



Jon's Helter Skelter Cold Case (Jon's Mysteries Case #6)

Author: *AJ Sherwood*

Category: LGBT+

Description: Jonathan Bane and Donovan Havili cordially invite you to their wedding.

They just have to prove a man's innocence and get him out of prison first.

Not to mention prove Solomon completely inept (not hard), and fired from being a detective.

Oh, and train Jon's new apprentice.

They can probably get married this year. Probably.

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Page 1

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You know how on TV there's always this big to-do when both sides of the family meet for wedding planning, and there's all this tension, and it usually ends disastrously?

Had I mentioned how glad I was that I didn't have to deal with any arguing? Seriously, this wedding business was stressful enough. I couldn't imagine throwing family drama on top.

Fortunately for me, all my family loved each other, and I was including the Havilis because Kanye and Alani were already parents to me. With all the love, support, and time I'd received from their family, how could I not? I knew it made Donovan super happy we all cared deeply for each other. I was just relieved I didn't have the stereotypical mother-in-law from hell.

I looked around the back deck of the Havili house, taking everyone in with a smile. Mom sat next to Kanye on the deck, laughing at something he'd said. Adjacent to them sat Alan and Grant, and Grant said something I didn't quite catch, but it set Mom and Kanye off all over again. Eight months had passed since our crazy Tree Case, as everyone called it. During those eight months, a lot of positive things had happened. My mom had bonded properly to both Alani and Kanye, much to their mutual delight. She was better taken care of now than she'd ever been, and honestly? She looked ten years younger. She glowed with happiness and health in a way I'd never seen. She told me she'd lost twenty pounds, and I believed her. She looked trimmer.

Also joining the family was Grant Walker, since he and Alan were firmly a thing now. Sometimes, Grant seemed a little bewildered about how he'd come by Alan and

been sucked into the Havili clan, but he wasn't protesting either. Honestly, Grant was a very welcome addition. I'd always liked him; he was one of the best men I knew, so being able to call him cousin was fine by me. He and Alan maintained they were "trying this out first," but I could see from their lines they were solid. I had no worries about them.

The divine scent of barbecue perfumed the air, and I breathed it in with a smile, even though my stomach was past the point of rupture. I had definitely overeaten. I felt a food coma coming on, especially while sitting in the shade on this fine sunny day. A nap sounded great. Skylar sat opposite me next to her parents and shot me the same sleepy grin, patting her belly in an exaggerated way. Yeah, kid, I'm with you. Food coma incoming.

Donovan slid in next to me on the bench, putting an arm around my waist and kissing my forehead. "Don't fall asleep."

"Just a little nap..." I murmured, mostly teasing.

"Nope, main event is coming up."

Ah. Right. The reason we were all here today. We had to set a wedding date.

I loved Donovan to hell and back, and I trusted him absolutely, so I wasn't nervous about marrying him. I figured everyone got butterflies in their stomach when setting their wedding date, though. The anticipation was like a siren's song to my desires.

Alani clapped her hands, coming to stand at the head of the large picnic table. She still wore an apron over her jeans and white shirt, dark hair up in a loose bun, looking quite excited as she spoke. "All right, everyone, don't fall asleep on me. We've got things to discuss. Time to set a date for these two. Now, who's got any major plans in the upcoming year?"

Now there was a good place to start. I knew Alani would be good at marshaling the troops. (No, I hadn't asked her to take charge. She'd volunteered and I wasn't stupid enough to say no.)

Kanye was the first to stir from his seat, picking up and sipping the last of his hard lemonade while he reminded his wife of something later this year. Another wedding, in fact, in Hawaii for his cousin. That got the ball rolling. People threw out a few things—vacations they'd already booked, other weddings they were set to attend—and what dates those spanned. Alani wrote them all down diligently, nodded, then lifted her planner in front of her. "Okay, that leaves us with a few possible months. July—"

Donovan immediately lifted a hand. "We want an outside wedding. No July."

Oh, hell no. Nashville's heat and humidity would kill us all.

Alani blinked at her son, head canting to the side. "Oh, you did decide on that?"

"We'd pretty much decided when I talked to you last."

"Well, I know, but you weren't firm on it, either."

