open up to her.

“Look, I had a memory earlier when I saw you on the ground. In my head, I heard loud noises all around me. Then I felt... hell, I don’t know. Excruciating pain I guess is the best way to describe it. Strangely, I knew what made me feel that way... because the guy with me got hit. I fell over the body to protect him, but I sensed it was too late. The rest is still a blur.”

“Got hit? What do you mean?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well where did this happen?”

His voice came out thick and filled with exasperation. “See, I don’t know that either. It was night... dark as hell, and I recognized terrible danger everywhere.” To curb his growing agitation, he breathed deeply and lowered his voice. “Hell I can’t even say it actually happened... yet it felt so real. It might be a bit of my memory returning. Doctor’s said it could happen slowly, all at once, or not at all.”

Megan’s interest showed in her softened voice. “Is this the only time you’ve had these flashbacks?”

“Like that, yes. But I’ve had strong feelings of right and wrong... like not understanding how I could ever whip Jack for instance. And yet Maria, my housekeeper, swears I used treat him horribly. She said I had this idea of making him a vicious guard dog.”

Megan glanced behind them. “He doesn’t seem to be holding any grudges. I’d say he likes you.”

Hearing his name, Jack whined and leaned forward from the back seat, his head resting cautiously on Joe’s shoulder as if he made this move many times before. Without hesitating, Joe reached back to rub Joe’s snout gently and pat his head, murmuring, “Good boy.”

Seconds later, Joe pulled into his driveway and looked over at Megan’s unhappy expression. “I’m not trying to take away your choice, Megan, but I can’t in all good conscience leave you to be alone. And because I didn’t want to leave Jack in the car overnight, I came back here. But if you’d really rather us go to your place, we can drop him off, feed him, and I’ll drive us there. Or, if you have someone else who’ll

stay with you at your apartment, get them to meet us, and I'll wait until they arrive. Otherwise, we're home."

He waited for Megan to answer, watching as she took her time thinking about her alternatives. Finally, all she said was, "I need my stuff."

"Okay. Give me a few minutes to feed Jack and grab my things, and we'll go to your place. I can sleep on the couch."

"Why are you being so accommodating?"

"And here, I thought I was being reasonable."

"That's what I meant. Don't quibble my words."

"Quibble?"

"Fuck you."

"Now there's my girl. You wanna wait inside? I can cook us something to eat before we leave. I don't know about you but I'm starving."

"That's another thing. How come you know how to cook? Earlier, when Maria brought me her outfit, she said you'd get her up all hours of the day and night and order meals... and other things."

"What? What other things?" Joe didn't like the innuendo in her words or her tone.

"Sexual services to put it bluntly."

Joe whipped around to stare at her, his heart rate speeding up from the indignation he

instantly felt. “No fucking way.”

“It’s what she said.”

Stunned, words slipped out before he could haul them back. “What kind of a freak am I? Christ.”

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When she saw how upset he became, Megan wished her words back. Hoping to make him feel better she added, “Hey, you’re clearly not that man anymore. Let’s drop it and go get something to eat.”

Muttering under his breath, he came around to her side of the vehicle to give her a hand.

She couldn’t help herself but point out what was obvious to her. “See what you’re doing here? The old Joseph wouldn’t have thought about me.”

Joe shook his head and turned to let Jack out too. Automatically, he petted the dog before answering her. “Who knows what I did or didn’t do anymore? It’s still all a mystery. One I hate hanging over me.”

“That I understand.” Not knowing why it seemed so important, Megan reached for his arm and held onto him, pretending to want his support to walk to the house. Sensing he needed a friend, she couldn’t withhold her understanding any more than she could whip a puppy.

Once inside, Joe led her to a stool by the island in the kitchen. Then he began gathering food from the fridge to make sandwiches for them. Before he’d gotten past the initial moves, Maria arrived breathless. Her revealing, snug-fitting, black silky dress could only be called a hooker’s outfit. One that highlighted her large breasts and bare legs extremely well. With thick makeup painted on and hair teased to look ready for a party, she stopped her rush when she saw both Megan and Joe’s shock as they stared her way.

Speaking first, Maria exclaimed, “Mister Joseph. You called. Here, let me make that for you.” She shuffled further inside the room, taking the package of ham from his hands. Stuttering, she added, “You-you pushed the button. I thought you wanted for me to come.”

Everyone had froze in place... well, except for Jack who ignored them and went to lay next to his dish.

Finally, Joe broke the awkward silence. “What button? I don’t understand.”

Red-faced, Maria pointed to a panel of six switches on the wall. “The middle one is to ring for me. When you come home late, you call me, and I come.”

“I thought those were for the island lights.” Shocked, Joe repeated her words. “Wait, you said I call, and you come?” Then he pointed at her. “Like that? Dressed for what... a party?”

“You like me to look this way. No. You insist. It’s part of the deal, Mister Joseph.”

“Please, Maria. I’ve asked you before to call me Joe.” When she nodded, her expression was so troubled that it seemed to spur him on. “Look Maria, we need to talk because I don’t get it. Why did you make this kind of an agreement with me?”

“You don’t remember? Of course not. Then I explain. But promise you won’t be angry with me.”

“I promise.”

Interrupting, Megan patted the stool next to her and gestured for Maria to come and sit. “I’m here, honey. You can tell him what you told me.”

Maria looked down at the counter, speaking slowly, like one might do for a child. “You expect for me to-to accommodate you at times like this... when you come home late. You call for me, and I come. That way I get to keep my job.”

Joe’s shock couldn’t have been faked. Megan knew when criminals lied, and she’d swear on a stack of bibles that Joe had no idea of any of the things Maria just divulged. “You’re saying that you’re my personal... like... hooker, maid, and housekeeper all rolled into one big... what did you call it... accommodation? Jesus. And what do you get for doing all this?”

“You know what.” Her voice became agitated. “The video.” When he shook his head, she added, “The video of me taking money from a client. And-and what we did in the hotel room. After the Mirage Casino closed down I needed money to send to Russia to help pay for my mother and son to emigrate. You know all this. You threatened to arrest me if I didn’t do what you say.”

As was his habit, Joe’s face contorted to the right while he thought about her answer. His cheek bunched up and his mouth pinched in a sexy way that caught one’s eye. Finally, he said, “Okay. But prostitution’s just a misdemeanor here in Nevada, right? So how come I’ve got so much power to basically make you my slave?”

“When I begged you to let me go, you said you’d show it to my mother.”

“Your mother?”

“Yes. She arrived finally and looks after my son. They live in a small apartment in North Vegas. Sundays I go to see them always. It’s my day off. We made the deal.” Agitated, Maria added, “you promised you wouldn’t show this to her if I live here for you. And you give me a wage so I can help her.”

Joe grunted. “I saw the measly amount you’ve been paid and tripled it. What Joseph

gave you was a joke.”

Her eyes widening, Maria admitted, “I didn’t know if you meant for me to have all of it. I didn’t spend the extra money in case you made a mistake and wanted it back.”

Joe looked at Megan and then back toward his maid. “Maria, how big is the casita out back?”

Stunned and frightened by the question, Maria looked first to Megan as if she had an answer. When Megan shook her head perplexed, Maria turned back to Joe, obviously frightened by the question. “You want I should leave?”

“No. No, of course not. I can’t look after this huge place by myself. And you’ve been a great help. No, I wondered if it was big enough for a family.”

“Yes. It has two bedrooms and a den. I keep it spotless, Mister Joe. I love living there.”

“Then why in the hell didn’t you bring your mother and son to live here with you?”

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Silence filled the room. Megan sensed that her eyes grew as big as Maria's while they both stared at Joe. Finally, Maria asked in a tremulous voice, "You would let me bring them here? Why?"

"Because I believe it's what you'd like. And that way you could save the money they have to spend on rent. There's school buses for your boy if he's school age."

"He's not."

"Then he can play around here. I like kids."

Megan couldn't stand it another minute. She reached across to Maria and took her hand. "He means it, honey. And we'll destroy what damn video you're talking about. I promise."

Sobbing now, Maria rushed to Joe and threw her arms around his neck, hugging him as hard as he let her. Both laughing, she kissed his cheek and then pushed him gently aside. "I will make sandwiches. You should relax." Swinging around like a child, she giggled. "I'm too happy to sleep now. Go."

Chapter Twenty-five

Lucia sensed that in her foggy existence her new world might not be what she'd dreamed for her future but the euphoria she floated in took away any and all of the guilt. Her grandfather didn't matter anymore. Neither did the reality of the outside world. Nothing held any importance. Not showering, cleaning her teeth, or even brushing her hair – things that held a great deal of importance at one time were

forgotten. In fact, most of the time, she wasn't aware of much at all.

The only significant person who mattered was Raphael... the keeper of the pills. He managed their reality his way, and weirdly content, she let him do so.

Chapter Twenty-six

On the way to Megan's place, as they discussed the case, Joe found himself staring at her lips, remembering how they tasted. Those images curdled his own brainwaves, and he lost the gist of the conversation. Floundering, he asked, "What?"

"Pay attention, Joe. This is serious."

"I am. Right. Focus." Forced to concentrate on her question, he pulled his mind back from where it had settled.

"I'm asking if you're sure it's what you want... letting Maria bring her family to stay in the house. That's huge, my friend."

"Hell yeah, I'm sure. Like I told her, 'I love kids.'"

"See... how do you know that?"

He shrugged, smiled sideways, and stated, "Because."

That made her laugh. "You're crazy."

"I know." This time he laughed with her. Pulling up to a stop sign, they faced each other, and the air suddenly filled with the awareness of how close they sat in the darkness. Both looked away, leaving an uncomfortable pause.

As if reaching an unspoken pact, once they arrived at her apartment, she made sure they kept their conversation on work matters. When they ran out of those topics, she put on the TV news, and they sat on opposite sides of the couch both seemingly concentrating on the screen. At least he thought she did. All he thought about was how good she smelled and how wonderful she'd tasted the night before.

Driven crazy with all his visions, he forced a stiff hold on his actions, careful to behave like a gentleman. When she smiled at him from time to time, he didn't relax. Quite the opposite. He knew he came across as hard and uncaring but if he lessened his control even a little, he'd pull her into his arms and kiss the hell outta her until she moaned her responses just like he remembered her doing last time they were together.

Eventually, she slid into a light sleep, and he watched over her to be sure she wasn't in any danger. Using the fluffy throw folded on the stool, he spread it over her body. Then he stared at her, feeling his heart lighten and a strange happiness seep in. She was absolutely beautiful. Her soft skin had a slight tan and from experience, he knew it to feel warm and soft to the touch.

In repose, her sleeping face made his heart skip. While her sweeping, red-toned lashes resting on her cheeks and covering those incredible sapphires kept his attention for some time, so did her lush lips with their natural upward curl and smiling indent on each side.

Reaching over, he took a handful of the long waves that floated around her shoulders. Once home, she'd released her hair from its clip. Now, without her awareness, he let the golden mass float over his fingers, liking the touch of those curls as they wrapped around his wrist.

Once Joe felt certain that Megan's fall hadn't caused any lasting damage, he left her apartment and drove home. Thinking of the night before, he appreciated how cleverly Megan had broached the subject of Maria to dispel any discomfort they felt being

alone in the vehicle. His response to her question of him being able to put up with having a child around had been instinctive, and thinking it out now, he knew it to be true. Kids and dogs fell in the same category. He liked them both.

Forcing his attention back to the present, he sighed with longing. God how he wished things were different. That he had the right to pursue that red-headed witch. But he didn't, and he knew it. For fuck's sake, how could any man go after a woman like her when he had no idea of who the hell he really was?

That fact made him grate his teeth. When he glanced in the rearview mirror and saw his tight jaw, he also saw an angry man, disgusted with his complicated world. Surrounded by questions and no answers in sight infuriated him. He sensed that his lack of control wasn't normal. And living on the edge not something he usually put up with.

Just as he turned a corner, he noticed the car in front of him swerve so much he felt sure that the driver was either high, drunk, or sick. When the driver hit the curb and climbed it only to get stopped by a tree, Joe pulled up behind him. The sudden continuous noise from the horn sent him a signal that something wasn't right.

Joe slammed his car into park and in seconds was at the door of the person in trouble. Sure enough, a man was slumped over the wheel, completely unconscious. Calling and knocking on the window brought no response so Joe opened the door and checked the man's sweaty neck to search for a pulse.

Finding it elevated, he sighed with relief to find the guy alive and soon had the big man stretched out on the road so he could do CPR. Instincts kicked in and he didn't hesitate to follow the steps any doctor would have done. Once another passerby came close, he sent them an order in a no-nonsense voice, "Call 911. Tell them it's a heart attack and they need to get here asap."

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Long minutes later, he heard the sirens and breathed a sigh of relief. Keeping up the chest compressions and mouth to mouth resuscitation had been tough but lifesaving. Not having time to think during this treatment, his automatic reaction didn't faze him. Not until after the paramedics took over his patient and moved him into the ambulance.

Then Joe plopped down on the curb, catching his second wind and holding his head in his hands. Folks nearby called out with congratulations, and "good job, buddy" comments but he just waved to them rather than reply. Finally, stumbling to his feet, he took the bottle of water someone handed him, along with a smack on his shoulder as a way of cheering his actions and went to sit in his car.

Christ that felt good. Joe thought back to the beginning. He had no hesitation on what needed to be done or any restraints on reacting himself. In fact, if he didn't know better, he'd have thought he'd been trained. He'd have to ask Kramer if the FBI went into that type of exercise. Another thought snuck in, and he didn't have any answers at all. He knew exactly the medications the EMTs should use and the procedures they would be taking. How the hell could that be?

Arriving home, he shut down his thoughts and opened the gate so he could pull into his driveway. When he stepped out of the car, he heard a man's screams of help interspersed with Jack's snarling replies, and he ran to where the noise originated.

Recognizing the voice as he got closer, he went around the garage towards his front door to see Kramer perched on the porch railing with Jack on guard, the dog's growls meaning business.

“Jack. Off. Come here.”

Instantly, Jack backed away from his position and ran to Joe, obviously expecting to be petted and acknowledged for doing his job.

Joe reached for the dog’s soft ears and rubbed them without fear. “Whatcha doing, pal? He’s one of the good guys.”

Pissed, Tom Kramer stumbled down from his perch. “About time you showed up. I’ve been stuck here for an hour.” He pointed at Jack and quickly pulled his finger back when Jack barked. “Fucking beast wanted to eat me. Wouldn’t let me move. Couldn’t even get my phone out. Bullying bastard.” Tom’s aggrieved manner would have been comical if his fear hadn’t been so real.

“Sorry, man. Guess Maria went to visit her mom and left Jack loose to guard the property. How did you get in?”

“Jumped the fence.”

Joe’s pointed look took the place of any words.

As if he felt the need to explain, Tom added, “Gate to the driveway was locked, and I wasn’t sure if you heard the intercom.” This time Tom motioned with his head. “Is he the dog you supposedly ran over? Seems like he didn’t hold a grudge with you but he’s a menace for the rest of the world. You might like to get him counseling for that mean streak.”

“Yeah. Poor boy’s totally mixed up now. Aren’t you, Jack?” Joe patted the head leaning on his thigh. “Guess I treated him differently before the accident. Maria said I taught him to guard the property using cruel, even vicious tactics.”

“Vicious?”

“According to her I used to kick and beat him to make him mean. She said he hated my guts back then. Go figure how one accident can bring about so many changes. Thinking of earlier, Joe’s shoulders slumped. “Sorry, Kramer. Come make friends with Jack, so he’ll know you from now on.

Joe watched as Tom timidly reached out to pet the menace and how the agent smiled when Jack allowed it. Joe’s following command made the dog’s ears stand straight. “Tom’s a friend, Jack. He’s a good guy. No biting him, no scaring the shit outta him from now on. Just be nice. Okay?”

Over his fear now, Tom chuckled. “You really think the dumb bastard understands that nonsense?”

As if he understood Tom’s sarcasm, Jack pushed at Tom with his snout, a shove that meant business.

“He understands that you’re dissing him, and he doesn’t like it.” Joe chuckled at Tom’s expression and led the way into the house. “By the way, Joseph set the gate’s combination at six one’s. Guess he had a memory problem, so he made it easy to remember.”

“By Joseph, you mean you.”

“Yeah, of course. Anyway, if it’s closed when you want to visit, you can open it and drive in.”

Once they entered the kitchen, Jack went toward his fancy dish and fancy dog bed Joe had ordered for him, and Joe headed for the coffee pot, which was left filled and ready to be started with the push of a button. Smiling to himself and feeling lucky to

have Maria to take care of things, he gathered some mugs, the tray with the honey and sugar and went to lean on the counter close to where Tom sat.

