



# Delivering David (Tennessee Task Force #5)

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**Category:** Action&Adventure

**Description:** After Vocational Specialist Suzanne Bennett's friend Mercy is murdered and Mercy's son David vanishes, Suzanne is targeted by The Cadre, a crime syndicate for what she knows of their work trafficking children. When she seeks help from Brotherhood Protectors, she is paired with a handsome but troubled man who guards his own secrets.

Retired U.S. Army Sergeant Kristopher Brower can't let go of the guilt over his former partner's death when they were cops. Now a Brotherhood Protectors' assignment has him investigating the murder of his partner's widow and the vanishing of her son. Paired up with Suzanne Bennett, the widow's friend, he is forced to deal with past issues as he fights for the future of exploited children while trying to ignore his attraction for Suzanne. Will they find David and the other children or become The Cadre's next victims?

**Total Pages (Source):** 36

## CHAPTER 1

December 26.

Knoxville, Tennessee.

“Two of my kids are missing from the Tennessee Cares youth emergency shelter, Suzanne,” Case Manager Mercy Phillips said softly. “I think someone snatched them.”

“What do you mean, snatched?” Suzanne Bennett stared at her friend across the diner’s scarred wooden tabletop. Outside, a drizzling icy sleet shivered down the windows and the temperature was falling fast. Knoxville seldom saw a white Christmas and the darkening granite hued sky suggested the arrival of snow now that the holiday had passed.

“You’ll probably think I’m crazy,” Mercy warned. She worked with at risk children at Family Services of Tennessee, a large state agency. Her skill at placing high-risk kids in good foster homes as well as keeping siblings in care together was phenomenal.

“After four years of doing volunteer work with you at Young-Williams Animal Shelter?” Suzanne grinned. “Try me.”

They met often for lunch at Daisy’s , a local café where Suzanne had placed several disabled adults and veterans in her job as a career/vocational counselor for Families United. It was a popular place, close to many of the downtown social service and

welfare agencies whose staff frequently lunched there. Today, the menu featured special foods for the first day of Kwanzaa. The aroma of slow-cooked black-eyed peas and greens, cornbread and a glorious yam stew scented the air. The place was crowded with post-holiday shoppers, but the servers were keeping up with the flow. Mercy always ordered the Hoppin' John casserole but today left it untouched.

Despite the hubbub, Mercy lowered her voice. "Christmas Eve, sisters Erin and Joey Campbell, who I placed at the shelter at the first of the month, told me that this past Saturday night they saw the Taylors, the on-duty couple dragging two young sisters down the hall in the middle of the night. The next day they told them they'd gone on to a foster home, but that's total bullshit. No one moves kids from a shelter to a foster home in the middle of the night. When I went there today, Erin and Joey were gone. The Taylors said they ran away last night which is also bullshit."

Unease inched up Suzanne's spine. "How can you be sure they didn't?"

"Because I told them I was going to take them home with me and damn the consequences." Mercy's usually gentle eyes blazed with determination. "The only reason I didn't take them right then was because David had an upset stomach all the way home from Memphis and I didn't want to expose them to whatever he had. So, I waited twenty-four hours. The girls are scheduled to move to a therapeutic foster home on New Year's Day. Besides, they'd never scare their mom, who's receiving special treatment at Vanderbilt Medical Center. There's no other family to take care of them which is why they're in temporary foster care."

"If the girls saw this on Saturday night, why didn't they tell you until you saw them on Christmas Eve?" Suzanne pushed away her plate, appetite gone.

Mercy brushed back a lock of curly, blonde hair. "David and I went to see my parents in Memphis last Thursday because they were flying to Europe Christmas Eve. We drove back then, and I went to the shelter to check on the girls and give them the

presents their mother sent to my office.”

“So, they had to wait until you got back to tell you,” Suzanne reasoned. “At least they waited for you.” Having survived the foster care system herself, she knew how tempting the urge to run could be. “Did they tell you the other girls’ names?”

“Robin and Cathy Clark,” Mercy said. “They’re six and seven years old, removed from their home due to abuse and neglect. The Campbell girls loved playing with them.”

Suzanne took a long sip of her tea and considered. “Have any of the other kids at the shelter run away since then?”

“No,” Mercy said. “Except for them, the shelter was empty when I got there. The other case managers managed to place their kids. It’s rough being in a shelter during the holidays and maybe some of them would run, but not mine.”

Despite the situation, Suzanne smiled. Mercy always referred to her caseload as “my kids”, as if they were just much her own as her ten-year-old son David. Considering Mercy was widowed five years ago, she was doing amazingly well, and David was a very cool kid. “Did Erin and Joey see anything else that night?”

“That Cathy and Robin were crying, saying they didn’t want to go,” Mercy described, her voice shaking with barely controlled rage. “My girls’ door was open just enough to see the Taylors taping the Clarks’ mouths shut. Erin and Joey were terrified and I told them I’d be back today. I should have taken them and let them stay in the den downstairs and kept David in his room.”

“It’s not your fault,” Suzanne insisted. “You didn’t want them to get sick. Do you think the Taylors know what your girls told you?”

“I don’t know,” Mercy admitted. “But I gave them hell today for not calling me as soon as they knew the girls were gone. I mean, the shelter was open in case there were kids who needed to be placed. At least The Taylors had the sense to call the police and the shelter’s director.”

“‘Scuse please, Miz Suzanne. Is lunch not good today?” Stan, their server who Suzanne had enrolled in Daisy’s culinary arts training program, asked. “Used more sage and pepper in Hoppin’ John. Old Polish trick I try. Not good?”

“It’s good,” Suzanne assured him. “We’re just talking about the holidays. Are you looking forward to your first vacation?” Daisy’s owner, Barry Collins, was giving the staff the next week off to celebrate the many holidays at this time of year.

“Yes, Miz Suzanne.” Stan smiled. “Starting tomorrow. First real vacation in America. ‘Scuse please.”

He hustled away, and Suzanne gave Mercy her attention again. “Who have you called about this?”

“I called Tennessee Cares right away and spoke to Perry Johnson, the shelter’s director and asked him to notify the CEO. The guy is out of town, and Johnson said he’d let him know but I’ve not heard back from him. My supervisor is still out of town, and after what the girls told me, I was afraid to tell anyone else. Call me paranoid, but I think something bad is going on at the shelter. And if there is, except for my boss Lucinda and you of course, who do I trust?”

Her words only increased Suzanne’s concern. If Mercy, with her years of experience, wasn’t sure what to do, there was a problem. “Do you have any other kids at the shelter?”

“Not right now,” Mercy said. “And you can be damn sure there won’t be until I get

an answer to my questions.”

“I’d do the same,” Suzanne agreed, picking up her fork. “Let’s eat before we hurt Stan’s feelings.”

“Can’t have that.” Mercy speared a bite of food and asked, “Can you come to dinner tomorrow night? David made you a Christmas present and he’s eager to give it to you.”

“Any clues you care to share?” Suzanne wiggled her eyebrows at her friend.

“Are you kidding?” Mercy laughed. “If I gave it away, he’d kill me.”

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:22 am*

### CHAPTER 2

Later that night

Her phone's persistent buzz from the bedside table had Suzanne fumbling for it. The bedside clock showed it was almost midnight. Someone was gonna get an earful. She hit accept, and growled, "Whoever this is, you've got a rotten sense of timing."

"Su-Suze?" The whispered question came from an all too familiar voice, pulling Suzanne upright and into complete awareness. The young, always confident voice was a raspy stutter, and her pulse hammered against her skin. The voice's owner never stuttered. David. Mercy's son.

"David? What's wrong?" Mercy never let David use his Snoopy-Woodstock phone after nine o'clock and he had yet to even try to break that rule. Unless it was an emergency...

"There's someone in the house," he whispered again, and she heard the terror in the boy's voice. "I think they're hurting my mom. She's crying."

"David, hang up and call 9-1-1 right now." Keeping the phone to her ear, Suzanne rolled out of bed, grabbed her sweatshirt and pants from the chair, pulled them on over her sleep shirt and slid her stockinged feet into loafers. "Get under your bed, OK? David?"

His silence sent terror spiraling over her, and she dialed 9-1-1 to give Mercy's address and report a break-in with a child in the house. Shoving her phone and keys

into her jeans pocket, she bolted downstairs, grabbed her coat from the back of the kitchen door leading to the garage. The garage door slid closed and damning the consequences of a ticket, she sped from her home in northwest Knoxville to Mercy's house in the Island Home area. She made the trip in fifteen minutes, thanking God for all the green lights and no snow.

Flashing blue lights were punching holes in the darkness when Suzanne pulled to a stop beside the two patrol cars in Mercy's circular driveway. Through the open front door, she could see the large Christmas tree she helped decorate Thanksgiving weekend. Climbing out, she hurried up the front porch steps, but a female police officer stopped her from entering.

"You can't go in there, ma'am," she said. "This is a crime scene."

"I'm the one who called 9-1-1," Suzanne snapped. "Are Mercy and her son David alright?"

"Suzanne?" Sgt. Grant Miller of the KPD stepped out on the porch. Suzanne knew him from volunteering at a local food bank, and he often ate lunch at Daisy's. But instead of relief, his presence drove her already thundering heart into overdrive.

"What's happened?" she demanded. "Where are Mercy and David?"

Anger had turned his handsome features into a grim mask. "I'm sorry, Suzanne," he said. "Mercy Phillips is dead. It looks as if someone strangled her."

Her knees gave way, and he caught her before she reached the ground. "No," she whispered. "Where's David? Her son?"

"There's no one else in the house," Miller told her, leading her inside. "We're waiting for the coroner and CSI to get here."



“Oh, my God.” Suzanne sank into one of the matching wing-backed chairs before the empty fireplace. They snatched my kids, Suzanne. “They’ve got David, haven’t they?”

“Who’s got him?” Miller demanded. “What are you talking about?”

“Nothing,” Suzanne amended hastily. “I mean, could whoever killed Mercy have taken—” She choked back her disbelief. Mercy dead? Not possible.

And where was David?

“We won’t know anything until later today at the soonest,” Miller said. “How did you know about this?”

She described David’s call but left out what Mercy told her about the Campbell girls vanishing. If the Taylors called the police, he might already know that. Besides, the two couldn’t possibly be connected. The thought was crazy. Or was it?

“He called me ‘Suze’” she said woodenly. “It was a signal that if he called me that, something was wrong. He said someone was hurting his mother.” She choked back a sob before adding, “Then he hung up.”

“Does David have a cell phone?” Miller asked.

“No.” Suzanne choked back a sob. “Only that Snoopy and Woodstock phone in his room.”

“Is that him?” Miller pointed at a framed photo on the mantle of a smiling David and Mercy, both looking as if they hadn’t a care or fear in the world.

“Yes.” Fighting the nausea churning in her stomach, Suzanne got to her feet. “I need

to go.”

After refusing Miller’s offer of an officer escort, Suzanne drove home, thoughts tumbling like autumn leaves. As she turned into the driveway, she remembered she’d forgotten to put the new garage door opener in the car and the old one worked when it wanted. Thankfully the door opened, but no matter how she pressed the opener’s button, it stayed up. The wall switch didn’t work either.

She unlocked the kitchen door and recalled the ceiling lights were burned out too. At least the light over the stove was on. Where was the new garage opener?

The smell of sweat and beer assaulted her nostrils as a strong hand clamped over her mouth and an equally strong arm wrapped around her chest. She pushed back but her visitor only tightened his grip.

“I wouldn’t move if I were you,” his clipped English-accented voice advised. “We’re going to have a little chat.”

Remembering a trick she’d learned from a self-defense class, Suzanne went limp, and the man’s grip loosened enough for her to slip free, take the pepper spray from her coat pocket and spray it into her masked attacker’s eyes.

“Bitch”! he screamed, staggering backwards.

“I’ll show you bitch!” Suzanne shouted, spraying him again, keeping her head down.

His shove sent her into the kitchen island. In the seconds it took her to regain her footing, he stumbled through the still open door, into the garage and out into the night. Right behind him, Suzanne slammed and locked the door, and sank to the floor, her breathing coming in short, rapid bursts. Taking out her phone, she called 9-1-1. Within minutes, she heard in the distance the blessed sound of approaching sirens.

Grant Miller must have sent someone to be sure she got home.

As the sirens' wail grew closer, she called her friend and supervisor Elaine Prescott at Families United to ask her about Brotherhood Protectors.

### CHAPTER 3

December 27.

Early Friday morning.

“Are you sure you want this assignment?” Hank Patterson asked.

Sgt. Kristopher Bower, U.S. Army, retired, looked up from the study of the report to meet the unflinching gaze of his boss at Brotherhood Protectors regarding him from the wide screen in the BP safehouse office. “I haven’t had any contact with Syd Phillips’ family since his funeral five years ago.”

“Not even when you got back to Knoxville a few months ago?”

“No, sir.” Kristopher admitted. After years in the Army, not to mention his time as a police officer on the streets of Knoxville, addressing superior officers came automatically. Not that the Brotherhood Protectors’ founder asked for such treatment. But only a fool would not respect Hank Patterson. Kristopher might be many things, but being a fool was not one of them.

“You’ve read the particulars of the case I faxed over?” It was more of a statement than a question.

“Yes, sir,” Kristopher said. “Syd Phillips’ widow Mercy was killed in her home last night by persons unknown and her son David went missing. Shortly after that, her friend Suzanne Bennett—who’d received a call from David and went to the scene—was

later attacked in her home. After fighting off her attacker, she called Elaine Prescott who called us for help.”

The beginnings of rage stirred in Kristopher. Breaking into someone’s home was the ultimate insult. To kill those who lived there was even worse. His paternal cop grandfather had taught him that, along with many other things.

But the rage was nothing compared to the old guilt. He’d failed Syd five years ago when Kristopher’s street snitch led them into an ambush and Syd was killed, sending Kristopher back into the Army. It took a moment before he could ask, “What have the police learned so far?”

“Very little.” Frustration kept Hank’s mouth in a tight line. “No one has any idea why anyone would want to hurt Mrs. Phillips or her son. If Ms. Bennett knew anything, she didn’t tell the police. But if she does, Elaine Prescott, will get it out of her because she’s Ms. Bennett’s supervisor at Families United.”

“No doubt about that,” Kristopher agreed. Elaine was engaged to fellow BP member Griff Tyler and an incredible woman. She’d have to be, to have survived her recent ordeal with The Cadre, a notorious crime organization that was building its base in East Tennessee. She was smart, fearless and as tough as any woman Kristopher had served with in the army. “Was Ms. Bennett harmed in any way?”

For a moment, Hank’s eyes twinkled. “After giving her attacker a face full of pepper spray, I’d say he’s in far worse shape than she is. Unfortunately, he was masked and gloved, so all she could tell the police was he was tall, thinks he might be Caucasian and spoke with an English accent. She’s shaken and a bit bruised but that’s all.”

“Good for her,” Kristopher praised. “Have the police found any trace of David?” He searched his memory again for an image of Syd’s son. David had inherited his mother’s blonde hair and blue eyes but even five years ago, he had his father’s lean

build.

“No, but according to Grant Miller from KPD, a coat Ms. Bennett described was gone from the back of the chair in David’s room. So were his favorite high-tops, so let’s hope that wherever he is, he’s warm.”

“Absolutely.” Kristopher pushed his fists together. The office desk’s wood top was warm, but his hands were still cold. “The bastards have him, don’t they?” he asked. “The ones who killed Mercy?” The words tasted bitter.

“We don’t know,” Hank admitted grimly. “The police started a house-to-house search after they took Mrs. Phillips’ body to the morgue, but as of this morning, he hasn’t been seen by anyone.”

Kristopher nodded. He’d conducted many such searches in his time with KPD years ago. “Did Ms. Bennett stay with Elaine last night?”

“Elaine insisted on it,” Hank said. “We had a Zoom meeting about two o’clock this morning that lasted until almost four. If Ms. Bennett was attacked in her own home right after visiting the crime scene, it suggests the two crimes are related and someone tried to kill her as well.”

“How’d Ms. Bennett respond to that?” Kristopher asked.

Hank shrugged. “Not too well. Imagine your home being declared a crime scene.”

“Crime scene,” Kristopher repeated. How terribly cold and clinical that sounded. People’s homes weren’t supposed to be crime scenes, but all too often they were.

Hank locked his famous, steady gaze onto Kristopher’s face. “Hard question for you now, Brower. Grant Miller was first on the scene the night Sydney was killed in that

ambush. Do you think you can handle working more closely with him and keep your emotions in check?”

“I owe Syd my life several times over.” Kristopher said woodenly. “I was best man at his wedding and pall bearer at his funeral, so I need to do this. Need to help find David and get the bastards who killed his mother.”

And because I couldn’t face Mercy and David after Syd’s death, I ran back to the safety of the Army until you arranged for my discharge so I could join Brotherhood Protectors after my work in Romania was done. “Are our old friends The Cadre involved in this?”

The Cadre, a crime group out of Chicago, had infiltrated Knoxville’s criminal underworld early this year. While their operations included drug and weapons smuggling and distribution, their specialty was trafficking children, youth—especially runaways—and prostitutes all over the Eastern seaboard. Their ability to stay hidden had earned them the name ‘Los Silenciosos’ – Silent Ones – and it was said, “You’ll never see them coming until you do.” Kristopher’s first BP assignment earlier this month had involved helping to take down a Cadre operation involving the abduction of several young girls. BP hadn’t stopped them, but they’d at least slowed them down for a while.

And The Cadre did not hesitate to use violence, torture and murder to get what they wanted.

Hank shrugged. “We don’t have any evidence of that yet, but it wouldn’t surprise me.”

“Will Grant Miller be our point person with KPD again?”

“He will.” Hank gave Kristopher another hard stare. “Did you tell anyone from BP

that you and Miller once worked together?”

“Neither of us saw the need to share that particular piece of information.” Kristopher had not expected to work with Miller and neither man had spoken of their past association when they met again last month. “And I don’t see the need for anyone to know that now.”

Because Miller knows every last detail about what went down the night Syd died. There’s nothing to talk about. It won’t bring Syd back.

“You didn’t work that closely with Miller on the last case,” Hank reminded him. “But this is your case and you’ll be in regular contact.”

“I can handle it,” Kristopher said firmly, pushing the guilt back into its well-hidden place. “The mission is to find David Phillips and the people who killed his mother.”

“Sooner or later, Brower, you’re going to have stop blaming yourself for what happened to Sydney Phillips,” Hank said abruptly. “Your therapist at Brighter Days said you still had some residual issues over his death. I brought you into the Brotherhood because we need your knowledge and expertise on child trafficking to try to slow down what’s happening in East Tennessee, and I need you at 100 per cent.”

“You have it, sir,” Kristopher promised. He owed it to Syd, Mercy and David. They were family. Or had been. Anything less than 100 percent was unacceptable.

“Signing off.” Hank’s image vanished from the screen and Kristopher headed for the safehouse’s well-stocked home gym. A hard-work out was always good for clearing his mind, helping him to center on the task at hand, and keep his emotions under control. As his cop grandfather had taught him, “Cool heads always prevail.”



But Mercy Phillips' murder and her son's disappearance had torn open Kristopher's carefully buried sense of failure and everything that went along with it. Frustration. Rage. Guilt.

And worst of all, a horrible sense of irreparable loss. There wasn't a workout in the world that could take care of that. He'd failed Sydney Phillips five years ago and then his family by running away.

But by God, he wasn't going to fail them again. He'd find the bastards responsible for Mercy's death and David's vanishing and bring them to justice.

He just hoped he could keep Suzanne Bennett safe while he was doing it.

### CHAPTER 4

A little later that morning .

“Mom?”

Shivering, David Phillips sat up and blinked hard. What was he doing on the ground? The trees around him looked like the ones in the grove behind his house but how did he get here? He was stiff and cold but mostly he was hungry. He scratched his neck, and his fingers came back dirty. His heavy jacket was dirty too. At least he'd remembered to grab it from the back of his chair. But why was he here? Where was his mom?

Then he remembered hearing his mother crying, begging someone to stop, please stop and a funny voice telling her to shut up. He remembered calling Suze Bennett too and then crawling out his bedroom window onto the deck outside and running down the stairs and into the woods like Mom had always told him to do if someone broke into the house.

But he couldn't remember where he and Mom were supposed to meet up when something like this happened. Back at the house? At Suze's place? No, that was way too far, even if he had his bicycle. And if Mom were still at the house, why hadn't she come to look for him?

His sudden trembling was not from being cold, even though he was. Something bad had happened to his mom. Something really bad.

Crunching leaves, a sneeze and a loud curse had David pulling on his backpack and scurrying deeper into the grove towards what the kids on the block called “The Big Tree.” It was huge with large fat branches that led higher and higher until you got to the fattest one almost at the top. David was the only one that could climb all the way up there, earning him the nickname “Monkey” from his friends.

He took his gloves from his coat pocket and pulled them on, glad he’d shoved his feet into his best sneakers. Otherwise, he’d never be able to make the climb. He pulled himself up to the first branch, then the next, hoping whoever it was, couldn’t hear the chattering of his teeth ‘cause it sounded like ice cubes falling out of the front of the ‘fridge.

He reached the biggest, fattest branch and pulled himself up. Leaning against the trunk, he sat and drew his legs to his chest, planted his feet firmly on the branch and wrapped his arms around his legs. When he was sure he was steady, he looked at the ground.

Whoever it was wore a big black jacket, jeans and a UT knitted cap. He might be tall but from up here, it was kinda hard to be sure. After a moment, the dude took off his hat and rubbed his head. Even up here, David could see he was a white guy, and he was bald. But what was that funny thing on his head? Looked like a big red bird.

“Dude” leaned against the tree, head down, as if listening for something. He stood there a long, long time. Finally, he spoke, and David forced himself not to breathe. He sure didn’t want Dude to hear that.

“Where the hell are you, kid?” he asked, putting on his cap again. “Too damn cold to be outside, so you must have gone to ground somewhere.”

Gone to ground . David remembered that from the English detective stories he and Mom sometimes watched with Suzanne. It meant hiding in a place where no one

could find you. If Dude didn't look up, David would be okay. Maybe.

But he couldn't stay up here all day, and he was really, really hungry.

After what seemed like seven forever's, the man pushed himself off the tree and headed back into the grove. David waited another seven forever's before climbing down again.

Gone to ground, he repeated. Going home didn't seem like a good idea, so, he'd have to find some place to hide until he could figure out how to get word to Mom that he was okay and to please come and get him. If she'd only bought him a cell phone for Christmas, he could just call her.

But for now, he needed to find a place to hide.

### CHAPTER 5

Still later Friday morning

“What do you mean, there was a child in the house?” Gregori Bogdan’s hands grabbed the neck of the man he only knew as Kraft. “Who is he?”

“David Phillips, Mercy Phillips’s son,” Kraft gasped with a cigarette hanging out of his mouth, his fingers tugging at Bogdan’s grip.

“And why was this mistake made?” Bogdan released his hands. There would be time enough to kill Kraft later. “Why was I not told? This could disrupt everything.”

“I don’t know.” Kraft whined, rubbing his throat. “What if the boy saw you before he got away and he went to the police?”

“Fool!” Bogdan slapped him, hard. “If he had gone to the police, we would know it by now.” But what if the boy had?

“Why didn’t you take someone with you?” Kraft’s question was almost a whimper. He was obviously afraid. Good. He should be very afraid of Gregori Bogdan.

“I do my killing alone,” Bogdan answered. He had not hesitated to strangle Mercy Phillips. She was a threat to The Cadre and so must die. That was his mission and what he was paid to do. “If I had known there was a child in the house, he would be dead as well. I do not leave loose ends. Do you at least know what this David Phillips looks like?”

“Blond, blue-eyed and medium build,” Kraft offered. “And he’s ten years old. Do you think someone’s hiding him?”

If they are, I will kill them too. “I have no idea,” Bogdan growled. He would enjoy killing this punk-ass man-child later.

“So, what do I tell—

“That is my business, not yours. You have delivered your message. Now go.” And just because he could, Bogdan slapped him again.

Kraft couldn’t get out fast enough, nearly falling to the ground as he exited. Seconds later, his car engine fired up and he drove off like all the devils of hell were after him. Better to be chased by them than Bogdan. He would deal with The Cadre for sending a punk-ass to deliver their message.

He rolled down the windows to let the stench from the cigarette Kraft had dared to smoke without asking permission to waft out of the car. Cigarettes were such a waste of money. Bogdan never wasted money. Growing up on the mean streets of Bucharest, he remembered all too well what it was like not to have it. Those years had served him well.

The Cadre had hired Bogdan to bring in a group of young girls from Eastern Europe for an upcoming event where those with an appetite for young flesh could view and purchase those they wanted. Bogdan was very good at his job and until recently had been very successful. One does not arrive at the top of Interpol’s ‘most wanted list’ by not being so.

And not being told about David Phillips was a big mistake on The Cadre’s part. Bogdan didn’t mind taking risks. It came with the job. But unnecessary risks were not acceptable. To leave out such vital information that his target had a son living with

her was stupid and careless. And when people were stupid and careless they got killed. Bogdan had no intention of being killed.

But now that he knew about David Phillips, Bogdan had other plans for him. A blond, blue-eyed boy who was ten would fetch huge sums of money in Europe. When Bogdan found him, he would keep him and sell him to the highest bidder among his own clients. To hell with The Cadre and their clumsiness. And he would certainly ask for more money for killing that couple from the shelter earlier this morning. If they had refused to let Mercy Phillips talk to those girls at the shelter, none of this would have happened and he wouldn't have had to kill her or them.

Now he was waiting for instructions from The Cadre about what to do about the woman who'd shown up at Mercy Phillips' house. He'd crept out of the woods while she was in the house last night and taken a picture of her license late without being seen. Bogdan was very good at that. He'd forwarded it to his contact at the DMV—the one who liked young boys—and got a name. Suzanne Bennett, a social worker, and friend of Mercy Phillips. Maybe she was hiding the boy.

His phone's screen lit up with an answer to his question about the Bennett woman.  
**FIND AND KILL HER.**

And with that new assignment, he started his car. Now Bogdan needed to deal with Toby and his failure to kill Suzanne last night, even before they knew who she was. Bogdan sympathized with his not-so-bright partner. Being pepper-sprayed was never pleasant but at least it had not been so strong it kept Toby from searching for David Phillips this morning. The last time they'd seen Suzanne Bennett was when she got into the police cruiser earlier this morning at her home. But they would find her. And then Bogdan would let Toby kill her.

### CHAPTER 6

Still later that morning

“Have you been able to reach anyone at Tennessee Children’s Services?” Suzanne asked.

She and Elaine Prescott sat on the sofa in the latter’s office at Families United. After the former director was caught in a pedophile sting this past autumn, Elaine was appointed as the agency’s acting director and was expected to be made director after the first of the new year.

“No.” Elaine sounded rueful as she filled their cups with strong black tea from a china pot. “With Christmas falling on a Wednesday this year, they’re running with a skeleton staff, and Mercy’s supervisor Lucinda Gonzalez, is out until Monday. And like Mercy, I don’t want to share her suspicions with just anyone. With her suspicions about that couple at the shelter Tennessee Cares operates being involved with both the Campbell and Clark sisters disappearing, it will become a problem between the two agencies. And Tennessee Cares is closing at noon today. We’re stuck with waiting.”

“It doesn’t seem right not to call someone,” Suzanne insisted, putting down her cup. “But I’m grateful Families United is open, and you gave up your day off to help with this.”

“You know I’d do that.” Concern drew Elaine’s eyebrows together. “Was there a reason you didn’t tell Grant Miller what Mercy told you yesterday?”



Suzanne shook her head. "I guess I was too stunned to think about it, especially after that guy attacked me."

"Completely understandable," Elaine agreed. "You were in shock about Mercy and David too."

"And when Sergeant Miller texted me this morning, he only said none of Mercy's neighbors saw or heard anything last night and had no idea where David might be," Suzanne continued. Heart aching, she added, "and I have no idea where he would go."

"You need to let Grant Miller know what Mercy told you right now," Elaine urged. "Has he notified Mercy's family yet?"

"He said they found her cell phone crushed into bits," Suzanne said sadly. "So was the Snoopy-Woodstock phone in David's room. I also forget to tell him Mercy's parents are in Europe, and she didn't tell me where they were going."