"If at all possible, we want one outside, as the venues we like are outdoors. If it's not possible, we'll be flexible and open to change." Mostly because outdoor weddings were a lot easier on me. Being in massive indoor venues usually came with risks, and I didn't want to stress myself or Donovan on our wedding day if I could help it.

Alani consulted her list and calendar again. "In that case...end of August? Last two weeks are free. Possibly September, too."

Hmm, that did sound better, weather-wise. My concern was my new apprentice, who

definitely wanted to be there for the wedding. She'd be back in school by that point.

It was like Donovan read my mind. "Abby won't mind missing a day of school."

I snorted because yeah, teenagers never did. "True. Although we could do a weekend, too, but I'm not going to be strict on the exact date."

"My vote's September."

I had to agree that was likely the better choice. The weather would be cooling down some, and the rainy season wouldn't fully hit until October. We should be in a better position.

Grant leaned around Donovan to give me a questioning look. "Abby? As in the girl from the Tree Case who's like you?"

"That's the girl. Abigail Moore is her name. She's a Reader and has all the potential to be very, very good. She doesn't run quite as hot as me, although electronics still suffer around her."

"Sho's working on EMP-shielded stuff for her," Donovan threw in.

Thankfully. Her poor father would go broke replacing things at this rate. "But yeah, I've taken her on as an apprentice. Once school stopped, we started intensive training, and she's really picking it up fast."

"I still think it's amazing another Reader is so close to us," Mom said as she snatched another lemon cookie.

To be fair, the lemon cookies were amazing .

“It does beat the odds, doesn’t it?” Alan pushed his glasses up on his nose, the professor in him coming out strongly. “There’s not a set pattern to where psychics are born, although plenty of studies are trying to figure that out. But still, Readers are one of the rarer abilities, and seeing someone almost as strong as Jon is mind-boggling. The odds of this happening are rather astronomical.”

They were indeed. I was so achingly glad for Abby’s sake I was close. I remembered all too well having to figure out my abilities all on my own, and I didn’t wish the experience on anyone.

Except Rodger. I wished all evil and complicated things on Rodger.

Of course, Skylar had wholly different questions. “Is she cool?”

“She’s very cool.” I thought so, at least. Apparently, she also had a spine of steel, as she’d managed the whole craziness of the Tree Case like a trooper. “You’ll likely get to meet her soon. Anyway, September. What’s a good date in September?”

I could tell Alani was composing diplomatic phrasing. Her lines flared with a little caution. “Do you want an absolute set date? Or would you rather be flexible with the wedding venues?”

“Ohhh.” I hadn’t thought of that. “Some people probably locked in dates a year ago, right? Uh. Babe?”

Donovan shrugged. “I’d rather be flexible.”

“Yeah, me too. Let’s go with that option. I think even if we have to skirt up a bit, say...last week of August, or down to the first week of October, it’ll still be fine.”

“Agreed.” Alani looked visibly relieved we were being sensible. “Okay. Dates are

good, then. Venue? Have you thought of it much?"

"I'd love to do Cheekwood." Botanical garden weddings were always so pretty. "But I understand they're quite popular for weddings."

"They are, but we can try, Jon." Alani noted down the venue.

Mom lifted a hand. "I will say, I know someone who has a farmhouse wedding venue. He's right off the 840."

That might be good. I checked with Donovan again and got a go-ahead nod. He was quite easygoing about all this. I got the impression he was fine with whatever, so long as it was a nice wedding and we were married by the end of the day.

"Mom, can you get details for us?"

"Sure. Farmhouse is a viable option, then?"

"Yeah, I think it'd be cool."

Kanye, knowing his son well, pinned Donovan with a look. "You will not say 'whatever Jon wants is fine.' That's too much pressure on Jon. Even if he can read you like an open book."

Honestly, Donovan hadn't been putting pressure on me. He just didn't have strong opinions about most of the wedding. He was the one who had stipulated an outside venue, having foreseen trouble and wanting to enjoy a stress-free, happy day with me. We might have to do inside, though, and just find a low-tech venue.

I had my mouth open to say as much when Donovan spoke in a steady and somewhat amused tone.

“I actually have two very firm things I want in this wedding.”

See? He was actively participating.

Kanye grunted, satisfied. “All right, what are those two things?”

“First, any wedding colors you guys want to pick are fine, but not pink. I just can’t do the pink.”