“So, Kramer, to what do I owe this visit?”

“Got news on the shipment. It’s arriving in LA in two days. No doubt Vinnie will be all over it.”

“He just wants to know if the FBI is aware of the drugs, and what your plan is so he can get to them before you do.”

Tom nodded, his expression inquisitive but he didn’t question Joe. Instead, he answered. “Of course we’ll set up a task force. We’d hate to disappoint the sick bastard. We just need to know what his plans are so we can intercept when they arrive in his warehouse. You know it’s important we catch his people in the act, right? So we can pin it on him and put him away where he belongs.”

Straightening, Joe stood, folded his arms, and scrunched his lips. “Okay. So what’s my next move then?”

“First things first. What’s happening with the kid... Lucia? You get any more leads, other than what you already phoned in?”

Shaking his head, Joe grunted. “I wish. Just what we got out of Bear. Nobody knows anything about the idiot she ran off with. At least, no one’s owning up to knowing. We figure the whole neighborhood is terrified of Vinnie and everyone’s backing off because of his influence. It’s hard on Megan, you know the woman I told you about. She’s Lucia’s bodyguard. The woman’s really broken up about losing the kid.”

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“No doubt. Look, we called in a lot of favors, yet we’ve run into a brick wall too. There’s so little video footage in that area. No sooner is one installed, than some low life smashes it. Surprise! They don’t want eyes on what happens in that place.”

“Understandable, considering they break the law continuously and don’t bother hiding it very often. Did I tell you about my meeting with the religious dude who gave me Bear?” When Kramer shook his head, Joe continued. “A black man in his fifties – maybe forties, who can tell with these street people. He appeared solid, says he lost a teenage daughter to drugs and then found the Lord. Seemed to care about Lucia. I gave him my card and told him to contact me with an address where I could make a donation to his church group. Know anything about that?”

“Not me, but I can ask around.”

Joe moved back to the coffee pot and turned. “You hungry?”

“I can eat.”

The odor of the freshly made coffee filled the room, enough for Joe to pour two mugs. He passed one over to Kramer and took a sip from his own. Since he hadn’t eaten yet himself, he gathered three different boxes of cereal and grabbed a huge jug of milk from the built-in fridge, following it up with a couple of bowls and spoons which he threw on the counter between them.

Then he shoved the toaster and a loaf of Maria’s homemade bread close to Tom, plugged in the machine on the underside of the counter and passed him a plate, the butter dish, and a jar of apple jelly. Suddenly remembering, he reached into the

cupboard and brought out the peanut butter. Without needing instructions, Tom put four slices into the machine and pushed the lever.

In minutes, after dumping a bunch of dogfood in Jack's dish, both men sat hugging bowls of cereal, munching on the crunchie stuff, and wolfing down the toast. Tom murmured between mouthfuls, "Heard any more from Vinnie?"

"No. He's been quiet, but I figure I'll go see him later, bring him this information you gave me. Is there any special instructions you want me to pass on?"

"Nope. It's more the other way around. We need you to keep your promise of giving us his plans. You're not gonna screw us over this time, are you, buddy?" Tom peered up at Joe.

Munching on the last slice of toast, Joe shook his hand and then enquired, curiosity making him watch Tom for a reaction. "You're anticipating him showing up himself, aren't you? Wouldn't that be insane when he has so many men on his payroll to do his dirty work?"

"It's not so much that we need to catch Vinnie in the act. If we get his gang, we can tie him to them easy enough." Tom hesitated and then continued, "Okay. Big reveal. And I'm not sure I should be sharing this with you so keep it to yourself. It's his contact in China that we're after... the big cheese, Chen Bao. He's been on Interpol's radar as well as the Justice Department's for quite some time. Knowing we have the chance to reel him in on this job has just sweetened the assignment."

"How do you know he'll be in Vegas? And how come it's the first I've heard about this man?"

"Because when we talked before, we didn't know for sure he'd be making an appearance."

“Bullshit. You didn’t trust me.”

“Still don’t completely. Look, Joseph...”

“Joe.”

“Fine. Joe. You have to understand. We’ve got you helping Vinnie. Therefore... from the evidence we collected, you’re a dirty cop. So, why should we trust you now?”

“I wouldn’t do that.”

“So you say. But it’s only your word against the proof of the past, right? Baby steps, my friend. Listen. This Chinese billionaire has a habit of disappearing like a smoke cloud. But we know one thing about the prick. He’s a gambler and can’t stay away from the tables for long. Guess it’s what’s bringing him to us this time. Well, that... and he uses Vinnie’s operation as a reason to come here.”

Joe settled his ire, knowing that Tom was right. Though everything inside him refused to believe he could turn against his country, he had to accept that he had. And that they were giving him a second chance to be the man he felt he was inside. Pulling his attention back to their conversation, he said, “If he’s been here before, why didn’t you catch him then?”

“You were pivotal last time, helping him escape by warning him we were closing in. Bastard likes to play games with law enforcement. Used look-alikes to conceal his real identity in the past. Probably why he’s still free. But this time, we have you undercover working for us, which gives us an opportunity to make an arrest.”

“I’ll do the best I can.”

“All we can ask. Look, Sheila wants me to take you to the Battlefield range for

shooting practice this morning. Knowing you'll be in deep with these criminals, she's determined to see if you can handle yourself."

Dropping his mug with a distinct bang, relieved at the change in the conversation, Joe grinned. "Sounds like fun. Help me learn one more thing about myself. So far, I'm having trouble believing I'm the dislikable shit you all make me out to be. Christ... I can't explain why, but everything I've learned so far about Joseph Marcus just makes me cringe."

Tom stared at Joe, his scrutiny going deep, leaving Joe feeling uncomfortable but willing to let his new partner investigate him and his sincerity. The probe lasted for long seconds and as much as Joe wanted to, he didn't look away.

Finally, Tom made a weird face and said, "Your scars are healing."

"Yeah. The ones on my neck are taking the longest." Joe's hand reached up to smooth the skin's texture.

"And you smile differently."

"What?" Joe's mouth scrunched sideways, and his eyebrows rose.

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“Yeah. Sounds weird I know, but I don’t ever remember actually seeing you smile and certainly not that goofy grin you have now. See. Sideways. It’s different. Kinda like a Bruce Willis thing. If I remember correctly, Joseph – shit you have me messed up now – you had a sideways smirk, but it never held any humor.”

Unexpectedly, Joe broke out laughing. “You saying I look like a movie star?”

Tom joined in, chuckling too. “Hell, I don’t know. I was never that close to you before. Mostly saw you from a distance. You look the same in many ways, but you act different than the Joseph I remember.” Chuckling, Tom stood with his bowl and mug in his hand and headed towards the sink. “Dude, are you aware of how often you talk like Joseph and you and are two different people?”

Following Tom’s action, Joe admitted, “You’ll think I’m crazy but I’m beginning to wonder if that might not be the case. Maybe the authorities made a mistake.”

“Sorry Dude, it’s not likely. The forensics people know their jobs and so do the doctors. They all agreed. You are the same prick.” Ducking away from Joe’s tossed towel, he walked over to where Jack lay contentedly.

“You sure he’s suddenly gonna like me?”

“Try reaching out.”

Pretending to gulp, Tom did as Joe suggested and grinned when Jack allowed him free rein to pet his neck and ears. “Good Boy. We’re friends now, right? No eating Tom. Got it?”

Chapter Twenty-seven

Joe knew instantly that the weapon they gave him felt at home in his grip. Instinctively, he remembered how to remove the magazine and cycle the slide back to make sure if a bullet had filled the chamber. Unconsciously, he checked that the magazine fit back in tightly before he lifted the gun to check the sights. Then Joe moved over to the firing range, put on the headgear, aimed and fired at the target, getting an incredibly high score.

When Lanny the manager approached to say howdy, Tom reached out to shake hands. “Hey man, how’s shit?”

“Good. We’re busy and that makes me happy.” He lifted the lid to the delightful-smelling box he carried. “Hey guys, wanna fresh donut. Just out of the oven from the bakery across the street. They bring me a box every morning... on order.”

Tom grinned and reached out as did two others passing by to set up their shooting. “Can’t say no to these fuckers. It must be true what they say about cops and donuts. How can you have these things here every day for the customers and look as trim as you do? Slim son of a bitch, don’t you eat them yourself?”

“Trust me, I do. But I limit myself to one a day since my last heart attack.” Chuckling, Lanny pointed to where Joe just finished his practice, a sarcastic comment following. “Joseph still his sweet-natured self? Looks better than before his accident. Couldn’t shoot worth shit back then.”

Tom hesitated before saying, “Maybe his eyesight’s better after the knock on his head.” Chuckling at the thought, nevertheless, he looked startled at Lanny’s words.

“What?” Lanny pointed at Tom’s expression before commenting.

“Nothing. It’s just that they’re a lot of things different about Joe since the accident. Remember when he used to get his shit in a knot if people called him Joe? Now it’s the opposite. He hates it when folks call him Joseph. His mannerisms are goofy too... his smile, even the way he walks... kinda relaxed and easy, not that strut he always performed in the past.”

“Never liked the uptight asshole,” grumbled Lanny. “Bastard didn’t have a good word to say about the place. Swagged around in his fancy duds like he owned the joint. Even made fun of anyone eating my donuts. Used to say he wouldn’t be caught dead stuffing his body with the cholesterol shit.” Lanny ended his rant. “Not my favorite from your bullpen. You can probably tell.”

Before Tom could answer, Joe approached and checked his weapon’s magazine before placing it gently on the counter in front of Lanny. “Nice weapon. Good sights.”

Then he pointed at Tom’s donut, grinned at Lanny, and reached in for his money. “Any more of those around? They taste as good as they smell, I’ll be in heaven.”

Stunned, Lanny lifted the lid, roughly pushed the box Joe’s way, and waved the money away. “Thought you hated these things.”

“Did I? Sorry, man, don’t remember you or what I might have said in the past. But I do know I love sweets, and donuts like these rank way up on the top of the list.”

Lanny’s face swiveled toward Tom, his eyebrows raised in confusion.

Cleaning off the treat in three bites, Joe wiped his hands on the butt of his jeans and looked at Tom. “What?”

“Nothing. Let’s go outside and check your long range skills.”

“Don’t gotta. I know I’m an ace.”

“And... he’s back.” Lanny sniffed, shaking his head sadly.

Chapter Twenty-eight

Lucia refused to let reality in when her dreamworld gave her so much comfort. Then something happened to shake her foundation. The effects had started to wear off, and her sluggish brain began working. That’s when Raphael upended her very survival.

“Lucia, baby. Look here. See this bag? It’s almost empty. We only have a few pills left. Have you got anything to sell in that backpack you hang on to?”

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“What? Sell? I don’t know. Is my money gone? I have a credit card.”

He shook his head slowly, his stringy hair hanging limp from being unwashed. “Na. Bad idea. The cops are probably watching for us to surface. I heard in the street yesterday that they’re looking for you.”

“For me? My grandfather. He’s the one.”

“Then maybe we don’t take any chances. Look, I have a friend who lost his girl. He’s lonely and needs some loving. I told him about you and how sweet you are. Do you think he could get a piece of action from you, baby. He’ll pay. Do it for me... for us.”

Shocked by his meaning, she had to make sure she understood. Rousing herself to sound reasonable, she mumbled, “You want me to fuck him. For money? And you’ll be okay with that?”

“Only if you want to.” Kissing her mouth first and then sliding his hands on each side of her face to keep her attention, he whispered, “We need to rebuild our stash or we’re gonna be in trouble.” Raphael kept her in his arms, holding her upright so she wouldn’t slump over. “Baby, please. Do it for us? I won’t be mad.”

“For us?” She understood in her heart that what he’d asked her was sick. Yet in her sweet fog, he made a strange kind of sense. She could save them.

And she would.

Megan relived the night before, accepting that she didn't remember a lot and what she did remember made her angry. She'd let Bear get the best of her and yet she'd done everything she could to save herself. Bastard had a fist like a wrecking ball. Her stomach was bruised and her head felt sore and shaken.

Thank God for Jack. He'd saved her from the worst possible nightmare, and she knew it. She also knew that when Joe arrived, he'd also changed the dangerous scenario. They'd made it to safety, and she had him to thank for that.

The rest of the night remained foggy, yet surprisingly, she'd felt safe and comforted with Joe close by. Not wanting to read too much into that thought, she forced herself to think of the bigger problem.

They hadn't managed to find Lucia, and her worry for the girl's safety increased. She'd hoped the lost teen would reach out to her. Yet no matter how many times she checked her texts, nothing showed up. No telling how much trouble she'd gotten herself into hanging around with the pit's losers. Megan's head hurt thinking about it.

A message had come through from headquarters earlier, one that needed Megan's attention. Deciding to go there and follow up on the summons from the ASAC, she dressed in her Megan clothes, including her dark wig, and drove to the Bureau. Knocking on Sheila's door, she waited for her to look up from her computer screen.

"Hey, Megan. Good, you're here. You got my message."

"I did. What's up?" Megan sauntered in and slumped in the chair across from the desk.

"You okay?" Sheila's eyes narrowed.

“Don’t ask.”

“I am asking. What?”

“It’s nothing. Got into a bit of a tussle with a guy called Bear. He looks like his name. In case you wondered, he won.”

“And yet you’re here, altogether in one piece.”

“Thanks to Jack.”

“Jack?” Sheila leaned back in the chair, settling in to listen.

“Joe’s German Shephard. Dog’s an ex-K9. Long story.”

“I got time.”

“Right. So... the dog attacked one dude, sent him running, and came back to put Bear against the wall.”

“Where was the hero in this fight?”

“Getting information a few blocks away. He came in time to end the battle and call off his dog. He got me upright to help him interrogate Bear... with Jack’s help of course. The prick was scared spitless of the animal. Don’t blame him. When Jack’s raging, raring to attack, his snarling jaws are incredibly intimidating.”

“S’at right? Your abundant adjectives paint an all too vivid picture.” Her sarcasm lessened. “Seriously, glad you’re okay. But... what I want to know is if you got any update as to where the girl might be.”

“Nothing concrete.” Megan explained about the loser they’d been told about who might have absconded with Lucia. “Unfortunately, we have no leads on this asshole. I’m going to see Vinnie this afternoon with an update. I’m hoping his people might be able to add something on the subject.”

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“You and Joe going together?”

“Don’t know. Haven’t seen him so far today. He’s gone MIA.”

“Not really. On my orders, Tom went to get him and take him to Battlefield. I wanted to be sure the man could handle himself if things go down during the raid. Crazy thing. Tom called in to say Joseph’s shooting skills far surpass what they used to be, and then he rambled on about donuts.”

“Donuts?”

“Beats me. Guess Joe likes donuts now and never used to.” Laughing, Sheila changed the subject based on what she’d heard earlier. “I’m thinking you haven’t heard about the ship from China.”

“It’s been repaired then.”

“Yes. It’s docking in L.A. this Saturday. It’ll take a few days for them to get through inspection, etcetera, and the truck to be loaded. Not sure yet when to expect them to arrive here. This time they’ve chosen China dolls to stash the drugs in. Our undercover guy at the loading area expects the transport will head to Vegas as soon as the shipment has been cleared. Maybe a day or two later. That’s when we’ll find out the name of the trucking company, expected arrival time, and which specific vehicle they’re using.”

Megan’s sour tone added a level of nastiness to her words. “Dolls.” She spit out. “That’s how they’re concealing the drugs? What’ll the bastards think of next?”

“Who knows. Look, we got word through the grapevine that Chen Boa will also be here... arrival time to correspond with the coming shipment.”

Megan shot to attention. “Seriously? How did you find out?”

“The bug you planted under Vinnie’s desk paid off. They discussed it.”

“So we get another chance at the bastard?”

Sheila chuckled without a speck of humor involved. “I hope so. Vinnie confirmed this when they talked on the phone. With any luck, he’ll discuss Bao’s anticipated arrival with Joseph, and we’ll get that info too. That’s if Joseph’s on the up and up.”

Megan stiffened but stayed cool. “I trust him.”

“I’m still on the fence... but hopeful. Just glad you got that bug planted in time.”

“I’m glad it’s paying off. Something as innocuous as China dolls would have gotten through security, and there’d be another wave of the crap flooding the streets.”

Nodding, Sheila agreed. “Exactly.

Megan sat back, relaxing. “And Chen Bao, he’s up to his old money laundering tricks.”