"Oh dear," Elaine sighed. "Someone's going to need to identify Mercy's body."

Her statement chased the cup's warmth from Suzanne's hands, and she quickly set it on the table in front of them. "Oh, Lord," she whispered. "I can't—what if Grant Miller asks me to do that?"

"I'll go with you if he does," Elaine offered quickly. "But you need to text him right now and tell—"

A quick knock at Elaine's partially open door cut her off as office manager Barbara Simmons stepped inside. "I'm sorry to interrupt, Elaine," she said. "But that guy you were expecting is here. Sergeant Kristopher Brower?"

“Thank you, Barbara,” Elaine said. “Why are you grinning like a cat in a room full of canaries?”

“‘Cause he’s the best-looking thing on two legs that I’ve seen in a month of Sundays,” Barbara declared. “A little whipped cream and a cherry on top and he’d be good enough to eat.”

“You’re terrible,” Elaine scolded but she was smiling. “What would Fred say if he heard you talking like that? And about a younger man?”

Barbara winked. “Never hurts to look,” she declared. “But I knew when I first laid eyes on my husband of fifty years, he was my one and only. I’ll go fetch your visitor.”

She left, whistling Deck the Halls and despite the situation, Suzanne laughed, grateful for the break in the sorrow. “I’d hate to think of what would happen if Barbara left Families United.”

“Hush,” Elaine scolded. “She’s under strict orders not to retire until she turns one hundred, so we’ve got her for almost another thirty years.”

“Sergeant Kristopher Brower,” Barbara announced from the doorway. A tall man in black trousers and heavy black jacket waited behind her.

“Kristopher, come in.” Elaine rose to greet him. “You look nearly frozen. Thanks, Barbara.”

He entered, then turned and said, “Thank you, Mrs. Simmons,” before looking back at them. “Good to see you again, Elaine,” he said, taking off his gloves and putting them in his jacket pocket.

“You too, Kristopher,” Elaine said. “No doubt, Hank has already filled you in on the situation.”

“He has,” Sergeant Brower confirmed as Suzanne stood and Elaine said, “Suzanne, meet Sergeant Kristopher Brower, US Army, retired, now with Brotherhood Protectors. Kristopher, this is my friend and colleague, Suzanne Bennett. She and Mercy Phillips were friends.”

He came forward to offer Suzanne his hand. Strength pulsed there as his long fingers wrapped around hers, his skin warm and soothing. He looked like he was right at six feet tall which meant she’d have to wear heels to kiss him.

Good Heavens! Where did that come from? Barbara, you are a bad influence. Suzanne gave herself a swift, mental kick but had to admit with his short black hair, pencil thin moustache and hazel eyes, Sergeant Kristopher Brower made a very nice package indeed, even without whipped cream and a cherry.

“I see you have coffee,” Sergeant Brower said, gesturing at the machine on the stand in the corner. “I’ll help myself before we get started.”

When he rejoined them, he sat in the high back chair in front of the table and crossed his legs. “I’m sorry to meet you under the present circumstances and also for your loss, Ms. Bennett,” he said. “Have we learned anything since yesterday about Mrs. Phillips murder or her son’s whereabouts?”

His voice was low-pitched and melodious with a trace of an East Tennessee accent. Suzanne shook her head. “I was just telling Elaine that Sergeant Grant Miller from KPD-have you met him, Sergeant Brower? –hasn’t learned anything new about either so far. But I guess since it’s less than twenty-four hours, that’s not unusual.”

“Probably not,” he agreed. “And yes, I’ve met Grant Miller. We worked on a case

together earlier this month. And it's Kristopher with a K. May I call you Suzanne?"

Suzanne nodded and Elaine added, "Kristopher worked with my friends Patrick—who's with BP—and Danni. Danni can't stop talking about how helpful you were."

"Glad to be of service," Kristopher said. "What should we do first, Suzanne?"

Suzanne and Elaine traded glances before Suzanne spoke. "I need to tell Sergeant Miller something Mercy told me yesterday over lunch," and described what her friend had shared.

Concern narrowed the BP member's eyes. "That's not good," he said.

"I was just about to text him." Suzanne tried to keep from sounding defensive. "And before you accuse me of anything, all the agencies involved are closed until Monday so I couldn't have called anyone."

"I meant the situation about two sets of missing young girls," he responded. "Sounds like a kidnapping."

"And if that is what's going on, we need to be very careful about who we tell other than the police," Elaine added. "At least the shelter staff notified them when the Campbell sisters went missing. Grant Miller confirmed that. But how can we determine if the two cases are related?"

Silence filled the room, and the pounding of her heart roared in Suzanne's ears. The only other sounds were the faint whoosh of cars driving by and the chiming of church bells down the street.

'Kristopher with a K' set down his cup and switched his study of Suzanne to Elaine.

“Are you thinking The Cadre might be involved with this?” He gestured at Suzanne.  
“Does she know about them?”

“I told her about them last night,” Elaine said. “After that monster attacked her, you can’t blame her for not remembering to tell Grant Miller about Mercy’s suspicions. It’s a wonder she got any sleep at all.”

“I’m sorry if I gave you the impression that I was accusing you of doing something—or not doing something, Suzanne.” His smile was gentle and some of the tension in Suzanne’s shoulders lessened.

“Thanks,” she said and choked back an unexpected sob. She took a quick sip of her tea before adding, “Sorry to be so shaky.”

“No reason to be,” he said. “You’ve lost a friend under horrific circumstances and were attacked in your home. Anyone would be upset. Did you bring your suitcase from Elaine’s?”

“I did.” She favored him with a tiny smile and Kristopher’s heart hitched upwards. Her glossy chestnut bobbed hair swung just above her shoulders and her dark brown eyes rivaled a good, dark chocolate. She was petite but with plenty of curves and looked like she might be able to hold her own in a fight.

But a kind of weariness that only comes with sorrow had stained the skin under her eyes and he wondered if she’d slept at all last night.

“Elaine told me to pack as though I would be away for at least two weeks,” she said, pointing at the oversize rolling suitcase in a corner. “I hear BP has its own safehouse. One decorated like a luxury hotel with a state-of-the-art computer lab, gym with a pool and a fully equipped kitchen?”

“We do,” Kristopher acknowledged, and wondered if she’d heard about Patrick banning him from the kitchen unless to clean up after dinner. “I think you’ll be comfortable. Why don’t we go there first so you can unpack? You can text Miller about Mercy’s news while I’m bringing the car around.”

“If you don’t mind, I’d really like to go back to David’s neighborhood first and try to talk to some of the people who know him,” Suzanne requested. “And then go to Mercy’s and help look for her address book. I guess Grant Miller will need to okay that since it’s probably still a crime scene, like my house.”

She choked again and lowered her head. Elaine took the cup from her, set it on the table and covered Suzanne’s hands with her own while Kristopher’s outrage at the insult of her being assaulted in her home after learning her friend was dead started a slow burn in his chest again.

But Elaine’s simple act of holding her silently weeping friend’s hands acted like a balm to a wound, because Suzanne Bennett’s quiet tears quickly slowed, and Kristopher knew sometimes being silent was the best thing to do.

And then because even before he was a Brotherhood Protector, or a U.S. Army veteran, he was a gentleman. Reaching into his inner jacket pocket, he pulled out a handkerchief and passed it to Suzanne. Taking it, she dabbed her eyes, then pressed it to first one cheek, then the other. Some of the color came back into her face and he noticed for the first time the warm, tawny hue of her skin. Suzanne Bennett was a beauty alright, and he wondered why Hank Patterson hadn’t included her photo in his faxed report.

Withholding his sigh of appreciation, Kristopher said, “I’ll go ahead and take your bag to my car. Is that yours?” He pointed at the bright pink coat draped over the back of the sofa.

“It is.” Suzanne tucked the handkerchief into her dress pocket. “And thanks.”

“Don’t forget to put it on,” Kristopher advised. “It’s cold outside.”

He fetched the suitcase and pulled it from the room into the hallway and then out to his car. A thin ray of sunlight had worked its way through the gun metal gray clouds, and he sent up a hasty prayer for calm. He needed to tell Suzanne Bennett about working with Grant Miller five years ago, as well as knowing Mercy and David Phillips.

But not about Syd Phillips and how he died. Kristopher wasn’t ready to tell her about that just yet.

### CHAPTER 7

“What did Grant Miller say about you talking to Mercy’s neighbors and helping to look for her address book?” Kristopher asked as they drove south in his decommissioned black and white patrol car.

“He’s not answered my text yet,” Suzanne replied. “I told him it was important, but who knows what else he might be dealing with today? I’ve always heard the holidays are one of the busiest times for law enforcement.”

“That’s what my grandfather Joe always said,” Kristopher agreed. “And he was a cop for almost forty years. He’s the one who got me this car.

“Hmm.” Her eyebrows drew together. “Do you think Grant will let us into Mercy’s house?”

“I think as long as there’s an officer there, he won’t mind us looking around,” Kristopher replied. “But we should wait for permission, if only out of respect for Miller’s position.” Just tell her.

“Good idea,” she agreed. “We’ll wait. Elaine said he’s good at his job.”

“You’ve got that right.” He paused, gathered his thoughts and said, “There’s something I need to tell you, Suzanne. About this case.”

Curiosity brightened her eyes. “I’m listening,” she said.



“I was on the KPD police force five years ago and worked with Grant Miller occasionally before I joined the Army. And I know–knew–Mercy Phillips and her son David too, though I’ve not seen them since I returned to Knoxville when I joined Brotherhood Protectors this past autumn.”

Silence filled the car and tension tightened his stomach. Was she angry? Puzzled? Suspicious at why he took the case?

Tilting her head, she asked, “Did you know Mercy’s husband Syd?”

“Yes,” Kristopher chose his next words carefully. “I sometimes worked with him too. He was a damn good cop. How long have you known Mercy?”

“About four years,” she said. “She didn’t talk much about Sydney, said it was still too painful.”

“It would be,” he said. You ass. You should have reached out to her the moment you got back to Knoxville.

“Does Elaine know that you worked with Grant Miller and KPD five years ago?”

“I don’t know,” he said, glad he could be honest on this score. “It never came up when I was working the case with Patrick and Danni, which actually only ended a few days ago, but someone else might have told her.”

“Did you work with Grant Miller on that case?”

“A bit,” he admitted. “We were too busy trying to find the kidnapped kids to spend a lot of time together. No problems, but I thought you should know.”

“Hmm.” He could almost see the wheels turning in her head. “Anything else you

want to tell me?”

“I think that’s it. Could I ask you something?”

At her silent nod, he continued. “I know you were exhausted and in a state of shock when you spoke to Miller after being attacked, but was there any other reason you didn’t tell him about what Mercy told you?”

“Are you familiar with inter-agency protocol?”

“I know about HIPPA guidelines for confidential records if that’s what you mean,” Kristopher said. “And like Elaine said, if there is something going on at that youth shelter, you’ll want to be damn sure about who you talk to, especially if The Cadre is somehow involved. Until we know that, the less said to the fewer, the better.”

“Please don’t think that I don’t trust Grant Miller,” she said quickly. “Elaine would have said something if he weren’t trustworthy. You’re right. I was so shocked about what happened to Mercy and being scared for David, I just forgot.”

“Understandable,” Kristopher echoed Elaine’s words. “And don’t minimize being attacked right after that. Shock can do funny things to the brain. How much sleep did you get last night?”

That tiny smile returned, brightening her face. “Not much,” she said. “Elaine mixed me a hot toddy, calling it ‘Mac’s special brew’, a recipe from a Brotherhood Protector friend. It must have been a ‘soft’ one ‘cause it didn’t really help much.”

“I’ve heard about that toddy,” Kristopher admitted with a grin. “They’re usually lethal.” He couldn’t wait to give Mac hell about this.

Her brown-eyed scrutiny warmed him, and some of his tension melted away. “How

do you know about HIPPA?" she asked. "From your work with KPD?"

"My mom is an OB-GYN," Kristopher told her. "I grew up hearing about such things. Did Mercy ever have problems like this with her caseload?"

"I doubt it," Suzanne said. "She was a great case manager. Wouldn't put up with kids being outrageous or sassy and told them so from the get-go. They loved her for it, and she always went the extra mile for them."

Kristopher's fingers tapped the steering wheel. "I wonder who's job it will be to tell The Campbell sisters' mother they're missing."

"Oh dear," she murmured. "I hadn't even thought of that. And Mercy didn't say."

"You've had a lot on your plate in the past eighteen hours," Kristopher said gently. "We'll ask Miller when he calls how that should be handled. Did Mercy know the Clark sisters' case manager?"

"She didn't say if she did," Suzanne said. "And she probably didn't ask that couple at the shelter any questions to keep from arousing their suspicions. And before you ask, the Campbell sisters were the only kids Mercy had at the shelter."

"That's a relief," Kristopher said thoughtfully. "I have a feeling Erin and Joey are wherever the Clark sisters are. The million-dollar question is, where? And why were the Clark sisters taken as well?"

The Cadre. The Cadre wants them.

Suzanne's phone trilled from the holder on the dashboard. "It's Grant Miller," she said. "Are we ready?"

“Have you worked with him before?” Kristopher asked.

“No, but I’ve met him,” Suzanne said. “We sometimes do volunteer work at one of the local food banks.”

“What if he says ‘no’ to your request to talk to Mercy’s neighbors?” Kristopher asked. “It’s one thing to help look for her address book but considering someone tried to kill you last night, he might think it’s too dangerous for you to be involved in this investigation.”

“I’ll decide when I hear what he has to say,” Suzanne Bennett’s scowl rivaled his grandmother’s when she was annoyed at him.

“Okay.” Holding back his chuckle, Kristopher tapped the phone’s screen and hoped this was the last time he was on the receiving end of Suzanne Bennett’s scowl. Hopefully, Grant Miller had faced it before and knew how to handle it.

### CHAPTER 8

A meeting room in Knoxville at the same time

“Do you want those girls or not?” Bogdan asked. “I can find others who want them, others who will not make such mistakes as not telling me about David Phillips.”

“I apologize,” Samuels, his Cadre contact said smoothly. “A mistake on the part of someone new to the organization. It will not happen again.”

“I would have preferred to do that myself,” Bogdan told him. At least Samuels was high in the ranks of The Cadre and not like that little pissant Kraft. Bogdan had no doubt that Samuels was not the man’s real name. No matter. In businesses such as his, secrecy was often required. As long they were honest with Bogdan and paid him what he was due, they could call themselves anything they liked.

“I think we may have a way of compensating you for your trouble,” Samuels said, taking several stacks of money from the desk drawer and sliding them forward. “Payment for killing the Taylors this morning. It was only a matter of time before they talked to the police.”

“More money is always acceptable,” Bogdan replied, picking up one of the stacks and thumbing through it. Smart of The Cadre to recognize he needed to be compensated. “What else?”

“There is an organization that has caused problems for The Cadre since we arrived in East Tennessee earlier this year,” Samuels said. “They call themselves Brotherhood

Protectors, largely made up of ex-military men and women who hire out their services for those who are in danger. It is likely that one of them will be hired to protect Suzanne Bennett, and even David Phillips when he is found.”

“And you want me to kill him as well as Suzanne Bennett?” Bogdan asked. He had no intention of sharing with The Cadre his own plans for David Phillips. That would make up for the earlier disrespect.

“Yes,” Samuels said simply. He turned to the silent masked man beside him. “Is there anything you wish to ask?”

“No,” the man said after a moment. “Just that I am hearing from more clients every day about the purchase of the girls you’ve provided. Can you possibly acquire more at this late date?”

“Perhaps,” Bogdan said. “But that will also cost.”

Both men nodded and Samuels said, “I will send you a dossier on the Brotherhood Protector when I have confirmed his identity. There will be no more mistakes, I assure you.”

“There better not be,” Bogdan warned, staring at the silent man. Only a coward would wear a mask to such a meeting. “I will be waiting for your information.”

He gathered the money and stuffed it into his coat’s inner pockets before leaving the room without saying goodbye. After the door closed, the other man asked, “Just how dangerous is he?”

“Very,” Samuels said. “If this gets fucked up again, he’ll kill us without mercy and vanish before we get to enjoy what we’ve worked so hard to make happen. Be careful who you send to deal with him.”

“Then we’ll just have to kill him after he delivers the merchandise,” the man said removing his mask. “You can do that, can’t you?”

Samuels smiled. “To paraphrase our greedy friend, for a price.”

“You’ll have the first pick of the girls?” the man offered.

Samuels smiled. “That will do.”

And they shook hands in silent agreement.

“Are you crazy? Absolutely not!” Grant Miller’s shout came through the phone’s speaker loud and clear at Suzanne wanting to talk to Mercy’s neighbors. He’d been annoyed enough at her not telling him about what Mercy had shared with her about the Campbell sisters and their claim, but her request had clearly infuriated him.

“You are not going door-to-door in Mercy’s neighborhood asking questions, is that clear?” Miller lowered his voice, but his biting diction proved his anger was still volatile. “That is an order.”

“But I’ve met some of her neighbors—” Suzanne started, but one look at Miller’s expression on the screen shut her up.

“I don’t care,” Miller retorted. “You were targeted in your own home last night, Suzanne. Someone followed you as soon as you left Mercy’s house. It’s nothing short of a miracle you weren’t killed. You can look for Mercy’s address book, but that’s it.”

“How likely is it the killers are still hanging around?” Suzanne persisted. “That wouldn’t be very smart.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Miller said. “I’m not taking a chance of you being seen. Besides, my guys have just finished talking to Mercy Phillips neighbors and they all deny knowing anything.”

“If one of the neighbors comes to the house while we’re there, could she talk to them?” Kristopher asked. “Your men would be there, so it would be safe enough, right?”

“No,” Miller said firmly. “Officer Jackson is going to wait for you. And it’s the job of KPD to interview people, not yours, Suzanne. I’ll give you an hour to search through the house, but then Sergeant Brower, I expect you to take her back to whatever safehouse you’re using and keep her there.” It was obvious that he was not going to give in an inch.

“I’ve met one or two of Mercy’s neighbors at block parties,” Suzanne continued her plea. “If they know anything they might be more willing to talk to me because they know me.”

“The answer is still no.” Miller’s tone could have sliced through steel.

“Did you find her laptop?” Suzanne asked. “She usually kept it on her office desk.”

“I’m sorry to say like her phone, it was destroyed,” Miller said. “Do you think there was something work-related on it?”

“No,” Suzanne said. “Just a thought.”

“Okay. You have an hour,” Miller repeated. “Got it?”

“Absolutely,” Kristopher said, trying not to look at the very frustrated woman beside him.



“Okay,” Miller repeated. His gaze seemed to target Kristopher. “Have you told her we worked together? That you were with KPD?”

“I did,” Kristopher acknowledged. “We’re good there. We’ll contact you if we find something. Talk to you later.”

He ended the call and glanced at Suzanne. “You okay there, Miz Bennett?”

“Was he that stubborn when you worked with him in the past?” she huffed.

“He could be,” Kristopher said. The anger on her face did not make her any less pretty and Kristopher wondered what she might look like when she was really angry or in the throes of passion. Hell’s bells, Brower! You just met her! Get your mind out from between the bed sheets! You’re here to protect her, nothing more.

“But he’s fully invested in helping Brotherhood Protectors when we’re on the job,” Kristopher assured. “He cares a lot about keeping kids safe and stopping or at least slowing down The Cadre. Did Elaine tell you about Tennessee Task Force?”

“She did,” Suzanne said, and he watched some of the anger fade from her face. “It sounds like a great organization. And it makes sense, all the agencies, including law enforcement joining together to find and rescue missing and trafficked kids. My work is placing underemployed or disabled adults in employment situations, and I have almost no professional experience with kids.”

“I’d like to hear about that later,” he said. “Maybe over lunch?”

“Sure thing,” she agreed. Let’s go help Officer Jackson.” She sighed and added, “For now that’s going to have to be enough.”

### CHAPTER 9

A little later

“There’s that Bennett bitch!” Toby hissed, nearly yanking the drapes from the rod. “What’s she doing back here? And who’s that with her?”

Bogdan shoved him away and the drapes settled back into place, but not before he’d seen Suanne Bennett exit from the old-fashioned black and white squad car once so popular in America that had pulled into the Phillips’ circular driveway. A tall man with an unmistakable military bearing got out from the driver’s side.

Brotherhood Protectors uses ex-military men and women. Was this man with that organization? They had wasted no time in arranging for Suzanne Bennett’s protection. She must know a great deal more about The Cadre’s work than they had guessed.

“Calm yourself,” he warned the glowering Toby. “I told you she would come back. Soft-hearted women always stick their noses where they don’t belong, especially if it involves children. Those bleeding hearts always think they can save the world.”

“What are we gonna do now?” Toby asked sullenly.

“We wait and watch for them to come out,” Bogdan told him. Breaking into this empty house across the street last night after he killed Mercy Phillips had been child’s play and the perfect place to hide. The FOR-SALE SIGN in the front yard had guaranteed that. Even though it was just two days after Christmas, a realtor might

come by later to show the property, so they needed to leave soon and return after dark.

“I’ll bet that guy with her is a cop,” Toby muttered. “How am I supposed to get close to her when she’s got a cop with her? I’m not about to kill a cop, no matter what our bosses say. That’s the death penalty for sure.”

“You are too eager, Toby,” Bogdan warned softly. “Being too eager leads to mistakes, and our employers want no mistakes.” The Cadre thought they were scary, but Bogdan had worked for scarier people in Europe. Fools.

“So, what are we going to do?” Toby demanded again.

“There is a bicycle in the garage,” Bogdan said. “Go get it and go out through the side door there and wait. When you see the black and white leave, follow them at a distance. Do you have what you need if they should stop?”

“Yeah, but what if I lose them?” Toby demanded. “How am I supposed to find her again?”

“You won’t,” Bogdan told him. “She will snoop around, I guarantee it, and you will find her. You will have your way with the Bennett woman. Now, go.”

Still muttering, Toby left, and Bogdan tweaked the drapes aside just enough to peer outside. Yes, there was something familiar about that man with Suzanne Bennett. It would come to him soon enough. It always did, but now he was tired and needed to sleep. Killing three people so close together, while necessary, was exhausting. He just hoped he wouldn’t have to kill Toby for being a hot head.

And there was something familiar about that man. Bogdan raised his high-powered binoculars, parted the drapes, and waited.

“Well, that was a lot of nothing,” Suzanne complained as they drove out of Mercy’s driveway. Despite searching every possible hiding place where Mercy might have hidden her address book, they’d found nothing, not even her parents’ travel itinerary.

“You tried,” Kristopher reassured her. “Any chance she left it at work?”

“Maybe,” Suzanne said. “She always bought a one address–appointment book at the first of the year, so maybe that’s where it is.”

“Or maybe her killer took it, thinking the people in it might know something,” Kristopher suggested. “It’s not likely that David took it, is it?”

She gasped and he watched tears brighten her eyes and then roll down her cheeks. “No,” she choked, lowering her head so her hair framed her face.

Damn, Brower. How about a little sensitivity? He pulled over to the curb and reached for her hand. “If I let you shoot me for being a first-class asshole, will that help?”

“Probably,” she said her head still lowered. “Are you ‘packing’?”

“Always,” he said. “Suzanne, that was the stupidest damn thing I’ve ever said to anyone. I’m sorry.”

She looked up and Kristopher’s heart turned over at the sorrow haunting her face. “It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not,” he insisted. “My protecting you is more than just keeping you physically safe. It’s—”

“But you’re right,” she interrupted, squeezing his hand. “As much as it hurts, the facts are still the facts. Someone killed Mercy, most likely for what she guessed or knew

about the Campbell girls vanishing. And whoever did that, most likely has David. Or he's hiding somewhere and too terrified to move."

"And we're going to find him." Kristopher undid his safety belt to move closer and enfold her in his arms. "My gut tells me we're gonna do that."

"Me too," she whispered, raising her head to accept his kiss. Her lips were soft and sweet, tasting like coffee and cream, one of Kristopher's favorite things. Best slowly savored, and even better when done between the sheets of a very warm bed.

Then they were pulling back, muttering apologies, smoothing their hair and clothing. Suzanne took out his handkerchief from her dress pocket, dried her face and then looked over his shoulder. "Do you think Grant Miller will be mad at us if we go look at something?"

"That depends," Kristopher said, savoring the lingering taste of her lips on his while mentally kicking himself for lack of control. "What is it?"

"Over there." She leaned against him again, which was quite all right with Kristopher. "Or actually, down the street and around the corner. There's a skateboard park. Whatcha want to bet there's some kids trying out new boards? And maybe some of them know David?"

"Is he a boarder?" Kristopher asked.

"He wants to be," Suzanne said. "I'm giving him one for his birthday next month, but he likes to hang out at the park and talk to the kids there."

"Well, Miz Bennett," Kristopher drawled. "We won't know if there's anyone there unless we go look. But if we find someone, what do we do? Watch or ask questions?"

“Ask questions,” Miz Bennett decided. “What could it hurt?”

“And what if we make Sergeant Miller really mad?” Kristopher wanted to respect his former colleague, but he had a feeling that Suzanne Bennett would have her own way, no matter what.

“Easier to ask forgiveness than get permission,” she declared. “Let’s go see.”

### CHAPTER 10

He followed her directions and drove into another well-maintained neighborhood. Most of the houses lining the street were still decorated for the holidays with inflated Santa's, reindeer and Grinches in the yard, with colored lights wrapped under and over the roofs and ribbon wrapped wreaths hanging from the windows and doors.

"Everything looks so festive," Suzanne commented. "Such a contrast to what's happened in the past twenty-four hours."

"Sure is," Kristopher's voice was soft, and she wondered if he, like she, was thinking about their kiss. Stupid, girl. Really stupid. "Turn right," she directed, pointing at a stop sign.

"Got it." Kristopher continued their drive until he reached a gate with a set of open double doors. An arrowed sign led them to a parking area overlooking the skatepark and he eased the car into a lined space. A flight of steps led down to the area and from the car they could see a tall, lone figure navigating the ramps with terrifying speed and skill. Kristopher switched off the car and they sat watching the boarder. After several moments of silence, he asked, "Now what?"

"Is that a boy?" she pointed at the figure. "It's hard to tell in that slouchy beanie and baggie clothes all the kids wear these days."

Kristopher rested his arms on the steering wheel and watched the boarder execute moves that would make Tom Schaar and Tony Hawk proud. "It's a guy," he affirmed after a minute. "I mean, look at those shoulders. Do you think you know him?"

“You have good eyes. And I think I recognize him because of his hat.” Suzanne pointed at the rainbow-hued beanie. “He’s a foster care kid who lives down the street from Mercy and if I’m not mistaken, his name is T.J. Fielding. David loves to watch him practice, says he’s ‘a wicked boarder’ that practices here all the time, and always wears that beanie. I’m guessing that might be him.”

“Is T.J. one of Mercy’s kids?” Kristopher continued to watch in awe as the kid launched himself into the air, flipped and landed with effortless agility. He was very good.

“No, but I met him—if it’s him—at the annual neighborhood ‘Meet, Greet and Eat’ gathering the day after Thanksgiving. He’s fifteen years old and he’s kind of a loner, but David worships him.”

“‘Meet, Greet and Eat?’” Kristopher repeated. “What’s that? A get-together where people bring leftovers from Turkey Day?”

Her soft laughter warmed him. “Exactly,” she said. “There’s another park nearby with covered areas and picnic tables. People in the neighborhood gather, and not only share their leftover food but play croquet and volleyball or bring musical instruments and organize games for the children. Mercy said T.J. was placed with a new family a few months ago and the placement seemed to be working, but he was also moved a lot, or he ran.”

“Guess his worker isn’t as good as Mercy, huh.”

“No one was.” Tears sparkled in Suzanne’s eyes again and Kristopher wondered if she’d had time—or allowed herself—time to have a good, hard cry since Mercy was killed. It wasn’t even twenty-four hours yet.

“Well, then let’s go see if this our T.J.” Kristopher suggested. “Then we’ll know what



to do.”

### CHAPTER 11

“I wonder where all the other kids are,” Kristopher voiced his curiosity as they exited the car and headed for the stairs. “One would expect the park would be full, with everyone trying out their new boards and shoes two days after Christmas. Or even if they just come hang out.”