His preference was completely fair. I had the right complexion to pull off pink, but I recognized not everyone did, and Donovan was not a pink kind of person. “I thought maybe classic colors? A black, silver, and white theme?”

Donovan’s eyes lit up. “Now that’s what I’m talking about.”

Alani scribbled that down. “I think it’s a great idea. Those are timeless colors and easy to match, too. What’s your second request, Donovan?”

“I don’t think we should be restricted by genders for our wedding party. With two men getting married, that means way too many groomsmen, and most of our groomsmen overlap.”

Ah. A wrinkle I had not thought of, but he was right.

“So I want bridesmaids, too.” Donovan nodded, sure of his own decision.

Well, if he wanted bridesmaids, then...I turned toward Natalie, who sat near the head of the table, and asked her, “Be my matron of honor?”

Her lines lit up with pure yellow joy, twined with golden love. “I’d love to!”

As expected of my sister. I got up from the table and scooted around so I could give her a hug. She hugged back, arms firm around my waist, body warm from the sun. I knew I could count on my sister. I'd always been able to.

I looked down at Skylar, who watched us with her own delight, and perhaps some wistfulness. Silly girl, I wasn't done yet.

"Will you be my bridesmaid? Or I guess groomsmaid?"

Skylar immediately launched from her chair and joined in on the hug. "Absolutely!"

My best friend in the world was Donovan, but I could hardly ask him to be my best man, all things considered. Plus, I didn't think I'd need one with Natalie as my matron of honor. That said... "Aaron, I want you as a groomsman."

"Whole family's getting involved." Aaron grinned, white teeth flashing against his swarthy skin. "It's my pleasure, Jon."

"Thanks." I had such amazing family, I really did.

Donovan pointed a stern finger at Garrett. "You can be my best man, but I swear to god, if you do something with a haunted theme, I will end you."

Garrett laughed like the demented gremlin he was, not even remotely apologetic for his darker schemes. He put a hand over his heart, blinking those baby blues like he was innocent as the day he was born. "I can be good."

"Ha! Fine chance of that."

I knew those two had already promised to be best men for each other's weddings, and I knew Sho and Garrett drew very close to the line of becoming engaged. After living

with each other for over a year, they were a solid couple, and I didn't see that changing in the future.

Mom fussed under her breath, "I wish his father was here for this."

Dad and Neil were currently wrapped up in a case and hadn't had time to make the drive over here. Being in the business myself, I completely understood.

"It's fine. I promised to call them tonight and go over everything we decided. Um, speaking of, Alani? We do have one request."

She gave me a go-ahead gesture.

"Can our grooms' cake be your orange cake?" Please say yes. My taste buds were already singing. She generally only made the cake around Christmas and I neeeeeeded it before then.

Her lines lit up with faint surprise, then pride. "You really do love that cake. I'll make it for you."

Yaaaaaaaas! Victory~ "Thank you so much."

Alani shot me a wink before going back to her planner. "All right, we're making very good progress. Next thing we need to lock down is a venue and a guest list. I want you two to work on the guest list. I can work on the venue."

"Sounds like a fair division of labor to me." Donovan glanced at me. "Also, I'm saying this now, but I don't want a huge wedding."

Oh, fuck no. A big wedding sounded like so much work. "Guest list is one hundred people. Max."

For some reason, everyone at the table gave me strange looks, like they were questioning my common sense.

Their reactions made me defensive. “What?”

“Jon,” Sho drawled, eyes rolling so hard they almost fell out of his head, “do you not understand how many friends you have? How many people will want to be there on your big day? Donovan, you as well, do you genuinely think you can get by with only inviting fifty people?”

Uh. The way he said that, it felt like I’d jumped to an assumption I should not have. “It can’t be that many. Can it?”

“How about you both make individual lists first, then combine them and see what the total is.” Sho shook his head fondly, but his lips were pursed in exasperation. “I think you’re forgetting that half the police station are good friends of yours.”

Ah.

Shit.

I kinda had? But Sho was right, there were a lot of work colleagues who were also friends, and I couldn’t discount them.

“Make the lists tonight,” Alani reiterated. “Then we’ll have a much better idea of what to plan for in terms of venue size.”

“Yup.” Donovan let out a low breath. “I think that’s the smarter plan.”

Mom, being an efficient person, already had a yellow notepad out and was jotting down names. Family members first, then friends we had in common, and I could see

her list growing very quickly.