“Bloody drug traffickers are increasingly partnering with Chinese underground money to take advantage of the large demand for U.S. dollars from Chinese nationals. It’s become an industry for Christ’s sake. And U.S. citizens like Vinnie are supporting it by letting those fuckers sell their drugs to us, knowing they kill our own. It’s pathetic and downright wrong. The thought of taking them down delights the shit outta me.”

“I know exactly what you mean. What can I do?”

“Stay close to Joe and Vinnie.”

“Will do.”

Sheila huffed while shaking her head. “I don’t like that you got nothing on Vinnie’s granddaughter. It’s like a lit fuse.”

Dejected, Megan admitted, “I know. If only we could get a break on this dude preying off of young girls. From what we know, he collects them, pimps them, and when they burn out, he tosses the poor things and brings in a new one. I’m thinking to go in myself and ask around.”

“It’s been what – not quite a week with Lucia?”

“True. I’m thinking to go in as her stepsister. That way, I’ll have a reason to be there.”

“Shit... it makes me uncomfortable. If you find and corner him, and he forces drugs on you, you’re done.”

“Won’t happen. I’m not some angry weakling in need of a home or a friend.”

“Not saying that. Those fuckers have all kinds of ways to get you addicted. In a drink, in food, Christ by forcing it in your arm while they hold you down. Happened to one of the police gals that got caught up in an arrest that went bad. She’s still in rehab. No way. I don’t like it.”

“So I won’t go in alone. What if Joe goes with me?”

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“Could work. But don’t take any chances. That stink hole is infested with those strung-out losers. No doubt, even the street cops are too intimidated to wander around without backup.”

Megan stood to leave, scratching at the wig covering her hair. “I’ll be careful.”

“Keep me updated.”

“Will do.”

Megan left the office about to head to the elevator when she heard Joe’s voice. Seeing him and Tom approaching, she scooted into the main office and quickly walked to the far door to leave by an alternate route. Thankful she’d missed him; she hurried to her car where she checked her texts.

What she saw made her pale.

Chapter Thirty

“I killed him. Oh my God, I didn’t mean to. It was an accident.” Bending over, Lucia gulped in a lungful of air before continuing, “Megan, he was raping me. I hit at him and shoved him away. I-I’d changed my mind. I couldn’t stand having the creep near me. That’s when he grabbed at his chest and fell over. Maybe I pushed too hard. Raphael ran. I didn’t know who to call.”

“Slow down, Lucia. I’m here now. You did the right thing calling me. Does Vinnie know?”

Shaking so hard she had trouble staying on her feet, Lucia fell back against the wall. “God, no. I don’t want him to know. He’ll use it to keep me trapped.” Emitting harsh sobs, Lucia even had difficulty wiping her eyes. With her hands in constant motion, and her body reacting to the stress in a way Megan had seen many addicts behave, she was a mess.

“Lucia, look at me. I need the truth. Are you taking drugs... pills, snorting, or shooting up?”

“I guess. Raphael gave me pills.” Searching for the person she named, she stared blankly all around her.

“He’s gone, Lucia.”

“He takes care of me.”

“By feeding you drugs.”

“Just to help me cope with running away from Vinnie. Raphael’s my man.” Still looking confused, Lucia dropped her head in her hands, running her fingers through the dirty mop of hair massed around her shoulders.

“Okay. So where is Raphael now?”

“He saw this – this happen... and got scared. He ran away. I don’t know where he is.”

“He’s gone. And he won’t be back. Trust me. No way he wants to be involved in someone dying.”

“You’re wrong. He loves me.”

“So who’s idea was it to pimp you out?”

“What? No. That’s not the way it was. He wouldn’t do that.”

“Then it was all your idea to let this guy rape you?” Megan pointed at the dead body.

“No. Yes. I mean I agreed to let him be here, but he’s a pig. I couldn’t... you know. I just couldn’t. Only he wouldn’t listen and get off me. That’s when I shoved him.”

“And he fell over.”

“Yes. Oh, God... I’m so sorry. I never meant to hurt him. I just wanted him to leave me alone.”

“Okay. Listen, there’s no obvious wounds, right? I’m thinking his heart probably gave out. He’s been using for a long time from the look of his emacipated body. I’ll get the paramedics to collect him, and they’ll be able to tell us for sure. In the meantime, we need to get you to the station so you can give a statement.”

“What? No. I don’t want to. Can’t I just go home?”

Megan shook her head. “Sorry, kiddo. That’s not what’s going to happen. They’ll take your statement, and if it’s a heart attack, they’ll let you go. If not, you’ll get out on bail while they do an investigation. Then I expect you’ll go to a facility where they can help you get off the drugs.”

Lucia wobbled close to Megan. “Listen. I don’t want to stop. They make me better... relaxed, almost happy.” Her expression wilted when Megan didn’t appear agreeable. “I-I need to pee.”

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Megan watched as Lucia ran to the small, dank bathroom, and while she waited, she made a few phone calls. When Lucia didn't return, the lapse of time made her uncomfortable. Realizing that the teen had been gone too long, she rushed to the door, flung it open, and found the girl sprawled on the floor behind the toilet, totally buzzed.

Feeling for a pulse and finding it, she slapped her cheeks, yelling, "Lucia. Look at me. What did you take?" Searching her body, she found a plastic bag with a half-dozen pills at the bottom and knew that Lucia had decided to have one last fling before they forced her to face reality.

Waiting for Joe to arrive, having called him to take over the investigation, she also called Vinnie who answered the phone on the first ring.

"You found her."

"Yeah, she texted me. Vinnie, she's in trouble. I found her beside a dead body. Look, I called the FBI... Agent Joseph Marcus. I had no choice. There're others who saw what happened."

"You should have called me. I could have made it go away." His gritty voice barked out the comment. "On the other hand, I do trust Joseph."

"Look, I don't believe she's in too much trouble. From her explanation, I figure the guy died from a heart attack."

"Then she's free to leave."

“Not until we can positively determine the cause of death. We’re waiting on the paramedics to arrive. They can help with that.”

“I don’t care what they find, I want you to bring her home.” Vinnie’s tone brooked no argument.

Too bad, Megan thought. Since she didn’t answer to him, she told him what she meant to do. “Sir, that’s not what she wants or needs. Look, calm down. I’m positive the guy she was with had a heart attack, so she won’t be held responsible. But she’s in bad shape herself from taking the crap that’s on the streets. I expect it’s fentanyl or one of the spinoffs. Once the police are done with her, I want to take her to a rehab facility. You make the arrangements, or I will, and mine won’t be near as posh as what you can afford.”

The hesitation that followed made Megan wince. Praying he’d do the right thing, she felt giddy with relief when he agreed. “Right. Okay. I’ll get on it now and let you know where we’ve booked her.” The phone slammed so hard that Megan held it away from her ear. Talking to herself, she mumbled, “Hmm, I’d say he’s kinda angry.”

“Who is?” Joe arrived just in time to see her reaction to the phone call and made his way to her side. “You okay?”

“Yeah. But look at our little darling. She’s blistered... higher than the Time’s Square lit sphere before it drops.” Megan pointed at Lucia humming nonsense to herself as she played with her fingers.

Joe chuckled. “That she is. Dumb kid is on that shit now.”

“Yep. I just talked to Vinnie and told him to make arrangements for a rehab. Also told him I’d called you in to make the arrest.”

“Arrest? What did she do?”

“Guess you missed the corpse in the other room. The medical team is taking their own sweet time as are the cops. Called them almost an hour ago.”

“It’s this neighborhood. Can’t blame them. They don’t get a very good reception when they do show up in this pit.”

“Who’s fault is that?” She looked at Joe... who stared her down. “Right. Goes both ways.”

“No argument from me. Wait. That’s them now. Okay, you deal with the ambulance, and I’ll talk to the police. Once they finish a preliminary investigation, I’ll take our little addict into headquarters and get the ball rolling with her. Let me know what Vinnie comes up with so I can bring her to the rehab.” For the first time, Joe sounded like a cop who knew the ropes.

But Megan had her own plans. “Nope. Once I’m finished here, I’ll pick her up and deliver her. After all, as her bodyguard, she’s my responsibility.”

As if he heard the guilt she couldn’t hide, he reached out to touch her arm. Head shaking, his warm hand gently held her in place, so she’d listen to his words. “Uh huh. Not your fault, Megan. Don’t you dare go blaming yourself. She’s a sixteen-year-old with a brain and free will to make the choices she did. Sure, it’s a shame she chose this, but if it’s anyone’s fault, it’s the fuckers who make this shit available.”

Weakened from his intuitive understanding, Megan had a hard time believing later that she’d leaned her head on his chest, her way of saying thank you for the support. When he dropped a kiss on her hair in passing, it loosened her tears to where she had to blink them away.

Chapter Thirty-one

Earlier, when Joe got Megan's call he couldn't move fast enough. Knowing she was alone in a place filled with soulless drug zombies, he'd rushed to get there.

While en route, he thought about his day and felt it started off well with Kramer. He'd enjoyed learning more about himself and his skills that were revealed at the shooting gallery. From the beginning he'd felt he had an expertise with rifles but knowing he could handle all weapons reduced his tension over the coming threats he faced.

Deep inside he accepted that he'd never turn away from the commitment he made to help the FBI. Though still existing in that dark fog of uncertainty, somehow he had no doubts about that promise at all. Now he just had to convince the others in the department.

His mind returned to the recent meeting with Sheila, and he couldn't shake the feeling that the woman he saw leaving her office was Megan. Sure, she'd lost the red wig and changed back to her dark curly mass, but he'd seen her that way before. It was more his reaction to her body that couldn't be ignored. The instant knowing that she was close. Deciding that later he'd ask her why she'd been there, at the moment he focused his mind on what they'd eventually discussed in Sheila's office.

The ASAC displaying her aggressive side, had basically barked out her information. "The ship is expected in L.A. on Saturday, and the freight will be trucked here a few days later. We need to know in which of Vinnie's warehouses they plan to store the dolls before they ready the drugs for market. More importantly, we need to know if we can rely on you."

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“That’s been covered, and the answer’s the same. Now let me get this straight. You need me to find out the address beforehand, so you can pretend to have a task force set up and ready to strike. Only when I tell him that, he’ll change to another location on my say-so and that’s where you’ll actually plan the assault.”

“Exactly. And remember, once you give Vinnie a false report about our plans, there’s no turning back. Right? He’ll know you’re the snitch.”

“I’m fully aware of my involvement. And I’m good.” After they sussed out their ideas for when the truck showed up and suggestions for what they wanted him to share with Vinnie, they let him leave.

Knowing they still had doubts bothered him; yet he didn’t have any himself. He’d show them he could be trusted. After all, as an FBI agent hadn’t he pledged allegiance to the constitution? Which in his mind meant keeping his country safe. As well as the people. Somehow, he knew that vow meant the world to him and why he’d trampled over it in the past still rankled.

Just then his phone buzzed. When he checked to see an incoming call from Megan, he stopped in his tracks. Automatically, he wondered why she’d be calling him. With his heart speeding up, he answered. Something had happened, he just knew it.

By the time they had the body cleared away and the coroner’s office pronouncing a likely heart attack as the cause of death... back at the office, Joe had all the paper work finished for Lucia. Having trouble filling in the forms, he had Tom work with

him, and they had her processed in no time. Once they heard back from the medical examiner that there would be no charges and therefore no arrest, she would be free to leave. As the hours dragged by, unstable and needing a hit, Lucia became more unruly. “Where’s my pills? I want them. Megan had no right to take them.”

“Sorry, I don’t know anything about that, kid.”

Peering up at him, beseeching for understanding, she continued, “They’re just to relax my nerves you know. They’re good for me. Like stress pills. Raphael said so.”

Promising to help, Joe said gently, “I’ll get you something else to calm you.” He brought her a coffee, a couple of Tylenol, and a cigarette one of the men passed over to him, thinking it might help settle the girl. Accepting his bribes, Lucia puffed away on the smoke and guzzled the coffee. Then begged them again to let her go, but Joe had promised Megan he wouldn’t do that.

Eventually, the girl slept but soon woke in distress... so much so that he sat with her, talking about all kinds of things. Mostly, he told her about Jack and how he’d gotten close to the dog. What it meant to him that the German Shephard now looked to him for leadership. She listened to his voice and soon her head relaxed against his shoulder. He didn’t move finding it nice to have a girl do that again. Suddenly, he had a picture of another young teen cuddling up to him this way, leaning on him in a loving, sister-like way. His whole body reacted to the image and warmth flooded, stirring a feeling of love that meant the world to him.

Eventually, Megan arrived to pick up Lucia with the details for the exclusive Treatment Center that Vinnie had chosen. Of course, Lucia didn’t want to go. But as Megan explained more than once, still being underage, her grandfather had authority over her therapy.

“I won’t go.”

“Oh, yes, my sweet little ladybug, you will. We need to get these drugs out of your system so you’re thinking clearly.”

“No. I don’t want to think clearly. I want Raphael.”

“He’s moved on, baby. He doesn’t give a fiddler’s fart about you. So just accept that this is what the prick does. He finds young homeless runaways and turns them into stoners. Once he gets them hooked on drugs, they rely on him to provide them with their so-called medicine, and then he pimps them out to get money for his own addiction. When they burn out, he drops them and moves on.”

“It’s not like that with me. He loves me.”

“If he loved you, he wouldn’t want another man near you. No, he loves opioids, heroin, and fentanyl. Your grandfather loves you.”

“Well I hate him. I don’t want to see him ever again.” Screaming, Lucia continued to let Megan know her feelings about both her grandfather and their choice of placement. While en route, she tried to open the car door, and Megan had to slow down and pull over to the right hand lane. “Cut that out, Lucia. Or I’ll cuff you.”

Paying no attention, Lucia reached to grab at the wheel, forcing Megan to hit the brake hard. That’s when she whipped out the cuffs she’d brought along just in case this might happen. Struggling with the weakened girl, she had them on Lucia in notime. Then she reached over and secured her to the handle above the car door before continuing on their way. Thankful they were almost there, she looked at her charge.

Forced to ignore the slouched body of a weeping mess, Megan had trouble believing Lucia had gone so far down the rabbit hole in such a short time. From being a normal, albeit angry teenager to this distraught, stinky, unwashed tragedy, one who’d lost

enough weight to be a worry, saddened Megan's usual belief in the goodness of humanity.

Obligated to remind herself of the truth she saw in Lucia, she sighed with a deep sorrow. These goddamn drugs washed away all a person's goodness, turning them into craving disasters where only the next hit mattered. That was the truth. And another truth she faced was the thankfulness that they'd caught up to Lucia as soon as they did.

Because they had to face the fact that many of the addicts died from this shit. And those numbers were increasing in a never-ending upward spiral. According to the information passed out to the different law enforcement agencies about these new potentially lethal drugs, Isotonitazene (aka Nitazene or street name "ISO"), they could be forty times stronger than fentanyl and up to 500 times more powerful than heroin. Shuddering, she prayed they'd found Lucia in time so she could be pulled back from the brink.

Driving to the facility entrance, they were met by three caretakers ready to deal with the angry teenager who she willingly handed over to them. But before a relieved Megan could get away, screams brought her rushing back, only to see Vinnie appear in the middle of what could only be called bedlam.

Once Lucia had seen him, all hell broke loose. Before they could maintain their hold on the girl, she yanked away from the guards and rushed her grandfather, clinging to his body, begging, "Please, Nonno, I'll be good. Take me home. I don't want to be here. I'm sick. I need my medicine, and they won't give me my pills." Hysterically, she whipped her head around, pointing at Megan. "She took them away from me. They're mine. I want them back... now."

Obviously repulsed by Lucia's dirty, sickly image and bizarre behavior, Vinnie forced her to let go and pushed her away so he could look at her. "My God. What

have they done to you. I'm sorry, Lucia mia. You must stay and let these people look after you here." Revolted and horrified, his expression showed the shock he couldn't hide. "Nipotina, granddaughter, it's a special place, and the people know how to deal with this. Baby, stop." He thrust away her clinging, grasping hands. "I can't help you at home. You must remain here."

Megan watched the old man's expression change from one of shock to incredible sadness. While talking, he again tried to hold the girl in place so she would listen to him, but staying still for Lucia had become impossible. Shaking viciously, she couldn't stop her body's constant shudders. And when he didn't immediately agree to her demands, she lost control, screaming obscenities and hateful abuse at the crushed man.

In a voice whispery with emotion, she spit nastiness at him, cruel words that were meant to inflict pain. "I detest you. You're a horrible, mean old man. I never want to see you again." As the guards forced her to walk inside, she whipped away from them, clutching again at the old man's reaching hand. "I didn't mean that Nonno, I'm sorry. Help me. Take me home. Ple-ease."