“Maybe their parents are making them stay inside because of Mercy,” Suzanne suggested. “News like that probably has them barricading their doors, refusing to let their kids go anywhere without them.”

“And having your parents glued to your side would be the very worst thing for a fifteen-year-old,” Kristopher recalled.

“I wouldn’t know,” she said, keeping her gaze on the boy. “I went into foster care for the first time when I was eight years old.”

Her statement stopped him, and he put his hands on her shoulders to turn her to face him. “You grew up in foster care?”

“More or less,” she said. “Lots of moving around but I’ll tell you about that over lunch, okay?”

“Sure,” he said quickly. “Didn’t mean to pry.”

“It’s okay, Kristopher with a K.” Her tone teased him, but her eyes said otherwise. “Here’s the short version. My grandparents on both sides tried to take care of me, but

they all had serious health problems, so I wound up in foster care. I was moved so often I kept half of my clothing in my suitcase.”

“I’m sorry,” he said again. “Tell me to shut up if I get too personal. After all, we did just meet a few hours ago.”

“So, we did.” The teasing lilt returned to her voice.

They reached the steps, and Kristopher instinctively offered her his arm and a protective wave ran over him as she touched him.

“No ice,” she commented as they descended. “That’s good, ‘cause I don’t think these boots were made for climbing down slippery stairs.”

“I won’t let you fall,” Kristopher promised. “Ice or no ice.”

“Thank you, kind sir.”

At the bottom, they stood in silence for several moments, watching the boy, and Kristopher was unexpectedly pleased that she was still holding on to his arm and even more at the warmth coursing through him. The only sound was the soft whir of speeding wheels, the pop of the board lifting off the surface and the thunk as it hit the pavement again. His movements were smooth, graceful and confident, his focus solely on his actions. He launched himself again and landed a good twenty feet away from them. He pivoted on the board and stopped but kept it rocking back and forth with his feet, his balance perfect. Oversized sunglasses covered his eyes, but he was smiling, obviously pleased with himself and his skill.

“Your move,” Kristopher told her. “After all, this was your idea.”

Her gaze slanted up at him. “Does your boss have enough money to bail us out of jail

if Grant Miller arrests us for doing what he told us not to do?”

“Oil tycoons and billionaires from around the world come to him for loans,” Kristopher said solemnly.

“Really,” Suzanne asked incredulously.

“No. I was just joking,” he replied. “Do you want me to go with you?”

She shook her head. “This kid may not have heard about what happened yet. And if it turns out not to be T.J., then we’ll excuse ourselves and go to your safehouse. No harm, no foul, right?”

Her answer surprised him, but then he knew next to nothing about this woman. “Are you a sports fan?”

“Season ticket holder for the Lady Vols, but we can talk about that over lunch too. Wait here.”

She headed for the skater and the familiar pricking at the base of his spine started, warning Kristopher not to stand down, but stand ready and he touched the service revolver in his jacket’s inner pocket and waited.

### CHAPTER 12

Suzanne walked towards the skater, keeping her hands deep in her coat pockets and then stopping where the arena began. “Excuse me,” she called.

The kid remained silent but kept on rocking his skateboard. Either he was too focused on his moves to notice her, or he was pretending not to see her. She would put her money on the latter. Elaine always said Suzanne’s pink coat could lead in ships lost in a foggy sea

““Scuse me,” she said again, taking another step forward. “Are you T.J. Fielding?”

“Who wants to know?” His tone was the bored, I-know-and-have-seen-it-all of fifteen-year-olds everywhere and Suzanne was very glad that age was far behind her.

“A friend of Mercy and David Phillips,” she answered. “My name is Suzanne Bennett. Do you remember me? I think we met at the ‘Meet, Greet and Eat’ a few weeks ago.”

He stopped rocking and pulled down his sunglasses just enough to appraise her. “You’re that social worker.” It was more of an accusation than a question, one strongly laced with contempt.

“For adults,” she offered, as if this might make her admission less offending to his sensibilities. Social workers were too often the enemy of kids in foster care, the one who took you from your parents, even if it were for your own good. “I help them find good jobs and housing.”

“Since when does that make a difference?” he sneered. “Bunch of do-gooders who think they can save the world, acting like they care about kids and other folks when they’re just doing it for the money.”

Determined not to let him get to her, Suzanne laughed. “That’s good,” she said. “Most folks I know who do this kind of work could use a big raise.”

“Boo-hoo. Like I’m crying.” He slid his sunglasses back in place.

“Have you seen David this morning?” Suzanne asked, keeping her expression determinedly friendly.

“Nope. Got better things to do than hang out with little kids.” He continued to rock the skateboard from side to side, folding his arms across his chest. His confidence bordered on arrogance, and Suzanne wished for one iota of Mercy’s skill at talking to unhappy kids. Unhappiness was written all over this boy.

“I thought you two looked pretty tight at the Meet-Greet,” Suzanne persisted. “You spent a lot of time shooting hoops and talking.”

She reached into her coat pocket, pulled out a photo of him and David and held it up to him. “His mom took this and gave me a copy. It sure does look like you’re having a good time together.”

“Well, I guess you were wrong, weren’t you?” The rocking started again, and Suzanne involuntarily stepped back as the boy added, “Just being nice to the kid but it was a bore. Like you’re boring me now.”

“OK, let’s cut the crap and have a little courtesy for the lady, shall we?” Kristopher was suddenly beside her, snatching the sunglasses from the boy’s startled face. “Answer the lady’s question, or I just might knock you off your board.”

“Hey, what the fu—give me back my shades, man!”

Kristopher held the “shades” over his head, way out of the boy’s reach. “Answer the question, ‘man’ and I just might do that. Are you T.J. Fielding or not?”

The boy hesitated and Kristopher fixed him with the gaze he’d learned from his first drill sergeant. The one who could have her recruits begging to do more pushups or go on twenty-mile hikes with fifty-pound packs that didn’t include their weapons. Kristopher would have walked through fire for the woman.

“Yeah, I’m T.J.,” the boy finally admitted, his expression sullen. “Are you gonna give me back my shades?”

“Not just yet,” Kristopher replied coolly, putting the shades on his own head. “In case you haven’t heard, your neighbor, Mrs. Mercy Phillips was murdered in her home last night and her son David is missing.”

Suzanne tugged on his arm. “I don’t think we’re supposed to tell him that,” she hissed. “It might not have been announced to the public yet.”

“Then Miller can arrest me,” Kristopher retorted. He gave his attention back to the now open-mouthed T.J. “Ms. Bennett says you spent time with David recently so cut the I-don’t-give-a-shit attitude and try to be helpful. Or is that too hard for you?”

Rage twisted T.J.’s features into an ugly mask. “Listen, dude—”

“No, you listen,” Kristopher stepped closer to tower over the boy. “There’s a missing ten-year-old kid who probably doesn’t know his mother is dead. Dead, T.J. As in murdered in their home. Did you understand that part?”

“Kristopher—”

“No, Suzanne, let me finish with this wise ass little punk.” Kristopher’s finger was millimeters from the center of T.J.’s chest. “David might have seen who killed his mom and now he’s gone. Whoever killed her might have taken him, so we’re trying to find him and fast, before someone kills him too. You copy that?”

“I–”

“Ms. Bennett here said she saw you hanging with David at Greet, Eat and Meet or whatever the hell it’s called.” Kristopher took the photo from Suzanne and held it up again. “You must be a damn good actor because in this photo you look like you care about David. Or maybe you’re just a good liar or trying to make yourself look all badass to a kid whose father died five years ago. So, tell us what you know—if you know anything that is—and we’ll leave your sorry self to your selfish little world.”

“You can’t talk to me like that!” Angry red splotches stained T.J.’s cheeks. “I’ll kick your ass!”

“Kid, I kicked more ass during my time in the Army than you ever will.” Kristopher’s sudden, slow grin was nothing short of feral. “So, cut the attitude and at least try to pretend you’re a human who might give a shit about a missing kid whose mom got killed in her own home last night. A kid you know and who’s been nice to you. Are you going to help us or do you even have a heart?”

Open-mouthed, T.J. blinked twice as if sizing Kristopher up, then stepped off his skateboard and put it over his shoulder. “Mercy is really dead?” he asked.

“Very,” Kristopher acknowledged, and T.J. lowered his gaze to his feet as if inspecting his Skate Rowley XLT shoes. They were an odd contrast to the standard teen uniform of ripped blue jeans and oversized flannel shirt, but his shoes looked new. He might have a shitty attitude, but someone cared enough about this boy to get him clothes he could be proud of.



He looked up at Kristopher, the arrogant expression gone. “I don’t know anything, man,” he said. “My foster parents are nurses and got called into work at the ER for a twelve-hour shift and left around seven. I heard someone banging on the door ‘bout three o’clock this morning, yelling it was the cops, but Mr. and Mrs. Johnson told me not to ever open the door to anyone at night, especially if they weren’t there.”

“That’s a good idea,” Kristopher agreed gently, handing back the sunglasses. “Do you know what time they got home?”

T.J. shook his head. “They were in bed when I woke up at nine, so I just let them sleep. And they left a note saying they have to work that shift again until New Year’s ‘cause people are calling in sick like crazy or going out of town. ER work can be tough, especially over the holidays. Lots of fights and drunks, you know?”

“That’s right,” Suzanne agreed. “I’ll bet the Johnsons take good care of their patients. And of you too.”

“I guess.” He gave Suzanne his attention. “I remember you,” he admitted. “At the Meet, some guy with a guitar sang a song with your name. Suzanne, right?”

“That’s right,” Suzanne repeated. “The old Leonard Cohen classic.”

“OK.” T.J. looked away and then back at her. “Mercy is really dead?”

“I’m afraid so.” Suzanne didn’t try to hide the wobble in her voice.

“That sucks.” T.J. dug a toe against the pavement. “She was one of the good ones. Kids in the system would kill to be on her caseload. David said you’re one of the good ones too.” A muscle jumped in his jaw. “Do you really think David is—I mean—”

“We don’t know,” Kristopher said. “But he was gone when the police got there last

night, and no one in the neighborhood as seen him, so we don't know what happened. Any ideas on where he'd go or hide if he ran?"

"No," T.J. said quickly. "Mercy—I mean Mrs. Phillips was super strict about where he went, him being only ten. David said she was a good mom."

"She was," Suzanne agreed, not wanting to shatter this fragile beginning of trust. "She must have liked you too if she let you call her Mercy."

"I guess," T.J. admitted, studying Kristopher through narrowed eyes. "Were you really in the Army?"

"Yep. Several tours."

A pinging sounded from Suzanne's jacket pocket, and she took out her phone. Her eyes scanned the screen, and Kristopher watched the color fade from her face. He leaned down to whisper, "What's wrong?"

"It's Miller," she whispered back. "We need to go."

She gave her attention back to T.J. "Thanks for talking to us." Taking a card case from her other pocket, she opened it and gave him one. "If you get any ideas about where David might be, please call the number here, any time of the day or night. Please."

"Hold up." Kristopher took the card from her and scrawled his name and phone number on the back. "There. You can call me too."

"Kay." T.J. slid the card into the ripped pocket on his shirt and pushed away. "See ya, bye."

“Thanks,” Suzanne said again. A wave of his hand acknowledged her, and T.J. sped toward a ramp at a frightening speed, dismissing them. “Well, let’s hope that helped,” she said. “Where on earth did you learn how to talk to kids like that?”

“You learn all kinds of things in the Army,” he said. “Especially with newbies who don’t want to do what they’re told. Did you really just give him your phone number?”

“I have a special phone for clients to use if there’s an emergency,” she explained, putting her right hand on the stairs’ banister and stepping up. “No one has ever called me after hours. Why did you give him yours?”

“So, he won’t bother you too much.” Kristopher took her arm and walked them toward the stairs. His earlier discomfort returned. If anything, it was growing. And it had nothing to do with T.J.’s hostility. Kristopher was reasonably sure the kid didn’t know anything. Or else the boy was a very good liar.

It was being out in the open less than twenty-four hours after someone had tried to kill Suzanne Bennett. He never should have agreed to come here. They were out in the open like a pair of sitting ducks.

They reached the stairs and Suzanne reached for the bannister and stepped up. Then she winced and stopped, her face pale and Kristopher turned her to face him again. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“It’s just a twinge in my right wrist,” she admitted. “From where that guy grabbed me.”

“How badly does it hurt?” Kristopher demanded.

“A little,” she said. “I mean, it’s not a big deal.”

“And you didn’t tell Elaine that it still hurts?” Kristopher struggled to rein in his annoyance.

Her eyebrows rose. “About a strained wrist? C’mon, Sergeant Brower. I’m not a wimp. After all, I did fight off that guy.”

“Oh, that’s great,” Kristopher groaned. “Just great. Elaine is gonna kick my ass and probably yours too for not mentioning it. I know you didn’t go to the ER ‘cause it wasn’t in the report KPD sent to Hank.”

“Go to the ER for a strained wrist two days after Christmas?” She stared at him in disbelief. “Are you nuts?”

“Never mind,” Kristopher retorted. “Did Miller say why he needed to see us?”

“It’s bad, she said, leaning against the banister and closing her eyes.

Instinctively, his arms encircled her waist to steady her. “Suzanne, what’s happened? Are you in that much pain? Just tell me.”

“It’s not my wrist, silly.” She opened her eyes, and he saw the fear shining there. “The police found two bodies early this morning near Volunteer Landing,” she said. “A man and woman wearing ID badges from Tennessee Care Youth Shelter. They’d been shot in the back of the head.”

### CHAPTER 13

This is so freakin' weird. David's mom got murdered? T.J. watched the couple walk towards the stairs and then took out the card the woman had given him. Suzanne Bennett's name and phone number were printed in the right corner in simple black letters. She seemed okay but social workers and case managers were all the same. They made lots of promises, got your hopes up but never kept them. T.J. knew that well enough. Seven years in foster care had taught him that.

And that Army Dude's name was Kristopher Brower. The guy looked like he could kick some serious ass without breaking a sweat. T.J. was glad Army Dude hadn't kicked his.

But David was missing? That was definitely not cool. If the cops found him, they'd stick him in foster care and that would really suck. Maybe Army Dude was right. Maybe someone wanted to hurt David 'cause he saw something. T.J. blew out a long, thoughtful breath and considered.

David was a little kid, but he was smart and if he thought someone was trying to hurt him, he'd hide somewhere other than his house. From what T.J. had heard, half the neighborhood was gone for the holidays, and the other half would call the cops if David showed up at their houses. T.J.'s money was on the kid hiding himself where no one would think to look, some place the cops wouldn't know about.

Then T.J. grinned and after texting the Johnsons to tell them he was still at the skate park—they were probably still asleep—tucked his skateboard under his arm and headed toward the other entrance to the park. This way he'd hopefully not run into any cops

and make it to the McCallister house without anyone noticing him.

Ruth and Thomas McCallister were a retired couple who lived two streets over from the Johnsons' house. In their backyard, Mrs. McCallister had what she called a 'she-shed,' a place where she could be by herself or ask friends to come over and hang out. T.J. wasn't exactly sure what they did there, but he'd heard Mrs. Johnson and some other women in the neighborhood talking about it at the 'Meet, Eat and Greet' last month. T.J. had learned a long time ago, if you keep your mouth shut and ears open, you could pick up all kinds of useful stuff.

Including that Mrs. McCallister had a bad habit of leaving her she-shed unlocked.

And David might know that.

It wasn't far but T.J. forced himself to walk at an easy stroll, so no one who didn't know him would think he was up to something. Adults freaked out if they saw a kid they didn't recognize. On the McCallister's' street, there was a long alley with high thick hedges hiding the houses that ran behind them. The hedge was thick and woody, and you could barely see anything on the other side.

Taking another deep breath, T.J. clutched his board to his chest and shoved through the hedge, glad for his long sleeves and pants. The branches were prickly and smelled like a Christmas tree. And besides, it was cold. Good thing there was no snow.

So that was Mrs. McCallister's "she-shed." It looked like those storage sheds you could buy at one of those big box home improvement stores. This one was huge and painted white and someone had installed real windows and put up curtains. The curtains were closed but a faint light showed inside. Big pots stood beneath the windows, but they were empty. Guess it was too cold for flowers.

Wondering if the front of the she-shed would look the same as the back, T.J. crept

along its side. More windows on the front, with the curtains drawn but he could still see that faint light. Either David had turned on the lights or Mrs. McCallister had forgotten to turn them off before she left. Mrs. Johnson said the older woman was nice but a real airhead.

Cautiously, he stepped up to the front door and put his head against it, listening. Then he tapped his fingertips against it and waited. A quick touch to the doorknob showed it was locked. Hopefully David had thought about doing that, 'specially if he got here last night or early this morning.

If he was in there.

Reaching into the back pocket of his jeans, T.J. took out the small case of picklocks a buddy at a shelter in Nashville gave him years ago. "Never know when you'll need them," Oscar had told him. "You might need to take cover inside some place, fast." T.J. always carried them when he was away from the house. The Johnsons would probably have a cow if they knew T.J. had them, but what they didn't know wouldn't hurt them.

His choice of pick was lucky because the door opened up right after he inserted it into the lock and the door opened. With another glance behind him, T.J. stepped inside, stuck the pick into his pocket and closed the door.

The inside was all one room but the way it was set up made it look like a small apartment. Little sofas and chairs, low tables and a desk pushed up against the window that faced the hedge. There was even an itty-bitty kitchen area and a table with chairs. A closed door suggested a bathroom.

And on the far side of the room, curled up under a blanket on a daybed, was a sleeping David Phillips.

Now what? T.J. hadn't really expected to find David here. It was more of a lucky guess, but now he had to decide whether to tell David about his mom or take him to the cops and let them do it. Both of those were crappy choices.

And he had better decide fast, because David was squinting at him.

"T.J.?" David said, his voice thick with sleep. "What's going on?"

"Lookin' for you, little dude," T.J. told him. "How'd you get in here?"

"It wasn't locked," David yawned. "But I locked it when I got here 'cause of that guy. How'd you get in?"

"Picked the lock," T.J. went to sit on the daybed, pulled out the pick and held it up. "I saw the light and thought maybe you might be here." He took out the case and returned the pick to its place and held it out. "Pretty wicked, huh?"

"Wicked," David echoed, rubbing his eyes. "Can you get in anywhere you want?"

"Pretty much," T.J. admitted. "What guy?"

"The guy who was in my house last night, hurting my mom." Abruptly David began to cry in big noisy gulps. "Or I think it was him. He might be the same one I saw from the Big Tree when I woke up in the woods earlier. Do you know if my mom is okay?"

Double crap. "Did you run away last night?" T.J. hoped he could keep the kid talking and not start asking questions.

"Yeah. Suze told me to get under my bed, when I called her last night, but I was scared and ran away." Tears streamed down David's cheeks. "I gotta go back to the



house to see if my mom is okay. Will you go with me?"

Suze. Wonder if that's that Suzanne social worker. "Listen, little dude," T.J. said slowly. "The cops were all over the neighborhood last night, so you need to stay here a bit longer until I find out what's going on. It might not be safe to come out yet. Are you hungry?"

"Starved," David said eagerly, and again grateful for something to keep the boy from asking questions, T.J. searched the kitchen and quickly put together a sandwich, found some chips, cookies and a sparkling beverage.

"This should hold you." He beckoned David to the table. "Tell you what. I'm gonna look around and come back and tell you what's going on. I think I remember Mrs. McCallister saying there are lots of games on the TV, so you eat, and I'll see what I can find."

When David was settled in front of the TV, the remotes in hand, and a stack of DVDs beside him, T.J. advised him to keep the sound down, the lights off and the door locked. Then he left. Back on the street that led to his house, T.J. mounted the skateboard and pushed off. He had a big mess on his hands, with no idea what he was gonna tell the Johnsons and—

"Hey, kid," a voice called from behind him. "Come over here a minute, will you please?"

Pivoting, T.J. saw a police cruiser slowly coming down the street. Switching into super-helpful mode, he stepped off the board. When the cruiser stopped, he could see two uniformed officers in the front seat. Play it cool, man. "Hey, officer," he called cheerfully. "What's up?"

"You live around here, son?" the older man in the driver's seat asked.

“Yes, sir,” T.J. said, using his best fake sincere voice. He wasn’t about to give up his address unless they asked for it. “I heard there was some trouble in the neighborhood last night. Can I help?”

“You seen a blond kid wandering around?” The other officer, younger and with a bad haircut, leaned forward from the passenger’s seat. “White kid, around ten years old?”

“No, sir,” T.J. lied with ease. “Is he missing?”

“Yeah,” Bad Haircut said. “His name is David Philips.”

“No, sir,” T.J. repeated. “But if I see him, I’ll take him home with me and call you. Will that work?”

“It will,” said the first officer. He took a card from the console and gave it to T.J. “Here’s the name of the officer in charge,” he said. “If you learn anything, call that number and someone will find him. And you need to go home right now. There might be trouble going on, understand?”

“Yes, sir,” T.J. called as they drove away. He waited until the cruiser had vanished around the corner and then headed to the Johnsons.

“This just sucks,” he muttered. “Cops will be crawling everywhere looking for David. I’ll need to move David after dark.” The question is, where?”

### CHAPTER 14

A little later at the Brotherhood Protectors Safehouse

“I should haul you downtown and charge you with interfering in an ongoing murder investigation if I thought I could make the charges stick.” Grant Miller’s eyes pinned them to their chairs.

“But you won’t, will you?” Suzanne asked hopefully.

“And T.J. remembered her and knows David,” Kristopher put in. “It wasn’t like she was talking to a stranger.” He did not add they’d told T.J. Mercy Phillips was dead. He’d bet ten to one that her neighbors had already spread the news all over their social media accounts. So, T.J. would have learned it anyway.

“Mercy Philipps was killed less than twenty-four hours ago and you stayed in the neighborhood where it happened.” Miller’s tone was relentless. “Real smart, Brower,” and Suzanne watched the two men exchange accusing glances and wondered if they’d clashed over cases before.

Grant Miller had agreed to meet them at the BP safehouse to tell them about the dead couple from the shelter. And since going to the ER would be a waste of time for everyone, Kristopher had called Amos Jones, MD, a BP doctor who lived in Knoxville and was almost always available, to come and look at Suzanne’s wrist.

“It doesn’t really hurt,” she lied as Jones wrapped it with a soft elastic style bandage while trying not to watch the other two men. “It feels a bit bruised, but the biggest

problem will be I'm hopelessly right-handed."

"Sometimes these sprains or strains hurt more a day or two after they occur," Jones told her. "But I don't think you'll have much trouble using it. Over-the-counter meds and some salve I'll leave you should take care of any pain but let me know if there's a problem. Brower, do I need to give you the once over?"

"I'm good to go," Kristopher said. "But Elaine Prescott is going to have your head on a platter when she finds out you didn't tell her about your wrist, Miz Bennett."

"Officer Jackson phoned in his report after you left," Miller said as Amos Jones exited the room. "He said you didn't find Mrs. Phillips' address book or any kind of contact information."

"No," Suzanne sighed. "Her address-appointment book might be at work, but whoever did this must have been incredibly angry. The house looked like a tornado tore through the rooms. I don't think I've ever seen such a mess. What does that suggest to you, Grant?"

"That it's looking less like a random killing and more of a targeted one," he told her, running a hand over his face. He looked as tired as Suzanne felt.

"Do you know how the intruder got into Mercy's house?" Kristopher asked, and Suzanne noted he did not use the word 'murderer'. His thoughtfulness should have made her feel better.

It didn't.

"The front door was securely locked, so we think the killer entered Mrs. Phillips' study through the French doors facing the deck just outside," Miller described. "It runs the length of the back of the house, and the doors face a wooded grove. They

were standing open when we got there last night. But there were no fingerprints on the doorknob, or anywhere else for that matter. Was she in the habit of leaving those doors unlocked?”

Weariness slid over Suzanne and her bandaged wrist began to throb. “No,” she said. “Mercy was careful about things like that because of David. His upstairs bedroom windows face the deck and the grove too. When he called me last night, I told him to call the police and then get under the bed—”

Her voice stopped and her hands began to shake. “I guess they found him, huh?” she whispered. “Whoever did this. I should have told him to run. It’s my fault they have him.”

“Stop that,” Miller ordered fiercely, but his angry expression was finally gone. “We don’t know that. The question is, if he did run, where would he go? None of the neighbors questioned today or last night had any idea where he might go. Would this T.J. kid know?”

“T.J. said he didn’t know anything about what happened,” Suzanne said. “He had an attitude, but after Kristopher did his badass soldier thing, he warmed up.”

“Scared the hell out him, did you?” Miller’s laugh erased some of the weariness from his face.

“Just pointed out it was in his interest to cooperate with a veteran who’s done more than one tour of duty,” Kristopher said modestly. “That and being a lot taller. Besides, I was holding his shades over his head where he couldn’t grab them. Suzanne gave him a card with a number on it, and I gave him mine, but I’ll bet you a six-pack of Bohemia beer he won’t call either one of us.”

“Oh, ye of little faith,” Suzanne scolded. “Now are you going to tell us about that

murdered couple? I think they might be the one Mercy gave such grief when she learned the Campbell sisters were gone.”

“The Taylors were the night supervisors at Tennessee Cares youth emergency shelter,” Miller confirmed. “They started working there when TC absorbed All Families at the first of the year and we only know that from Sophia Langley, who’s still working there today. She supplied the officer who went there with the name of TC’s regional CEO, Charles Tattersall. We’ve got people trying to contact him even as we speak.”

“Mercy spoke with Perry Thompson, the shelter’s director about the Campbell girls and he said he was going to try to find the CEO, but he never called back,” Suzanne said.

“Tattersall needs to have his ass chewed if they have to hunt him down,” Kristopher observed. “Even if he is the CEO. You should always be able to reach the man at the top.”

“Absolutely,” Miller agreed. “I’m going back to the precinct, so we can call the media about releasing a photo of David to let the larger community know he’s missing. Hopefully someone has seen him and will call us.”

“You aren’t going to announce Mercy was murdered, are you?” Suzanne’s voice rose and her weariness returned. “David doesn’t need to learn about his mom like that!”

“Suzanne, we told the neighbors she was dead,” Miller said wearily. “We had to do that for their own safety. We’ve waited long enough to release that information to the media as it is. It’s like Brower said. The neighbors have probably told all their social media contacts what happened, so it won’t be that big of a surprise.”

“Then if they know, shouldn’t we be putting up posters of him?” Suzanne demanded.

“I have a picture of him we can have blown up at one of those print places. It’s just above freezing outside, and he’ll be cold and hungry if he’s even out there and—”

She knew she was babbling but she couldn’t stop herself. David was missing. Sweet David, who knew lots of silly jokes, was a math whiz and loved cats but couldn’t have one because he was allergic and hated needles. David was missing or worse might be— no. Don’t go there!

And then to her great shame, she began to cry. Great gulping sobs wracked her chest, and putting her elbows on her knees, she lowered her face into her hands and wept.

She was barely aware of the men’s soft voices and then the opening and closing of the suite’s front door. A minute later, she heard something rolling, then stopping in front of her, and a pair of hands placing themselves on her shoulders.

She continued to weep and the hands—steady and warm—remained in place, their owner blessedly silent. After a while, she sat up and the hands slid away so she could sit up and come face to face with Kristopher Brower.

His was a very fine face, with those hazel-green eyes fringed with dark lashes that regarded her from under brows as black as his hair. His mouth under that slim moustache, was full-lipped, sensitive but incredibly sexy.

“Here.” He handed her a handkerchief he’d pulled from his trouser pocket.

“Another one? I’ve heard about these,” she sniffed, patting her face dry. “Aren’t they sort of standard issue for BP members? This is the second one you’ve handed me.”

He smiled and fine lines crinkled around his eyes. “Something like,” he said cheerfully. “I think Hank buys dozens of boxes of them every month. Good for all kinds of things, don’t you know.”

“Yeah,” Suzanne agreed, twisting the cloth between her fingers. “Did Grant say anything else?”

“Mostly that you needed to rest. What did you have for breakfast this morning?”

“Toast with peanut butter and some yogurt,” Suzanne recalled. “I’m actually hungry, but I don’t think going out again is a good idea, do you?”