It didn't upset me. Everyone needed a reminder sometimes of how much they meant to other people. This was such a reminder for me, and Donovan, as I could see the same sort of feeling in him.

Sitting here with my family and planning out my future, knowing I'd soon be surrounded by people who celebrated a huge milestone for me, I felt a euphoria like I'd never experienced before. A truly heady feeling, like I was so full of joy it threatened to spill over. It was such a beautiful moment, I felt it become a core memory in my head. I hoped I never forgot it.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:47 pm

To everyone's complete lack of surprise, the prison staff LOVED Jon. The warden especially loved him, but the people who loved him the most?

The parole board.

Parole board members were not above bribing Jon to come sit through hearings for them. Fancy dinners had been involved. Just saying. They fought dirty to get him. Mostly because he made their lives so much easier. He could tell in a glance if a prisoner was actually remorseful or not. Sometimes prisoners didn't even clear the doorway before they spotted him, sighed, and walked right back out. Which was comical in its own way.

Today, we had special permission from Warden Lopez to bring Abby in with us. I felt a little cautious about this whole idea, but it was true Abby would get all sorts of experience reading people by being here. Warden Lopez damn near shat himself, he was so excited there was a Jon .0.

With Abby on board, it meant doing double duty for a while, but I didn't mind. Abby was a great kid. She was smart and studious, much like Jon. She wasn't the type to look for trouble, which sincerely helped because two beings walking around who could kill electronics? Felt like I was playing an extreme-mode RPG.

No lie, I sometimes felt like asking my dad to play anchor for Abby. It hadn't come to the point where I needed to, but it was a "when" question more than an "if."

Anyway, today was easy enough. Abby sat next to me, yellow pad in her hand, busy taking notes on the prisoner who had just walked in. Abby had dressed up a little in a

turquoise summer dress that accented her pear-shaped build and green eyes in a very nice way. I thought it was cute she was trying to give people a more professional impression. Frankly, she could wear cardboard and they'd welcome her with open arms.

This current case was interesting. Dude was guilty of vehicular manslaughter, bootlegging, and driving under the influence. Triple whammy of poor life decisions. He sat there before the three board members, visibly nervous, and kept glancing at Jon like he had no idea who Jon was or why he was sitting in. He seemed to mostly ignore Abby and me.

The room wasn't large—twelve by twelve with a single long table, chairs for everyone, and absolutely nothing else. They kept these rooms bare to help control the collateral damage if a prisoner lost his temper. I didn't think we'd have trouble from this guy, though. For one thing, Jon hadn't signaled incoming trouble. For another, the prisoner's body language screamed fear and nervousness, not aggression.

Abby leaned against me, showing me her pad. In very cute, swirly handwriting she'd written, He's really sorry but he's also kinda...I dunno, resigned ? He doesn't think he'll get released .

Huh. Well, if he was showing remorse, Jon would say something. So his fear probably was groundless.

Chelsea Martin, one of the most senior members on the board, glanced at Jon after asking her questions. "Jon?"

With that, Jon knew he had the go-ahead. He cast a sympathetic smile at the prisoner. "Thomas, I can see you're genuinely sorry for everything that happened. But I can also see you're severely sleep deprived, you have an addictive personality, and you're dying for a drink. Which is a recipe for another disaster."

Abby nodded along, like she'd seen all that too.

Readers were scary, man.

"So here's my recommendation," Jon continued smoothly, speaking to the board. "I think therapy and some time in a rehabilitation center would be the best thing for Thomas right now. Say, a year of therapy, then six months in a rehab center, at the very least."

"Agreed, it's a great idea." Lee, another friend on the board, bobbed his massive head. "Everyone in favor?"

All hands rose in the air.

"Then that's what we'll do. Thomas, you'll be on probation for that year and a half, okay?"

Thomas looked around the room like he could not believe he'd heard things right. He had truly thought he wasn't going to get out. Then his eyes welled up with tears and he nodded, so emotional he couldn't get a single word out.

Aww, poor guy. He'd made some bad decisions, but apparently he wasn't a bad person.

"Th-thank you," Thomas choked out. "Thank you very much. I promise to do better moving forward."

An incredibly low bar from my perspective, but without question the right direction to aim.