Megan watched Vinnie's physique shrink in front of her. Noting how his back and shoulders sagged, defeat written across his features like he'd taken the worst hit a man can suffer, made her almost feel sorry for him. She watched as he finally gave up trying to talk Lucia down and instead nodded at the watchful guardians to forcibly take her away, still screaming and then begging and finally sobbing.

Once the girl disappeared, Vinnie roughly grabbed Megan's arm and hauled her over to a quiet area where they would be alone and could talk. "What the fuck happened to my granddaughter?"

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Yanking her arm from his hold, Megan pushed at his chest, taking comfort in the fact that she'd made him back off. Then staring him in the eye, she speared words at him she'd been holding in for too long. "You did. You and this shit you sell to make more disgusting money than you'll ever be able to spend in a lifetime." Megan pulled the bag of leftover pills from her pocket and pretty much threw them in Vinnie's face. "Recognize these?"

She saw the moment it registered. The agony he didn't hide. And she couldn't bear to watch the man disintegrate in front of her. Knowing her instinctive feeling of sorrow for one human being to another might intrude, she left him there, alone in his misery. Because... dammit, in this case, she refused to feel sorry for the heartless asshole who should have known better.

Wheeling away, she stomped to the car, realizing if she didn't get away from the disgusting old fool, she'd be tempted to pulverize the miserable son of a bitch. She took one last look through the rearview mirror and stunned, she saw him fall to his knees in prayer.

Shaking off her sympathy, thoughts reverberated.

Really?

Jesus, gramps... too late.

Chapter Thirty-two

Joe arrived at Vinnie's place just a few minutes after the man's chauffeur-driven

black SUV pulled up to the house. They met in the front entrance, and when he saw the shape of the older man, he couldn't believe the difference.

“Sir, are you okay?” Taking Vinnie's arm to steady him, he helped the unexpectedly feeble guy inside. “Did something happen?”

Talking so low that Joe had to concentrate, Vinnie muttered, “Yes. It's my granddaughter, Lucia. You saw her before... my beautiful girl. Now, she's in a terrible way. Mio Dio, in just this short time, she lost so much weight. She acts like a... a pitiful animal.” He turned to his Chinese bodyguard, gesturing him to come closer. “Jie, take me to my office.” With his employee's guidance, the old man stumbled after a few steps, and Joe rushed in to help. Once there, with both men aiding him, Vinnie fell into his chair.

As if a tap opened, words spewed from his grayish lips. Though he spoke out loud, Joe knew Vinnie wasn't aware they were even listening. When the mumbling continued, Joe made out more of what he said. With Lucia obviously on his mind, Vinnie ranted on. “Dirty, stinky, her hair mussed, her skin gray like she never washed or ate the whole time she's been gone. My poor baby, just living on these – this SHIT.” Suddenly, his big hand opened and a crumpled, plastic bag with a few colored pills remaining dropped onto the desk.

Joe leaned over and got a closer look. “Opioids. I had to take this stuff in the hospital after my surgeries. Goddamn devil medicine, I couldn't wait to get off them. But at least I was being monitored.” He stared at Vinnie until the man looked up at him. “That's what they'll do for Lucia in the rehabilitation center. They'll wean her off properly. Feed her nutritious foods, and she'll finally be able to sleep through the night again.”

Suddenly, Vinnie straightened and waved Jie away from him with an order. “Vino. Red. My special stuff. Two glasses. Then leave us.”

Once they had the drinks in front of them, Vinnie took a few sips, and slowly his shrewd persona returned. Finally, he looked at Joe. “What’s the news you have for me?” Surprised by his question, Joe sat back.

“You mean the doll shipment? As you must know it’s arriving in L.A. on Saturday. Then they’ll transport it here. The FBI will be watching every truck heading to Vegas. But if you give me the location where the drugs will be taken, I can give them a fake address and get them off our trail.”

Having spent some hours with Sheila and Kramer going over the various warehouses that Vinnie owned and had used in the past, he named the last one they’d chosen. “Will they be brought there again?”

Vinnie slammed his glass on his desk, almost choking to get the words out. “I don’t want them.”

“Excuse me?” Joe wasn’t sure if he’d heard correctly. “Did you say you don’t want the shipment?”

“That’s exactly what I said.” Vinnie’s face took on a fierce appearance, and he added, “I put out a hit on the stupid bastard who got her hooked. He’s done for. That street punk will never mess with another girl like my Lucia again. And now it’s over. I want nothing more to do with this shit.” Vinnie pointed at the pills in front of him. “I’m shutting down my operation.” He picked up the soiled plastic bag and threw it towards Joe. “Get these out of my sight.”

Ignoring the bag, Joe didn’t pick them up but had to ask, “You mean it?”

“Goddamn rights I do. Look close? They’re from our shipments. They could have killed my baby, still might if she can’t get over her addiction. Lord knows, many never fully recover. She could be scarred for life. And it’s my fault.” Vinnie sunk

back against the wing chair, suddenly shrinking right in front of Joe's eyes.

The small, saddened man sniffed more than once, his pain obvious. "Leonardo, my beautiful boy, would be furious that his daughter should become involved in my world. It was never meant to happen. I thought I kept her safe and away from all of this." As his arm swept the room, the disgust in his voice showed clearly. "This. This is my crap. And because of it, I lost my son and his wife. Now I might lose my Lucia. It's over. No more. I can't take anymore."

Flummoxed by this sudden change in plans, Joe didn't know what to say. They needed to stop those drugs from getting loose and without Vinnie's info, how would they do it. "Sir, the Chinese won't be happy with this news. They need to get their drugs to the sellers and onto the streets. Without you, they can't do it."

"I don't give a fuck. I'm done. On the way home from Belvedere, I also sent Chen Bao a text. He'll be here with the shipment, and he'll have to deal with this mess himself.' As if Vinnie understood Joe's real concern, he added, "Don't worry. I know we had a deal. I've already paid you your money. Now go. I need to rest. Send Jie to me."

Joe left, heading straight to headquarters. He needed to let them know about the change of plans. All the way there, he worried about the most important aspect of the mission. If he didn't work with Vinnie, how could they track the drugs?

Chapter Thirty-three

Megan read the text message and let the phone slip from her hands, dropping it on the dinner table.

"What happened, Meggie? You look like you just saw a porn video on your screen."

Taking a sip from her wine glass, she tried to gather her rioting thoughts. “Mikey. The world is going crazy. You wouldn’t believe it if I told you.”

“Try me. Come on darling. Tell Uncle Mikey. You look like you need a shoulder.” He swept the last of his steak onto his fork, shoved the fork into his mouth, and began to chew. Giving her his full attention, he leaned forward. “I’m all ears.”

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“It’s this case I’m working on. See, there’s this man who runs a cartel here in Vegas, and they sell drugs, flooding the streets with the shit. Well, this bastard has a granddaughter who ran away from him and somehow ended up in the pit herself and has become an addict. So, gramps is suddenly refusing to deal with the incoming shipment... the one we had a sting set up on so we could seize the shit and burn it. Only now with him out of the picture, we have no way of knowing where it’ll end up.” Still in a stupor, shaking her head, Megan admitted, “Even I can’t figure out what’ll happen with this new twist.”

“What did the text actually say?”

“Basically what I just told you. Which means the plans have changed and I’m to report to the office in the morning.”

“So, what about Joe? He’s also involved... right? By the way, I like that dude. He’s got class. Know what I mean?”

Surprised, Megan stared at her roomie. “What’s this? A bromance? You never like any man I’m with.”

“That’s because you have rotten taste in my sex. But Joe, he’s cool. Has a heart and some humor. Why not pay him a surprise visit and see what he knows about your drug case? He’s involved... right?”

Megan set down her wine, pushed her chair back, and stood. “Why not? He still doesn’t know I’m FBI. Thinks I’m just Lucia’s bodyguard. But I am involved, so he won’t find it strange that I’m interested.”

Changing the subject as Mikey often did, he offered some typical advice. “Put on that new sweater you showed me. That cashmere one you bought on a whim because of the green color. It’s you, girl. Makes your eyes glow.”

Bending to wrap her arms around Mikey’s neck, she kissed the back of his head, loving that she got fashion advice from such a handsome guy. “Every girl should have a Mikey for a roommate. You’re special, you know that?”

“Let’s hope my new boyfriend agrees with you.”

Sensing an importance to his statement, she teased, “He’s a fool if he doesn’t.”

“I wish it were that simple.”

Something in Mikey’s voice stopped her dead. “Wait, do I hear fear in your tone? Is he the one... this new beau?”

Smiling softly, shyness marking his features, Mikey nodded. “Wanna meet him? He’s flying in from the UK on the weekend, and we’ll be spending a few days together. I could bring him home for mama bear’s inspection.”

Being serious, Megan admitted, “I look forward to it. What’s his name?”

“Peter Jones. He’s been alone for a couple of years after losing his partner to cancer. I like him, Meggie. I really think he’s perfect.”

Hearing the nervousness in his tone, she kissed his cheek. “I’ll try and like him, I promise.”

“You’ll be nice?”

“Of course, aren’t I always?”

“Not with Rollie, or Jimmy you weren’t.”

“That’s because they were both idiots. I didn’t appreciate the way either one of them treated you... as their personal lapdog. You’re too precious to be ordered around like someone’s lackey. But I promise, if Peter is as nice as you say, I’m sure I’ll love him.”

“Thanks, pet. Trust me, he is.” Beginning to clear the table, he stopped and pointed his finger toward her room. “Now go. Get pretty and follow Mikey’s advice. Joe’s a good guy.”

Giddy as all hell, taking her time getting ready, Megan picked up her phone a few times, thinking to text Joe to see if he was home and would be okay to having company. But then she dropped it, remembering Mikey’s advice to surprise him. Were they close enough friends that she could just show up and expect to be welcomed?

The memory of their last time together with him kissing her head settled her nerves and got her thinking. Seriously idiot, if he showed up at the door, I’d welcome him inside, right? Happily. So doesn’t it follow that he’ll do the same? Yes... it does. Get going.

Finally, clad in her pretty off-the-shoulder green sweater, her dark wig in place since he believed it to be her real hair, she checked her mirror. Looking this way and that for any flaws in her flirty skirt and bohemian-style bling sandals, even she knew she looked good. Grabbing her matching small bag, she headed for her car, playing loud music the whole time, her way to calm her nerves.

When Maria opened the door, Megan’s heart dropped. “Oh, I was looking for Joe.”

“Sure. He’s here. Just in the living room; probably didn’t hear the doorbell. When he’s playing his harmonica, he doesn’t hear anything. Go in. Surprise him. He’ll like it. I’m just finishing up in the kitchen.”

Before she could move, Jack came rushing around the corner of the garage, running straight to her side. His welcoming woofing sounds made her chuckle. Maria, obviously anxious around the dog, backed away. “Go to Joe. He’ll be happy for the company.”

“Thanks, Maria.” Megan crouched, petting Jack’s ears and his massive back. “Find Joe, boy.”

Jack turned his head towards the sound of music and sprinted into the house ahead of her. Following him, she froze at the doorway into the room. In the low light of one lamp, Joe lounged in an easy chair, the harmonica nestled by his face and the sweetest sounds of a blues song filled the room. Seeing his eyes closed, Megan stood in the doorway and just listened, enraptured by the incredible, heartsore, wrenching tune.

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As if he sensed someone there, Joe paused and looked her way. Straightening as if to stand, she held up her hand for him not to.

“Don’t stop. Please. Keep playing. It’s amazing. What is it?”

“Hey, Megan. Glad to see you.” His hand automatically rested on Jack’s head, fondling his ears. Gesturing for her to sit near him, he waved the instrument. “It’s a harmonica blues solo that I often play when I’m thinking... helps me concentrate.” Lifting the instrument once again to his lips, he finished the song, leaving Megan with her eyes closed and her head back against the chair’s leathery smoothness.

“That was incredible, Joe. You’re very talented.”

“See. I really can’t say that. I only remember a few songs. Didn’t even know I played until I was listening to some music one night and remembered when the hospital gave me my belongings it included this toy.” He held up the harmonica. “As soon as I put it to my lips, I found out I could play but mostly western stuff. Then I heard this song on YouTube and had to try it. Turned out that with a bit of practice, I could master it too.”

He put the harmonica on the side table and leaned over again to pet Jack. “I’m glad you came. I can’t begin to tell you how many times I went to call you and then thought better of it.” As if the dog had his total concentration, he didn’t look her way at first. When the silence lasted, he noticed her confusion and added, “I didn’t think you’d want to hear from me.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Because I work with Vinnie. And you must have figured out what he’s involved in.”

Megan sighed, remembering that as far as Joe knew... to her... he was a dirty cop. “Joe. I wanted to know how things went after I took Lucia to rehab. Besides, I understand you’re actually employed by the FBI to capture Vinnie now. And the truth of the matter is that I work for them too. I’m a special agent with the criminal investigation department.”

Joe’s face brightened. “Ahh... so it was you I saw in headquarters the other day. I thought I recognized you there. Clearly Vinnie and Lucia don’t know.”

Megan shook her head. “No.” She explained how she’d gotten involved with the family in the first place and appreciated him listening right to the end without interruptions or questions. All he did was nod. “Makes sense. No wonder you were willing to go undercover at the bus station.”

Thinking back to that night brought her thoughts to what happened between them, and she blushed. Knowing he too was revisiting their time together, she admitted, “I have a weird metabolism. Me and drugs don’t bode well. Sorry for putting you in a spot.”

Shocked by her apology, his face clearly expressed his feelings. “Whoa! Don’t apologize. You’ll never see me complaining.” In the following silence, Joe stood, looking unsure. “Can I offer you a drink... some wine or a beer? I have liquor too. Anything you want actually.”

“Sure. A glass of wine might be nice. If you have a shiraz, it would be perfect.”

Joe headed to a bar in the corner of the room and came back with a fancy glass for her and bottle of beer for himself. He lowered the wine down in front of her and sat across from her, taking a sip from his bottle before putting it carefully on the table.

Smiling, he said, "I'm all ears. Tell me what brings you here."

Unable to resist his smile, she returned it. "I got a strange text that I hoped you could explain. It says the drug bust is canceled. Do you happen to know anything about that?"

Nodding, he said, "Yeah. When I brought Lucia to Belvedere, Vinnie was waiting for us." By the time Joe finished the story, Megan understood why the text had been so abrupt. No doubt, Kramer and Sheila were pissed on having missed the opportunity to catch Vinnie with the drugs.

Now they'd be forced to use their old method of capture which often didn't work out in their favor. Placing undercover agents in the loading area to see if they could pick up on information about the various shipments heading to Vegas could be like betting on a trifecta.

"Do you believe that Vinnie meant what he said?"

"Yep. I've never seen such a quick about-face in a person. From one minute to another, he went from a satisfied aristocrat to the saddest pauper in the world. Seeing Lucia like that sent everything spiraling straight to the devil."

"You feel sorry for him?"

"You didn't see what I did. The man was suffering."

"Actually, I did see it. I felt no sympathy.... well not for him. The fool got exactly what he deserves."

Seeing Joe's shock, Megan explained her reasoning. "Come on, Joe. Why should he get off scot free when his operations have broken so many other lives. The one I feel

for is Lucia. She's young, totally messed up, and hurting badly. And it kills me to know I didn't stop her from this tragedy."

Riddled with guilt from his own part in the sad events had been tearing at Joe prior to her arrival, but now sympathy for Megan drove him to sit beside her. Taking her hands in his, he spoke with authority. "No, Megan. Quit blaming yourself. Hell, if anyone is to blame it's me. Kramer told me about my corrupt past, working with Vinnie. It disgusts me to know I might have any responsibility for that crap being out on the streets."

Megan wriggled her wrists, reversing their hold so she ended up cradling Joe's hands. Clinging hard, she lifted them to shake. "Stop it. You're not the same man. Oh, I heard all about your past, but you've made restitution, and you were willing to put yourself in harm's way to deceive Vinnie over the latest shipment. Sheila had some doubts about using you, and I told her she didn't need to worry. That you would come through for us."

Joe stared at her, surprise plastered over his features. "How can you know that?"

Shrugging her shoulders, she grinned. "Because... because I like you and I trust you. I can't explain it. Something isn't right in what they found at the accident. Tell me again what happened, and why they believe you're Joseph Marcus. Did they ever do a DNA test?"

"Why would they? Come on, Megan. I look exactly like the guy, I was driving his car, and I had his wallet next to my body."

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“See. You even talk about him like he’s a different person... his car and his wallet.”

“Because... hell... I don’t know. And what’s worse, I can’t remember.”