“No,” he agreed. “I checked in the kitchen before going over to Elaine’s office this morning. There’s a ton of food in the fridge we can heat up. I’ll bet Patrick made most of it.”

“Are you the one he won’t let in the kitchen except to plate the food or clean up?” she teased.

“That would be me,” he said, and she laughed at his mournful expression.

“Why is that?” She was suddenly aware of how little she knew about this man. Last night—or was it very early this morning? —Hank Patterson had only told her Kristopher’s name, and that he was in the area. “Did you set something on fire?”

“That’s a story for another time,” he said. “How about moussaka, home-made whole wheat rolls and a Greek salad for a late lunch?”

“That sounds awesome,” Suzanne declared. “I love Greek cooking.”

“Good, because the moussaka and rolls are already in the warming drawer courtesy of yours truly.”

Suzanne stared at him. “Hunger must be making me stupid,” she said. “When did that happen?”



“I slipped in here while you were talking to Amos,” he admitted. “It was a guess that you’d like Greek food, but everything Patrick makes is beyond delicious. It should be warm enough by the time we finish with our showers. I can make a pot of tea to go with it if you like.” Concern drew his eyebrows together. “You’re sure your wrist isn’t hurting too much?”

“The OTC pain meds I always have in my suitcase will do the trick,” she assured him. “Shouldn’t we call Hank Patterson and tell him what we’ve learned?”

“Absolutely,” Kristopher agreed. “I’ll text him now.”

Hank’s return text asked that they hold their zoom meeting in two hours, giving them plenty of time to shower and eat.

“I put your suitcase in the last bedroom while Amos was wrapping your wrist,” Kristopher said. “That’s the one with the best view of the city, especially at night. You can see Knoxville lit up in all its wintertime glory. “

“That was thoughtful of you. Thanks for thinking of that,” Suzanne told him. “See you in the kitchen in a few minutes.”

“You’re going to need to re-wrap your wrist after you shower,” Kristopher pointed out. Amos left several extras and some of that salve he mentioned. Are you sure it doesn’t hurt?”

“The only thing that hurts right now is my empty stomach,” Suzanne declared. “See you in a few minutes. And I want to hear more about your working with Grant Miller.”

She left, considering just what she would ask him.

And how much he would be able to tell her.

### CHAPTER 15

The blue tiled bathroom had stacks of fresh smelling towels and a huge shower box with a host of spray settings to choose from. There was even a built-in sound system, and she selected something labeled ‘calming string quartets.’ After washing her hair—a task not as hard as she had feared with her injured hand—Suzanne enjoyed standing under the prickling beat of water as she scrubbed her skin with a loofah and a peppermint liquid soap.

As the bright sweet smell soothed her weariness, she thought of everything that had happened in the past twenty-four hours and vowed she would do everything in her power to find David. He was alive, she just knew it. Anything else was unthinkable. They would find him and deliver him to his grandparents.

Feeling energized and hungry, she turned off the water, wrapped herself in a towel and blew-dry her hair. After dressing in black jeans, her favorite wooly socks—the carpet looked too deliciously soft to put on her shoes—and an oversize blue sweater she followed the aromas to the front of the suite. Soft piano jazz blessed the room where she found the table ready and her host waiting.

And oh, my goodness, what a handsome host. Kristopher’s change of clothing into simple but well-fitting jeans and a classic, long sleeved white shirt, showed him to be even better looking than before. Elaine had warned her that BP seemed to employ the best-looking men you’d ever seen. And as it was in almost every case, her boss was right. Kristopher-with-a K Brower was simply put, heart-stopping gorgeous.

“I hope I didn’t keep you waiting,” she said. “It’s been a long time since I used a

showerhead with so many settings.”

He gave her a slow, lazy smile. “I took a long time myself. Lots of the women I served with in Afghanistan said the worst part of it was not being able to shower on a regular basis. Lunch is ready if you are.”

He came forward and pulled out one of the chairs at the table. “If my lady will be seated, I’ll bring in our meal.”

“You don’t have to wait on me,” Suzanne protested as he picked up the plates.

“You need to rest your wrist,” he replied, giving her a wink.

“OK, but don’t spoil me too much,” she warned as she sat. “I might get used to you doing it.”

“I’ll stop tomorrow,” he called over his shoulder as he headed back to the kitchen. He returned with their filled plates and pointed at the teapot and water pitcher on the table. “I hope you weren’t expecting a fancy kind of tea. It’s just Lipton.”

“My favorite kind,” she said, watching him fill their cups and glasses. Picking up her fork, she tried the moussaka and sighed in pure bliss. “Oooh,” she murmured. “This is fabulous. Patrick’s cooking, you said?”

“It is,” Kristopher said after swallowing his first bite. “He’s a genius in the kitchen and pretty good at a bunch of other stuff too.”

They talked about trivial things at first. Sports, music, favorite places to visit, and while a white Christmas could be pretty it could also be a pain if you had to drive.

“Okay,” she said as they finished, and he re-filled their teacups. “Tell me a little more

about your past work with KPD. Which came first, them or the Army?"

He paused, as if deciding what to tell her. "I joined the Knoxville Police Department right after I graduated from UT Knoxville," he said. "My wanting to go into law enforcement like my father's father pissed my parents off to no end because they wanted me to go to medical school. I turned down several scholarships to places like Harvard, Vanderbilt and Duke. But I was twenty-one, so there wasn't a lot they could do about it."

This was not what she was expecting to hear, and it was a moment before she finally said, "Wow. I'm impressed. And then?"

"After several years with KPD, I joined the Army for five years and came back to KPD for five years and then went back to the Army again. And before you ask, let's just say I like variety."

"You've been in the Army twice?"

"Yes," he said simply, his tone carefully neutral. "Separated from them this past autumn, thanks to Hank Patterson. And now I have a question for you."

"What is it?"

"Would you like a slice of chocolate cake and coffee? Patrick swears coffee is the only way to cut the cake's sweetness."

She recognized his change of subject as a stalling technique but was too tired to bother with more questions, even though there was a great deal more she wanted to know, especially about his work with Grant Miller. There's something he's not telling me. I wonder if Elaine knows.

“Okay,” she agreed. “Sounds good Can we have it in the living room? I want to stretch out my legs.”

“I don’t see why not,” her protector replied. “Go make yourself comfortable while I take care of this.” He gestured at the table. “And before you ask, making coffee does not involve any kind of cooking, so the kitchen will be safe.”

“Patrick will be pleased to hear that. When do you think I can meet him?”

“I’ll see what I can do,” he promised. “Just be sure to assure him all I did was heat up our meal.”

Her soft departing laugh was like a caress as Kristopher cleared the table and headed for the relative safety of the kitchen.

You better prepare yourself, Brower. Sooner or later, she’s going to start asking about Syd Phillips. And you’re going to have to tell her the truth.

He took his time preparing the dessert tray, but not so much as to make her think he was stalling. When the coffee cups were filled, he placed them on the tray with the plates and forks and headed for the living room, then stopped and stared.

Suzanne lay on the sofa, facing him, fast asleep. Her chest rose and fell in gentle rhythm, her hands curled together. Even though she’d seemed relaxed while they ate, weariness stained her face, and he could see the area under her eyes was slightly swollen. Lack of sleep and no food since dawn could do that to a person.

He took the tray back to the kitchen, put the cake away, and poured the coffee back into the press. Then he walked to her room, turned down the bedspread and return to gently scoop her up, carry her down the hall and put her to bed, pulling the bedspread around her shoulders. After dimming the lights and closing the door, he headed to the

office and put through the call to Hank. He spent the next hour describing the events of the day.

“That was some first day on the job,” Hank commented when Kristopher finished his report. “How is Suzanne holding up?”

“Sound asleep,” Kristopher said, rubbing the back of his neck. “It’s early afternoon but there’s no reason not to let her sleep as long as she needs.”

“Good idea,” Hank agreed. “How did things go with Grant Miller?”

“No problems,” Kristopher told him honestly. “On the way to Mercy’s house, I told her we’d worked together in the past without a lot of detail but he’s setting limits on how much he’ll let us—particularly Suzanne—do, even though she’s eager to involve herself as much as possible.”

“Well, in light of what’s happened, I’m sending in some back-up,” Hank told him. “Remember Bailey Mills?”

Recalling the tall dark-haired man of few words and a fondness for Crown Royal, Kristopher laughed. “You mean that Marine sharpshooter that Mac nick-named MacGyver because he can fix almost anything? Yeah, I remember him.”

“Well, he’s in route from Alabama even as we speak.” Hank gave him an answering grin. “When he gets there, we’re going to have a long meeting about an upcoming secret mission both of you may be tapped for when this one is over.”

“Secret mission?” Anticipation tingled over Kristopher. At Hank’s silent nod, he asked, “What do we do if Suzanne wakes up while we’re in the meeting?”

“She’s a big girl,” Hank chided. “Leave a note on her door. I promise to let you out in

time for dinner, but it's going to be a long one. She'll find something to do."

"Right," Kristopher said. Suddenly aware of the rising howl of the wind, he glanced out the window and watched snow swirl past the bulletproof glass. When did that start? A quick check on his phone showed the temperature had dropped six degrees since they'd returned and he offered up a silent prayer that wherever he was, David Phillips was warm and safe.

Giving his attention back to his boss, Kristopher propped his elbows on the desk and rested his chin into his hands. "What I can't begin to understand about all of this is what Mercy could have known or suspected that would lead to her being murdered in her own home. It's not as if she knew about The Cadre. Or did she?"

"Not likely," Hank agreed. "Just a caring woman who saw two kids in danger and wasn't afraid to say so. You didn't find anything at her home?"

"No," Kristopher admitted. "I hate the thought of her parents not knowing about this. They need to be told asap." He remembered all too clearly the discomfort of having to tell families a loved one had died. It was the worst part of being a cop.

"I'll see what I can find out from my European contacts," Hank promised. "And meeting T.J. was a lucky break because I'll bet Suzanne is right and he knows more than he's telling. Maybe tomorrow you can find him and keep talking to him. Something bizarre is going on and my money is on The Cadre. We need to find out how they knew Mercy Phillips."

"Agreed," Kristopher said, using one of Hank's favorite expressions. "Maybe Elaine would know. I'll check in with her later. And we'll look for T.J. tomorrow but tell Miller about it."

"Always good to keep our KPD point person in the loop," Hank said. "Good work, by



the way.”

“Thanks.” Kristopher released his relief in a long sigh. “What time can I expect Mills?”

“ETA is two hours,” Hank said. “We’ll start the meeting as soon as he’s settled.”

“Sounds good,” Kristopher acknowledged and signed off. He scrawled Suzanne a message on a sticky note about Bailey and the meeting, and he would see her at dinner. After putting it on her door, he headed for the safehouse gym.

### CHAPTER 16

That evening

“When can I go home?” David sobbed. “I want to go home.”

Man, this is a bigger mess than I thought. T.J. had checked on David three times today to be sure he was okay. Sometimes he was asleep, and other times T.J. found him playing video games.

But he certainly hadn’t counted on the kid getting so bored he’d switch on the TV and find a local station to learn that his mom was dead, and he was ‘missing.’ T.J. knew the cops would have had to let everyone know that, but it was still a crappy way for the kid to find out.

“You knew, didn’t you?” David kept crying. His face in the soft light of T.J.’s flashlight was tear streaked. “You knew today she was dead and didn’t tell me!”

“Look, little dude, I didn’t know if those people I talked to were being straight up,” T.J. argued. “I’d never seen them around here before, so who knows who they were?” He’d decided not to tell David one of those people was Suzanne Bennett because he’d want to go to her straight away. He’d called her ‘Suze’ earlier, which meant they were probably tight. And he did remember seeing her with Mercy at the ‘Greet, Meet and Eat,” thing. And who knew about Army Dude? He might be a cop in disguise.

“They might have been with Child Protection,” T.J. told the boy. “And they’ll slap you in foster care or protective custody or whatever before you can take your next

breath. I need to find some place for you to hide you until we can figure out how to find your grandparents.”

““kay,” David choked, rubbing his nose on his sleeve. “What are we going to do?”

“I’m working on it,” T.J. said. We. Damn, this is what happens when you care about people. Army Dude had called T.J. selfish, but when you’d been moved six or seven times around the system after your parents get busted for making and passing counterfeit money and their parents didn’t want you and you wound up in state custody, you stopped caring about anyone but yourself. Survival, Army Dude. That’s what it was all about. You should know that.

“Are you gonna get me some clothes before we move?” Tears welled up in David’s eyes again. “I don’t want to keep wearing my pajamas all the time. I mean, if you can use those pick things to get in here, can’t you use them to get in my house and get me some clothes?”

T.J. stared at the boy. “What?”

“Why can’t you break into my house and get my—”

“Hold up!” T.J. ordered, searching his memory. “That might work. Gimme a minute to think. You have a downstairs den, right?”

“Yeah,” David confirmed. “It’s humungous, takes up the whole downstairs with a bathroom and a kitchen, sorta like an apartment. Mom said we could turn it into my man-cave.

If the cops are gone from there, I could sneak David back into his house, and he could hide in the den. No killer is gonna be dumb enough to return to the scene of the crime, right? He could stay in the den and if he keeps those heavy drapes—what did

Mercy call ‘em—black out drapes—closed he can turn on the lights. There are no houses behind his, so no one will be able to see him. Brilliant!

“David, I think that’s a good idea. No, it’s great!” T.J. slipped his arm around the boy’s still shaking shoulders. “But I gotta be sure the cops aren’t still at your place, so it might be way after dark, maybe kinda late before I can take you there. Can you hang tough for a couple hours?”

“Whatcha you gonna do?” David wiped his face on his sleeve again.

“Go back to my house and talk to my foster parents,” T.J. said. “They’ll be getting ready to go to work, but they may have been talking to the neighbors about what happened. I’ll ask them if the cops are still there and tell ‘em I’ve been going around looking for you. They’ll believe that.”

“You won’t tell anyone, will ya?” Fear chased the color from David’s face. “That I’m gonna be there?”

“Nope,” T.J. said. “Look, while I’m gone, can you clean up this place? We don’t want anyone to know we’ve been here.”

“I can do that,” David said eagerly. “Do you really think we can go tonight?”

T.J. made a quick decision. “Yeah,” he said. “I need to go now. Like I said, my text to the Johnsons said I was looking for you, but you never know with grownups, you know?”

David’s sudden giggle brought T.J. a small measure of relief. “‘kay”, the younger boy agreed. “Promise you’ll come back and tell me?”

“Promise.” T.J. echoed, giving him a quick salute. “Better go.”

He cautiously opened the door and stepped outside. After determining none of the neighbors' back porch lights were on, he pushed through the hedge and into the alley. Then he jogged down the alley to the street, mounted his skateboard and headed for the Johnsons.

### CHAPTER 17

#### Saturday Morning

The smell of coffee, frying bacon and biscuits teased Suzanne awake. The old-fashioned school-house clock on her bedroom wall showed seven o'clock. "Mmm," she murmured, stretching her arms wide. "Breakfast food for dinner. Yummy. But why is it still so light outside when it should be dark?"

Wait. Seven o'clock? She grabbed her phone from the nightstand. 7:00 am Saturday morning . December 28 th . She'd slept since yesterday afternoon and all through the night.

She broke her own record for showering and dressing before hurrying to the living-dining area. From there, she saw a tall, broad-shouldered man standing at the kitchen stove. "Hello?" she called cautiously.

He pushed a large skillet to a back burner, covered it and turned. Dark brown eyes and a broad smile greeted her. "Good morning," he greeted. "You must be Suzanne."

"Yes," she said cautiously. "Where's Kristopher?"

"In the office, talking to Grant Miller." He wiped his hands on the towel hanging from his apron before coming forward. "I'm Bailey Mills, USMC, retired and Brotherhood Protector," he introduced. "Hank asked me to join you guys. Would you like some coffee?" He pointed at the coffee press and cups on the counter.

It's fresh."

"I'd love some," she said, going to pour a cup and add milk from the small pitcher. "Are you here because Hank Patterson thinks we might be in more danger than we first thought?"

Bailey's smile vanished. "Yeah, especially since we think we're dealing with The Cadre and that couple from the shelter got murdered. Someone is seriously pissed."

"And it's about to get messier," Kristopher announced, joining them. "Miller said the police released the news about the Taylors to the media late last night. It will be all over the morning news."

"Holy cow," Suzanne whispered, shaking her head. "What a mess."

"Yeah," he said. He cocked his head and gave her a long once over glance. "Did you sleep well?"

"You should have at least woken me for dinner." She affected an annoyed expression. "Did I miss anything?"

"Only a meeting with Hank about some Brotherhood business," Kristopher said. "And you needed to sleep."

"Amen," Bailey echoed, as he plated their food. "Now, let's eat. I do better on a full stomach and I have a feeling today will be a long day. What did Miller say about those bodies?"

They took their places at the dining room table and Kristopher said, "Their names were Eva and Alfred Taylor, and they worked at the youth emergency shelter since the first of the year ever since it was absorbed by Tennessee Cares, also known as

TC. He's still trying to track down TC's CEO to ask for a meeting about everything that's gone on in the past two days."

"I wonder what else has happened there since TC absorbed them," Bailey commented with a frown. "I read up on the organizations before I left Alabama. Sounds like the old agency, All Families, did a great job over the years. Sometimes changes aren't always good. New people, new ideas when the other ways worked just fine."

"I'll bet they agreed to become part of TC because it has more money." Suzanne reached for another biscuit. "More money, more programs for people who need help. Did you learn anything about the CEO?"

"Charles Tattersall, who has a long stellar career with family service organizations," Bailey supplied. "He's got quite a career in family service organizations, but we should keep digging."

Something in his voice got Suzanne's attention. "What do you think we might find?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "But something is off."

"Well, with these two new bodies, he better be kicking some ass," Kristopher declared. "I know it's the holidays, but two missing kids and three murders since the day after Christmas is bad news for the community."

"Four missing kids, if you count the Clark sisters," Suzanne reminded him. "Bailey, did Kristopher tell you about them?" At his nod, she continued. "And today is Saturday so all the agencies are going to be closed. But Elaine would open Families United if we needed to meet there."

"Yeah, but Grant Miller won't let it being Saturday stop him," Kristopher said. "He'll just dig in his heels and keep going."



“Sounds like my kind of guy,” Bailey commented. “Like BP, he aims to please.”

His comment erased the remaining tension in the room, and they finished their breakfast with light conversation about the weather and the upcoming season for the Lady Vols basketball team.

“I believe the rule is, the cook doesn’t have to clean up,” Kristopher said, standing to gather their plates.

“Works for me,” Bailey announced. “I’m hitting the showers.”

He left them alone and Suzanne rose. “My wrist is feeling much better, so I can certainly help clean up. What is that old expression? Many hands make light work?”

“Works for me,” Kristopher echoed Bailey. “Let’s get it done.”

There was actually very little to do. Bailey obviously belonged to the clean-as-you-go cooking club. After they put away the leftovers and loaded the dishwasher, Suzanne made a fresh pot of coffee while Kristopher swept the floor.

“Looks good,” Kristopher announced putting the broom and dustpan in the small closet.

“We make a good team,” Suzanne agreed, starting the dish washer. She looked up and found Kristopher standing next to her. This close she was able to inhale the comforting smell of soap and a faint woodsy scent that reminded her of autumn days. It was a comforting scent and Suzanne suddenly realized she felt safe. Still worried, but safe.

“I haven’t thanked you,” she said shyly.

His eyebrows rose. “For what?”

“Taking care of me.”

He shrugged. “That’s what I’m supposed to do. No need to thank me for doing my job.”

“I’ll bet there might have been more exciting assignments,” she teased.

“I was already in Knoxville, remember?” he said. “So, it made sense for me to take the case.”

“And you knew Mercy and David, so taking this case was important to you,” she added but his expression suggested this might not be the time to talk about that. “Do you have family here?”

He hesitated and after a long pause, said, “Yeah. My parents are here. But we’re not exactly on speaking terms. Even after all this time, they still disapprove of my decisions to become a cop and join the Army. I spent the holiday in Townsend with another BP member and his fiancée. Nice and peaceful.”

His flat tone tugged at her heart, and she offered up the only reply she could think of. “Should I say I’m sorry?”

“No,” he said, the ancient hurt darkening his eyes. “I’m ok with it.”

“Well, I’m still grateful,” she said, not really believing him. Standing on her toes, she kissed him on the cheek. “You seem like a nice guy, even if you can’t cook.”

His arms slipped around her, and she leaned into him. Staring down at her, he said, “But I make really good coffee, don’t you think?”

“Really good,” she agreed, lifting her head to accept his sudden kiss. It was warm and sweet, tasting of breakfast honey and was completely delicious and she wondered what the rest of him might taste like.

After a moment, he pulled back. “Two kisses in twenty-four hours. I think we’re getting way ahead of ourselves,” he said. “I mean, we just met.”

Heat flamed Suzanne’s face. “I’m sorry,” she muttered. “You’re right. Lots for us to do.”

“Don’t be sorry,” he said, his fingers brushing her cheek. “We just need to stay focused.”

The sound of someone singing, Who Let the Dogs Out? had them stepping back just as Bailey entered. His eyes did a quick study of them and Suzanne had no doubts he knew exactly what was going on. “So” he asked, sliding his hands into the front pockets of his jeans. “What’s the plan?”

### CHAPTER 18

“I’m glad Grant is available to meet us at the youth shelter,” Kristopher said as they drove towards South Knoxville. “He’s probably got more on his plate than he can grace over, it being the holidays.”

“Me too,” Suzanne agreed. “And I’m especially interested in hearing Sofia Langley’s impressions of Mercy’s last visit. She’s the shelter’s day supervisor and I know her from volunteering at a local food bank. She’s waiting on us.”

“Can she be trusted?” Kristopher gazed in the rearview mirror at the two-lane highway. Grant Miller’s black sedan was several cars behind them. The man preferred non-descript vehicles and often said, “Who remembers a plain black car?”

“Absolutely,” Suzanne said. “Her adult son has a learning disorder, and I placed him in a training program for disabled adults at Daisy’s, a local café years ago. And Sofia is as honest as the day is long. She knows Grant too.”

“But won’t there be kids at the shelter?” Kristopher asked. “I remember from my days on the KPD force, that holidays can be a bad time for families and their kids. Lots of alcohol and drug use, lots of arguments and hurt feelings. It can be a bad time for families, and kids often have to be removed from their homes and placed in emergency shelters.”

“That’s what Mercy often told me,” Suzanne said. “Case managers hate removing kids from their homes during the holidays unless there’s no other option. But unless some kids were admitted yesterday, Mercy said there were no kids there and Sofia

said she told Grant the same thing, which is weird considering the holiday.”

“The whole case is weird,” Kristopher said. “Do you think other case managers took out their kids after the Clark sisters were gone? Kids in foster care talk about stuff. Maybe they asked to be moved because the Campbell sisters told them what they saw.”

Suzanne massaged her hands. She’d forgotten her gloves, and even though the car’s interior was warm, her hands were still cold. “I don’t know,” she said. “Kids in foster care can be sneaky. When you grow up in the system, you learn a lot of valuable skills like that.”

“You were going to tell me about that.” Kristopher checked his mirror again. Grant was now two cars behind them.

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll give you the edited version. My parents were alcoholics. My grandparents on both sides tried to take care of me but they all had serious health problems, so I first went into foster care when I was eight years old. My parents would get sober for a while and petition for me, and I’d go back to them. But they always start drinking again and make me stay home from school to take care of them or clean the house ‘cause that’s what I was supposed to do. So back to foster care I went. The state finally terminated their parental rights when I was twelve.”

Her tone was matter of fact, as if like Kristopher, she’d long ago accepted her family situation, no matter how badly it sucked. But foster care at eight? Becoming a ward of the state at twelve because your parents couldn’t get their shit together to raise you? Recalling her question to him from this morning, he asked, “Should I say I’m sorry?”

“Not at all. I had a great case manager who found a therapeutic foster home for me just as I entered high school. There was only one other girl there and I could stay until

I graduated unless I screwed up and there was no way I was going to do that. Your turn is coming up on the right.”

“Sorry.” Kristopher quickly turned onto the street and followed his phone’s GPS to their destination. It led to a lone house with a long driveway with a small parking lot in front. The last houses they passed were a good half a mile back and he noted a covered bus stop at the foot of one driveway with benches. This one-story building was simple in design and looked well maintained. “This is a shelter?” he asked, pulling into one of the spaces. “It almost looks like a church.”

“It was a Quaker meeting house for years,” she said as he turned off the engine and pocketed his phone. The congregation outgrew the house, and they gave it, gave it, mind you, not sold—to All Families.”

“The agency absorbed by Tennessee Cares,” Kristopher recalled as Grant pulled in beside them. They exited their cars, and he followed them to the back of the house. The backyard was fenced and had swings, a slide and an old-fashioned jungle gym. Flower beds empty except for the remaining green of Lenten Roses graced the area. It was neat and welcoming as if someone cared about the children whose lives brought them here and wanted to give them a nice place to play.

At the end of the sidewalk, Suzanne rapped on the door. It was opened immediately by a tall, well-built woman with a mass of silver hair. “Suzanne,” she greeted, opening the door wider. “Grant Miller. And you must be Suzanne’s friend, Kristopher. Please come in. I have fresh coffee.”

“Kristopher, this is my friend, Sofia Langley,” Suzanne introduced as they stepped inside. “Sofia, this is Sgt. Kristopher Brower, recently retired from the US Army and whose helping me out with a situation.”

Sofia’s wide smile dimmed as she closed and locked the door. “You’re talking about

Mercy Phillips, aren't you?"

"Yes," Suzanne said sadly. "Can you tell us anything?"

Sofia gestured and they followed her to the kitchen table. After she'd served them, she said, "I'll bet you want to jump to the chase. Mercy is really dead?"

"I'm afraid so, Sofia," Miller told her. "I know you've already talked to one of my men about the Campbell girls, but can you tell us anything about the Taylors' last days here?"

"Only that the Campbells seemed on edge," Sofia said, her gray eyes narrowing. "Especially after the Clark sisters left so abruptly. Their case manager never did return my calls, but Perry Thompson, the shelter director told me he'd take care of things, including letting the CEO know, but he never got back to me."

"What about Christmas Eve when Mercy came by?" Suzanne asked.

"There was something going on, that's for sure," Sofia declared. "I was getting off just as Mercy got here with presents for the Campbell girls, and they were, as my grandma used to say as 'nervous as a pair of long-tailed cats in a room full of rocking chairs.' When I left, it was just them and the Taylors, God rest their souls. If they have them."

Suzanne exchanged glances with the men. "You know they're dead?" she asked.

"Saw it on the news," Sofia said. "I don't want to be hateful, but they could be awfully mean to the kids. Always criticizing them if they put their elbows on the table or slurped their milk. Dumb stuff."

"Kids in a shelter don't need to be scolded," Miller agreed. "They're scared enough

as it is.”

“Exactly!” Sofia declared. “The Taylors came in when Tennessee Cares absorbed it from All Families at the first of the year. Big phony smiles and ‘we’re gonna really make this place special for kids’ kind of crap. As if it wasn’t special already. Before they came, kids almost never ran from here. Since the first of the year, we’ve had four kids take off, and that’s not counting the Clark sisters, poor kids.”

“When the Clark sisters were ‘taken out’, was there paperwork?” Suzanne asked.

“The Taylors filled out the shelter’s discharge paperwork and kept a copy of Henry Tate, the Clarks’ state case manager’s report,” Sofia said, “but I still think something was going on. Something bad.”

“And you think the Taylors were behind it.” Miller clipped off his words. “That they were up to something.”

“I do,” Sofia said. “The Taylors came on duty in the late afternoon and would stay overnight five nights a week and sit up in a small apartment so they could keep an eye on things. Perfect chance for mischief, you know?”

Kristopher raised his eyes from studying the contents of his cup. “What did the Clark sisters’ case manager supposedly tell the Taylors about moving them?”

Sophia scowled. “Henry Tate? That skunk. He acted like he cared, but you could see he didn’t. This was just a job. He told the Taylors their druggie parents had learned where they were and were coming after them, so he had to take them out fast. But I don’t believe it for a minute. For one thing, he didn’t put in the discharge papers where he took the Clarks. It should state it there.”