Thomas was escorted out, and the whole room relaxed a hair. Jon waved Abby in

closer. He did this between each hearing, wanting to see her notes.

Everyone else stood, stretching their legs, including me. These hard plastic chairs were not comfortable.

Lewis came over to speak, grinning from ear to ear. Generally he was a happy man, but today he practically beamed. “Donovan. Can we keep Abby?”

“You’ve got to wait until she’s fully trained and out of school at least, man.” I grinned back at him. Abby had job security waiting for her, that was for sure.

The fifty-year-old ex-cop made a face. “But Jon’s always so busy!”

“She’s not cleared to work without supervision yet. Hold your horses. She’s good though, isn’t she?”

“Hell yeah, she is.” Lewis turned so he could grin at her, which Abby returned, tickled at the praise. “Some more experience doing this, and she’ll be another Jon running around, and god knows we need the help. Cuts the workload and guesswork way, way down.”

“That it does. Was that our last one for today?”

“No, one more,” Chelsea corrected from the table. She remained standing in her low-heeled shoes, but she flipped through the file in front of her, reviewing it. “This one’s the most challenging of them all.”

Oh. Finishing strong, I guessed. “What’s his deal?”

“Name’s Torres, forty-eight, spends more time in the system than out, according to his record. He’s in for several accounts of arson and causing a lot of property

damage. Talking over two million. He's served his base time."

Base time was what the judge set during the trial. If the judge stated an inmate was eligible for parole, there was always a certain amount of time they had to serve first. "What was Torres's base time?"

"Ten years."

I let out a low whistle. Long time to be in, all right. Two million in property damage was no joke.

The guard outside the door gave a warning knock, and we all went back to our seats. Abby was a very happy girl, pleased she was doing so well. I did see a few corrections with Jon's blue pen, showing her what she'd missed or slightly correcting what she'd seen. But they looked like minor corrections, and Abby was clearly not worried about it.

The door opened and a man in an orange jumper—who was covered in tattoos and had a shaved head—stepped through. He had mean written all over him in capital letters. I didn't like the vibe from him at all. Most of the prisoners we'd seen today hadn't been antagonistic, but this guy? He'd throw hands with little to no provocation.

Jon caught my eye and gave the signal, a T resting under his chin.

I gave him a nod in return. Got it.

Abby leaned in to whisper, "What did that mean?"

"Our sign for this guy's trouble," I whispered back.

Her mouth formed an O in enlightenment. “Can I use it too?”

“Please. In fact, I’ll teach you all the hand signals later.”

“Okay.”

It would so make my life easier if she could subtly signal me for help. I really should have thought of this before.

Torres dropped into the chair, but his eyes were on Jon. Sometimes his gaze flickered over to me and Abby, assessing, like he was sizing us all up for a fight. No sign of remorse from this guy. I had a feeling I knew how this would go.

“Normally three in a hearing, right?” Torres challenged.

Chelsea stared him down. Honestly, I wouldn’t cross Chelsea; she was the type of woman who would tear you up. “Mr. Bane is a psychic who works with us, Mr. Torres. Show him the same respect.”

Torres chose to shut up. Then again, he’d been through this process before, so he knew to make nice at this point. Not that it would do him much good.

I wasn’t an expert, but I could read Jon’s face, and Abby was busy over here making notes, and none of them were positive.

Yeah, Torres wasn’t getting out anytime soon.

Still, there had to be a formal hearing to adhere to procedure, so Chelsea sucked in a tired breath and started in.

“Mr. Torres, you have applied for parole. Please plead your case.”

Torres started talking, which wasn't the best move, in my opinion, even though he'd been urged to talk. Him talking did not make things better.

Jon had a system worked out with the parole board members. Every time a lie was told, he'd tap his pen. An easy, simple way of saying uh-uh . Man looked like he was fidgeting, he tapped so much. Torres calmly spewed one lie after the next, proving he was an experienced liar.

Finally, the man rounded down and looked proud of himself, like he'd gotten his whole speech out perfectly, as planned.

Dummy, dummy, dummy.

Chelsea finished scoring her paper. She didn't even glance in any other direction to verify with people, just put her pen down and looked up. "Denied, Mr. Torres. Please return to your cell."

He sat there, looking at her with this poleaxed expression. "What? Why?!"