Sensing Joe’s frustration, Megan’s sympathy exploded. Leaning towards him, she kissed him, trying to heal his pain in the only way she knew how.

The softness of her fleeting lips made him catch his breath, and he lifted his face to gaze into hers. His look deepened and shock turned into words. “Where are your blue eyes?”

Chapter Thirty-four

That day, after leaving Vinnie, Joe felt heavy despair tearing at his emotions. Not knowing how to handle these weird sentiments, once home and settled, he reached for his harmonica and began playing a new song he’d recently taught himself. The bluesy tune worked well with his current mood.

So many things had gone wrong. Earlier, when they set up his duties at the FBI headquarters, he felt reasonably competent and could see a future he liked. He knew he could play along with his role in getting the data Kramer and Sheila needed to seize the drugs before they hit the streets. In that way, he’d earn some respect for Joseph Marcus... or should he say for himself.

The plan had made sense. Knowing he might be able to make some restitution for what he’d done in the past had kept him sane. But now, he didn’t know what would happen. Would they press charges for his previous crimes and put him in jail? Christ,

just the thought made him crazy.

The entire time his mind was dealing with his issues, sweet music floated around him, soothing some of the conflicts that were battling inside. When Jack had bound into the room, it made his heart swell knowing the dog had gotten over his standoffish behavior and appeared to trust him now. Suddenly, a wave of sensual knowing hit him, and he searched for the reason only to find her standing in the doorway, watching him play.

How he knew it was Megan didn't matter. What did was that she'd come to him and everything inside his body flushed with delight at seeing her there. Once they'd cleared away the small talk and settled with their drinks, he discovered a serious dilemma. While soothing her distress, one thing became very clear. From previous intimacies, he knew the color of her eyes, and the woman next to him didn't have them.

This woman who walked, talked, looked, and even smelled like Megan confused the hell outta him. She had the most gorgeous glowing green eyes he'd ever seen. Before he could think, he blurted out his bewilderment.

Megan had to laugh at the expression of horror Joe couldn't hide. "It's me, you idiot. Don't worry. Sometimes when I go undercover, I wear the blue contacts. And this hair is also a wig. Again, I meant to just drop by and had no intentions of revealing my secrets tonight. Therefore I had to wear what you believe is my own hair. Dummy me, forgot about the lenses."

Reaching up, she pulled the snug wig off, using her fingers to undo the pins restraining her own hair. Next, she sifted through the strands to release them from being held in place. Tipping her head back, she then shook it from side to side,

allowing her own red waves to swish around her neck and shoulders in a downfall of softness.

Joe took a handful of her hair ever so gently so he could feel it for himself. “I knew this had to be your own hair. You’re eyelashes are a perfect match.”

“Don’t kid yourself, there are a lot of men who have no idea between a fake hairpiece and what’s real. I’ve fooled a few in my time.”

“Working undercover.”

“Exactly. I wore these disguises while employed at the bank. And when I first met Lucia, it’s what she saw. Of course, to protect the undercover operation, I couldn’t reveal to anyone that I was with the FBI. Therefore, this was how I looked when I went to meet Vinnie.”

“Right. Well, I for one am more than happy with you this way. That wig kind of intimidated me... all those curls everywhere. But this gorgeous girl, not so much.” He smiled into her eyes, obviously delighted with her disclosing herself to him.

“No doubt it’s because looking the way I do now is when you got to see the real me. I mean better than most... certainly more intimately anyway.”

He laughed at her teasing and admitted, “Know what. I enjoyed every minute. My only worry was taking advantage of the situation. Otherwise lady, trust me, I’ll never regret what happened.”

“You taking advantage of –? Ahh, as I recall, I forced myself on you and like a gentleman, you let me.” Megan teased him because she thought it delightful when he blushed.

“Honey, you didn’t have to convince me too hard. Once I got close to you, I was pretty much a goner. You’re very persuasive when you want to have your way.”

“Hmm. You shouldn’t share that much ammunition with any female. Knowing that, I could take advantage again.”

“If only.” He teased right back.

Suddenly, their eyes caught, and the smiles faded. As if her body had lost its strength, she leaned in, and his willing arms scooped her closer. Whispering, he warned her, “Baby, fighting temptation to keep my hands off you is not my strong suit.”

“Who says you have to?” Her mouth made the connection, and he groaned with delight. Their kisses became heavy with desire and the electricity being generated overloaded their systems.

Without waiting for permission, Megan scooted closer to Joe and climbed into his lap, her knees snuggling his hips. He leaned his head back accepting her sexy aggression, and by the way he groaned his approval, she knew he too was reveling in their shared sensations. His hands held her waist in place and his lips unconditionally welcomed hers. Which urged her to continue in her attack.

Considering that this behavior wasn’t her normal way of acting around men – not that she’d ever admit to being scared of getting rebuffed – but it had happened in her early years with a guy she liked in high school. Being a girl who learned a lesson well, she hadn’t put herself in that position again. Until now.

And here she was going full force into the same kind of tornado and loving every minute of the aggressive tactic of being in charge. Joe, like a gentleman, let her have her way with his body, and so she didn’t stop. Kissing his neck, she opened his shirt, moved it aside, and licked and kissed her way downward, over his chest, not

forgetting to pay attention to his nipples.

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The loud groan he didn't hold back let her know the man appreciated her efforts and showed a real willingness for her to continue. And so she did. Once she had his shirt ready to be removed, he leaned forward to help her and then watched as she did a little lap dance while removing her own sweater.

In seconds, eyes widening in appreciation, he helped her take it off and before he could lean in to place his mouth on her body, she pulled back teasingly and reached behind for her bra. Feeling the power, she took her time lowering the lacy white material, revealing her breasts.

The widening of his eyes and the ultimate sigh of approval more than paid for her playfulness. His warm hands reached to cup her fullness and for the first time, she moaned along with him. Overcome with hunger, she began moving against him in the age-old sexual rhythm, her groin grinding against his with each back and forth movement she made.

By now, both of them were breathing hard. Their mouths becoming devoted in ramping up the passion. Both loved the desire the other brought to their togetherness. And both delighted in the expectation of what would be coming.

In unison, their breathing rang with unfulfilled craving and without fully knowing how it happened, she was under his body on the large sofa. Megan never remembered exactly how she got there, but she became so involved with helping him remove her clothes and then his that she didn't care.

The need to be naked... skin to skin was vital. Rubbing against each other in the age-old slow motion dance for sexual gratification, they sighed heavily in unison. Licking

and kissing his neck, her hands massaged the skin on his back, his hips, and over his waist to his man buns of perfection.

All the while, his hands also traveled her body... like a sculptor making magic with his clay. Taking his time, he eventually inserted his fingers to make her aware of his ultimate goal and ensure her readiness for his intentions. Megan, loving the attention, jerked and bucked with gratitude for his persistence until her patience with his playfulness ended.

Wriggling to accommodate his engorged body, she almost screamed with relief when she felt him enter, gently at first, but once she arched herself to make it easy for him, her willingness and encouragement urged him forward. When she began to pant seductively, Megan heard him whisper, "Baby, it's so good. You're beautiful."

Needing her name coming out of his mouth rather than any generic title, she groaned, "Joe, say my name."

"Megan. Christ, woman I'll say anything you ever want me to, just don't ever stop."

Hurt that he misunderstood, she pushed at him to back off so she could see his eyes. Her voice grating, ordering, filled with need, she insisted, "I have to know that you're aware of who you're fucking."

He stiffened. Harsh words followed, melting her resistance completely. "Christ Megan, I'm not fucking you. Can't you tell when a man's making love to the woman he adores?"

Stung, floating to an unknown precipice she'd never before reached, she suddenly understood his meaning. "Me too, Joe."

Loving his stark whispered truth, she began actively participating, moving her body

with him each time he pumped into hers. As their hunger intensified, they became even more invested in helping each other reach the magic. Knowing her climax was imminent, she held her breath. Never having felt such intensity before, she submerged herself in every emotion, every powerful building of passion. Until the tingling turned into shivers... followed by pulsations that seemed to go on forever. When the final rush peaked, she screamed his name.

Chapter Thirty-five

Joe never, ever... ever wanted to part from the woman glued to him.

United by flesh and whispered honesty, his heartrate took its own sweet time slowing to a normal rhythm. Cuddling Megan's sweat-soaked body close, he reached for the throw he kept at the end of the sofa and pulled it over them both. Still locked in an embrace, he felt his body still reacting to the incredible journey it had just taken. As he tightened his lower muscles and enjoyed the lasting sensations, small twitches enhanced the moment.

Megan also appeared to be in her own little world, which he didn't want to disturb, but he had to know if she meant what she'd said. Was it whispered in the moment of passion, or did he matter to her like she did to him? If so, he'd be the luckiest bastard in the world.

Should he ask? Christ, he wanted to so badly, but everything he'd been worried about earlier rushed over him again. How could a man tie a woman to him with prison in his future? Noway could he put Megan through that nightmare, especially with her being in law enforcement. Feeling her clinging to him, he allowed himself to linger, enjoying the satisfaction of holding her in his arms for a few seconds longer.

God, letting her go would be the hardest thing ever asked of him. And he thought serving his country was paramount.

What? Now where the hell did that come from?

Shaken, he didn't understand how such an unsolicited memory could intrude, but he knew it to be sincere. Hey man, you're in a load of shit. Keep it together.

With his mind hating the idea of their possible separation, he decided he'd deal with what might happen when it did. In the meantime, he'd show her that – in this moment – she meant the world to him in every possible way.

If the phone hadn't interrupted his dreamworld, he'd have probably turned to her again, but the ringing started niggling into his conscience. Number one, who would be calling him at this time of night if it wasn't important? And two, with so much hanging in the balance, he couldn't afford to ignore anything. Decision made, with one hand he reached for the cell and checked to see that it was Vinnie who waited for him to answer.

By this time, Megan had pushed away, watching his face, knowing from his stiffening that he wanted to take the call. When he showed her who was calling she nodded and went to leave him in privacy, but he pulled her back against him and put the call on speaker. "Hey Vinnie, what's up?"

Heavy breathing made him stiffen with apprehension, and then a ragged voice followed. "Lucia ran away from the center. They just called. Joseph, she was here. I know it. Remember that bag of drugs I left on the desk in the office? Well, it's gone. So is the cash I kept in my file cabinet. You have to find her."

"How the hell did she get back there without anyone seeing her?"

"Snuck in through the back gate. That security guard just got his ass fired. Nobody else saw her coming or leaving."

“Then how do you know for sure it was her?”

Megan leaned up to whisper in Joe’s ear. “The security cameras.”

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Vinnie's voice barked his reply. "I played back the tape, you idiot."

"Of course. Right. I'm leaving now. See you shortly."

"Hey. Get Megan too. She helped find her the last time."

"Okay. I'll call her now. Bye."

Once he hung up, Joe turned to Megan. "You heard?"

"Yeah, he wants me to help." Wrapping the throw around her nakedness, she pushed her way off the sofa to gather her clothes. "Where's the washroom?"

Joe pointed to a door off to the left. "You'll come to Vinnie's with me?"

"Of course. You couldn't keep me away." She lowered her tone and added, "Look, the kid didn't just wander all that way out there by herself. She either stole a car or got a lift with someone else. I'm thinking she's not alone."

"Any ideas who she could be with? We both know it can't be Raphael. Not according to what Vinnie said earlier. By the way, did the police ever find his body?"

"Not that I know of. I'd be surprised if they do. There's a lot of desert around here, and Vinnie's boys know how to get rid of a corpse with no one else the wiser."

Joe grunted as he pulled on his jeans. "Christ, it's a sad world we live in."

“Tell me about it. But don’t despair, there’s still a lot of good people around to even the score.”

Joe sighed his agreement and asked, “Could she have met up with someone else from the pit?”

By now, Megan had her clothes in hand. “Not so sure about that. Those folks don’t own cars. Not unless they’re dealing drugs themselves or pimping. As far as we know, Lucia wouldn’t have had any money when she left rehab. So, either she convinced someone to take her by promising them a payoff after she stole Vinnie’s money, or she got lucky and hitchhiked. Which means it’s possible she could be around there somewhere. I say we bring Jack. He could track her, right?”

“According to his previous owner, Jack was top of this K9 class... exceptional performance were his exact words. Well, until he burned out. But it couldn’t hurt to try working with him again.”

“Good. Give me five minutes to dress, and I’m all yours.”

“If only.”

She stopped and looked back at him. Their gazes met and held.

Before Joe let her rush away, he pulled her in for a mind-blowing kiss, and one whispered word, “Megan.”

In a throaty voice, husky with remembered intimacy, she looked at him, her dreamy-eyed gaze making him smile. “Yes?”

“Just... Megan.”

She stopped moving. The moment called for her to pay attention. Staring into his eyes, she wasn't disappointed. He cared. His needs were written clearly. She knew her own eyes were glittery from the overwhelming emotion that his hoarsely whispered word had instigated.

His message and the way he voiced it meant more to her than anything else he could have said. Kissing him, showing him her appreciation almost brought them back to the couch, but she pushed out of his arms. "Later, tiger. Right now we have an angry, spoiled teenager to find who's in a world of trouble."

Chapter Thirty-six

Lucia hated being locked up against her will and forced to do what others wanted without having any say in things at all. The fight to get away settled in her head but her weak body had other ideas. Knowing her grandfather had been behind this torture chamber bullshit made her hate him more now than ever before. Wanting to show him, she tried to make plans to get the hell out of the place. Only her mind wouldn't work. Her thoughts were a muddle and all over the place.

Once they had her in a room of her own, they brought medications for her to take.

She still had enough sense to ask, "What is it?"

"Don't worry, honey. It's medical intervention to reduce your withdrawal symptoms and manage those cravings. We're tapering down your addiction. Trust me, it'll help."

She took the medication and waited. Sure enough, she stopped trembling. The hunger had been fed... for now. Pacing, clawing at her arms, Lucia knew she needed money

above all else. A memory surfaced of Vinnie going into a cabinet in his office where he opened a cupboard to reveal a stack of bills. When she saw the stack, she'd asked, "Gramps, what's all that money for?"

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“It’s not a lot, Nipotina.” He’d put his arm around her back, hugging her close. “I call it my slush fund. Sometimes, I need a little extra cash, and so I keep it here rather than the safe.”

Thinking back to that moment, she knew what she had to do. If she could get to that cupboard, she’d take the money. Then she’d buy a lot of pills for both her and Raphael. And they’d be happy again. Just the two of them, together, like it was before.

She lunged back on the bed and laid there, trying to formulate her next move. With her head all fuzzy, it wasn’t easy. Suddenly, the door opened and a smaller man in a white coat came into the room. He approached the bed, obviously checking to see if she were sleeping. When he reached her bedside, she leapt up and pushed at him with all her might.

Not expecting such behavior, the poor fellow fell back against the wall, banging his head. He slid down, his eyes closed, and his head at a funny angle. Stunned at her own behavior, first Lucia rushed to his side to be sure he was breathing, and when she saw he was, she pulled his keys away from his hand and got the coat off of him and onto herself. Then she ran to open the door, locking him inside.

Following the exit signs, she ran to the far end of the building. Praying she’d find that the door opened from the inside, she fumbled with the bar, realizing it only stood to reason it would be locked. Shuffling through the keys she’d pilfered, she finally hit on the right one. Once the door opened, she slid outside and stayed close to the building while the bushes provided her cover. Once far enough away from the place, she broke into a staggering run, thankful that she had the stamina. By the time she

reached the parking lot, she could barely breathe.

God she was out of shape. A thought occurred to her, and she fumbled again with the mound of keys to find a weird fob that might belong to a car. Sure enough, when she hit the second button, it beeped, and she saw lights blinking from a gray, older model Camry further up the row.

Oh-kay. There is a God!

Chapter Thirty-seven

Joe thought Vinnie had looked terrible earlier when they'd had to help the suddenly frail old man into the house. But this gray-faced Vinnie shocked the bejesus outta him. Shaken, he managed to hide his surprise and talk as if it were just another day. "Hey, boss, any word?"

"Not from Lucia or anyone else." Vinnie acknowledged Megan with a nod and continued. "Jie figures she came by car. We checked the surveillance videos at the gatehouse, and we saw a vehicle that went slowly past earlier and then drove further on, going out of sight. We figure it doubled back."

Megan spoke to Joe. "Could be the Camry sedan we passed that's parked further up the road." She turned to Jie. "Do any of the guards leave their cars outside the gate?"

"Nope. There's a parking lot behind the garage where we're allowed to leave our rides. Do you think it could be Lucia?"