“What do you believe, Ms. Langley?” Kristopher leaned forward and rested his arms



on the table.

Anger sparkled in the woman's eyes, but her voice was firm. "That someone took both sets of girls, and the Taylors were behind it. Now they're dead and so is Mercy. It's nothing short of a miracle that the Campbell girls were the only ones here the night they vanished. All the other case managers managed to find temporary foster homes for the rest of the kids because of the holidays. Who knows what might have happened to them if they'd been here?"

"Sofia, I don't want to scare you, but you need stay away from here," Miller warned and there was no mistaking the urgency in his voice. "Tell whoever you need to, whatever you have to, but I would lock the doors and leave."

"Good heavens." Sofia's voice rose. "You think I'm in danger?"

"I wouldn't hang around long enough to find out," Miller warned. "And warn your son as well. We don't want either him or you to be targeted by whoever is behind this."

"Sofia's son Alex works at Daisy's ," Suzanne explained to Kristopher. "He's on my caseload for adults who need help finding employment."

Sofia nodded. "I've made copies of Henry Tate's report and the ones the Taylors filled out when the Campbell girls vanished. I don't give a damn about confidentiality at this point. I just want both sets of girls found safe and alive. Maybe it was intuition, but Mercy never provided us with their mother's contact information."

"Maybe because the Campbells were in state custody," Suzanne suggested. "And that made the state responsible for them."

Nodding, Sofia rose, left the room and returned almost instantly with two manila

folders. Handing one to Suzanne and the other one to Miller, she said, “I’ve included the reports on all the kids who’ve run this year. Maybe I watch too many police shows, but I think everything is connected.”

“Can you fax copies of those to my boss?” Suzanne recited Elaine Prescott’s number. “She’s eager to help. We don’t want any of the families we take care of to wind up dealing with Tennessee Cares until we know what’s going on.”

“Consider it done,” Sofia declared. “Will you let me know when and where there’s a memorial service for Mercy?”

“Absolutely,” Suzanne said, and they all stood. “Thanks, Sofia. You’ve been a tremendous help. And listen to Grant. You and Alex might need to find some place safe to stay until this is over.”

“We can stay with my sister,” Sofia said. “And Daisy’s is closed for a few days, so we should be okay.”

She led them to the back door, and they shook hands. In the parking lot, Miller unlocked his car, and said, “I’m going back to the station. There was another situation brewing and I need to talk to the men involved. Text me if you need me.”

They watched him drive away before they got into the black and white. “Are we good to go?” Kristopher asked. “And was this worth the trip?”

“I think Sofia confirmed Mercy’s suspicions and mine,” Suzanne said, stuffing the manila envelope into her oversized bag. “We’re good to go.”

“Then I’m glad we came,” he said simply. “And that we invited Miller.”

Suzanne’s gaze swept over him. “What’s wrong?”

“Just a feeling,” he said. “Probably because I’m getting hungry again.”

He turned onto the road, and drove slowly, processing everything Sofia Langley had shared with them. Beside him, Suzanne checked her phone for messages. “Elaine says there have been three PSAs on TV about David today,” she told him. “Surely someone’s going to have seen something.”

“Let’s hope,” he said, ignoring the old, familiar pricking at the base of his spine. The one that always started before something happened. Something bad.

A blue Mustang of indeterminate age pulled out from a side road and into the road behind them, going too fast for Kristopher’s liking. He noted the absence of oncoming traffic and silently released a sigh of relief. The idiot could pass them any time he liked and—

Glass from the back windows exploded behind them, showering them both as smoke filled the car. Suzanne cried out and doubled over, her arms covering her head. Coughing, Kristopher jerked the wheel and steered them onto the road’s shoulder just below one of the houses. The smoke grew thicker, burning his eyes and making breathing nearly impossible. Gasping, he grabbed up his phone and stuffed it in his jacket pocket. Then he opened his door, unbuckled both their seat belts to wrap his arms around Suzanne and scoot them across the bench seat to tumble from the car where he half carried, half dragged her to the covered bus stop he’d noticed earlier. He gently sat her on one of the benches and then, phone still in hand, he dialed 911 as he slowly walked back to his beloved car to grab Suzanne’s handbag. Smoke poured from the back and the smell of burning leather seats polluted the air. Cars slowed and pointed, and one fool looked like they were filming the whole damn scene. After dialing Grant Miller’s number to ask for help, he returned to the bus stop and found Suzanne huddled in a corner of the front bench, her back to the glass side, her arms wrapped around her legs, head down.

Sweet Savior, let her be alright. “Tell me you’re okay, Suze,” he whispered, unexpectedly using David Phillips’ nickname for her. “Tell me you’re not hurt. I got your purse.”

She raised her smoke smudged face and opened her eyes. She squinted at him, but her expression was proudly defiant. “Good to go, Sergeant Brower,” she rasped. “Good to go.”

### CHAPTER 19

Later that afternoon. BP Safehouse.

“What do you mean, my car was bugged?” Kristopher shouted.

He’d called Bailey and Hank Patterson after calling Grant Miller who raced back after calling KPD’s bomb squad and the Fire Department. Fire Chief Masie Flores had said the device had failed to detonate properly but had still destroyed the car’s back windows and burned the seats. Someone, Chief Flores said, must have had very bad aim because in her mind, whoever threw it, was trying for the front seats.

And now the news Kristopher’s car had been bugged.

“The mechanics at our garage found a listening and tracking device in the windshield wipers.” Bailey shook his head in disbelief. “This is looking more and more like The Cadre. You two have really pissed off somebody, and I mean bad.” He poured and handed Suzanne a glass of water from the pitcher on the coffee table. She and Kristopher sat side by side on the living room sofa, still wearing their smoke saturated clothing.

“But who would have access to your car?” Suzanne demanded “Hasn’t it always been here at the safehouse in the underground garage?”

“Yes, and our surveillance cameras there go 24-7,” Kristopher said flatly. “No way in hell anyone could have made it into the garage without us knowing.”

“We still need to check the tapes,” Bailey argued. “I don’t know if someone could have screwed them up remotely, but anything is possible.”

“What about when you came to Families United yesterday?” Suzanne paused to sip her water. “Did you park on the streets or in their parking lot?”

“The lot,” Kristopher answered. “But since Elaine became involved with BP, we’ve had security guards there during working hours and in the building overnight. They know everyone who works here on sight and take every possible precaution. Griff Tyler believes that The Cadre could still come after Elaine. If someone went near my car while I was inside, our people would have stopped them.”

“Maybe while you were at the shelter?” Bailey suggested.

“Impossible,” Kristopher argued. “We would have heard someone pull into the parking lot. No, it had to be before so they would know where we’d gone.”

“Well, whoever it was, they sure as hell won’t be following your car anymore,” Bailey said. “I’m going to call the lab again. And then I’m going to work on finding you a set of wheels ‘cause your old black and white is going to be in the shop for a good long while. Holy crap. Someone bugged your car.” With a disgusted snort, Bailey lurched to his feet and headed for the office.

Only when they heard the office door close, did Kristopher ask, “Are you really alright?”

“If they followed us to the shelter,” Suzanne said slowly, putting her glass on the table, “then they were waiting for us to leave so they could throw that bomb, hoping the car would catch fire and explode. Good Heavens. What kind of people are we dealing with?”

“Monsters from your worst nightmares,” Kristopher answered. “Monsters who prey on little kids and teens for their own sick, twisted purposes. Hell is too good for them.”

“Good heavens,” Suzanne gasped. “I think I know how they did it. Bugged your car.”

“How you figure?” Kristopher leaned in to brush a strand of hair from her face and for a moment he imagined running a brush through it. Slowly, gently, deliberately until it shone like the best silk.

“When we were talking to T.J.,” she said, realization widening her eyes. “We left your car unattended, and standing down there, we wouldn’t have seen anyone. How hard could it have been for someone to slip it on the wipers? That’s the only time someone could have done it. No one would dare do it while we were at Mercy’s because Officer Jackson was still there. Kristopher, I’m sorry. This is all my fault.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Kristopher managed to swallow his shout of impatience. “None of this is your fault! Do you understand me?”

“But if I hadn’t suggested we go to the skate-park—”

“It was a good idea,” Kristopher argued. “A damn good idea. Because I’ll bet you ten to one, T.J. knows something, or will go looking for it. So, we’ll just have to go find him again. But just get the idea of any of this being your fault out of your head right now.”

“But you think I’m right, don’t you?” Suzanne challenged. “It could have happened then.”

“Yeah,” Kristopher agreed. “It’s likely. More work for Miller, poor guy.”

“And thank goodness we asked him to join us at the shelter,” Suzanne released a relieved sigh. “How else would he have gotten back to us so quickly? Poor guy. I think he was angrier at himself for not staying us than going ahead.”

Kristopher reached for her hands. “You never did answer my first question. How are you doing, Miz Bennett?”

She couldn’t hold back her laugh. “You seem to be favoring me with that title.”

“Just good old-fashioned manners,” he said, his fingertips tracing over her cheeks. “You’ve got some smudges on your face from the smoke.”

“I do?” She covered his hand with her own. “I must look awful.”

“Just a bit dirty,” he said, leaning closer. “But there’s not a trace of it on your mouth.”

“Are you sure?” she whispered. “Maybe you should—you know—check?”

“I can do that.”

His mouth hovered over hers and his body’s heat radiated over hers, all earlier thoughts about holding back forgotten. She moved her hands to palm the sides of his face, heart tangoing in anticipation of his kiss—

Her phone rang.

They sat back, sighed and then laughed together. She took the phone from the sofa’s arm and hit the speaker button. “Hi, Elaine. What’s up?”

“I know it’s Saturday, but are you and Kristopher available?” Her friend’s tone held a



note of unfamiliar urgency.

“We are.” Suzanne met Kristopher’s questioning look. “When and where?”

“In an hour at Family Services of Tennessee,” Elaine told them. “Mercy’s supervisor came back to town and wants us to meet her there. And she’s found Charles Tattersall, regional CEO of Tennessee Cares. Get ready, girlfriend. This may get ugly.”

“It can’t get any uglier than it already is,” Suzanne told her and chuckled at Kristopher’s exaggerated eyeroll.

“Has something else happened?” Elaine asked quickly. “Are you and Kristopher okay?”

“Let’s just say it’s been an interesting day,” Suzanne said dryly. “We’ll see you in an hour or less.”

She ended the call and looked at her bodyguard. “Well?”

“I don’t think we should go to a meeting with your boss and all those big wigs, covered in smoke and soot,” he said, raising her to her feet. “Especially if it’s going to get ugly. We should look our best.”

“Absolutely,” she said, enjoying the feel of his hands in hers. “So—?”

“Whoever finishes showering first has to set and clear the table,” he announced. “And I’ve got less hair than you do—”

“You’re on,” she challenged, pulling her hands away and racing for the hall.

### CHAPTER 20

So, Kristopher Brower is with Brotherhood Protectors now. And he is here in Knoxville? Bogdan switched off his laptop's computer screen and sat back. He had thought about asking Samuels if he could kill Kraft for his disrespect, but killing Kristopher Brower would be so much more rewarding.

Because only three months ago, Kristopher Brower and his team had helped take down Balaaur, a Romanian child trafficking operation stationed in Bucharest, named for a multi-headed dragon from Romanian mythology. A creature that preyed upon and destroyed everyone and everything that stood in its way. And people thought Dracula was scary. Balaaur found, kidnapped and transported children as well as men and women all over Europe to answer the needs—sexual or labor—of those willing to pay the price. Things had become so much easier when the Romanian government had become less involved in trafficking and Balaaur was able to operate with little interference from the local and national authorities.

But then that special forces from the U.S. Army arrived and stuck their noses where they didn't belong. Among them Kristopher Brower, who spoke Romanian so fluently one could swear he was a native. In four years, he and his team dismantled what Balaaur spent more than twenty years building, and had cost Balaaur millions of dollars, including Bogdan's very generous cut.

The problem had been that the U.S. team was very good at staying hidden and working underground. Bogdan had only caught a fleeting glimpse of Kristopher Brower once in all that time, just before the tall, dark-haired man had jumped onto the plane carrying away fifty children selected for those with deep pockets and

warped tastes.

But now the photo his Bucharest contact had just supplied, confirmed that the man Bogdan had seen getting out of that old black-and-white car at Mercy Phillips was indeed Kristopher Brower.

That the U.S. army unit escaped after freeing Balaur's captives still stuck in Bogdan's craw. At least he had kept some of the best children himself, the ones he'd smuggled into the United States and planned to hand over to The Cadre in the next few days.

And Brower was guarding Suzanne Bennett? To be able to kill them both at the same time for all the trouble they had caused Bogdan proved that there was a God in heaven after all.

"And Mercy thought someone had deliberately taken the Campbell sisters out of the shelter after meeting with her on Christmas Eve?" Lucinda Gonzalez, regional director of Family Services of Tennessee asked. Even with her voice pitched low, her anger was hard to miss. "That they hadn't run away?"

"Yes," Suzanne said. "She said she would have taken them from the shelter on Christmas Eve, but David had some kind of stomach bug. She didn't want to expose them to it, and they knew she was coming back for them Christmas Day. Can you let their mother know what's happened?"

"As soon as we finish here," Lucinda promised. "What's next Charles? Will the youth shelter remain open?"

Suzanne shifted her gaze from Lucinda to look at Charles Tattersall, Regional CEO for Tennessee Cares. His neatly groomed hands were folded together on top of the meeting room's long table, looking every inch the executive in his tailored suit and carefully brushed silver hair. But a mixture of sorrow and anger knotted handsome,

kindly features, drawing his eyebrows together.

“First, Lucinda,” Tattersall began, “let me say unequivocally, I am appalled by all of this, and you may be sure I will immediately dismiss Perry Thompson, our regional VP and who acts for me when I am away. He should have contacted me as soon as the Campbell girls were found to be gone.”

“Thank you for that,” Lucinda said. “It’s been four days since they went missing, with no report of them being seen. And I support Mercy’s belief that those girls did not run away.”

“Secondly,” Tattersall continued, “KDP has the cooperation and complete support of Tennessee Cares to help find the Campbell girls and bring Mercy Phillips’ killer to justice.”

Why isn’t he mentioning the Clark sisters? Or has Lucinda not dealt with their case manager yet? Suzanne swallowed her questions and instead asked, “Where were you when this was happening, Mr. Tattersall? Why did it take so long to contact you?”

“I can’t explain Perry’s behavior in not reaching out to me, Ms. Bennett,” Tattersall said, a hint of annoyance entering his voice. “But to answer your question, I was in Nashville at a Tennessee Cares planning meeting for a New Year’s fundraising event here in Knoxville.”

“Could this not have been done by Zoom meeting?” Lucinda asked.

Tattersall ran his hand over his hair and sighed. “Our CEO, Abner Graham is very old fashioned and absolutely hates the Internet. No amount of pleading got him to agree to do Zoom. So, off to Nashville—which is where Graham lives—I go. At least it was the day after Christmas. My grandchildren would never have forgiven me if I’d not been there on Christmas Day. I got back late last night.”

“And what was Perry Thompson’s reason for not calling you?” Lucinda asked.

Tattersall scowled. “That he didn’t want to interrupt TC’s planning meeting. Idiot!”

“How big of an event is this, Charles?” Elaine asked. “I’ve heard good things about it.” Her eyes looked tired, and Suzanne hoped her fiancé Griff Tyler was nearby. Elaine looked like she needed a hug.

“Huge, Elaine,” Tattersall replied. “Since Tennessee Cares is new to East Tennessee, we decided months ago to hold it here in Knoxville. We wanted to show off what is in my mind, the loveliest part of the state. But since I’m originally from Greeneville, I’m biased. Hundreds of sponsors are donating items of great value for both an open and silent auction. We’re hoping to raise at least a half of a million dollars for new programs that will reach out too many more families, including a new medical clinic around the corner from our office.”

“Sounds like a lot of work for one person,” Kristopher commented and even in the short time she’d known him, Suzanne knew he didn’t like Tattersall. It wasn’t the man’s sophisticated appearance or demeanor. He was just too smooth. But then a man in his position, one who spoke to large groups and helped raise larger sums of money, would need to be.

“You have no idea,” Tattersall replied. He tilted his head to stare at Kristopher. “I’m sorry, but who are you?”

“I’m her bodyguard,” Kristopher said evenly. “Someone learned she talked to Mercy Phillips hours before she died and then someone tried to kill her as well.”

“Dear Lord!” The color drained from Tattersall’s face. “I had no idea it had come that. Who would do such a thing?”

“That,” Kristopher said, “is what we’re trying to find out.”

“Lucinda,” Suzanne began, and had to swallow the tears clogging her throat. “Do you know who Mercy named as her emergency contact? The police couldn’t find anything like an address book at her home and her cell phone was smashed.”

“And who will identify her body?” Kristopher placed his hand close enough to Suzanne’s she could feel its calming warmth, and she realized her heart was pounding. “She and Mercy were friends,” he added. “She shouldn’t have to do that.”

“Both those unhappy duties fall to me,” Lucinda said sadly. “I have her parents’ contact and travel information, so I’m going to reach out to them today. She also named me David’s temporary guardian if something happened to her, including giving me medical power of attorney if needed. Thank God, he’s healthy. Are we finished here? I’m meeting Sergeant Miller at the morgue when we are.”

“Well, I for one, am going to go kick some ass,” Tattersall announced. “Perry Johnson is about to be handed his head on a platter without a reference. Tennessee Cares has spent too many years taking care of children for this to happen.” He gave Suzanne a sympathetic gaze. “You and Ms. Phillips were friends?”

“Good friends,” she said. “Very good friend.”

“The state has lost one of its best-case managers,” Lucinda said sadly. “I don’t know how we’re going to tell the children and youth on her case load. They’ll be heartbroken.”

“Then again, you have TC’s full support in the search for her killer,” Tattersall announced as he stood. “I hope Perry at least remembered to send you an invitation to the gala, Lucinda. If you will all excuse me?”

He left and it was a minute before Elaine asked,” Lucinda, what do you know about Charles Tattersall? I’ve worked with him a bit, and he really seems to know his stuff. He seems awfully calm in all of this.”

“He’s been in the child welfare industry for years and is highly regarded by almost everyone,” Lucinda described. “He helped found TC years ago and made it what it is today. I think he started the first one in Memphis because that’s where his wife wanted to live. He’s known not only in Tennessee but around the southeast.”

“One of the good guys?” Suzanne asked.

“Absolutely,” Lucinda said. “We need someone like him on our team. Sgt. Brower, why do you have that look on your face?”

“He was awfully defensive, don’t you think?” Kristopher sat back, and moved his hand, taking its warmth with him. His expression suggested that like Suzanne, he had a lot more to ask but was keeping his questions and comments to himself.

“I would be too, if I were in his position,” Lucinda said. “Especially with this fundraiser coming up. The proverbially shit is about to hit the fan.”

“I bow to you ladies experience.” Kristopher smiled and inclined his head. “We’ll be off, then. With everything that’s happened, I don’t like us being away from the safehouse for too long, even with Bailey driving us back.”

“Bailey?” Lucinda asked. Her voice and features were calm, but Suzanne had no doubt she was exhausted and wondered if she’d ever had to identify the body of an employee.

“A Brotherhood Protector backup,” Kristopher explained, and Lucinda nodded, and the meeting ended.

But once they were safely in the car, Suzanne gently prodded Kristopher with a gloved finger. “OK, Kristopher with a K, out with it. What’s on your mind?”

“Why do you think,” he said, stretching out those very long legs, “Ms. Gonzalez didn’t mention Henry Tate to Tattersall? If TC runs the shelter, shouldn’t he know about all the state case managers who place children there?”

“One would think,” Suzanne replied. “She’s probably keeping it in house until she talks to Tate because technically she’s his boss. Whatever Tattersall is going to do to Perry Johnson is nothing compared to what Lucinda will do to Henry Tate.”

“Going to do some ass-chewing?” Kristopher wiggled his eyebrow.

“Let’s put it like this,” Suzanne said. “I hope for his sake, Henry Tate is on vacation or he’s picked out the music he wants played at his funeral. He’s going to need it.”

“Good for Ms. Gonzalez.” Kristopher slipped his arm around her shoulders. “Is there a reason you didn’t tell Elaine about what happened to us today?”

“I’ll tell her on Monday,” Suzanne said. “She’s worried enough about me as it is. And Mercy was her friend too.”

“Not tomorrow?” Kristopher asked softly.

“Sunday is supposed to be a day of rest,” Suzanne reminded him. “Monday will be soon enough. With the two of you watching out for me, I’ll be fine. Let’s go back to the safehouse.”

“Good idea,” Bailey agreed from the front seat. “I’m getting hungry. And we need to be there when Kristopher’s new wheels are delivered.”



### CHAPTER 21

Later that afternoon

“T.J. why are you in foster care?”

T.J. stopped moving the brush through his sleep-tangled hair. He was almost used to getting up super early so he could leave David’s house and make it back to the Johnson’s before they came home from work. They’d said it was “really wild” and expected it to get wilder as the New Year holiday approached. “People just don’t use good sense,” Mrs. Johnson would say, and Mr. Johnson would just nod. They always looked super tired when they came in and would go to bed soon after they ate. T.J. would have breakfast almost ready for them when they got home. He was getting good at making omelets and frying bacon and some other stuff. He hoped that would keep them from getting suspicious about where he was spending his nights.

He turned to face David who was still at the table in the downstairs den at his house. There had been a huge amount of food upstairs, so they just had to carry it down here. They needed, T.J. had warned, to stay downstairs as much as possible so no one would suspect they were here. So far so good. But, geez, the questions the kid could ask.

“My parents got caught passing counterfeit bills,” T.J. said.

“What’s that?” David asked, his cereal spoon half-way to his mouth.

“Fake money,” T.J. explained. “It’s illegal to do that. You know, against the law.”

Curiosity wrinkled David's face. "Why'd they do it?"

T.J. withheld his sigh of impatience. "I don't know, little dude. They didn't tell me."

David considered this. "Did they have to go to jail?"

"Yep, and before you ask, none of my grandparents wanted me after that, so that's why I got put in foster care. Enough questions for now." T.J. put down the brush. "I gotta go. Do you have everything you need?"

"Yeah. T.J., when my grandparents get back from vacation, you can come and live with us."

The kindness shining on the younger boy's face nearly made T.J. lose it and he had to bite his lip hard to keep from bursting into tears.

"That's okay, David," he finally managed to say. "The Johnsons are okay, so I'll just stick with them for now. I need to go. See ya, bye."

And with that, he was out the den's door and taking the back way to the Johnsons house.

Later that same night.

"They know!" the man bellowed. "Or at least are highly suspicious. If you screw this up, The Cadre will carve you up like a Thanksgiving turkey."

"I d-did what you told me." Henry Tate grabbed the chair's arms to halt their frantic trembling. "Ev-everything by the book. You said it would be easy. How was I to know those other girls would see what happened? Seems to me that the Taylors are to blame for this."

“The Taylors were careless,” the man snapped. “And now they’re dead. Do you want to be next?”

“N-no, sir.” Sweat ran down Tate’s neck and pooled under his collar.

“Then go get those children from that other shelter and have them at the rendezvous site no later than midnight tonight. Don’t even think about talking to the police. You do, and you’re dead. Now get out of here.”

Tate stumbled from the room and the man fought the urge to throw something against the wall. They’d probably need to kill Tate after he delivered the kids, but later. Three deaths in less than three days would only add to the firestorm of investigation and The Cadre didn’t need that. Things had been going so well until those Campbell girls had opened their mouths to Mercy Phillips and she had told Suzanne Bennett. The sooner that bitch was dead the better before the operation collapsed like a house of cards.

He placed the call to expedite that.

### CHAPTER 22

December 29<sup>th</sup> .

Late Sunday Morning

“Where do you think Bailey found that delivery truck?” Suzanne asked, re-filling their coffee cups. “Do you really think it’s bullet-proofed all over?”

After they’d returned from Lucinda’s office yesterday, they’d found the oversize white van painted with pictures of fruits and vegetables and the words Mills’ Farm Fresh Produce painted in red on the side, parked in the safe house garage.

“Count on it,” Kristopher told her as he cleared the table and loaded the dishwasher. “And yes, that winning word was really a word.” After getting back to the safehouse yesterday, they’d spent the afternoon alternately playing cards and then Scrabble, each winning three games until Kristopher earned an astronomical points-with triple letter values and triple word. Dinner was warmed up leftovers, but they agreed, leftovers always made for the best meals. But Kristopher really needed to convince Patrick to rescind the ban on Kristopher cooking. “Do you want to go for a ride later?” he asked.

In the four days they’d known each other, they’d fallen into a comfortable rhythm. Kristopher could not remember the last time he’d felt so at ease in a woman’s company. Of course, the women in his life these past five years were colleagues, and their mission too great to become emotionally involved. One of Kristopher’s hard and fast rules was to never do that. Too messy.

But this mission was different and his feelings for Suzanne Bennett were growing stronger. He needed to find something to keep them busy, at least for today. No more kisses.

She cocked her head to regard him. “Is it safe for us to do that? I know the van is, but—”

“I think so.” Kristopher returned to the table. “Who’s going to bother a delivery truck hauling fruits and vegetables on Sunday morning? And it’s wired so we’d be tracked wherever we go. Don’t think it could be safer and I doubt whoever threw that bomb is going to try again so soon.”

His cell phone’s vibrations rattled their cups, and he hit accept and turned on the speaker. “It’s Hank,” he told her. “Hey Hank, what’s up?”

“We have reason to believe Gregori Bogdan is in Knoxville.”

Apprehension shuttled down Kristopher’s spine. “Is he now? Is this something Suzanne needs to know?”

“Since the son of a bitch put a price on your head?” Hank’s snort was loud and clear. “Yeah, I think she needs to know everything, especially since we suspect he’s working with or for The Cadre. Double your efforts in staying safe. I need to go.”

The phone went silent. Kristopher pushed it aside and propped his elbows on the table. “That may explain some things,” he said. “Damn. Gregori Bogdan.”

“This sounds serious,” Suzanne said softly.

“Very,” Kristopher said. “Damn serious.”

Suzanne looked over her shoulder. “Where’s Bailey?”

“He’s in the garage with our tech guys, going over the surveillance equipment and checking the tapes,” Kristopher explained. “We’ll know in seconds if someone is following us. And we’re sure not going to leave the van unattended, not even for a minute.”

“I’m sorry about that,” Suzanne sighed. “If we hadn’t left your old black and white alone when we went to talk to T.J.—”

“Hush up, Miz Bennett.”

“Yes sir.” She gave him a quick salute and said, “Let’s take our coffee to the living room. I think you telling me about this Bogdan guy is going to require a softer place to sit than these chairs.”

When they’d settled themselves on the long sofa, Suzanne asked, “Does this Bogdan guy have anything to do with your last hitch in the Army?”

“My last hitch ?” Kristopher repeated and despite Hank’s news, laughed. “What old movies have you been watching?”

She wrinkled her nose at him. “‘C’mon, Sergeant Brower. Give it to me straight.”

“Okay,” Kristopher said. “But that was a good guess.”

He took a sip of coffee to order his thoughts. She needed to know everything. Both their live, and the lives of the Campbell and Clark sisters—and who knew how many more kids—could depend on it.

“Because a great deal of my work with KPD involved child protection, both my

‘hitches’ in the army took me into locating and stopping child traffickers,” he began. “The last Army posting, I was almost exclusively in Romania.”

“I’ve heard that’s one of the worst spots in the world for that kind of activity,” Suzanne commented.

“It is,” Kristopher agreed. “And it’s a damn shame because it’s one of most hospitable places I’ve ever visited. The people are friendly, welcoming and throw a great party. It’s also one of the prettiest places I’ve ever seen. But like most places in the world, it has a darker side. Child trafficking is rampant there. That sick desire to use kids and teens knows no borders. Hell is too good for them, Suzanne. All of them.”

She watched the past darken his eyes. “Go on,” she said.