"Because there's no remorse in you." Lewis shook his head. "We don't even need Jon to see that. You just spent five minutes lying to our faces. Frankly, until you come to grips with your pyro side, you're a menace to society."

Torres lunged out of his chair, but I'd expected the move. I left my seat the second he did, reaching him in two long strides.

Oh no you fucking don't, you asshole. You're not getting near anyone in here.

Torres noticed my approach but couldn't turn around fast enough. I caught him in a bear hug from behind, lifting his feet right off the ground.

Torres wiggled, trying to fight my hold or kick at me. “Let me down, dammit!”

“Not on your life.”

The guard caught up, so I put Torres down and spun him, giving the guard the right access to slap cuffs on him. “I got him, Havili. Thanks.”

“No problem, man.” The guards here were good guys. I let go completely and let him do his job.

Chelsea had a hand over her heart, and she looked a little wide-eyed. “And this is the other reason why I love it when you come, Jon. We always get some extra protection.”

I winked. “Happy to serve.”

“Thank you, Donovan. And I want you all—you too, Abby—at my barbecue party this weekend, all right?”

See? Fancy dinner bribes. No complaints from me. “You got it.”

We all cleaned up and then walked out the door—Jon reviewing Abby’s notes as we left. He kept a hand on my arm, letting me guide his feet. It always tickled me when he trusted me blindly like now. And he knew it, so he did it often. This man spoiled me.

While walking through the main hallway, heading for the doors leading outside, I asked Abby, “What did you think?”

“Like, it was really interesting. I didn’t always understand what I was seeing, having never seen it before. But I can understand why Jon brought me, as it’s good practice.”

She nodded firmly, her curly brown hair swaying in its high ponytail. “I want to do it more.”

“You’ll definitely be doing it more. Trust me. Now that the warden and parole board members know about you, you have job security.”

“There’s worse things in life.” A bounce appeared in her stride.

I hadn’t thought she’d react any differently.

We went through the process of signing out at the front desk and giving back our visitor badges. It neared four o’clock now, close enough to quitting time we might as well go back home and send Abby on her way. That being said, what to do about dinner?

Abby abruptly stopped, lifting a hand to shade her eyes from the summer sun, and stared hard toward the yard. I stopped as well, not sure what she was looking at, and Jon stopped too. The prison yard had people in it, some of them playing football, others walking around, enjoying being outside. I didn’t see anything nefarious going on, so what had caught her attention?

“Uh, Jon?” Abby’s voice dripped with uncertainty. “I dunno if it’s the light playing tricks on my eyes or what, but...that guy over there? The one leaning against the wall, staring at the ground. I don’t see any guilt lines in him.”

Uh.

Come again?

Jon peered the same direction, shielding his eyes, and—after a taut ten seconds—went “Huh.”

Never a good sound from Jon. “Guys, don’t leave me hanging. What are you seeing?”

“Nothing,” Jon answered, the words coming out slowly while he continued to stare hard. “Nothing at all, and in this place? That’s very much a problem.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:47 pm

Abby was dead right, I didn't see any guilt lines in the man. Granted, I was somewhat far away, but still, this was a max security prison with a wing that housed psychic prisoners. No one was guiltless in this place. He should be throwing off something like a neon light.

Not good. Super not good. We had an innocent man in here, and I was damned if I'd leave him.

I did an about-face and went right back in. To hell with whatever we had on schedule after this, it didn't take precedence over the poor man.

At the front desk, Marge looked surprised to see us again. "Hi, Jon. Forget something?"

"We've got a problem," I told her grimly. "I need the warden."

"Uh. Oh dear, guards too?"

"Not yet."

Donovan pitched in over my shoulder, "Nothing of imminent danger, just something problematic."

Somewhat reassured, she lifted her phone, calling the warden. I bounced impatiently in place while she convinced him to come down. It wasn't like she could hand me her phone, I'd kill it, so he had to come down in person.

Warden Lopez appeared in a minute flat, an impressive feat considering the size of the prison. His breathing sounded short from speed walking the distance, his heavy gut bouncing with each stride.

“Bane,” Lopez greeted, anxiety running in sparks along his lines. “What the hell?”

I’d known this man for years and had never called for him like this, so he was right to be worried. “Warden, you’ve got a problem. There’s an innocent man in your yard right now. A psychic.”