When Megan didn't reply, Joe spoke in her place. "Megan figures if Lucia came back here, she's either gotten someone to give her a lift, or she's hitchhiked. We never thought of her stealing a car." He looked at Vinnie. "Does she know how to drive?"

“Of course. On the ranch, everyone is taught early.”

“Right. Which means, if she did take a car, and it’s still here, she could still be out there somewhere. We’re gonna take Jack for a look-see. Do you have anything of hers we can use to help the dog find her?”

Vinnie pointed across the room. “Actually, that’s her sweater on the chair. She left it in here.”

“Good. We’ll be right back.”

Slumped at his desk, his face gray, and his usually manicured hair a mess of flattened sweaty straw, Vinnie’s head moved slightly up and down. In a whiney voice, he stated, “Then you should check the videos. There’s no mistaking that it’s Lucia. Never thought I’d see the day where my baby would steal from me.” Appearing frail, he shook his head in disgusted sadness, a tear running down his cheek.

Unable to stand the enormous self-pity, Megan stomped closer. “What the fuck did you think she’d act like when she found out the man she’d honored and adored all her life was nothing but a lowlife, drug swindling crook?” Joe tried taking her arm and pulling her away, but on a roll, Megan fought him. Swiveling out of his reach, she faced Vinnie again and didn’t hold back. “Christ man, you brought all this on yourself.”

This time, Jie stepped in and blocked her view. Snorting in disgust, Megan saw his pleading stare and swung around to reach for the door. She bounded down the hall, leaving Joe to bring up the rear. When she heard his quiet words floating behind her, she knew if she checked, he’d be smiling that right-sided grin she’d come to love. “Way to give it to him, baby. Fool deserves everything he got.”

Minutes later, Joe drove back through the gate and toward where they’d earlier seen

the small, dirty, older-model Camry. He opened the back door for Jack and held the balled up sweater for the dog to sniff. “Go find Lucia, boy.”

Pulling his head away from the article, Jack jerked back, acting unusually edgy, obviously wanting his freedom. Willing to trust the dog’s judgment, Joe let him off the lead. Once free the dog raced towards the car. Circling it once, he eventually bowed down near the front tire on the driver’s side, his feet scratching at the surface under the car. Whining and then barking loudly, he frantically scraped at the dusty gravel, clearly showing he’d found something.

Once Joe joined him, he went to pull Jack away, but the dog wouldn’t move or stop barking. Understanding that Jack wanted him to get down on the ground, Joe did so. “Okay, pal. I’m here. Give me room. Back off, pooch.” Joe got on his stomach and tried to reach under the car but couldn’t see anything in the dark.

Calling to Megan, he said, “Jack’s found something, but I can’t reach it.”

She stepped closer. “I think he’s picked up a scent. Here’s my phone flashlight. See if you can find what he’s after.”

Scanning the beam, Joe saw what the dog had smelled. “Got it.” Joe soon pushed away from the car and sat up, holding a small plastic bag of pills in the flashlight’s glow. “Good dog, Jack. You did it.”

Prancing nearby, Jack barked and circled in obvious joy at the praise. Overcome, he gave Joe a nudge and even licked his face like one would expect from a puppy. Laughing, Joe held the ecstatic dog back so he could stand. “You did good, Jack. Feels great to be a drug buster again, eh?”

Megan had to laugh at the dog’s antics. Even a non-dog owner could tell what the huge German Shepherd was acting out so clearly. He’d done his job and deserved the

praise.

Taking the bag carefully by the corner, she lifted it in front of Joe. “Is this the bag of drugs you described earlier. The one Vinnie wanted you to get rid of because they were Lucia’s?”

“Yep. Same one. She must have gotten them back but why would she have thrown them under the car?”

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“See... I don’t believe that’s what happened. No way a drug-addict would have left them here unless coerced.”

“What are you saying?”

“I don’t know for sure. But it scares the hell out of me. Let’s go and watch Vinnie’s videos.”

Later, they got the answer to Joe’s question. Watching the security images, they saw the gray Camry drive by slowly and then reverse to eventually park where they’d found it. They saw a smaller figure leave the car, wearing a white jacket. Whoever it was kept their face down, and they were hunched over, making it damn near impossible to come up with any kind of identification.

For a few moments, the person disappeared to return ten minutes later... only to be approached by a large man, all dressed in black. At this point, they clearly made out Lucia. Though she didn’t appear to want to talk, the man forced her attention when he slammed the car door closed after she’d opened it to leave.

A few more seconds of dialogue followed, and then the man reached out, grabbing Lucia who was now fighting for her freedom. Throwing her over his shoulder, he headed for a dark SUV which drove forward, showing up on the screen. He literally threw her inside the back where hands reached out to control her. Then he slid in beside her and slammed the door shut before they drove off.

The hijacking took a matter of seconds... maybe a minute. When Vinnie saw what they all watched, he broke down completely. Sobbing, he said, “It’s them. The

Chinese. I know it. Chen Bao wouldn't accept my retirement. He warned me. Now they've got Lucia. That son of a bitch has my granddaughter." Angrily, he bolted out of his chair just to drop to the ground, his legs unable to hold him upright.

Jie rushed to his side and between him and Joe, they guided Vinnie back to his office. "Now I have to go through with the deal. He warned me if I didn't, he'd get to me, and he has."

Megan stepped forward. "Do you expect him to call with a ransom? To make you do what he wants, and then he'll give back Lucia?"

"No. It's not like that. He warned me earlier that I'd insulted him and would need to make amends. He'll be expecting me to reach out."

Joe added, "You're sure that's him? Did you recognize who took Lucia?"

"Oh, not the big man who approached her. But the ring on the hand that reached out to pull her inside, I'd know that anywhere. It's the gaudy Chinese symbol Chen wears. There's no mistaking it. The devil knew I'd recognize it." Vinnie turned to Jie. "Get him on the phone."

Jie took a few seconds and then handed it over to Vinnie. "Chen I got your message. The deal is back in place. Listen to me my friend, you hurt one hair on my little girl's head, and you're a dead man."

Chapter Thirty-eight

Megan wasn't sure if she was happy or not with this new twist. To have the chance of capturing the crooks in the act would be a huge advantage. Originally, their intentions had been to arrest the bad guys, including Joseph, and get the junk off the streets... like millions of dollars of Iso, Fentanyl, and similar crap that kills.

Yeah... but that was before Lucia was involved. Now they had to resist making any moves until they knew the girl was safe. That meant they could possibly lose again. She'd reread the files of the last drug run Vinnie had made where the FBI had followed Joseph's info and lost the bust. By the time they'd shown up at the address he'd given them, the drugs had been cleared out and no arrests had been made.

They couldn't afford another screwup like that and more deaths on their streets. Megan knew it as well as Kramer and their boss.

The three of them waited at headquarters for Joe to appear. They needed to get their plan in place if they were to be successful in the takedown and save Lucia. Both Tom and her paced in the limited space, following each other.

Sheila spoke first. "You two are making me nervous. What the hell is wrong with you? Is there a trust issue with Joseph? Don't forget, he's played this game before, and we lost. The only reason he's still walking around free is because he left the city and no one knew where he went. Then the guy shows back up in the vicinity and flips his truck, almost killing himself. Now he's willing to play on our side."

Although Joe had been weirdly absent the night before, leaving her on pins and needles when she heard nothing, Megan still believed in him. She answered Sheila, her conviction firmly in place. "No. I'm not worried about Joe or his abilities. It's just Chen Bao. Man's a loose cannon. Bastard struts around as free as a bird yet he's been linked to more crimes than I can count on both hands. It's like nothing sticks."

Tom nodded sadly. "True dat. The prick's Teflon. But I have faith that for every rotten action, one day they'll be consequences waiting to be paid. And this asshole has a lot of payments due. Hopefully, we can make this his judgement day."

Smiling, Megan poked him. "What, you believe in karma now?"

Grinning, Tom dropped his head as if he were shy. “Gosh, ma’am, that I do. Then again, I’ll admit to putting my trust in the Almighty as well.” He waited seconds before adding, “And in our ability to beat them bastards at their own game. That’s with Joe’s help.”

“Someone speaking my name in vain?” Joe’s obvious side grin made the others laugh.

Megan’s body tightened with glee at hearing Joe’s voice after his latest absence. Before she could comment Sheila spoke up.

“You’re on the team, right? Therefore, we need to know what Vinnie shared.” The boss’s tone made everyone aware of the seriousness of the question. The time had passed for any evasion.

“Yeah, about that. He wants to play the same game as we did before. I had to ask him exactly what we did to lose the cops last time and get the shipment away from the police. For a few seconds, I wasn’t sure he’d reply... my not knowing threw him. Until I reminded him about my accident and my memory loss. Then he explained. He said we’d led you to believe the drugs would be at his main warehouse in the Apex industrial park at a certain time. But he actually has more than one place that he can store them. The other warehouse is owned by another of his fake companies under an LLC completely unattached to his business, and it’s in the Northwest Industrial Business Park located east of US-95.”

“Did he tell you what it was called?”

“Nope. Didn’t ask. But he gave me the address.” Joe shared the information and watched Sheila bring up the page on her screen.

“Yep. I see it. There’s a lot of places there. It’s rundown and not very large, which

would make it seem quite ordinary. Bet they have top security inside.”

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“No doubt. Look, he’s expecting the trucks to arrive later today. Says we’ll be unloading around ten in the evening.”

Suddenly, Sheila answered her phone and the look on her face made all three people in the room stop. Once she hung up, Megan was the first to question her. “What? Something’s wrong.”

“They found the agent we had at the loading dock in Los Angeles. He’s been shot and is in critical condition.”

“Jesus. What happened?” Megan sat before her legs gave out.

Sheila’s head lowered. “Because we didn’t know that Vinnie would be back in the game, we placed Agent Stokes undercover to get information about the shipment. Guess Chen’s people caught him checking the manifest and asking questions. Dammit. It was his first covert assignment. The young guy only has a few years under his belt with the Bureau. I hope he pulls through.”

Tom Kramer turned to Joe. “Which makes me wonder about your involvement. This is all new to you, my friend. We’ve been trained to handle this type of a drug bust—”

“Hey. Don’t even go there.” Joe interrupted and then turned to Sheila. “Vinnie wants me to check out the facility and make sure everything’s in place later. Christ if I know what that means, but Jie is coming with me, so I’ll fake my way through it. I’ll contact Megan to let her know what I find out, then meet up with you guys later.”

Acting professionally, Joe nodded at Megan and then left the office with three sets of

eyes following him.

Sheila was the first to speak. “I want Joseph... shit... I mean Joe protected at all costs. The idiot is suffering from amnesia and has likely forgotten everything he ever learned about the job, not to mention his side engagement with Vinnie. Now he’s putting himself in a shitload of danger which he has no fucking idea about. I’m not expecting Chen Bao or for that matter Vinnie to give up easily, therefore once we appear, they’ll know who the culprit is that set them up.”

“Agreed.” Hearing her boss’s words, Megan couldn’t stop the fear rampaging through her body any more than she could stop her heart from flipping over from Joe’s last grin. “I’m thinking I need to pay Vinnie a visit to see if he has more news on Lucia.” When she saw Sheila jerk, she added quickly, “Hey, he only knows me as her bodyguard. I’m an interested party who’s been on the inside this whole time.”

“Not a good idea, Megan. Leave things alone. If Vinnie calls, that’s different. Otherwise, let’s lay low and give Joe room to work the angles.”

Not liking the restriction but agreeing with the order, Megan swore under her breath before answering. “Fine.” Taking her leave, Megan rushed to catch up with Joe. Pulling him aside, she talked low. “What happened to you last night? You never got back to me.”

“I know. Sorry about that. I had to stick with Vinnie. The man was in dangerous shape, talking crazy shit, wanting to form a gang and go after Bao. Jie called me to help settle him. Once I sat with him, he rambled for hours until he passed out. By the time I left him, he’d drunk himself into a stupor, and we got him into bed. Sorry I didn’t call but figured you’d be sleeping by the time I got free.”

“It’s okay. I guess I was just worried.”

Joe touched her cheek with a gentle hand. “No need, darling. I have a lot to stay safe for.” Lightly bumping his forehead against hers for a second, he pulled away. “I need to get back out there. See you later.”

She kissed his mouth quickly before he could take a step. “You better.”

Chapter Thirty-nine

Lucia hurt bad. The recent bout of nausea had been brutal. She’d upchucked until she figured her stomach lining was a ball of flaming flesh. Rather than leave the bathroom, she’d collapsed by the toilet, knowing she’d be needing the facility again and again.

Her body shook with chills, and her head screamed its fury over being deprived of the shit it needed to feel better. Sweating, crying, goosebumps breaking out, twitching from side to side, she screamed again for someone to help her.

Surprisingly, this time the door opened revealing a large Chinese man who brought her clean clothes, more towels, bottles of fresh water, and another dose of medications as if they were the answer to everything she suffered. After the first time this happened, she’d slapped his hand away, begging for different drugs. He’d left her alone for hours after that, and she’d learned her lesson. If she behaved, he would treat her better. So, nodding her thanks, she took his offering and gladly accepted his help to get back to the side of the room where there was a small cot.

For the first time since they took her prisoner, he brought a tray of crackers and a small array of cheeses. And he spoke which he’d never done before. “Eat if you can. Drink water. Is important.” He pointed at the pills. “Good medicine. You need.”

Trembling uncontrollably, Lucia nodded, not even bothering to beg anymore. All the other times had been useless and when she cooperated, he treated her nicer. Instead,

she asked in a small, shaky voice, “C-can I see my g-grandfather soon?”

“Yes. Tonight. You eat. Then sleep.”

Lucia nibbled on a cracker, waiting to see if it stayed down. Then she drank water slowly, again praying it wouldn’t bring on more puking. When everything seemed to be working properly, she took the medicine and again waited for a relapse that never happened.

Feeling well enough to rid herself of the stinky clothes she wore, Lucia had just enough strength to pull off the gown they’d put on her. Weak and nauseous, she replaced it with clean garments before she slowly eased herself down in a fetal position. Clutching the warm blanket in her arms, cuddling it close, she prayed for God to help her through the nightmare. Finally, she slept.

Chapter Forty

Heading back to his car, Joe got a call. “The boss needs you here. Come now.”

“On my way.” Joe had been tempted to drop Jack off at the house before he went to Vinnie’s place, but something made him hesitate. Since finding the drugs while searching for Lucia, the dog stayed glued to him, insisting he be allowed to travel with Joe. Earlier, intending to go to the office, he’d headed for the vehicle and Jack had rushed him. Hearing the soft whine from his pet, Joe didn’t have the heart to leave him behind. As if Jack had decided he was back on the job, Joe couldn’t look into those beseeching brown eyes and say no.

“Fine. Come. But you’ll stay in the car.”

Deciding the anxiety in Jie’s voice had to be dire, Joe decided to drive straight out to the mansion, taking the dog with him. This time, he left Jack outside of the car in the

shade with the order to stay. Once he got inside, he looked for the familiar butler who tended to hover.

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“My dog’s outside by my car and he needs water.”

“Yes sir. I’ll bring him a bowl.”

“Maybe something to eat. I don’t know... leftovers or whatever you have.”

“Sure. I can take care of it.”

“Thanks.” Satisfied that Jack would be looked after, he went to the office to find Vinnie. “Jie called and said you need me.”

“I do. Today is the big day.”

Joe followed Vinnie into his office, saying, “You look better today. You had us worried yesterday.”

Vinnie looked his way. “I feel better. And thank you for staying with me last night. An old man can be afraid to be alone during times like this. You kept me from losing my mind and I’m grateful.”

“No problem. Not that I could help much in the conversation. It’s a fucker losing one’s memory. You can’t believe how many things one can remember that have no significance and yet they can’t recall the important stuff.”

“It’s okay. You let an old man ramble on and that helped enormously. It’s good to speak of the old days when life was sane and free of all these troubles.”

Vinnie poured a cup of coffee for himself and then one for Joe. Handing it over, his hand shook slightly but not near as bad as it had the night before. “I wanted to go over the plans with you before the action starts.”

“Then I’m glad Jie caught me before I... ahh, took Jack for a run.” Actually, when Joe left the office, he’d planned to give Jack a workout before heading back to Vinnie’s. Jie’s call had changed that.

“I want you to go with Jie and make sure all the arrangements are in place. I know you don’t remember what happened the last time, but Jie will remind you. The dolls, where the drugs are stored, have to be opened and the product distributed to the street vendors. We can’t afford any mistakes. Chen will personally be watching every move we make.”

“Last night you mentioned that during previous hauls, he spent a good portion of the evening before with you in the casinos. Not surprising that this time he never reached out.” Joe waited for Vinnie’s reaction and saw his face tighten into a mask of hate.