“Because a great deal of this is still classified, I can only tell you so much,” he warned. “Let’s just say, my unit took down Balaur, the most highly successful and well-organized child trafficking ring in the country and probably in Europe. It took most of the five years we were there to do it, but it cost Balaur millions in revenue. One of the few operatives that escaped arrest was a very bad man named Gregori Bogdan. He let it be known that there was a price on my head, and when he found me he would personally send me to hell, after lots of torture of course. That was one of the reasons Hank Patterson arranged for my separation from the Army. Easier for Bogdan to track me if I were still in service after I got back to the states. He did the same for the other members of my team as well. And don’t ask me where they are, because I don’t know.

“Arranged for your separation from the Army?” Suzanne repeated. “That means you left active duty, right? At his silent nod, she asked, “Because you had a price on your head? Good Lord. You’re a dangerous man, Kristopher with a K Brower.”

He shrugged. "I'm used to people being pissed with me. It goes with the job."

"Humph! I'd say having a price put on your head is more than someone being pissed," Suzanne snorted. Then she considered his description of Bogdan, she asked, "Do you think we're in more danger than before?"

"I don't know," he said. "Probably. But my mission is to keep you safe at all costs. And that's exactly what I'm going to do, Suzanne. Word of honor."

She put her cup on the coffee table and leaned forward to palm his face. "I've never doubted for a minute that you would," she whispered. "Hank Patterson couldn't have sent anyone better."

He moved so he could wrap his arms around her. "He could have sent someone who knew how to cook so you wouldn't have to eat leftovers all the time."

"I told you I like leftovers," she answered, her mouth within kissing distance of his. "Better leftovers with friends than fancy meals in a five-star restaurant with strangers."

"Is that an old proverb?" he whispered.

"All of five minutes," she said. "I made it up."

"I like five-minute proverbs," he assured her. "Almost as much as I like leftovers."

"Good," she said and kissed him. The gentle pressure of her mouth moving over his pushed Kristopher's heart into a mad gallop and he pulled her closer. Beneath her oversized UT sweatshirt, her heartbeat matched his and her soft sigh was like the song Kristopher had waited all his life to hear. To hell with his past resolution of getting emotionally involved. He wanted Suzanne Bennett in the worst possible way.



And—

A persistent buzzing interrupted them and once again they pulled apart. Suzanne reached into her front jean pocket to take out her phone. Staring at the screen, she frowned. “That’s weird,” she said. “It’s Barry Collins.”

“Who’s that?” Kristopher asked, savoring the taste of her mouth on his.

“He’s the owner of Daisy’s, ” she explained, hitting accept. “Barry? What’s up?”

“Suzanne, we got a problem,” Barry sounded as if he were choking on his anger. “I need for you to get down to Daisy’s right away. It’s Alex Langley.”

“Oh my God!” Fear pushed Suzanne to her feet. “Has something happened to him? Where is he?”

“He’s here, and he’s okay,” Barry said quickly. “Sofia is here too, but you need to come as soon as you can. The police are already here.”

“Why do you need the police if everything is okay?” Suzanne watched Kristopher move to the closet and return with their coats. “Just tell me what’s happened.”

“Suzanne, someone has bugged my restaurant.”

### CHAPTER 23

They managed to get to Daisy's in minutes with Bailey dropping them off in the alley. A strong wind teased the tops of the garbage bins while an icy frost was coating the pavement and for the first time that day, Suzanne wondered where David Phillips was and offered up a prayer for his safety.

The back door swung open in answer to her knock and Barry ushered them inside. The kitchen, as usual, was immaculate, the stainless-steel appliance and fixtures gleaming with a polished care. Everything looked perfectly normal.

Except for the uniformed officer standing in front of one of the prep tables, examining what appeared to be a series of metal discs spread out on a towel covered tray. Barry introduced him as Lt. Officer Craig Randolph, who worked in KPD's surveillance unit.

"Thanks for getting here so fast," Barry said. "What a mess. Alex is scared to death and Sofia is furious."

"Alex Langley is involved in all of this?" Suzanne's head was reeling. "That makes no sense."

"Wait," Kristopher said. "Are we talking about Sofia Langley from the youth shelter?"

"Alex is her son," Suzanne explained. "I've got a bad feeling about this."

“When you called, you said something about someone bugging the restaurant,” Kristopher said. “When and where did you find it?”

“This morning, when Alex and I were cleaning under the tabletops,” Barry described. “And I should say them . We’d neglected to clean under there for months. I mean, except for the chewing gum that kids leave there, how dirty can the underside of the tables get? This is my fault. If I’d had the staff clean under there, we might have found them long ago.”

“Them,” Suzanne repeated. “You mean there were more than one?”

“Yeah,” Barry said. “Show them, Randolph.”

Officer Craig Randolph selected a dime thin, nickel sized silver disc from the tray. “These are recording devices, both powerful and sensitive. Whoever planted them knew what they were doing. They’re turned off now, of course.”

“Oh my,” Suzanne breathed. “Do you think they’re the same kind planted on your car?”

“We’ll find out later,” Kristopher said grimly. “What else, Officer?”

“This kind usually only records for a few hours.” Randolph put the disc back among the others. “I’ll need to take this back to our lab to collect whatever data is on them.”

“Barry, I thought you were closed this week,” Suzanne said. “And how did Alex get involved with all this?”

Barry shrugged. “I needed to do some deep cleaning and what better time than when the café is closed? Alex is always willing to help, so I called him. And since you placed him here, I thought you should know about it.”

“Thanks for including me,” Suzanne told him. “Kristopher, Officer Randolph, before we talk to Alex and Sofia, let me explain something about him.”

Her expression became calm and professional, and an unexpected sense of pride flowed through Kristopher. This was the first time he was seeing her in action, acting in her professional capacity.

And by damn, he thought he might be falling in love with her.

“Alex had a closed head injury when he was fifteen,” she said. “He made an almost complete recovery, but stress can cause him severe anxiety, and it sometimes can make him forget things. But he’s amazingly intelligent—can tell you everything you’d ever want to know about Dr. Who— and one of the hardest workers you’ll ever meet.”

“He’d have to be, or I wouldn’t have hired him,” Barry agreed. “He’s admitted to knowing about this, but now he’s scared I’m going to fire him.”

“Good enough,” Kristopher said. “Officer Randolph, what’s your part in all of this?”

“I work in KPD’s surveillance division, and was sent to look at the devices, not ask questions about how they got under the table or why,” Randolph said. “But I can take notes and turn them over to Grant Miller. Does this have anything to do with those missing children?”

“It does,” Suzanne confirmed, and Randolph nodded.

“Let’s get started then,” Barry said. “Sofia is so mad about all this, I think she’s gonna blow like Mount St. Helen’s at any minute.”

“Lead the way, then,” Suzanne suggested.

They followed Barry into the dining room and found Alex and Sofia Langley seated at a large, round table in a far corner booth, him looking nervous and her defiant.

“Am I in trouble?” Alex, a handsome young man of about twenty, with a head of dark curly hair, blinked several times while he rolled a pack of sugar between the fingers of his left hand. “I thought I was helping.”

“You were, Alex,” Barry assured. “We wouldn’t have found this if it weren’t for you,” and Suzanne watched Alex’s features relax. Sofia’s expression remained stiff with anger.

“So why are the police here,” Sofia demanded. “Is he going to be charged with anything?”

“No ma’am,” Randolph spoke, taking out a tiny spiral topped notebook. “I’m here about what your son found under the tables and learn what they are. I’m just taking notes to help.”

“It’s okay, Mom,” Alex said. “Hi, Suzanne. Did you have a good “Christmas?”

“Yeah, I did,” Suzanne lied. If Sofia hadn’t mentioned Mercy, she wasn’t going to tell him. “What can you tell us about those discs?”

“It was to help us find out what kind of Christmas presents to give,” Alex said.

“Presents to whom, Alex?” Suzanne asked.

“Everyone,” Alex said. “I mean, everyone who comes to eat here. People like you, Suzanne. Not big presents, but something to thank them for coming to Daisy’s.”

“Whose idea was it to put those discs under the table, Alex?” Kristopher asked, and

Suzanne quickly introduced them. His presence seemed to calm Sofia.

“Stan said if we listened to what people talked about what they wanted for Christmas, we would know what to give them,” Alex explained. “We put those discs under all the tables so we wouldn’t miss anyone.”

“Who’s Stan?” Kristopher asked.

“One my other employees,” Barry put in. “Go on, Alex. Did Stan help you put up the discs?”

“Oh, we both did it,” Alex said. “But it was his idea.”

“When did he tell you to start doing this?” Suzanne joined in again.

“The day after Thanksgiving,” Alex said proudly, his confidence returning. “We’d take them down when our shifts were done ‘cause Stan and I always did the cleaning after we closed. “He said he’d listen to what people said and write it down and then we’d put more discs back up in the morning. I don’t know when we’re going to start passing out the gifts, but Stan says he was still buying them.”

He looked at Barry and said, “Stan told me it was gonna be a big surprise and not tell you because you were going to get the best gift of all for hiring so many of us.”

Barry bowed his head and his fingers curled into fists. “Thanks, Alex,” he said at last. “Did Stan tell you to do anything else?”

“No, but the day after Christmas, I saw him give some of the discs to some guy,” Alex admitted. “He’d put them in a little bag, but when I asked Stan, he said the guy was helping to buy the presents, so I thought it was okay.”

“Did you recognize the man?” Fear laced with suspicion layered over Suzanne’s skin. “Had you ever seen him in here before?”

“Yeah, because he eats in here all the time and always orders the same thing,” Alex said. “Turkey and Swiss cheese on toast, hold the mayo, extra pickles and a diet-soda.”

“Shouldn’t be hard to find,” Kristopher commented. “Barry, maybe you can go through the receipts or something?”

“Alex, this is great,” Suzanne praised. “Thanks for your honesty and your help.”

“Do you think this may have something to do with your visit to the shelter?” Sofia asked, her anger returning. “And that Mr. Turkey-and-Swiss is involved?”

“Very likely,” Kristopher said. “Officer Randolph, how long will it take to retrieve the data from those discs?”

“I’m on my way right now.” Randolph stood, tucked his notepad in his pocket and nodded at the Langleys. “Thank you, both. I’ll give my report to an officer when I get back to the precinct.”

He left and Sofia stared at them. “Does that mean something?”

“Maybe,” Kristopher said cautiously. “Why don’t you and Alex head for home. Do you mind if our friend Bailey follows you? Just in case? You’re staying with your sister, right?” and Sofia nodded.

“Mom, what’s wrong?” Alex demanded. “Am I in trouble?”

“No,” Kristopher said quickly. “Sofia, I think you should tell Alex everything and

why him meeting with us is going to help crack the case.”

Sofia nodded again and left with Alex while Kristopher texted Bailey about following them home. “He’ll do it,” he said. “Then come back for us.” Putting down his phone he said, “I’ll bet that’s how the bastards learned that Mercy told you of her suspicions about the Campbell sisters. They’d bugged your table, but I’ll bet that disc is long gone.”

“Who bugged them?” Barry’s raised voice was a near shout. “And why?”

“Bugged by a very dangerous organization that helps traffic children,” Kristopher told him.

“And because Daisy’s is walking distance from half a dozen social welfare agencies,” Suzanne added. “Most of them deal with kids and families, especially Family Services of Tennessee. Families United is just two doors down.”

“Are you saying someone bugged Daisy’s to help them find children? To hurt and exploit them?” Barry’s anger rivaled Sofia’s.

“Yes,” Kristopher said. “We don’t know yet which group it is, but KPD has a pretty good idea. You were right to call the police about the bugs. This just adds to their case.”

Tears filling his eyes, Barry looked at Suzanne. “This is why Mercy Phillips was killed, wasn’t it?” he choked. “She figured something out and they killed her for it.”

Suzanne had to swallow hard before she spoke. “Yes,” she said. “We’re hoping that David somehow got away, but we’re still looking for him. Us and the police.”

“Are they trying to hurt you, Suzanne?” The beginnings of rage replaced Barry’s



tears.

“I’ve got Kristopher here to be sure that doesn’t happen,” Suzanne said proudly. “Brotherhood Protectors, the best protection agency there is.”

“Well, when you find David, the two of you can eat here every Friday for free,” Barry promised. “For the rest of your lives. You too, Kristopher.”

“Hold up,” Kristopher protested. “I think I missed something. Who’s Stan?”

“Stanislaus Dembowski, a Polish refugee I placed here,” Suzanne explained. “Let’s go to my office and I’ll find his file and show you. I can’t believe he had anything to do with this!”

“Suzanne, please don’t take this the wrong way,” Barry chided. “But you always see the good in everyone. You wouldn’t know mean and ugly if it slapped you in the face or bit you on your nose.”

“Thanks,” Suzanne said ruefully, trying to ignore Kristopher’s low-pitched laughter. “Stop that,” she told him.

“Yes ma’am,” he gasped, still laughing.

A furious pounding sounded on the kitchen’s back door, prevented her retort and with a worried look, Barry dashed in its direction.

“If you don’t stop laughing right this minute, I’m gonna hurt you so bad, Kristopher with a K,” she threatened.

“You and whose army?” he teased.

“Forget the army,” she growled, but enjoying every minute of this. “I’ll get Bailey to help me.”

“Marines beating the Army?” he snorted. “Ha. In your dreams, Miz Bennett. In your dreams.”

A babble of excited voices rose from the kitchen and then Alex Langley was running back into the dining room, Sofia on his heels. Barry followed, the earlier fury back on his face.

“Son-of-a-bitch,” he said. “Randolph may have to come back and arrest me for assault when I get my hands on that guy. Tell them, Alex.”

“I remembered, Suzanne!” Alex shouted gleefully. “I remembered!”

“What did you remember Alex?” Suzanne prompted, trying to ignore the excitement thumping in her heart.

“That guy! You know. Turkey on Swiss, extra pickles? I remember what he looked like and where he works!”

Suzanne silently inhaled. “Tell us.”

“He works in that building down the street, the one with those big tubs of flowers and that big green awning. The guy has red hair.”

“Are you sure?” Kristopher asked.

“About his hair or where he works?” Alex frowned.

“Both,” Suzanne said. “Go on.”

“Yeah, I’m sure,” Alex sounded defensive. “Barry lets me do deliveries there sometimes. The guy works on the fourth floor that has all those paintings of the Muppets and superheroes on the walls in the front lobby.”

“Oh my God,” Suzanne whispered, very grateful that she was still sitting. “Are you telling me the man Stan gave that sack of discs to is someone who works at Family Services of Tennessee?”

“That’s right,” Sofia interjected proudly, putting her arm around her smiling son’s shoulders. “And the man he just described is Henry Tate. State Case Manager for the Clark sisters.”

### CHAPTER 24

A short time later at Families United

“I’ll call Lucinda Gonzalez right now,” Elaine said. “What a fantastic break in the case. Have you called Grant Miller?”

They had piled into Bailey’s oversize truck—Alex and Sofia in the second seat—to make the short trip to Families United. Now, with Bailey taking the Langleys to their own safe spot, Suzanne had set up a Zoom meeting with Elaine at her work desk to tell her about the listening devices Barry and Alex found and of Stan’s involvement in planting them.

“No,” Suzanne said. “Officer Randolph is going to tell him about the bugs. And since Henry Tate is a state employee, shouldn’t Lucinda be the one to handle it with him?”

“Absolutely,” Elaine agreed. “I’ll call her right now. I just hope she can find Henry Tate before he gets suspicious. I’ll bet whatever is going to happen, it will be soon. What are you going to do now? Hey, there Kristopher.”

“Hey yourself,” Kristopher replied as he put two oversize mugs on Suzanne’s desk. “Glad to see there was coffee available.”

Elaine’s bright laughter brought Suzanne a small measure of relief. “Are you kidding? Human service workers practically live on the stuff. Tea, as well, but I’ve a lot of confirmed coffee-heads working here. Coffee is included in the annual budget. Are you pulling up Stan’s records?”

“I am,” Suzanne said. “This is not going to look good for Families United, is it? I mean, I’m the one who hired him.”

“You are not to worry about that,” Elaine ordered. “If Stan Dembowski’s paperwork was forged or fake, that’s not our responsibility or fault. Start with finding his address and text it to Grant Miller. And tell Alex I said, ‘good job’.”

“Will do,” Suzanne promised as she ended the meeting. The screen went dark, and she reached for one of the cups. “Wow,” she said after taking a sip. “What a day.”

“And it’s not over.” Kristopher hitched the chair beside her desk closer and sat. “What ‘cha going to do now, Miz Bennett?”

“Open Stan Dembowski’s Families United file,” she said, her fingers punching the keyboard. “Ah. Here we go. That’s him.”

The photo showed a Caucasian male with dark eyes and a beard, wearing an orange and white UT knitted skull cap. “He doesn’t have the beard anymore,” Suzanne said. “Barry won’t let his servers or cooks wear them ‘cause he’s afraid of hair getting in the food.”

“Holy crap,” Kristopher muttered. “I think I know this guy. What about the rest of his info?”

He leaned in, and Suzanne savored the faint scent of soap mingling with his coffee. “Here,” she said, tapping more buttons. “Stanislaus Tobias Dembowski. Thirty-five years old, originally from Warsaw. Made his way to the United States a year ago via a program called Humanities International. Chose to relocate to Tennessee because he likes Dolly Parton.”

“Well, yeah,” Kristopher agreed. “I mean, who doesn’t?”

“Has a background as a laborer, no advanced degrees, no criminal record,” Suzanne continued. “Bachelor, no known family.”

“Any distinctive marks?”

His tightly coiled tension rolled onto Suzanne as she continued to search. “None listed,” she said. “You mean like a tattoo? If he has, I never noticed it. Why would you think he has one?”

He remained silent, staring at the screen. After a long moment, his mouth tightened and he said, “Call Barry.”

“Why?”

“Just do it please, Miz Bennett,” and Suzanne realized even with him using her nickname, something was terribly wrong. As if things could get worse.

“Okay,” she said, reaching for her phone and placing the call. “Hey, Barry,” she said when her friend answered. “Here’s a question for you. Does Stan have any tattoos?”

“Yeah, he does.” Barry still sounded cross. “He’s got a big red dragon tattooed on the back of his head. Said he was in an industrial accident when he was still living in Poland. He said he’s got burns all over his body too, but I’ve never seen them and got the tattoo so people wouldn’t make fun of him being bald. I saw it once when he took off that knitted cap he always wears to put on a visor cap. Why all the questions?”

“Just a hunch,” Kristopher told him and the triumphant sparkle in his eyes pushed Suzanne’s heart into a two-step. “Thanks, Barry.”

She ended the call and squinted at him. “You gonna let me in on this, Sergeant Brower?”

“Look up the word Balaur,” he said, rubbing his hands together. “Oh, man, this could be it.”

Suzanne’s fingers hesitated over the keyboard. “Spell that, please.”

“B-a-l-a-u-r,” he replied.

“Got it,” she said and then gasped as the picture of large, multi-headed dragon filled her laptop screen. “Merciful heavens! What is that?”

“That, my dear, Miz Bennett, is the symbol from Romanian mythology.” Kristopher’s soft voice held a note of intensity she’d never heard. “A mythical beast known not only for its destructive powers but for kidnapping maidens and young girls. It’s found in other Eastern European folklore too.”

“Ugly beast,” Suzanne said. “And this is important because—?”

“Don’t you remember me telling you earlier about that child trafficking ring in Romania? That’s their name and symbol. All their members have dragon tattoos, although this is the first I’ve heard of any of them having one on their head. It’s usually on the palm of their hands.”

“Do you think the burn story is true?” Suzanne asked. “Why would he have his in a different place? Does that signify something?”

Her protector shook his head. “I don’t know. Would you let me look up something, please?”

“Sure.” They changed places and Kristopher took out his phone, consulted it, and spent a long time typing on Suzanne’s keyboard. At last a website appeared, and he opened it. “There we go,” he said. “Take a look.”

Suzanne stared at the photos. “That’s Stan!” she cried, pointing at one of the men she knew from Daisy’s. “But his eyes are green.”

“Tinted contact lenses are cheap, effective disguises,” he said. “But look at this.” He hit another series of keys and the photo reversed, giving a clear view of the back of Stan’s head. A three-headed dragon, wings spread out, covered the entire area, inching toward his forehead. The intricate design and vivid colors were almost beautiful. Until one remembered what it represented.

“How awful,” Suzanne said, shaking her head. “To think I hired that monster to work at Daisy’s.”

“You couldn’t have known that,” Kristopher argued. “And Elaine is probably right. Stan, aka Toby, probably entered the country with false or forged papers. It’s common practice.”

“You think?”

“Yep.” Kristopher hit a button, and another photo popped up. “And that’s Gregori Bogdan.” Kristopher pointed at the picture of a Caucasian man with brown hair, medium build, no smile. A rather ordinary-looking man.

But it was his eyes that kept Suzanne’s gaze fixed on the photo. Eyes without expression. “It’s like staring into nothing,” she murmured.

“It is,” Kristopher agreed. “He is without a doubt, the scariest human being I’ve ever had dealings with though we’ve never met face-to-face. As far as I know, he’s never seen me.”

“And that’s the one who put a price on your head?”



“It is.”

“Is his head tattooed?” Suzanne continued to stare at the screen.

“Should be,” Kristopher said. “Getting your head tattooed is part of Balaur’s initiation rite, which suggests that Stan is either a new member or his claim about his hair not growing is true.”

“Amazing,” she murmured. “So much has happened since early Friday morning. I feel like I’m on a roller coaster that barely stops long enough for me to catch my breath.”

“You okay there, Miz Bennett?”

“Am I helping in all of this?” Something like guilt rose in her eyes. “Or am I only adding to the mess?”

Kristopher stared at her in disbelief. “What are you talking about? Why would you think you weren’t helping?”

“My parents always said I wasn’t good enough at things or I didn’t try hard enough,” she said, sadness creeping into her voice. “They said if I did better in school—and I got straight A’s by the way—they could have stayed sober and kept me out of foster care. I mean, is any of this mess my fault? Mercy being killed or David vanishing or me hiring a suspected child trafficker—”

“Hold up there,” Kristopher ordered. “None of this is your fault that your parents became alcoholics, understand? And it’s a damn shame they couldn’t get their shit together to see what an awesome woman you turned out to be. There’s nothing you could have done at age eight for them to become alcoholics or addicts or whatever their choice of poison was. That’s their denial talking, and you shouldn’t have had to

tap-dance through your childhood to keep them sober.”

She lowered her head, and his heart twisted as tears began to slide down her cheeks. She turned away but he gently pulled her into his arms. “Let it go, Miz Bennet,” he whispered, brushing his lips against her hair. “Just let it go.”

She cried for a long time, harder than he’d seen before and he guessed it was not just the memory of her parents but everything that had happened since Thursday night and losing Mercy. Recalling Elaine’s silence when she’d cried on Friday—he kept his peace and let her cry.

She finally stopped and pulled a handkerchief from her jean pocket. “I think this is yours,” she sniffed against its folds.

“Got plenty more,” he promised. “Feel better?”

“Yeah,” she said ruefully, putting away the handkerchief. “Let’s put away these cups before Bailey comes back. We can do more research at the safehouse.”

“Okay.” She smiled. “You make good coffee.”

“Ah, shucks, Miz Bennett,” he teased as he followed her to the small kitchen. “I’ll bet you say that to all the boys.”

“I don’t know many boys like you,” she said as they rinsed and put away the cups. “I guess that old saying is true. You know, the one about good things.”

“I hope you’re not going to say something about small packages,” he said. “I’m not as tall as some of my Brotherhood Protectors, but I stand six feet in my socks so I wouldn’t call that short.”

“I was thinking of ‘good things come to those who wait’.” She tilted her head back to look up at him. “It’s been a long time since I’ve met someone as nice as you. Glad it turned out to be you.”

“Me too,” and he leaned in for a long, slow kiss. It grew in intensity as a raw desire slammed through Kristopher and he wanted nothing more than to join himself with this brave and stubborn woman who’s desire for justice had brought them together.

But then, like clockwork, his phone sounded. With a muffled curse, he took it out and sighed. “Bailey is downstairs,” he reported. “We better go.”

“You know,” she said after they’d gathered up their things and headed for the elevator. “One day, we’re going to have to silence our phones and see where these kisses take us.”

And stepping into the elevator with her, Kristopher found he had no reply.

### CHAPTER 25

#### Early Sunday Evening

“Simply brilliant, holding the meeting here,” the man in the blue suit declared. “In a church! Pretending we’re a widower’s support group!”

“It was quite simple,” Samuels told the group. “My great-grandmother’s family helped found this church and the family has contributed huge sums of money for years. They know I have a counselor’s background, and needed a safe place for grieving men that would provide privacy. They even offered it for free.”

“Hide in plain sight?” another man guessed.

Samuels smiled. “Something like that. Now. Let’s keep it short and simple. The “merchandise” as we call it will be there at the chosen place. And since it is New Year’s Eve, and we have multiple events going on at the same time, with hundreds of guests, no one will miss you when you slip away to the special auction room. You’ve all received and inspected the photos?”

Most of the men nodded and smiled, their satisfaction evident. But one lone man scowled. “What if the bidding war gets too intense? And are we guaranteed safety in getting the merchandise away?”

“We’ve promised you’ll be able to get it out of the site,” Samuels reminded him sternly. “Unless you want to pay an additional price. Once you’re off the property, the transport of it is your responsibility. As for bidding wars? We have several new

items that have become available, courtesy of our European contacts. I have no doubt even if you are outbid for one item, there will be others that will more than satisfy your needs and wants.”

“And the event starts at nine o’clock, New Years’ Eve?” The man in blue asked.

“Yes. So many people want to go out to dinner that night,” Samuels said. “I don’t want to take away from local businesses enjoying their own money-making. Especially since some of them contributed items for the auctions. Any more questions?”

There was silence and Smith nodded. “Then I’ll see you on New Year’s Eve,” he said. “Enjoy the rest of your Sunday.”

The men filed out and Samuels considered his next move. Except for that idiot Tate, everything was going as planned. Samuels had paid someone top dollar to hide cameras inside the Family Services of Tennessee building. There had been no sign of Tate all weekend—and Samuels had people watching his house— but he doubted the younger man would want to draw suspicion on himself by not showing up to work right after Christmas. When Tate did show up tomorrow morning, Samuels would let Bogdan know so he could kill him. He hated the thought of paying the Romanian assassin even more, but after viewing photos of those young girls he’d smuggled into the country, it was worth it.

And after his electronics man finished bugging Families United, Samuels would let Bogdan kidnap Suzanne Bennett when she arrived at work on New Year’s Eve—the agency was only open half a day—and finally, kill her too.

### CHAPTER 26

Early Monday Morning.

“I don’t think we’ve thanked you enough, T.J. for keeping the house so tidy while we’ve had to work these crazy twelve–and fourteen–hour shifts.” Mrs. Anne Johnson beamed at him from across the table.

“And making these great breakfasts too,” Mr. Taylor Johnson added, pouring syrup over the stack of pancakes with a generous hand.

“I was glad to do it,” T.J. said. “How much longer are you gonna be working those crazy shifts?” ‘Cause I’m getting tired of baby-sitting and I think David is gonna take off if I’m gone too long.

“Tonight, and tomorrow night,” Mrs. Johnson said. “And then off for a whole week. It will probably take that long to get our sleep patterns back in order.”

“T.J., have you heard anything about David Phillips?” Mr. Johnson asked. “Have you talked to anyone?”

“No, sir,” T.J. said quickly. “But then I didn’t want to bother anyone or make them think I was being nosy, you know? Aren’t a lot of people out of town for the holidays?”

“I’m so tired I really don’t remember, buddy,” Mr. Johnson said. “But if you see or hear anything, don’t wait for us to come home. Call the police right away. I saw on

the news in the ER breakroom, there's a special tip line you can call."

"I think I saw that too." T.J. hated to lie to them since they were being so nice, but he wasn't going to tell them about that card the cop gave him a few days ago. If someone came looking for David, he'd call that social worker first.

"You know," Mrs. Johnson said thoughtfully. "It's too bad Mercy never got around to buying that webcam for her garage or even her house. If she had, maybe the police could have used the SD card to find whoever killed her by now."

A hidden camera? T.J.'s fingers froze around his fork. Holy crap. Could David be right? As from a distance, he heard Mr. Johnson say, "Mercy was thinking about getting a webcam? Why?"