For a second, both Lopez and Marge stared at me, like they were waiting on the punchline or a “Gotcha!” I could see the confusion swirling in their lines, then the understanding, then the oh shit realization.

“Which one?” Lopez demanded.

Dammit, it wasn’t like I’d gotten a name. I hadn’t even read the man’s number properly—

Donovan lifted his phone. “This guy.”

See? This was why I had a Donovan. He did brilliant things like taking pictures of people for me. I had no idea when he’d shot it, he’d been so smooth, but he was getting a kiss for it later, regardless.

“Dwayne Evans.”

I was surprised Lopez knew the man off the top of his head. “You know him?”

“His case stands out, since it was disturbing.” Lopez shook his head. “Of course, now I know it was all misjudgment. Dammit, this is going to be hell to undo.”

He wasn't wrong there. "I want to interview him first."

"Head to the interview room," Lopez said, already turning. "I'll fetch him and meet you there."

"Okay."

We had to quickly sign back in, then we retraced our steps through the main floor toward the interview rooms. Abby stayed by my side the entire walk, asking questions.

"What happens? Can we get him out today?"

"No, sadly, we can't. A psychic's word is invaluable during an investigation, but it's not treated like hard evidence. It can't be. Psychics are human too; we can lie or bend the truth to suit our wants. The law's smart about that. But what we can do is learn about the case directly from the man himself and then ask him to take us on as PIs. We'll have to work the case pro bono or something, but until I have his clearance, we can't touch this."

Abby looked like she was taking mental notes. "So we have to convince him. I don't think that'll be hard. Surely he wants out."

"You're likely right." Although people could be stupid and stubborn about things in the weirdest ways sometimes.

Lopez was true to his word. We barely got into the room when the door opened behind us and Dwayne Evans walked in. A very tall, extremely thin man, I could tell he didn't work out at all and was one of those people who forgot to eat. His hands were shackled in front of him, confusion and something akin to alarm running through him. Then again, likely nothing had been explained to him, so his reaction

made sense. His lines showed he was a very gifted psychic, twenty-six, had lived in the Nashville area all his life, and he was cut off from his anchor. Ouch. From what I could see, this man had been through hell recently.

Then he spotted me and stopped dead, dark brown eyes flaring wide. I got that reaction from psychics a lot. I was far, far too bright for their vision and they had to adapt to me.

Abby beat me to the punch, going straight to him and grabbing both of his hands. It brought his gaze sharply down to her, and I did mean down—he could have been a pro basketball player with his height.

“I’m Abby Moore.” She looked earnestly up into his eyes as she introduced herself. “I can see you’re innocent, and I want to help you get out of here.”

Welp. That was one way to introduce yourself, I guess.

Shell-shocked, he stood there staring at her for several seconds. Then, interestingly enough, his head lifted and he looked at Donovan. Dwayne’s voice rasped as he said, “One Black man to another, can I trust what she’s saying?”

Ah. Considering the prejudices he’s faced, I could see why he’d want another man of color to verify things.

“You can,” Donovan said. “Abby is a Reader. Do you know what that is?”

Dwayne did. His eyes filled with tears, although none of them fell, and his hands grasped Abby’s in return.

“Then you can see,” he choked out. “You can see I didn’t kill my sister.”

Ouuuuuch. That was what he'd been locked up for? Okay, that was just wrong.

His eyes came up to mine and he said more than asked, "You're just like her, but stronger."

"He's my teacher!" Abby beamed at him. "He's Jonathan Bane."

My name meant something to him. His lines flared nearly neon yellow-green with...relief? Like he'd been anxious to meet me. Then again, word around the prison labeled me as an annoying know-it-all, so he'd likely heard some kind of account about how I could see guilt. Maybe he thought a lucky meeting with me would get him out of here.

He wasn't wrong.

Or at least, I'd do my damndest to get him free from a sentence he didn't deserve.

I came in closer, nudging Abby out of the way, and shook hands with him. "Sir. Far as I can tell, you've never even had a parking ticket."

He laughed, the sound garbled with emotion. "Correct. I kept praying I'd run into you somehow, and here you are. You came to me."

"You can thank Abby. She spotted you first."

Dwayne shot her the widest smile I'd ever seen. "Thank you."

She grinned back, pleased with herself. "I do try. Here, sit, tell me the whole story. We want to be your PIs and help prove your innocence."