“He knows I want him dead for messing with my Lucia. So it’s not surprising I didn’t get an invitation to join him. But I had some of my men following him when he made the rounds of the big gaming houses. Bastard acted like nothing had changed.”

“Did they pick up any clues to where he had Lucia?”

“None. But he better know this. If she’s been hurt in any way, he’ll pay. The fool knows family is where the line is drawn, and he crossed it. If I have my way, we won’t be doing business anymore.”

“So you meant it when you said you’d quit.”

“I wish.” Vinnie huffed. “Chen forced me to reconsider my decision.” Vinnie rubbed

at his face, anxiety clearly marking his blotchy cheeks and pale skin. “Only a fool thinks he can opt out when there’s this much money on the table. I’ve always known that to be a condition. One would have to be dead or in jail and neither option works for me.”

Joe heard the harsh tone and suddenly understood something Vinnie hadn’t put into words. The old man was trapped. He wished he could feel sorry for him, but he couldn’t. Responsible for bringing the devil’s indulgences to the city meant he had to answer for his crimes. After seeing personally the disasters and waste of humanity his drugs created, Joe’s sympathy had been with the poor fools hooked on the garbage. “So what will happen after this shipment?”

Vinnie’s shoulders slumped. “I don’t know. Chen Bao is involved with a wealthy Chinese tong with fingers all over the United States. Renouncing him and his people is dire. A commitment I’m not sure I’m willing to make. Right now, all I care about is my Lucia. Once she’s safe, I’ll worry about the rest.”

Sometime later, Jie walked Joe around the facilities they had used in previous operations, allowing Joe to see the set-up for the first time. Smirking, Jie made a startling announcement. “Known to only a few, the operation takes place mainly underground.”

“Excuse me? There’s a hidden basement?”

“Yeah. The Boss had it put in a few years back.”

“It’s ingenious. Even if the cops were to investigate, they wouldn’t find anything.”

“See... that’s the idea. Plus, it acts as a storage place for us as well.”

Joe looked around the large, well-lit space filled with clean tables surrounded by mostly empty shelves and laughed. “Where do they unload?”

“At the loading docks around back. One truck brings in dolls that haven’t been tampered with, and we place them on the shelves here. And the second truck delivers the real merchandise for the basement. Therefore, if the cops pay us a visit, they won’t find anything.”

“Christ. You’ve got it covered.”

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Jie headed to the hidden staircase, expecting Joe to follow. “We’ve called out the regulars who’ll unpack the drugs and separate them into bags, getting them ready to sell on the street. It’s absolute chaos for a few hours, but they all know their jobs and money is a big incentive. By this time tomorrow, the place will be empty.”

“Right. And the cops will be raiding the other warehouse, pissed at being given bogus info.”

“Exactly. We believe in covering all the bases.” Jie pointed at the front door that opened to a bunch of men. “Good, the workers are arriving now. We figure the trucks will be here within the hour.”

Joe watched as a busload of workers entered. Some stayed upstairs, but many of the others disappeared behind the wall hiding the staircase.

Jie laughed. “Yep. It’s party time. Let’s get them settled. In a few hours, it’ll all be over, and we can breathe easy.”

Following, Joe watched as Jie approached the others, lording over them like he had every right as their boss. Unwilling to comment, he stood back and watched them get ready. Suddenly, he sensed someone behind him and turned to see Vinnie approaching. Before he could say anything, he saw another man step out from behind the old Italian.

That’s when his heart stopped.

Special Agent Joseph Marcus appeared... his expression thunderous. Truly, the man

could be his twin. Every pulse inside Joe's body reacted to the moment, yet he kept his cool. Then Joseph glared at Joe with a surly mocking smile on his face.

And it was nothing like the unique side grin Joe used in return.

Chapter Forty-one

As the day wore on and Megan didn't hear from Joe, she decided not to listen to her boss. Sensing a need to go out to the mansion and check around, she held off as long as she could before giving in to her intuition. When she got there to find Jack waiting outside of Joe's vehicle, but no Joe or Vinnie, she hesitated but still questioned the nervous butler.

"They're gone, miss. First Jie and Mr. Joseph and then Vinnie got a call and went to a meeting. Don't know when to expect them back."

"No problem. I was just worried about Lucia and wondered if Vinnie had heard anything. I'll call later."

When she went back to her car, it was to find Jack anxiously pacing, racing to her, unwilling to be left behind.

"What are you doing here?" She patted Jack but he wouldn't settle. "Something wrong, boy?" Megan tried calming the big dog but to no avail. He intended on staying with her, and she didn't have the heart to leave him in the heat any longer.

"Okay. Come with me then. I'll drop you off at his place." She didn't admit to herself that her idea had been to hopefully see Joe and find out why he hadn't gotten in touch with her. Knowing his absence could be accounted for helped soothe the anxiety somewhat, yet with Jack so unsettled, her worry couldn't be stomped out completely.

Maria was just leaving as they pulled up to the house. Megan waved to the older woman and the boy in her car as she met the Russian housekeeper at the gate.

Maria spoke first. "Sorry, Megan. Joe's not home."

"I kinda figured that, but he left Jack, and I wanted to bring him back."

Megan led Jack inside the yard, leaving him loose and still agitated. "You're okay, Jack. Go relax."

Maria added, "There's water and food in the house. Joe had a doggy door installed so he can come and go as he pleases. He'll be fine. I've got the weekend off so if you see Joe, please remind him of my plans to take my son and mother to the mountains."

"Sure, Maria. You go and have fun. I expect to see him later tonight."

Unease mounted as Megan scanned her phone continuously, expecting Joe to reach out with more explanation once he'd checked out the warehouse with Jie. Disappointment flooded, and as the time passed, and she still didn't hear from him, her worry escalated.

Unwilling to stay home, Megan headed back to the precinct where Agent Kramer and the SWAT team were planning the raid. Everyone seemed comfortable with the coming search and seizure plans, all their arrangements firmly discussed and in place.

Not hearing from Joe continued to haunt Megan... and then Tom. Both constantly studied their messages, and the looks that passed between them spoke volumes. Megan's fear swelled and every fifteen minutes that passed without a word made more unwelcome doubts form.

Soon, the time had arrived for them to set up their positions in the area of the

warehouse. Informed that there were two trucks spotted outside the city limits heading to the exact location that Joe had given them, Sheila confessed that the spotters she'd placed to watch for the trucks' arrival established the accuracy of Joe's information.

Tom finally put into words what had been eating away at them both. "Where the fuck is the dude? He hasn't gotten back to you, has he?"

"No. Something's wrong. I can feel it."

"I don't believe he's betraying our trust. I just can't. Look, maybe there's been a change, and he's back at the house. It's on our way. We can swing by and see what's up."

"I don't know. I never mentioned this, but I dropped the dog off there earlier, and Maria let us in. She looked normal and said she was leaving for the weekend. There'll be no one to let us in."

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“No problem. He gave me the gate code. We’ll go check it out.”

Once they arrived, Tom put in the correct numbers and they ran to the house, ringing the bell and even calling Joe’s name. “Either he’s not answering... or he’s not here.”

“His car was at Vinnie’s earlier, and it’s not back. Look... he wouldn’t ignore us unless there was a problem.”

Suddenly, Jack raced toward them, barking his welcome. “Son of a bitch. I forgot about you buddy.” Tom shook his head back and forth, his voice filled with conviction. “If there was something wrong inside, Jack wouldn’t be happy to see us or running around out here loose.”

“True.” Megan checked her watch. “Tom, we gotta go. Time’s running out.” They ran back to the SUV only to have the dog follow them.

“You can’t come with us this time, boy. Stay.” Tom pointed at the pushy animal.

Jack barked angrily, leaping at the door, signaling his determination to be with them. Knowing they couldn’t argue with him in this mood, Megan opened the door wider and the dog jumped inside, heading for the rear seat.

Relieved that they’d settled the argument, even if it meant Jack winning, Megan reached back to pet the monster. “You can help us, boy.” She looked toward Tom. “He’s back on the job now and knows what to do when it comes to finding drugs.”

“I have a feeling we’ll be needing all the help we can get.” They sped away from the

mansion, their siren warning the other vehicles in their path to make way.

Once close to where the expected action would follow, they shut down the noise and eventually pulled up behind the other vehicles in the squad. Both Tom and Megan left the car and approached the ground team while they made preparations to enter the building in the distance.

“Ready?”

“As ever. The trucks have been there for about twenty minutes unloading. We figure they’re almost done.”

“Good. Let’s hold off until they drive away. You have another team waiting further up the road to pull them over, right?”

“That we do.”

Shortly after Tom and Megan arrived, they watched as the trucks followed each other down the road, taking the same route they came in on. That’s when the team leader turned to the officers waiting. “All set?”

Seeing the nods, he gave Megan and Tom the thumbs up.

“Excellent. Okay, ready when you are.” Before they moved, she held up her hand. “Wait. Jack’s making one hell of a racket. Does anyone have a leash I can use for him? He’s gonna hurt himself or rip the SUV apart if we leave him in there.”

Within a few minutes, Megan had a leash in her hands and opened the door to the SUV, blocking the opening from Jack being able to escape. The ferocious creature almost stampeded her, but she was able to get him secured before taking him with them.

“Jack, quiet.” Sneaking silently in a line, with her and Tom at the rear, they made their way inside to where the building opened into a large warehouse.

A dozen or so men were everywhere carrying boxes and placing them on the tables, the chatter muted but sociable.

“FBI. Stop where you are. Hands up.”

Surprisingly, no one ran for cover or tried to defend themselves. All the men did as they were told, and the chaos of the break-in settled into a dull roar. Agents went to the boxes, ripping them open to find harmless stacking dolls that when broken held nothing. The whole shit-show soon became a complete letdown. Megan’s heart dropped. Joe couldn’t have done it again. She’d never believe he’d deceived them on purpose... she just couldn’t.

Suddenly, Jack broke loose from her hold, trailing his leash behind him. He began barking hysterically, scratching at a wall in the far end of the room. Ignoring her order to come back, she went to him and gathered the leash to lead him away. Unable to move the hundred-pound maniac, she began to look at where he scratched, and sure enough, found a slight opening that when pushed, showed a crack in the wall, and then a hidden door.

Pressing against it, she almost fell down the stairs and only by releasing Jack could she stop her plunge. Tom, coming up behind her, pulled his gun signaling her to do the same. He gestured for them to follow the dog, and she nodded in agreement.

At the bottom of the stairs, they found another door slightly ajar. Waiting for them, Jack hovered, his frantic body trembling. Once opened, all hell broke loose.

Chapter Forty-two

Joe couldn't believe his eyes. He knew that man, recognized him immediately. They were so close in looks, they could have been twins. Well, except for the sneer riding the other man's swollen face.

Joseph rudely pushed past Vinnie. Before Joe had any inkling of what would happen, the lunatic growled, "You son of a bitch," and punched him in the face.

Down on his knees now, Joe realized the game was up. Shaking his head to clear the fog helped. Immediately the truth hit him. They had been wrong... all of them. He wasn't Special Agent Marcus. But then, who the hell was he? He stayed down, spitting out the blood and trying to make plans on how to get out of this mess.

Before he came up with any ideas, Vinnie stepped forward, stopping Joseph's plans for more punishment. Aiming his question at Joe, he bellowed, "Who the fuck are you?"

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Staring into Vinnie's angry eyes, he admitted, "Hell if I know. Everyone told me I was him." Joe got to his feet, swiping at blood pouring from a cut on his lip and pointed a finger toward the maniac waiting to finish him off. "Not that I can see the likeness. He's a real number, isn't he?" Joe grinned without a drop of humor toward the man he was heckling. He wanted the asshole to make another move, because this time he'd be ready.

Vinnie held him back. "Joseph. Not now. We need to get the merchandise cleared out as soon as possible. I have a feeling we'll be getting visitors. Go help Jie unload. I want those trucks gone."

Joseph started to argue but Vinnie cut him off. "I said go. You can finish this later."

Not willing to take on Jie who'd stood forward after hearing his boss's orders, Joseph backed down. As he turned away, he poked Joe hard in the chest saying, "This isn't over, dude."

Swiftly, Joe had Joseph's finger in a breaking grip so fast no one saw it happen. It was Jie's gun to his head that stopped him from taking the fight further.

Once they left, Joe looked toward Vinnie who'd collapsed on a stool facing him. "Sit Joe. It hurts my neck looking up at you. Settle down. Nothing is going to happen until I get my Lucia."

Before he could say more, Joe looked to the stairs and saw a small group of Chinese men approaching, the larger man pulling a young girl along.

“Lucia.” Joe heard the joy in the older man’s voice. Vinnie stood awkwardly, and Joe moved behind him, not sure if he had intentions to protect the old man or watch out for the girl. “You got your wish, Chen. The merchandise is here. Now hand over Lucia. Then we’re done. I’ll sell you my end of the business if you wish but I want out.”

“Not gonna happen, old man. You made your choice a long time ago. Now you live with it.”

Vinnie whined, his voice breaking. “I’m done, Chen. I mean it.”

“Not the way this works. You’re done when I say so. Be real. How can I know you’ll keep your mouth shut?”

“Because it’ll be my ass on the line too. I’ll never talk.”

Unexpectedly, Lucia pushed forward, yanking at her restraining hold. Angry beyond reason, she spit out hateful words. “But I will. I’m going straight to the police and tell them all about your dirty little business.”

“No, Lucia.” Vinnie cried out with anguish, understanding the danger much more than she did. Just as Chen lifted his gun toward the girl, Vinnie threw himself in the way of the bullet. The slug hit him in the chest, and he dropped toward the ground. Automatically, Joe grabbed for his falling body keeping it from hitting too hard. He heard Lucia cry out before throwing herself over the old man.

Joe leaned protectively toward Lucia, worrying that the next bullet would be aimed her way. Hearing her pitiful words of remorse, he tried pulling her back. “Nonno, I’m sorry. I was talking foolishly. I would never say anything. I love you. Please, please don’t die.”

Considering that there were no other sounds in the suddenly shocked room, Joe heard the old man's last comment. "No, Nipotina. It is I who am sorry. I l-love youuu." The last syllable dragged on until his breath ran out, and his head rolled to the side.

Hearing the cries of the young broken-hearted girl brought a world of realism to the moment Joe knew he'd never forget. Everyone in the room had stopped what they were doing for a few seconds after the blast. Eventually, the activity started up again, this time with tensions high and a sensation of fear pervading.

Without warning, they all heard a commotion above and Chen's frantic shushing sounds signaled for quiet. No one moved or spoke. The big guy tried to pull Lucia back by putting a hand over her mouth, but Joe watched her struggle to get back to her grandfather. He saw her eyes, and they were filled with shocked tears and terrible fear... but mostly sorrow.

He looked around at the others close to him, and his eyes widened. He saw Joseph suddenly lift his weapon and point it his way. The seconds that followed were filled with remorse. He'd die not knowing who he was and that mattered so much.

Then a strange noise made Joseph hesitate and instinctively turn to look, his face filling with disbelief. If Jack hadn't erupted into the room at that very moment, Joe knew he'd have been a dead man. But the dog saw the man he hated and lunged for his throat, making the gun drop as Joseph tried to fight off a hundred pounds of raging fury.

Making up for all the beatings and horrible treatment the asshole had inflicted, Jack didn't have an ounce of sympathy for the sniveler, but Joe did. While rushing to pull the dog off his victim, Joe heard the harsh voices in the background. "FBI. Drop your weapons."

Just as he forced Jack away from the whimpering idiot now cowering under one of

the tables, Chen stepped closer and held his gun pointed at Joe's head. He stared at the incoming police and ordered loudly.

“Stop or I kill him.”

Joe heard the snarling sound from the side but so did Chen. Grabbing Joe's arm, he forced him to block his body, saying, “Call off that beast or he gets the next bullet.”

Joe roared his order. “Jack. Stand down.” Thrilled to see the dog lay back on his haunches, his body trembling with energy, eyes glued on his master, Joe breathed easy. Jack, waiting for a new order so he could get back into the battle, stayed still while Joe held out his hand to signal he meant what he said.

Jack knew that sign and obeyed... for now.

Chen yanked at Joe to walk with him but not before Joe saw both Megan and Tom step out from behind the others. Tom spoke up. “Wait. Let's talk about this.” Joe watched as they each slowly lowered their weapons to the floor as a show of cooperation. God, they were so formal, both wore stone faces and showed no emotion. Then he looked closer into Megan's face and saw her eyes though hard with determination, held a glassy-like appearance of a woman forced to bear the unbearable.