"She'd read about a child abduction case in another state," Mrs. Johnson said sadly. "Some custodial dispute, I think she said. A child was kidnapped from their own home by a non-custodial parent. She said it spooked her enough to think someone could break in so easily, so it was going to be one of the first things she bought after the first of the year. Then she laughed, and said she'd put one camera either under one of her hanging bird feeders on the back porch or inside one of the garden gnomes there. No one would think to look there."

"Mercy had a great imagination and a great sense of humor," Mr. Johnson sighed. "I'm going to miss her. Aw, honey, don't cry."

He moved to put his arm around his wife's trembling shoulders as she grabbed a napkin and wiped her tear-stained face. "When did she mention that, honey?"

"At the Meet, Greet and Eat party," Mrs. Johnson sobbed. "Can we get one please? I know the house is safe since T.J. is never gone too long. You can tell by how clean the house is and how much food he makes. But school starts next week, and the house

will be empty. Can we get one please?"

"Sure thing, honey," Mr. Johnson soothed. "Anything you want. Right, T.J.?"

"You bet," T.J. said, his feet itching to go. "You bet."



### CHAPTER 27

Much later that same night

“Thinking about David?” Kristopher asked.

“Yeah,” Suzanne admitted. “It’s been almost five days since he vanished and there’s no sign or word about him. Those PSA’s are still running, so you think someone would have heard or seen something by now. Unless he’s de—”

“Stop,” Kristopher ordered. “We’re not going there again.” Despite his best efforts to help her put aside her guilt over everything that had happened, he could see she was still troubled.

They sat at the wide computer desk in the Safehouse office, searching the Internet for talk of events using young children. Even using Tor and the Invisible Internet Project to hover around the dark web, they’d found nothing, and Kristopher was unwilling to venture too far into that territory without identities that would guard their safety.

“If Griff Tyler were here, he’d be able to infiltrate them,” Kristopher told Suzanne. “He has a handful of identities he uses to go to chatrooms to learn stuff.”

“Glad he’s on our side,” Suzanne said. “Should we contact him?”

“I already did,” Kristopher told her. “If there’s something about to happen in Knoxville involving kids, he’ll find it. And about David,” Kristopher said, pushing the mouse aside. “I’ll bet someone is hiding him, keeping him safe. You know him.

What do you think?"

"That he's missing his mom," Suzanne replied. "And he wants to come home."

"Hey," Bailey called, pushing open the door. "You guys should really keep your phones with you instead of leaving them on the dining room table."

They exchanged glances, searched their pockets and issued a collective sigh. "Okay," Kristopher said. "Guilty as charged, but we've been doing research. What's up?"

"Grant Miller has been blowing up mine. Otherwise, I'd never know he needed to talk with us, and I mean like right now."

"I wonder if that man ever sleeps," Suzanne said. "He's been on this case almost non-stop since it started. Wait! Is it about David? Has he been found?"

"Not yet, but it's almost as good," Bailey said. As disappointment covered her face, he added quickly, "But he's found someone who says she knows something about all this mess. Or at least he thinks that's what it is."

"Does he need us to meet him at the precinct?" Kristopher started to stand but Bailey waved him back into his chair.

"Dude, I've got you beat and in spades," Bailey boasted. "I went after them while you two were doing your research. They're waiting in our smaller office even as we speak."

"Damn, Bailey. That's great!" Kristopher praised.

"Does BP allow people other than the police to come to the safehouse?" Suzanne asked. "Wouldn't bringing someone else here compromise your secrecy

“Hey, she’s good,” Bailey praised.

“I’ve had some good teachers,” she said modestly, and the men laughed.

“But we better hurry,” Bailey urged. “The lady ain’t too happy.”

“And why is that?” Kristopher asked. “Did your Southern charm fail you?”

Bailey just laughed. “Come and see.

In the small office, they found Miller waiting at the table with a short blond woman wearing a blindfold and a definite pout.

“Can you take off the f’ing blindfold now?” she complained. “You know I’m not a talker, Miller. And you said you’d help me get out of town if I helped.”

“The less you know where you are, Mandy, the better,” Miller carefully removed the blindfold and put it aside. “Everyone, this is Mandy, and she may know something that will help us.”

He quickly introduced them, and they all sat. Mandy’s very short skirt, low-cut top and stilettos screamed ‘working girl’. Suzanne stared in fascination at the little woman who had to be almost her own age, but with heavy make-up it was hard to tell.

“Mandy hears all kinds of things in her work,” Miller began.

“But I don’t snitch,” Mandy insisted. “At least not on the other girls. Only if there’s a heist going down or someone moving drugs. Drugs killed my little sister, so I don’t play that game. But this?” She shuddered and a look of disgust spread over her face. “This is about using little kids. I’m not standing for that crap.”

For a minute, her amber-hued gaze inspected the room and then them. Bailey sat at the head of the table and Kristopher and Suzanne were across from her. Grant stood behind Mandy's chair. "Nice place," she said. "You guys own it?"

"Our company does," Kristopher said. "We're in the personal protection business. What have you heard, Miss Mandy?"

Her eyes glittered with interest. "Personal protection? You mean like those TV shows, The Enforcer and Leverage?"

"Something like," Kristopher agreed. "What can you tell us?"

"I have this regular customer I'll call Joe," Mandy began after trading glances with Miller. "He's a nice guy, but his wife has some medical problems, and he has some needs, so we've got a twice a month arrangement. Last Monday night, he showed up as usual, but he's drunk, and I mean skunk drunk. Talks about how it's not right to treat kids that way, and someone should do something. I got some coffee in him, and he sobered enough to tell him he'd found out a friend was a short-eyes."

"Short eyes?" Bailey repeated.

"Prison slang for pedophiles," Miller interpreted. "Go on, Mandy."

"So, Joe starts talking about he overheard this so-called friend talking about some big party on New Year' Eve with lots of catered food and live bands where lots of these short-eye types are coming because there's gonna be some kind of kiddie swap or auction or something like that."

"What else?" Kristopher asked. Beside him, Suzanne sat perfectly still.

"Joe found a list on his friend's desk with all these initials with checks on it. Stupid

prick left it right there for God and everyone to see.” Mandy’s tone turned scornful. “It was full of letters and numbers, some kind of code for whoever is coming, or is already here.”

“Did Joe show you the list?” Suzanne asked, leaning forward.

“He did.” Mandy took a small, zippered bag from her purse, opened it, and extracted a folded piece of paper. “When Joe passed out, I wrote all this down.” She handed it to Miller and said, “I don’t know if it will help, but maybe you guys know someone who can make sense of it?”

“Are folks on the street talking about it, Mandy?” Miller asked. His voice and expression were carefully neutral, but Kristopher could only imagine at his professional excitement.

“They sure are, but like real hush-hush,” Mandy said. “That most people going to this shindig think it’s just a fancy party. But the kids will be in a secret room that you can only get into by special invitation. Geez, that’s one party I’d hate to be at when the bust goes down. And that’s all I know.”

She swiveled in her chair to look at Miller. “Now. How soon can you get me out of town?”

“I’ve already spoken to someone at Operation Phoenix,” Miller said. “Soon as we’re done here, we’re moving you to a safe house in another part of the state. No one is going to find you.”

“Okay,” Mandy’s tone was doubtful.

“Operation Phoenix helps get women in trouble or danger out of town and start new lives,” Suzanne told her. “It’s a great program. I’ve traveled with them once or

twice.”

“Honest?” Mandy demanded and grinned when Suzanne gave her two thumbs up.

“Just one more thing, Miss Mandy,” Kristopher said. “Have you heard any names mentioned about who’s behind this?”

“No, just that most of them are top dogs who think no one would ever suspect them ‘cause they’re high-powered folks who think their shit don’t stink. Using kids for pleasure makes me sick.”

“Us too,” Kristopher said quietly.

“Sergeant Miller, if you’ll let me have Miss Mandy’s piece of paper, I’m going to contact one of BP’s code breakers,” Bailey said. “Might save you some time.”

He started to leave but Mandy reached out and touched his arm. “Are you a Marine?”

“Yes ma’am,” he said.

“My daddy was a Marine,” she said wistfully. “Everything went to hell once he died in Iraq. Momma died, my little sister got put into state care and I hooked up with some freak which is why I’m where I am today.” She looked at Bailey again. “You kind of favor him. He was a good man and a good Marine.”

“We mourn when we lose one of our own, Miss Mandy,” Bailey said softly, taking her hand. “I’m sorry we weren’t there for you and your family after his sacrifice. The Marines are one, big family and we’re supposed to take care of our own. I’m sorry we failed you.”

Still holding his hand, Mandy rose and saluted. “Semper Fi, Marine,” she said.

Tears pricked Suzanne's eyes as the now former Marine returned the woman's salute. "Semper Fi, Miss Mandy." He was clearing his throat as he left

"Anything else?" Miller asked.

Mandy stared at Kristopher and snapped her fingers and she said, "I know you! You're that cop that busted Bobby, Harvey McClintock's son about five years ago. The one who's partner got killed in that shoot-out after that. What was his name? Sam or Simon—

"Sydney Phillips," and Suzanne heard the pain in his voice.

"Yeah," Mandy nodded. "I remember the both of you. Grant here too. Some cops are hard on us working girls, but you guys were always nice to us." When Kristopher remained silent, Miller said, "Let's go, Mandy."

"Okay. Hope this helps."

She stood and walked to where Miller had opened the door. Once she was gone, he said, "We've got them, Brower. It's just a matter of time. You've done damn good work on this case. Sydney Phillips would be proud of you. And for the last time man, his death wasn't your fault."

After he was gone, they sat in silence until Suzanne asked, "What did he mean, Syd's death wasn't your fault?"

He closed his eyes and bowed his head and she watched the mix of emotions play across his handsome face. Then he looked at her, sat back and said, "It's time I tell you about the night Sydney Phillips died."

### CHAPTER 28

“KPD had been watching a local crime family for years.” Kristopher’s hands curled over his knees. “Especially Syd Phillips and me. The McClintocks are an old East Tennessee crime family who got their start running moonshine during Prohibition. Any new criminal or drug enterprise came along, they’d get on board first. Old man Harvey McClintock—we called him Clint—was probably among the first to get involved in the ‘90’s opioid epidemic but no one could ever catch them. They were that good. We knew they had contacts all over the Southeast, but even with inter-state cooperation, and a few minor busts, we could never shut them down. Anyone arrested always clammed up because with the McClintocks, you talk, you die.”

“They sound scary,” Suzanne said. “A lot like The Cadre.”

“You got that right,” Kristopher agreed. “I’ve heard recently that the McClintocks weren’t too happy when The Cadre moved into East Tennessee earlier this year, but for some reason, have left them alone. Maybe they wanted to be sure who they were dealing with before they made a fuss.”

“Okay,” Suzanne said. “What else?”

“Clint brought his youngest son Bobby into the organization. Bobby had just graduated from college and thought he was smarter than everyone else, including his old man. But he was Clint’s favorite son and whatever Bobby wanted, Daddy gave it to him.”

“Young and dumb?” Suzanne guessed.



“Dumb like you wouldn’t believe,” Kristopher confirmed, his eyes still on his hands.

“What happened?”

Kristopher’s slow intake of breath looked as if it pained him. “In 2010, we got a tip from Zach, a snitch I used. His info was always right, so I thought I could trust him. He’d sometimes go underground for months, but in 2010 he gave us a tip that Bobby would be picking up a large supply of Oxycontin and cocaine originally from some pill mill in Florida. Turned out it was laced with Fentanyl, making it twice as deadly. The tip led to us catching Bobby and the courier exchanging a bag for money. Our drug dogs, Betsy and Hammer nearly ate the car looking for the rest of the stuff. Street value was half a million. Bobby was sentenced to thirty years and Clint let it be known that sooner or later, we—me, Syd and Zach were dead men.”

“Go on,” Suzanne whispered, her heart aching for this incredible man she’d only known a few days. She longed to embrace him, to offer him some comfort, but kept her hands where they were. On his.

“I decided a change of scene would do me good. With my experience investigating and then helping get kids out of abusive homes, I was placed in a special unit. After five years, I came home and returned to the states and started at KPD again. That was about the time Syd got married. I was best man at his wedding—” His voice trailed away.

“Go on,” Suzanne coaxed.

“A little over five years ago, McClintock managed to find Zach. I don’t know where Zach was while I was in Europe and I was always his main contact and he rarely came forward while I was gone. That should have been my first clue. Then Zach approached me with a story about Big Daddy moving underage girls into town. Really young girls. Do you know who Big Daddy is?”

“The pimp that tried to kill Elaine,” Suzanne said. “Yes, I know about him. What else?”

“Zach’s story was all a lie of course because at the time Big Daddy didn’t even touch underage girls, so that should have been my second clue that something about Zach’s story didn’t quite add up. But since his info to me in the past was always right, and there had been a similar bust in Chattanooga, I believed him. We set up a meeting to watch the girls arrive and wound up walking into an ambush.”

“And Sydney Phillips died,” Suzanne guessed.

“We got to the meeting site and saw the truck that supposedly had the girls,” Kristopher continued. “Zach drove up in this old Thunderbird he always drove. But it wasn’t him driving or who got out of the car as we got out of ours. The passenger door opened and a guy got out and started shooting. I took one in the shoulder but Syd took one in the chest. I managed to hit the shooter and then the driver, killing them both. By the time Grant Miller answered my summons for help, Syd was dead.”

“Oh, Kristopher,” Suzanne whispered. “Why did Zach betray you?”

“In the years I was gone, Zach developed a taste for oxycontin and cocaine.” Kristopher looked past her at the wall. “Clint bribed him with as much of the stuff he wanted to set up the phony meeting. Zach spent a month getting sober before he came to me, so even though he looked a little rough, I thought he was being straight with me. But drugs can turn even the most honest person into a liar. And I fell for the lie and my best friend and partner died. We found out later Clint killed Zach as soon as the hit was over.”

“What happened to Clint? Was he discovered?”

Kristopher’s harsh laugh held not the slightest trace of humor. “Talk about honor

among thieves. One of Clint's minions boasted about the whole thing to an undercover cop who was posing as a bartender. Got the whole thing on tape and we busted Clint's operation to hell. But it didn't matter a damn because Syd was dead. If I'd trusted my instincts, Syd and I would have gone in with backup and he'd be alive today. As soon as the investigation was over, I ran back to Europe without saying goodbye to Mercy and David, like the coward I am. And that's all she wrote, Miz Bennett."

"You are not a coward." Suzanne struggled to keep her voice from breaking. "You've put yourself in harm's way ever since we met. You'd trusted Zach before because he was reliable. He betrayed you for drugs. You couldn't have known what he was going to do that time."

"You think?" Now Kristopher's tone was sarcastic. "You know what? I'm tired. Tired of not cracking this case yet, tired of the memories. I think I'm going to shower and go to bed. Good night, Suzanne."

She let him go, even though she longed to follow him. Give him some other kind of comfort, some reassurance. But her counselor's training told her that this was a battle Kristopher Brower needed to fight on his own.

And so, she went to bed. But sleep was a long time coming.

### CHAPTER 29

Later Monday night

“So, this is how the cellphone works,” T.J. said. “You can play games on it an everything. I even downloaded some I’ll bet you haven’t seen.”

“That’s cool!” Excitement lit David’s face. “Are you sure your parents won’t mind you giving it to me?”

“Foster parents,” T.J. corrected. But parents had a nice sound to it. And the Johnsons had taken him shopping, keeping him away from David for most of the day. Buying him all new clothes– “you’ve already outgrown the ones we got you when you first got here,” Mrs. Johnson had teased –and shoes, new cellphone, and even a new skateboard. Some of the money T.J. knew came from the state. But the skateboard and phone–that was from the Johnsons.

Only now it was too dark to search outside for a hidden webcam or anything like that. They’d been lucky no one had figured out they were in the oversize den on the lower level of David’s house and T.J. wasn’t going too risk turning on the lights this late in the game. He’d start looking tomorrow after he was sure the Johnsons were at work. He’d waited until they’d finished dinner before he crept over here.

“Nah,” T.J. finally told him. “I’ll just tell them I gave my old one to a friend who couldn’t afford to buy one. They’ll understand.” Man, am I getting good at telling lies or what?

“They must be really nice,” David said, carefully wiping the phone’s surface with the cloth T.J. gave him. “Maybe they’ll adopt you and we can stay neighbors.”

“That would be nice,” T.J. said. At least that wasn’t a lie. He’d grown fond of the younger boy and keeping everyone—cops included—from knowing David was here was beginning to make T.J. feel guilty. Even more guilty than lying to the Johnsons about losing the cell phone. Maybe it was time to tell someone. Like Suzanne Bennett or that Army Dude who’d been a cop. Or both.

“T.J. does it hurt to get a tattoo?” David put the phone on the arm of the sofa.

“Whatcha talking about, little dude? I don’t have a tattoo. Do you want to get one?”

“No,” David said. “But I think the guy I saw in the woods had one.”

Steady now. Don’t spook the kid. “Give that to me again,” T.J. said. “Real slow.”

“Remember how I told you I ran from the house after Mom died and hid in the big tree?” David’s lower lip trembled. He’d described this for T.J. the first night they were back here, but T.J. had been too nervous about how to keep the kid safe and occupied while he decided what to do about him to really pay that much attention.

“I remember,” T.J. said. “Did the guy have a tattoo?”

“Yeah, on his head.”

“His head?” T.J. repeated. “How’d you know that?”

“I saw it when he took off his hat,” David explained. “It looked like some kind of big red bird with large wings. Only he put his hat back on kinda fast, so I didn’t get a good look at it. But it was big and red. And that’s how I knew he was a white guy.

All that red on white looked kind of freaky. Would it hurt to have a tattoo on your head?”

“Like you wouldn’t believe, little dude. Are you sure? If you were up in the big tree, could you see—”

“Positive,” David insisted. “He was tall and white and had a tattoo on his head. Don’t you believe me?”

“Yeah, yeah, I do.” T.J. took a quick sip of soda from his glass and considered his options. “David, listen. I think it might be time for me to take you back to the Johnson’s with me tomorrow morning. After all this time, I don’t think anyone bad is still looking for you. The Johnsons are ER nurses and smart, so they’ll know what to do first.”

“Do you think they can find my grandparents?” David asked. “I still can’t remember where they went in Europe, ‘cept it had a funny name.

“OK, we’ll work on that,” T.J. promised. “Let’s play Minecraft on our phones for a while. Then I’ll heat up that chili I brought over.”

But as David settled back, a sense of unease crept over T.J. Tomorrow was New Year’s Eve. And in all the movies, that’s the time when the bad guys pulled out the big guns and made their move. T.J. hoped that this guy with a tattooed head didn’t have a gun.

Yeah. He needed to take David to the Johnsons. Just as soon as he talked to them tomorrow. He didn’t want them to freak out.

### CHAPTER 30

Early New Year's Eve Day.

BP Safehouse.

"Where do you think Bailey has gone?" Suzanne asked from across the chess board. "He didn't come in last night."

"I think he wanted to be sure that the Sofia and Alex Langley were safe," Kristopher's hand hovered over his knight. "I know she told us they could stay with her sister, but between Balaur and The Cadre, the threat level has probably gone up. I wouldn't be surprised if he's hiding on the Langley's property, doing his very own special surveillance."

"Is he good?"

"Bailey Mills is the first person you want to have by your side going into fight and the last you want to piss off. I'm good with several kinds of weapons, but he's f'ing amazing. I think his dad put a rifle in his hand as soon as he was old enough to keep his mouth shut and to hold his water."

Suzanne choked on a laugh as the image of a much younger, much smaller Bailey Mills in hunting gear rose in her mind. "Oh, dear," she gasped. "That's too funny. But what do we keep saying? I'm glad he's on our side?"

"Amen to that."

“Where are you going when this is all over?” she asked. “This mission, I mean.”

“Hank has been briefing us on a possible mission in Central America.”

“Us? You mean you and Bailey.”

“That’s right, Miz Bennett.”

How she was going to miss hearing him call her that. “Doing what, exactly?”

“Can’t say, ‘exactly’. Top secret and all that. But it’s still in the planning stages, so I’ll probably be around for a while longer.”

“Can you at least tell me where?” Suzanne insisted. “Surely not Romania.”

“I think I’ll have a price on my head in Romania for a long time, even when this is over. I doubt I’ll ever get to go back there. Shame, because it’s a beautiful country. There’s a chance it will be in Central America. And no, I don’t know where, and even if I did, I couldn’t tell you. But he’s warned us that as soon as this mission is over, we could be called up at any time.”

“Such is the life of a Brotherhood Protector,” she said. “I’ll miss you.”

He looked up from his study of the board. “You’re wearing a dress and heels. Do you have to work today?”

“Yes. Elaine asked me to come into the office to go over some grant proposals we’ve written for the new year. Hard to believe that’s hours from now. We’ll probably be there most of the day. What about you?”

“Waiting for a development.” He’d been very quiet since he’d told her about Sydney,



and she hoped sharing it with her had relieved some of the old pain and guilt.

His phone buzzed and Kristopher released a good-natured sigh. “No rest for the wicked.” Hitting accept and putting it on speaker, he said, “Hey, Miller. What’s up?”

“Break out the champagne, boys and girls, for tonight we’re going to celebrate.” Miller’s voice was triumphant. “Or at least I think we will. Can you come to where the Langley’s are staying? I’ll text you the address.”

“After I take Suzanne to work,” Kristopher said, and she nodded. “Again, what’s up?”

“The officer I posted at the Langley’s house just arrested that son-of-a-bitch Henry Tate for breaking in with a gun.”

later that day.

So that’s where you’ve been hiding, you little bastard. Bogdan trained the binoculars on the figure mounting the bicycle in Mercy Phillips’ driveway. He didn’t recognize the kid, but it didn’t matter. He would deal with that brat later. Bogdan really ought to thank the kid before he killed him because he’d led Bogdan right to where David Phillips was hiding. In his own house. So simple. Hiding in plain sight.

And once Bogdan had taken David Phillips to the Bradford, it would be child’s play to finish off Suzanne Bennett. Maybe Bogdan would let Toby pepper spray her face before he killed her. Or worse.

And later tonight, after taking David Phillips to the Bradford, Bogdan would take down Kristopher Brower after he showed him Suzanne Bennett’s body. His screams of heartbreak would be almost as satisfying as the ones of agony while Bogdan very slowly tortured him to death. Bogdan had no doubt they were lovers. For now, he

must tap down the excitement rising inside him before he became careless. He must stay in a dispassionate controlled state of mind. No emotion, just logic.

After all, revenge was a dish best eaten cold.

### CHAPTER 31

“Henry Tate, you are under arrest for breaking and entering, the kidnapping of four minor children for the express purpose of exploitation and immoral purposes,” Grant Miller intoned. “And that’s just the beginning. You have the right to remain silent. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford—”

“I wave my rights!” Henry Tate shrieked. “I can do that, can’t I?”

“I think you’ve been watching too many police procedural programs,” Miller said coolly. “What do you think, Officer Kristopher?”

Kristopher chuckled. “I think you’re enjoying this way too much, Sergeant Miller.”

Tate’s glare at Kristopher was openly hostile. “You’re an officer?”

“Deputized him myself,” Miller said cheerfully. “Although he does have a long and splendid history with the Knoxville Police Department. Now, before I drag your sorry ass down to the precinct, are you sure you want to waive your rights?” Miller paused for only a moment, but when Tate didn’t respond he continued. “Yes? Then you can start by telling us what you’ve done with the Clark and Campbell sisters.”

“And where the hell you stashed them,” Kristopher added.

Sergeant Ted Franklin and Bailey had surprised Tate as he broke into Allison Langley’s home, gun in hand scaring Sofia, Allison, and Alex to death. As expected from their previous meeting, Alex Langley identified Tate as the man who Stan

Dembowski had given the bags of discs last week. The Thursday all of this had started.

Now they were seated at the Langley kitchen table while two other officers searched the house to be sure Tate, or someone else, hadn't planted anymore incendiary devices. The Langleys were in the living room giving their statements about noticing Tate's dark green car pass up and down the street several times before he broke in.

When Tate remained quiet, Miller stood. "Okay, Tate. You're not talking after all? We already know most of it. We're going to take a ride downtown and I'm putting you in the general population and have the officers casually mention why you're there."

"You can't do that!" The handcuffed Tate half rose in his chair. "Someone might kill me!"

"Heard about what prisoners do to those they think hurt children?" Kristopher mocked. "They'll have you for dinner and breakfast if they find out what your charges are."

"Okay!" Tate slumped into his chair. "But I want special protection."

"Talk," Miller ordered. "Where are the Clark and Campbell sisters?"

"They'll kill me if I tell you," Tate protested.

"Talk!" Kristopher shouted. "You'll probably be dead either way. Did you promise them to The Cadre? Or one of your sick friends?"

"Last time, Tate," Miller warned. "Where are the girls?"

Tate choked out an address in East Knoxville close to downtown. As far he knew they were still there being guarded by two women. After Miller radioed in the information with a request that a social worker and a female officer accompany another officer to the scene, he looked back at the quietly sobbing Tate. "Ok, that's good, Henry. Keep talking."

Between sniffs and sobs, Henry Tate described how he'd been approached to find young girls in state custody, the prettier the better. Once found, he'd pass the information and be paid a great deal.

"You or someone you work with bugged the tables at Daisy's ," Kristopher accused. As Tate's mouth fell open, he added. "But I don't think you're smart enough for that. But you did it to listen to any possible conversations about kids in state care. That's how you learned that Mercy Phillips suspected someone at the shelter was responsible for the Campbell and Clark girls vanishing."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Tate said but his face was the color of parchment.

"We found the bugs," Miller continued. "And we know you took some of them from an employee at Daisy's named Stan."

"You were seen taking a bag from him last Thursday afternoon," Kristopher added. "And later that night Mercy Phillips was murdered in her home, and her son David hasn't been seen since."

"Whoever you gave the bag to listened to those recordings, heard Mercy's suspicions and killed her or had her killed," Miller said slowly. "So, you see, Tate, not only are you accused of finding and supplying children for immoral purposes, but you're also an accessory to murder and kidnapping."

“Oh my God,” Tate moaned. “Oh my God, I’m dead.”

“You were the Clark sisters case manager,” Kristopher continued. “Did the Taylors help you take them out of the shelter?”

“Yes,” Tate admitted.

“And after the Campbell sisters told Mercy on Christmas Eve that they saw the Taylors dragging the Clark sisters out, you and they arranged for the Campbell girls to ‘run away’,” Miller continued. “Did you kill Mercy Philips?”

“No!” Tate screamed. “I didn’t kill anybody! I just identified and transported the girls. And I didn’t touch them! I’m not a pervert!”

“Just helped the perverts get what they need,” Miller’s tone turned ugly. “You’re as bad as they are, Tate. Who’s behind this? And I promise you, if you lie to me about any of this, I will put you in the population so fast—”

“Tattersall,” Tate sobbed. “Charles Tattersall from Tennessee Cares. He’s working with some organization. I don’t know if they’re Mafia or something else but they’re damn scary and they will kill me if they know I’ve talked to you. You have to put me somewhere safe.”

“Holy sainted Mother of God.” Kristopher sat back in disbelief. The Regional CEO for Tennessee Cares. A man who has access to hundreds of children. Young children. “Why, Tate? Why betray your promise to help children? They trusted you. Lucinda Gonzalez probably trusted you. You better be glad she’s not here, because she would eat you alive. How much were you paid?”

“You don’t understand,” Tate sniveled. “I had student loans out my ass. I started gambling to try to pay them off, but I lost more than I won. I don’t know how

Tattersall found out, but he approached me at a workshop and later offered to pay a big chunk of the debt—”

“If you became his personal pimp,” Miller interrupted.

“Yes,” Tate gulped. “And don’t ask me who else, because I don’t know for sure. There’s this guy Tattersall had me tell that David should have been in the house when he went there to kill Mercy Phillips. He threatened to kill me.”

“Tattersall told you that?” Kristopher tried to ignore the roaring in his ears. “That someone had murdered Mercy?”

“Yeah,” Tate whispered. “I guess he was supposed to kill David too, but I swear I didn’t know any of that was going to happen! You have to believe me!”

“Who?” Miller drew out his question. “Who threatened to kill you?”

“I’m not sure,” Tate admitted. “But he’s got this strange accent. Really good English, but funny accent.”

“Bogdan. ” Kristopher exhaled. “Where’s David Phillips, you little prick? Is he with the girls or did you hide him somewhere else?”

“I don’t know,” Tate wept. “I swear to God I don’t know!”

“Others have found children and approached Tattersall?” Miller’s words were more of a statement of fact than a question. When Tate nodded, he asked, “And where’s the party going to be tonight where the buyers for these kids are going to be tonight? Brown’s Hotel on Gay Street?”

“The Bradford. Oh shit!” Horror widened Tate’s eyes as he realized Miller’s trap.

“Thank you. That’s all I need to know,” Miller beckoned at the two officers waiting in the corner who came forward to jerk the now shrieking Tate to his feet. “I’ll be sure to place you in solitary once you’re booked. Happy New Year, Henry.”

“Wait a minute, officers,” Kristopher said. “I have one last question for Henry here. Who threw that pipe bomb at my car?”

“Go to hell,” Henry spat at him.

“Have a nice trip, Henry,” Kristopher called as the officers dragged him from the room. “You’re on your way to Hell already.”

He considered calling Suzanne first but instead called Lucinda Gonzalez with the news of Henry Tate’s arrest. She was overjoyed. “And I have some good news for you. I found Mercy’s parents late last night in Lichtenstein. They’re trying to book a flight to London but with it being New Year’s Eve, it’s impossible to get a last-minute flight and—

“If you’ll send me their contact information, I’ll take care of that,” Kristopher promised. “Or at least Brotherhood Protectors will. I know they’re grieving, but maybe it will make the trip home easier in a private plane with everything they would find in first class. We could have them in the air in two hours.”

“They’re already at the airport,” Lucinda said, and Kristopher could hear she was crying. “Where is Suzanne?”

“She’s working today. Elaine and she had some kind of special project. Do you have plans for tonight?”

“I was thinking of going to the Tennessee Cares fundraiser, but I’m just too tired.” she said. “You know, the one Charles Tattersall mentioned during the meeting.



Didn't Suzanne get an invitation?"

"I'm not sure," Kristopher said as Miller returned to the room. We've been so busy, I'm not sure. Where and what time?"

"It's at the Bradford," Lucinda said.

"The Bradford?" Kristopher gave Miller a thumbs up as he returned to the room. At least Tate wasn't lying about that. "Wow. Isn't that the one that has a penthouse? The one that can hold several hundred people?"

"That's right," Lucinda agreed. "The happy hour starts at nine with a cash bar and lots of hors d'oeuvres. I'm not sure how they're handling the auctions. But I really don't like crowds, and I'm too tired, so I'm just going to stay home. If Suzanne didn't get an invitation, I can let you use mine."

"I'm not so keen on crowds either," Kristopher told her. Let me check with her and I'll call you back. Happy New Year."

He ended the call and looked at Miller. "Do you need me?"

"Maybe for a bit," Miller said. "Wanna go check out the Bradford? I need to get a crew inside that can pass as servers and bartenders to watch for Tattersall and his minions. I may have to bust the Bradford's entire staff for their involvement with this, but it will be worth it. Do you want to come with me?"

"Absolutely," Kristopher declared. "I want to be there to help take Bogdan, Dembowski and everyone else, even if it's only as a witness. Catching Bogdan after all this time would be a fitting end to the year. And you can be damn sure I'm going to make Bogdan tell me what he's done with David Phillips. When we finish at the Bradford, I'm going to tell Suzanne the good news."

### CHAPTER 32

A short time later

“David? Where are you hiding, little dude?” T.J. stared at the empty den. It was neat and tidy except for the table where he and David would eat. Milk from an overturned glass stained the table and carpet and bits of toast littered the floor.

Shit. Someone’s snatched him. Oh shit. If there’s a webcam, where would it be? Frantically, T.J. began lifting pictures from the walls, opening the video cabinet to toss out DVD’s and opening what-not-boxes on the bookcase. Nothing. Think, dude think! What did Mrs. Johnson say about a garden gnome? Haul ass upstairs, man and—

“Hands in the air!” A voice behind him barked. “Hands in the air and keep them there!” T.J. froze and started to turn but another voice shouted, “Stop! Get on your knees very slowly and keep your hands up!”

“Okay!” T.J. shouted back. “Give me a minute, will ya?”

“Shut up, kid and do it!” the second voice shouted again. “Someone from the neighborhood was watching and saw you break in here, so don’t even try to deny it. On your knees!”

Slowly, T.J. knelt, and a pair of icy cold hands ran over him, patting his back and butt. “You should wear gloves when you do that, man,” he snarled and then let loose a string of profanity as the hands yanked his arms behind his back and handcuffed

him. “Ouch! That’s police brutality, man!”

“Save it for the judge, kid,” the first voice told him. “You’re under arrest for breaking and entering.”

“Listen, man, there might be a webcam hidden somewhere,” T.J. pleaded. “You gotta look for it because it may have taped the murder that happened here last week.”

“Look who’s been watching too much CSI Cyber,” the second voice jeered. “Shut up kid. There’s too much New Year’s Eve crap going on to stand here and listen to you make up stuff. Let’s get going.”

“Wait a minute, Briggs.” A hand turned T.J. around and he found himself facing the two officers who asked him about David days ago. The older man and the one with a bad haircut.

“What are saying, kid?” the older one asked. “That’s there a tape hidden somewhere?”

“My mom said Mrs. Phillips was gonna buy a camera and hide it somewhere to be sure she and David would be safe.” T.J. explained. “Like in a garden gnome or something. At least look for it! Someone’s snatched David so maybe it’s on the freakin’ tape.”

“You mean that David Phillips has been here all this time?” Briggs shouted. “And you knew? Callahan, I’m gonna beat—”

“Briggs, I’ll take care of this,” Officer Callahan ordered. “Go up to the deck and see what you can find,” the older one said. When Briggs had gone, he said, “I’m Officer Callahan. You are not bullshitting us, are you?”

“No, sir.” T.J would have added, “Scout’s honor,” but he wasn’t a Scout.

“Callahan! I found something!” Briggs called as he pounded down the stairs. In his outstretched hand was a miniscule camera.

“It was in the gnome,” Briggs panted. “Damn thing was facing the office windows”

“Let’s get out of here,” Briggs said. “I think we may have just broken the case. Uncuff the kid. What’s your name son?”

“T.J. Fielding, sir.”

“OK. T.J. Officer Briggs took him by the arm, but his touch was gentle. “Let’s go downtown and look at what you’ve found.”

Late afternoon. Families United

“Henry Tate, from Tennessee Cares?” Elaine said, stretching her arms overhead. “That scumbag. What else did Kristopher tell you?”

“That he’s going to the Bradford with Grant Miller to get things in place for tonight,” Suzanne said. “That’s where everything is going to happen. But there’s more good news. KPD have found the Clark and Campbell sisters and they were taken to Children’s Hospital to be checked out and were found to be in physically good shape. And if that isn’t enough, Lucinda called that the therapeutic foster home where Mercy was placing the Campbells, and they’ve agreed to take both the Campbell as well as the Clark sisters. The foster care couple there have years of experience in taking care of fragile kids and they will know just what to do to get these girls over this ordeal.”

“That is wonderful,” Elaine exclaimed.

“I know,” Suzanne agreed. “Lucinda is even going to drive the Campbell girls to Vanderbilt hospital tomorrow to see their mother for a long overdue Christmas visit. And last, but not least, Brotherhood Protectors is flying Mercy’s parents home from Liechtenstein on a private jet. They should be here tomorrow.”

“You’re kidding?” Elaine said in disbelief. “Did Lucinda tell them everything that’s happened? Including that we’ve still not found David?”

“Yes,” Suzanne said sadly. “But from the way Kristopher was talking, it’s just a matter of time before we know. He’s that hopeful. I just wish I had his faith right now. It’s been days and knowing everything that has happened, I’m beginning to lose hope.”

“Don’t talk that way. We’re going to find him soon,” Elaine declared. “I just know it. Once Grant Miller really starts hammering away at Henry Tate, the truth will come out and the whole thing will come down like a house of cards.”

“Not soon enough for me,” Suzanne said. Her arms ached to hug David good and tight and listen to every one of his silly, corny jokes. Twice if it made him happy. “Are you and Griff going to that event Charles Tattersall mentioned?”

“Griff and I have other plans,” Elaine announced sotto voce . “Besides, the invitation said black-tie. Griff looks great in a tux, but he absolutely refuses to wear one unless he absolutely must. What about you? Do you and Kristopher have plans for tonight?”

“He said to text him when we’re finished,” Suzanne said. “He hinted at a surprise he had but wouldn’t even give me a hint.”

“Aren’t our BP guys just amazing?” Elaine dabbed her eyes with her fingertips.

“Pretty impressive, I must say,” Suzanne agreed. “I kinda like Kristopher with a K.”

“Oh, come on, Suzanne,” Elaine teased. “You’re halfway to being in love with Kristopher. It’s all over you. Admit it.”

“I plead the fifth,” Suzanne insisted.

“Well I’m ready for some tea,” Elaine said. “I just wish we had a slice or two of one of those great cakes from Daisy’s but they’re closed, aren’t they?”

“I think they’re open until five, to take some special dessert orders and it’s almost that now,” Suzanne said. Let’s see if they can help our sweet tooth’s.

She placed the call and was surprised when Barry answered on the first ring. “Hey Barry,” she greeted. “Happy New Year! Is Daisy’s open?”

“You must be psychic,” Barry said. “I was just going to call you. What do need, Suzanne?”

“Elaine is craving cake and so am I,” Suzanne said. “Do you have anything?”

“Chocolate mocha cheesecake and Daisy’s triple layer lemon cake,” Barry said.

“There goes my diet,” Elaine moaned. “But after everything that’s happened, we deserve a treat. We’ll have both, one slice of both for the two of us.”

“I’ll be right there, Barry,” Suzanne said with a laugh. “Do I come in the front or the back?”

“Definitely the back,” Barry said. “And Suze? Could you hurry? I gotta get to a special service at my church.”

“See you in five minutes or less,” Suzanne promised and ended the call. She stood,

grabbed her purse from the floor and said, “I’ll be right back.”

“Don’t you think we need to go together?” Elaine asked, pulling on her jacket. “And it is starting to get dark.”

“Don’t be silly,” Suzanne scolded. “Daisy’s is two doors down and the streets are full of New Year’s Eve shoppers. I’ll be back in ten minutes or less. Go put on a pot of coffee. Tea won’t hold up against the amount of sugar we’re about to ingest.”

She took the stairs down to the first floor in order to burn up some calories before ingesting the ones in Barry’s wicked desserts and exited through the back door into the alley that ran behind the buildings. Kristopher might be annoyed she’d left Families United without someone to go with her, but she in a matter of seconds she was already banging on the back door of Daisy’s. She could almost taste the cake and coffee when everything went black.

### CHAPTER 33

Not long after that. Families United.

“What do mean she’s missing?” Kristopher didn’t try to control his shout, even if it was at Elaine. “How long has she been gone?”

“About twenty minutes, but she’s not answering her phone,” Elaine’s fingers twisted together. “Barry isn’t answering the phone at Daisy’s either, but I think she called him on his cell and I don’t have his number. Kristopher I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, Elaine,” Kristopher stopped long enough to hug her as he called 9-1-1.

“I think she went through the alley,” Elaine called after him. “She said Barry wanted her to come to the back door so no one would know they were open. Kristopher, is her nickname ‘Suze’?”

Her question had him wheeling about to face her. “What did you say?”

“She had him on speaker. Barry said, “Can you hurry, Suze””, Elaine said. “Does that mean something?”

“Holy mother of God,” Kristopher rasped as he bolted for the door. “That’s what David Phillips calls her when he needs her. They’ve got her. The Cadre’s got Suzanne.”

Daisy’s was a scene of bedlam when Kristopher arrived. Squad cars, lights flashing



lined the back alley and took a minute to convince a very young officer to let him in the kitchen. Inside Barry and Libby Collins were giving statements to another officer. Barry was holding a bloody cloth to his head and Libby was crying. Alex and Sofia Langley were there giving statements as well. Seeing him, Barry's face lit up. "Kristopher! How'd you know—"

"I went by Families United," Kristopher gasped. "Elaine told me Suzanne was coming here but never came back. What the hell happened?"

"Stan Dembowski took her," Libby sobbed. "He came to the back door, forced his way in and then said he'd kill me if Barry didn't call Suzanne and convince her to come here."

"I had to call her." Barry looked as if he was going to cry as well. "Stan put a rag over Suzanne's mouth, and she passed out. I guess it was chloroform. Then he shoved Libby and me into the freezer and said he'd be back. If Alex hadn't come by—"

"Alex?" Kristopher turned to stare at the young man and his mother. "You were here?"

"I left a textbook here," Alex explained. "Barry gave me a keycard to the back door since I work extra shifts. I heard him and Libby yelling and beating on the freezer door, so I let them out."

"He missed them by about ten minutes," Barry said. "What the hell is going on?"

"Revenge," and the old rage surged through Kristopher's heart. "Did Stan say anything?"

"Yeah." Confusion knotted Barry's features. "Something about going back to the beginning, whatever that means. Here's her purse." Tears rolled down Barry's face.

“And her phone is in it.”

Damn. Back to the beginning? Where the hell would Dembowski take her? I can’t find her without her phone.

Another officer stuck his head in the back door. “Hey. Are you Kristopher Brower?”

“Who wants to know?” Kristopher snapped. Rage was making him forget his good manners.

“Sergeant Grant Miller wants you down at the precinct, pronto,” the officer said. “Seems like there’s a new development in your case.”

“The one with the girls?” Kristopher asked, heading for the alley.

“No. The one with that missing kid. David Phillips.”

“Suze, wake up. Please wake up.”

“Oh, this is bad,” Suzanne moaned. “Howie, why did you let me drink so much? I think I’m dying.”

“Who’s Howie?” the voice asked.

“That’s not funny, Howie,” Suzanne moaned again. “Oh, my head.” She rolled over, her hands patting what felt like a mattress. She sat up and squinted into the dim light at the small figure wearing a rumpled shirt and cargo pants seated next to her. “You’re not Howie? Ouch. Why does my mouth feel like it’s packed with cotton?”

“Suze, it’s me. David,” the figure said plaintively. She blinked again and her beloved young friend came into view, his blue eyes wide with hope.

“David,” she coughed, pulling him close. “David! Oh, my head. Where are we?”

“Across the street from my house. I think,” David told her. “That’s where I’ve been all this time. I mean, at my house, not here.”

“You’ve been at your house?” Suzanne repeated, trying to make sense of this. “Why didn’t you call the police? Or me?”

“T.J. said the police would put me in foster care and that’s a bad place to be.” David knuckled his eyes, trying to stop the tears running down his cheeks. “My head hurts so bad, Suze, I can’t think. But T.J. stayed with me at night, you know? We’d sit up playing games and watching movies. He’d come back and check on me during the day too. Don’t be mad at T.J., Suze. He said he was gonna take me to his parents tomorrow when his parents came home from working all night and it was probably safe for me to leave the house, you know? Suze, why does my head hurt so bad?”

They must have used chloroform on him like whoever opened the door at Daisy’s used on me. Trying not to gag against the dryness in her throat, Suzanne rasped, “I’m not mad, David. Just glad you’re safe. If you were staying at your house, how did you get here?”

His tears started again. “Some man got in. Maybe he picked locks like T.J. I kept the blackout curtains pulled like T.J. told me so no one would know I was there. But that man put a cloth over my face, and I went to sleep. Now my head hurts. But Suze I’ve got a—”

“Ah, you are awake,” a heavily accented voice interrupted. “So, you are Suzanne Bennett.”

Her arms still around David, Suzanne moved them to face the voice’s owner, and her heart froze as she stared into the pair of eyes that held nothing. Gregori Bogdan.

“I told Toby—or Stan as you know him—to be careful with how much chloroform he used,” Bogdan mused, as if they were discussing plans for dinner. “The fool should have killed you that first night. You’re a great deal of trouble, Suzanne Bennett.”

A wave of nausea surged through Suzanne. “Stan from Daisy’s attacked me?” She could barely get the question from her sore throat. “But the man who attacked me at my home was English!”

“One of my colleague’s many little talents,” Bogdan purred, his dark eyes staring at David. “Stanislaus Tobias Dembowski is an Englishman who grew up in Poland and can pass as an Eastern European as easily as you apply your mascara. It’s funny to consider your Brotherhood Protector thinks he’s chasing a Pole with limited English. Did they not know that?”

A man who hurts children. But Suzanne kept that opinion unspoken. David had been through enough. She wasn’t going to add to his fear. “What are you going to do?” she asked.

“Wait for your Brotherhood Protector to find your body.” Bogdan smiled and Suzanne suppressed a shudder. Like his eyes, there was no warmth to it. Only a chilling mockery to go along with his words. “He’ll no doubt track you on your phone that will lead him right here which is what I want. I want him to find what’s left of you when Stan finishes with you.”

Realization broke through the remnants the confusion that the chloroform left. “This isn’t about the children, is it,” Suzanne said slowly. “It’s about getting back at Kristopher for taking down Balaur in Romania. He and his team cost you millions of dollars. I’m surprised they let you live. You’ll have to wait for Kristopher to find me because I left my purse at Daisy’s. I guess Stan forgot it.”

Bogdan launched himself at her, striking her face with his open hand, while knocking

David to the floor. The boy shrieked and rolled away. Suzanne recoiled but managed to not cry out. “Will you kill Kristopher too?” she asked. “He doesn’t know where we are.”

Bogdan struck her again, harder this time and she bit her lip to keep from crying out. At her feet, David had curled himself into a shivering ball.

“Fool!” Bogdan hissed. “Enough of this. I have work to do. Get on the floor and pick up the boy and sit back to back.”

She did as he asked and winced as he tied her and David together. Then he took out a bottle from his coat and poured something onto a cloth.

“I can’t have you screaming,” he said. “So now you will sleep. “I will deal with Stan later He’s probably had a little too much to drink, but he’ll sober up soon enough. I hope he destroys your pretty face before he takes you. You are going to wish a million times before you die, you’d never involved yourself in this.”

He covered the sobbing David’s mouth. The smile he gave Suzanne was pure evil as was the light in his eyes.

“Good night, Suzanne Bennett. Enjoy your time with Stan.”

And then the world went black again.

### CHAPTER 34

“Tell me what Barry calling Suzanne ‘Suze’ means,” Miller said as Kristopher paced his friend’s tiny office.

“She told me that’s what David Phillips calls her when he’s in trouble or worried about something.”

“Would Barry Collins know that?” Miller sat on the corner of his desk.

“Maybe,” Kristopher admitted. “Right before I left, Libby Collins told me that Mercy, David and Suzanne would eat there on Saturdays and David told Libby about calling her Suze because ‘Suze’ would always keep him safe if his mom wasn’t around. I think Barry was trying to warn Suzanne not to come, but with Stan holding a knife to Libby’s throat, what could she do?”

“Not much,” Miller agreed. “But—what is it?”

“Hey Sarge?” The young officer who had wanted to keep Kristopher out of Daisy’s hovered in the doorway. “You need to come talk to this kid that Callahan and Briggs caught breaking into the Phillips’ house while you were downtown. Something about a webcam recording. And that we need to find some social worker or an army dude.”

“Holy shit! It’s T.J!” Kristopher shouted. “Get him in here right now!”

At Miller’s nod, the officer scurried away and almost immediately reappeared with T.J. The boy’s sullen expression vanished upon seeing Kristopher.

“Army Dude!” he shouted. “They took David! He was in his house and—”

“Back up, T.J.,” Miller snapped. “And go slow but just the facts.”

The boy’s story spilled out. How he’d found David in the she shed and then hid him at David’s own home, thinking the bad guys would ‘never return to the scene of the crime’. That he’d feared David would be put in foster care and never get out, like T.J. And most importantly, how T.J.’s mother thought that Mercy might have had a camera hidden somewhere no one would ever look. Like inside a pot of flowers or one of those stupid garden gnomes Mercy had liked so well.

“But they found the webcam Mrs. Phillips hid in the garden gnome on her back porch. It’s right in front of her office doors. Do you think—?”

“We’ll check it out,” Miller assured him. “T.J., think hard. “Where do you think they would have taken David?”

“I don’t know, but you can track him on his phone, can’t you?” T.J. frowned.

“David has a phone?” Kristopher demanded.

The boy’s frown became a scowl. “Yeah, I gave him mine and—”

“Do you have a new phone?” Kristopher asked. When T.J. nodded and handed it to him, he asked, “What’s that number? Miller?”

“On it,” Miller responded. “Do you want Mills in on this?”

“He’ll kill me if I don’t,” Kristopher said, staring at the phone’s screen. “Good Lord in the morning. David is across the street from his own house.”

“There’s a vacant house across the street,” T.J. offered. “Kinda weird because inside it looks almost like David’s in a den downstairs and woods in the back. Maybe that’s where they are, you think?”

“I think I could kiss you but that would be gross,” Kristopher said and laughed as the boy recoiled. “But thanks, T.J. I owe you big time. Call your parents and tell them it’s an emergency and one of them needs to come down here.”

And then he was racing for the door.



### CHAPTER 35

“Can you see anything?” Kristopher asked Bailey. “And how many people are in the house.”

The officers Miller had gathered hovered at the edge of the woods behind the house across the street from David’s. The new moon’s dim light was obscured by clouds and even the stars were faint.

Bailey raised his special issue night binoculars to stare at the vacant house. “There are three people,” he whispered. “A guy moving around in an upstairs room. He’s got a big red tattoo on the back of his head.”

Dembowski!

“What else?” Kristopher asked.

“Looks like two people downstairs, but it’s dark,” Bailey described. “Could be a woman and a kid tied together, but her head is down. Wait. Holy shit. It’s Suzanne.”

“And David.” Kristopher said and knew instinctively that he was right.

“Okay, Dembowski is moving,” Bailey warned. “Miller? What’s the word on Bogdan? Where is he?”

“Seen in the penthouse at the Bradley and there’s a whole bunch of girls there,” Miller whispered. “Bastard’s gotten cocky if he’s showing himself. Probably wants to

pick out his on kids. Okay, fellows. On my signal, move toward the den door. One. Two. Go.”

The finest of the Knoxville Police Department moved forward as silently as wind through the grass, with Kristopher, his heart in his throat right behind him, grateful to have Bailey by his side.

From somewhere inside a light flashed on, followed by heavy footsteps clumping down the stairs. Dembowski staggered as he reached the last step and paused to steady himself against the wall. Then he reached into his vest and took out a large, ugly knife. He stepped toward Suzanne and—

“Now!” Miller shouted as he kicked in the door. Dembowski turned, grabbed a pistol from the back of his pants and leveled it at the entering men. Miller shot twice, striking Dembowski in the knee and stomach, sending the screaming man to the ground.

Kristopher pushed back the officers to wrap his arms around the woman he loved. “Suze?” he whispered. “Are you alright?”

She looked up at him and blinked. “Howie?”

“Kristopher,” he corrected and bit back a laugh at her vacant gaze and slurred speech.

“Oh, yeah,” she muttered “Hi. Hey, Kristopher with a K, look! I found David.” She gestured with her head to the sleeping boy tied against her. “He’s kind of tired. So am I. Guess it must be that stuff Stan made us smell. He’s not a nice person, Kristopher with a K. I think—” she blinked twice— “that you should arrest him! Or make him stop yelling ‘cause it’s giving me a headache.”

“He’s got the tattoo alright,” Bailey called as Kristopher used his own knife to cut

Suzanne and David's bonds. "Is she loopy or what?"

"She is indeed," Kristopher laughed again as he listened to the wail of approaching sirens and one of the officers checked David's vitals. Miller was trying to Mirandize Toby-Stan, but the prick was cursing in Romanian so loudly, Kristopher doubted if he heard a word Miller was saying.

"You can drop the act, Dembowski," he called. "We know you're English. Nice accent though."

"Screw you!" Dembowski shouted.

"Definitely English," Bailey commented.

"Are we going home now, Kristopher with a K?" Suzanne asked dreamily as he lifted her in his arms.

"That we are, my dearest Suze," he whispered as his tears caressed her hair. "That we are."

January 2

And just like that it was over.

The raid at the Bradford's was a triumph. Fifty girls under the age of sixteen were rescued as more than forty pedophiles were arrested, including Charles Tattersall, Perry Johnson, Samuels, the Cadre operative; half a dozen of their members as well as executives from child welfare agencies all over Tennessee. Henry Tate was singing like a bird. Reporters Anne Hamilton and Danni Blake, fiancées of BP members, couldn't write the stories fast enough. Some of the rescued girls had families and Lucinda Gonzalez was working overtime to find the ones in state custody therapeutic foster homes. After a stern lecture from Grant Miller not to "Play cop," T.J. Fielding was released to his horrified but very proud foster parents, who immediately began proceedings to adopt him. Stanislaus Tobias Dembowski—who was demanding to see the English ambassador—was locked up or he would blow them up like he tried to Kristopher's car, which was now back in the Brotherhood Protectors garage.

And Gregori Bogdan was caught. Miller had hurried back to the hotel and had led the raid on the penthouse, taking down Bogdan himself. The webcam recording from the gnome had captured in horrific detail, his killing of Mercy Phillips.

"I may have gotten a bit carried away while I was subduing him," Miller told Kristopher. "He might try to sue for excessive force. But damn, it was worth it."

But best of all, David Phillips' grandparents were home. The boy had a lot of healing to do, but he had a score of people to help him with that.

“I’d call this an amazing week,” Elaine announced as Kristopher, Suzanne, and Bailey waited for the principals to arrive at her home. They’d decided to wait until today to give David some time with his grandparents and for the effect of the chloroform to wear off on him and Suzanne.

“I still feel like I’ve been on a roller coaster,” Suzanne said, accepting a glass of champagne from Bailey.

“Still woozy there, Miz Bennett?” Kristopher laughed at her scowl.

“If this wasn’t the good stuff, I’d pour it over your head,” she threatened. “You’re not going to let me forget that I was as drunk as three skunks from that chloroform, are you?”

“Not in a million years,” he teased. “What kind of woman leaves her purse behind while she’s being abducted?”

“One who’s been chloroformed,” she retorted. “Thank God T.J. convinced those officers to look for that webcam. Hiding it in a garden gnome? Mercy was a genius. And that he also gave David his phone, otherwise you never would have found us.” She paused, shaking her head. “Good grief. This is an experience we’ll never forget.”

“And I’ll never forget New Year’s Day and our own little private party,” Kristopher whispered, brushing his lips over her hair. They’d spent the day making love over and over, like they were the only ones in the world. A world they had created themselves.

She blushed and Elaine rolled her eyes. “Come on and help me in the kitchen, Bailey. I won’t let Kristopher in mine either.”

“Maybe the last time in a long time before I get to cook in a proper kitchen,” Bailey said as he followed her. “I don’t think they have kitchens like this one where I’m going.”

When they were gone, Suzanne set her glass aside. “OK, before you leave town for parts unknown, are you going to tell me about why no one will let you in a kitchen?”

He sighed. “OK. I guess since you’ve seen me naked, I can tell you. I left the eggs out of a quiche Lorraine I was making and baked it in a very dirty and very old oven. The oven caught fire and turned the quiche into something like cheesy molten lava. And there was a roomful of people to whom I had boasted about my quiche making skills. We had to send out for pizza. Patrick was there and has never let me live it down. And who say’s I’m leaving town?”

“What about that mission you couldn’t tell me about?” Suzanne said, as hope surged through her. “Wasn’t that what Bailey was talking about just now?”

“Well, I think I’m going to be needed to testify after all this business you got me into,” Kristopher said. “Hank has agreed to let me stick around. Indefinitely.”

“Oh.”

“Is that the best you can do, Miz Bennett? Oh?”

“You want to stay here?” she whispered. “With me?”

“How could I leave behind the woman who helped me bury the last of my demons over Syd?” Kristopher gathered her in his arms. “Helping you find David Phillips did that.”

“The guests are arriving,” Elaine shouted. “Are you guys good to go in there or do I need to come breakup some hanky-panky?”

“Are we good to go?” Suzanne placed her palms on his face.

“Not good to go, Miz Bennett,” he said, pulling her closer. “Good to stay. Always,

and forever. Good to stay.”

And he kissed her.