He tried to smile, knowing it might be his last chance to let her know how much she meant to him. When he saw her lips twitch in response, his heart broke a little. With his mind going a thousand miles an hour, he knew one thing for sure. If Chen got him away from the warehouse, he'd be a dead man.

Calm ascended and another fact surfaced. A normal man would be panicking and terrified, and the reality that he wasn't made one thing clear. Whoever the hell he was, he'd been in dire situations in the past. That had to mean something.

Speaking now, he let Chen know he had a say in their situation. “Hey, buddy, quit pushing. I’m going, aren’t I?” Postponing their exit for as long as possible, he shoved back against the man holding him in place. Seeing his boss in trouble, the big man stopped trying to pin down Lucia and moved to follow Chen. Being free, Lucia again fell back to Vinnie, her body draped over his.

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Chen emboldened... again pulled at Joe, his attention strictly on escaping and not behind him. That's when Lucia rose, holding her grandfather's gun in her own hand, waving it around like a crazy person, and screaming at Chen. "Let him go or I'll shoot you. You killed my grampa, you bastard."

Panic exploded and the room erupted. Jack, seeing his chance, roared his attack at Chen's gun hand, making sure he didn't get a chance to use the weapon. Joe, now free, turned to face Chen's bodyguard who appeared intent on breaking every bone in his body.

Instinctively, he spun away from the first punch, and pulled back just in time for the second attempt aimed his way. Taking the now open opportunity, he drove his own fist into the big man's belly. And, as if it were a punching bag, he did it again and again. Liking the sounds of the air being forced from the other's body, he stepped back, thinking the match was over. Unfortunately, it didn't slow the monster down.

Grunting angrily, wanting to hurt Joe even more, the idiot reached out again. This time, Joe maneuvered their bodies in such a way that he got a choke hold on the big man and down they went, just in time for the bullet shot from Lucia's gun to thankfully miss whatever target she had in mind. Seemingly shocked by her own actions, the panicky girl froze, which gave Megan the chance to knock the weapon clear.

In no time, the other agents gathered up the rest of the criminals and calm settled. Releasing his own hostage, Joe stepped over to where Jack stood, forcing Chen to cower. It took Joe to convince him to back off so the authorities could move in to take the prisoner into custody. No sooner did the agitated dog leave his Chinese victim,

still provoked, he obviously heard noises behind him and turned back to where Joseph thought to leave the safety of the table.

Jack's savage charge changed his mind, and again it took Joe controlling the animal's leash to allow Tom to get close enough to convince Joseph he'd be safe. "You got two seconds buddy, or I'll shove the table back and get Joe to release your old pal." Joseph's tear-filled face slowly peered up at the agent, and shaking uncontrollably, he inched his way out.

Just as Tom went to force him to turn in order to put on the handcuffs, Joseph pulled a fast one. He yanked Tom's gun from his holster and held it against Tom's chest. With his voice hardening on each word, he yelled, "Don't move. Don't let that fucking, crazy son of a bitch near me, or he's a dead dog." Joseph's warning was his mistake. He should have taken the shot rather than making promises.

Joe looked into Tom's eyes and saw the hard stare of a man under tremendous pressure but unwilling to let it take control. Joe winked and began laughing, making Joseph look his way. "Hey pussy, you scared of a little old puppy? What... you beat him so many times you figure he's got a hate-on for you? It's true. Look at him."

While Joe talked, Jack growled in the background, paced back and forth, and his huge, muscled body shook in anticipation of sinking his teeth into his old foe. The snarling dog's muzzle lifted to show the dripping teeth of a monster that could rip a man apart and only Joe's control kept him from following his instincts.

Once Joe saw that Joseph's terrified gaze was drawn to Jack, his hand streaked out like a piston, and the gun in the other man's hand flew to the ground. In seconds, Tom recovered the weapon and once again grabbed Joseph's arms to haul them behind his back while he handcuffed the now sniveling idiot. "Thanks, partner." Tom's low words were spoken with the thankfulness of a man whose death had been too close for comfort. Joe didn't reply. Instead, he nodded before turning away.

Free now, Joe began his search for Megan. But Jack had other ideas. The canine roughly pushed against him and then headed for the dolls on the table, barking and making so much noise that the agents took notice. Without hesitation, Joe lifted one of the porcelain souvenirs and dropped it to the floor, seeing exactly what they expected. The bag of pills that flew out from inside made all the officers in the room step a little higher, feeling good for having done their jobs.

Standing back while others moved in, Joe again searched for Megan and watched her take off her jacket to place it over Vinnie's face. Lucia, having fallen back after losing the gun, still held onto her grampa's hand.

Megan crawled toward her and gathered the hysterical girl in her arms. Guiding her to her feet, she walked with her to the exit, obviously wanting to get her as far away from the seeping blood as possible. Seeing her gentle consideration made his heart lighten with pride. That one humane action meant the world to him, and he couldn't wait to be with her again.

Until reality smacked him in the face.

Jesus... what the hell am I thinking? I have no fucking idea who I am... no home, no name, no nothing. And I want to approach Megan like I have the right? Christ man, give your head a shake.

Chapter Forty-three

Later that night, both men were sitting in a bar when Tom spoke angrily. "Give me a break, man. What the hell are you talking about? We've just been through a drug bust that will be written up as one of the biggest here in Nevada. And you were instrumental in that happening. Now you want to disappear?"

Joe couldn't believe that Tom had found him. Once the dust had settled back at the

warehouse, Joe had taken Jack and hoofed it back to the main road where he'd found this bar. Needing to get his head straight, he'd brought Jack inside with him, glad that the bartender ignored the breach of rules. Sitting alone at a window table, with Jack at his feet, he kept his face down and nursed his beer

Not ten minutes later, Tom appeared, taking the seat across from him. "Thought you'd lose me, aye? Not happening."

"How'd you find me?"

Tom shrugged. "Saw you in the window. Pure luck. Look, I'm heading into the office. You coming?"

"No. I'll pass."

"Seriously? We just pulled off one of the biggest busts in the state. They'll be celebrating. Come with me."

Joe shook his head before speaking. "Hell if I know whether it was a big deal or not. Considering I've never been a special agent, I have no idea. And if we're going to be honest, I still don't know who the fuck I am."

"It doesn't matter. You're one of the good guys."

"It matters to me." Shockingly, Joe leaned over and punched Tom's arm.

"Ow. What was that for?"

"For not telling me there were two people in the car during the accident."

"How could I? We never knew until earlier when Joseph confessed to being with you.

After the accident, he crawled away before the truck burst into flames.”

“That’s another item no one thought to mention. I never knew the vehicle caught fire.”

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“Look, by the time you’d recovered enough it was old news. Guess we figured the local police had gone over all that stuff with you.”

“Yet you were quick enough to label me with that bastard’s name.”

“Okay... you got me there. In our defense, we had proof it was your... ahh, Joseph’s truck that you were driving. Besides the fact that no one else was there, you fit the bill. Christ man, as far as his identity went, you crossed all the t’s. Not only are you weirdly alike both in size and facial structure; you didn’t dispute the fact.”

Joe pointed out, “Because I had no memory.

“Exactly. You couldn’t argue that you weren’t the same prick, so... we believed youwerethe man.”

“I want you to check my DNA.”

“Fine. We’ll take care of it.”

“Then run it through the FBI data bank... CODIS or whatever you call it. Maybe, I have a record.”

“Doubt it, but whatever you want.”

Sensing some humor in Tom’s answer, Joe grinned. “What makes you think I don’t have a record. I’m pretty bad ass. When it came to being in danger, I gotta admit, I was cool. Makes me think I’ve been in tight spots before.”

“Speaking of which, what are your plans now?”

“Well I can’t go back to Joseph’s house other than to get my things. Guess I’ll have to find a place to live.”

“That’s no problem. You can bunk with me as long as you want.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, man. It’s no palace like Joseph’s digs but I have an extra bedroom and Jack’s welcome.”

“Here I thought he’d stay with me.” Megan’s voice broke into the conversation, and Joe’s eyes narrowed with a condemning stare at Tom. “You messaged her.”

“That I did. You have no idea what pain our she-devil can inflict if she’s carrying a grudge. Plus, there’s no doubt she wanted to bring you up to date on everything.”

Megan slid into the seat beside Tom so she could watch for Joe’s reactions. “Why did you disappear?”

Joe raised his hand to the bartender for a new round and then took a sip of his beer... stalling. “You know why. That dude was the real Joseph Marcus. Me... I have no fucking idea who I am. Guess I figured I was free from facing any charges so no one would care if I made myself scarce.” He grinned in his own right-sided way, this time the humor obvious on his face. “Let’s face it. You can’t arrest me now. That’s good, right?”

Tom’s laugh was choked off when he saw the anger Megan didn’t try to hide. “Don’t be a smartass. You can’t just disappear.”

“I can’t?”

Her finger drove in close to his nose, and her voice held glass. “No, Joe. You can’t”

Contrite, he nodded and looked down at his beer. “Fine. Then you guys gotta help me figure out who the hell I am.”

Chapter Forty-four

Over the next few weeks, while waiting for the final results of his DNA, Joe helped Lucia deal with her dire situation. Refusing to go back into rehab, the poor girl fought every minute of the day to stay clean and keep focused. And after begging Joe to stick with her, he didn’t have the heart to refuse. Over their lunch one day, he finally questioned her reasoning for wanting him to stay with her at Vinnie’s house. “Why me, kiddo?”

“Megan suggested it. Said I needed help with the mess my grampa left, and she didn’t feel good about me living here alone. When she told me you wouldn’t live in Joseph’s place and that you might accept a job and bring Jack along, I knew it made a lot of sense.”

Joe finished chewing his pizza and wiped his face with the napkin their housekeeper insisted they use. Taking time to answer, he finally said, “She was right about me and Jack needing a place to live. Besides, Maria and her family are thrilled with this new arrangement and were happy to come with me. Manuel, her son, is ecstatic about the horses, and Jack here is more than content.” Joe reached down to pet the head nestled against his leg.

Grinning, Lucia waved her hand like a magician waving a wand. “See... it all worked out. It’s sad that I had to let the people go who were here before, but I never felt right with them watching every move I made and then reporting to Nonno.”

“Hey... that would freak me out too. By the way, I like the changes you’ve suggested. This old place needs to be opened up to let the sun in.”

“And without you acting as my guardian, none of this could be happening. I’m so glad you accepted my offer, and that the lawyers for the estate were able to carry out my wishes.”

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“Actually, your offer fit in with my plans or lack thereof. Until I know my name and background, I can’t make any real decisions for the future.”

“That’s what Megan said. But, Joe, I watched you at the warehouse. You stayed calm the whole time. Even fought with that Chinese monster that would make any man cringe. The giant scared the shit out of little ole moi. Yet he never did hurt me. Guess it’s cause I didn’t give him cause.”

Joe nodded and then added, “You were pretty brave yourself. Going after your grampa’s gun like that.”

“Actually, he’d pulled it out so it was on the floor beside him, practically in my hand when I dropped next to his body.”

“Well, if I didn’t thank you for making that stand before, I am now. You saved the day.” Lucia smiled with real emotion that made Joe appreciate her more. “You’re getting healthier every day, aren’t you?”

“Yes. Having Jack to run with, and you and Megan always around has been very cathartic. When I promised myself that I’d never use again, I meant it. Yet without help, I’m not sure I could have survived.”

“Do you remember anything about that time?”

“Enough to know it was the worst period of my life. Thank you for saving me.”

Joe reached across to take her outstretched hand. “We never gave up searching for

you, kiddo. And though I told you this before, it's worth repeating. Vinnie suffered huge regret knowing that his world had sucked you in. The man wanted to quit the business and do right by you, but Chen wouldn't hear of it, forced him to continue. You understand that, right?"

"Yeah. I believe you. It's taken me so long to even think about him with love, but I came up with a plan last night, one I believe he'd like. I want to go over it with you. I'll need a lot of help, but if you'll stick with me, I believe it can be done."

"Shoot. What do you have in mind?"

"I want to turn this place into a rehab site... and not just for the rich. There's a lot of kids like me who are lost, and victims of the assholes in places like the pit. Yesterday, when our lawyers gave me a breakdown of the money Vinnie had, I figure there's enough to fund a place like that and have some left over."

Joe watched Lucia's expression, her eyes lit with reverence and commitment. "It's a fantastic idea, Lucia. If you want my help, I just have one stipulation. You need to go back to school and finish your final year. By then, you might change your mind, and that's okay too."

"I won't change my mind, Joe. I know it's the right thing to do with the money. I have an inheritance that's more than enough for me. But the drug money, it's dirty, and I don't want anything to do with it. This is the only way I can think of to put it to good use. I want you to manage it all for me." Her narrowed eyes took on a sudden glint, and he knew she wanted to argue about his stipulation, but she seemed to think twice when she saw his expression. "Fine. Deal."

"Then I promise... if I'm available, I'll do everything I can to see your dream survive. In fact, while you're away, I can get started on the plans... talk to people who can turn your ideas into reality." Joe felt the first real excitement he'd

experienced in a very long time.

“When will you know if your DNA has the answers you’re looking for?”

“Megan texted me earlier, asking for us to come into the Bureau this afternoon. I think they may have the reports. It’s been long enough.”

“Okay.” Excitement obvious, Lucia grinned in a cheeky way, “You like Megan, don’tcha?”

“Between you and me, brat, it’s gone way past liking.”

“Then marry her.”

“Without knowing my name? No can do.”

“You’re crazy. She’s infatuated with you so much that she glows every time she sees you. And you’re gaga over her. I say the hell with worrying about the small stuff. Hey, dude... we can hold the wedding here.”

Joe ruffled Lucia’s hair before standing. “Quit messin’ around, tempting me like that. This ole heart of mine is fragile.”

He liked the sound of her laughter following him into the house, yet what he’d told her rang true. He’d give anything to feel that he had the right to pop the question.

Chapter Forty-five

Megan was on pins and needles waiting for Joe and Lucia to appear. She wondered if she’d done the right thing in making the arrangements now in place. Hell, she’d even begged Mikey and his wonderful new boyfriend, Peter, if they agreed with what

she'd planned, and they'd both given her their seal of approval.

Still worried, she'd checked the internet, and according to Google, some people in Joe's mental state of amnesia could react in a physically negative way. So she'd questioned the doctor. But he thought it would be okay for them to spring the report on Joe, as long as he was with people he trusted.

And so her and Tom figured what better place than the FBI office where there was structure and truth all around. Again, Megan searched the space looking for Tom and was disappointed that he still hadn't shown up. He knew the time they'd planned to talk with Joe and had promised to be here for extra support.

In the lobby, she watched as the elevator doors opened, revealing Lucia and Joe. Looking extraordinarily happy, Lucia held up her thumb signaling that she'd talked to Joe about their ideas and had gotten a positive answer. Happy to hear it, Megan approached Joe, her hand held out for his. "We have the information you're seeking. It's great, don't worry. Turns out you're one of the good guys."

She led him to Sheila's office where the ASAC greeted Joe politely. "I'm happy to tell you that we have found out who you are from the DNA report. Turns out, you did have a record. Christ... don't get all twisted. You more than made up for your one small slip, son." She pointed at the chair for him to sit before handing him a folder that held the information.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:50 pm

Joe reached out, hesitating. He looked around, his side smile teasing. “I’ll apologize now for whatever I’m about to uncover.”

Megan couldn’t help herself. She pushed at his shoulder, entreating him, “Look, Joe. You’ll be as proud as we are.”

Lucia also urged him on. “I can’t wait, Joe. If you don’t look soon, I will. Open it.”

Sighing with trepidation, Joe began to read the contents, and Megan swore later that he sat straighter the more he read. Finally, he stood and looked around at the others who were teasingly saluting him. When he raised his own hand in answer, he actually broke out laughing. “I knew I couldn’t be a bad cop but never guessed I’d be a Captain in the United States army.”

A knock at the door caught their attention. When Tom stuck his head in, he laughed at the sight. “I see you read your file.”

Joe’s smile widened. “Yep. Told you I knew about rifles.”

“That you did, brother. Look, I have someone here who’d like to meet you. Seems she’s been looking for a long lost brother that she expected to show up weeks ago. Says his name is Joe Wyatt.” Tom stood aside, ushering in a pretty blonde woman.

The group froze. Joe’s eyes grew round, and he began shaking. Seconds went by where everyone held their breath. Not a sound could be heard. Then they watched his expression change to that perfect warm side-smile that was so completely his.

The words he forced out were low and guttural. They held a world of shock, plus satisfaction, and overwhelming love. “Hi, Nadine.” He pulled her close and hugged her hard before turning to the others. “Everyone... meet my sister.”

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