Her offer sounded good to him, but as he let go of my hand, his worry nudged back

in. “I can’t pay you right now.”

“Don’t worry about it, we can work payment out afterward. Right now, let’s focus on getting you out of here. Warden Lopez, can you act as a witness for this interview?”

“I most certainly can. Uh, I’ll record it on my phone.”

It would preserve the chain of evidence better that way, so using his phone was fine.

“Sure. Donovan?”

“Taking notes, you’re good,” he assured me.

Seriously, best anchor ever. “Then let’s sit and start.”

The room only had one table and four chairs, so Warden Lopez stayed standing. Abby parked herself right next to Dwayne, like she was moral support. I could tell she liked him, but then, he was a good man. For Readers like us, being around the Dwayne Evanses of the world was soothing. Criminals and the like made me distinctly uneasy, and I couldn’t relax around them.

He didn’t seem to know what to do with this teenage girl acting so friendly with him, but he wasn’t unhappy about it, either. He sat, and I think it was only then he took a full breath, like he could finally breathe now that someone believed him. I rattled off my name and license number, and the names of the others for the camera, then looked at Dwayne.

“I don’t know where to start,” he admitted.

Abby was quick to ask, “What kind of psychic are you?”

Good job, Abby. I was curious myself.

“I’m a Coder,” he answered easily. “Technically, a xenoglossist for coding.”

I pursed my lips in a soundless whistle. As unique as Readers were, Coders were about the same. They had the ability to read and write any programming code without needing to learn it first. They were highly sought after in the programming field and earned an insane amount of money.

All right, this gave us a starting point. “So you were working where?”

“Government worker, actually.”

So his clearance had to be higher than God’s. Got it. “Start us off on the day everything went down.”

Dwayne took a breath, looking tired, and I knew he’d rehashed this a thousand times already, but he gamely did it again. “I honestly don’t know what happened. I was at work, and about ten a.m. the police showed up and arrested me. My sister was missing, presumed dead, and they were certain I had done it.”

It was one of those cases. I hated those cases.

A very foreboding feeling washed over me. “By any chance, was the detective in charge of your case named Solomon?”

Dwayne’s head jerked back. “Yeah, that’s the guy. You know him?”

“Know him, hate him, would love to bury an axe in his face.” It fucking figured Solomon was involved in this somehow. “Okay, so I have a very good idea of how this went sideways if he was managing things. Why your sister?”

“I don’t know.” Dwayne crumpled, upset and livid all over again. “That’s the hell of

it. Even during the trial, when they were unveiling all the evidence against me, no one ever suggested a motive. There is no motive, I love my sister to pieces! She is—was—my anchor.”

Oh shit. Now that complicated things. I had seen a broken bond within him, something over a year old, but had thought it was because of him being in prison and his anchor cutting ties. But if his sister was his bonded, and the bond had broken, then odds were very good she was dead. Shiiiiit.

He huffed out something, a dark laugh. “I can tell from that horrified expression on your face. Your eyes are incredible. You picked all that up by looking at me, didn’t you? How my bond with my sister is dead, and so is she.”

“I am so sorry.” The words felt wholly inadequate. “I know how painful that is. I watched my mother go through it. I promise, a therapist will work with you after today. I’ll throw a fit until it happens.”

He gave me a slight nod and smile. “Thank you. I could use a therapist for sure. But let me get back to that day. I really don’t know what happened to Tylesia. She took a half day—she had errands to run—and nothing was out of the ordinary. We lived together, I would have known if something was off. She normally worked with me. Tye was a good coder in her own right, so we liked to bounce ideas off each other, and we worked really well together. I expected her back at work after lunch. Actually, I expected her to bring me lunch, which was the plan. Next thing I know, I’m being accused as her murderer and thrown into a jail cell to await a hearing.”

“Fuckers,” Abby muttered under her breath.

“You’ve got that right.” I sighed, rubbing my eyes. “Abby, if you ever run into Solomon, steer clear. He’s got a nasty habit of doing shit like this.”

“Got it.”

I could see why Dwayne hadn't been able to muster up a good defense at trial. He didn't know enough of what had happened to even formulate a defense. He'd gone from thinking it was a normal day to shit hitting the fan.

Well. This should make the cold case more interesting, to say the least.

Dwayne's grief came back full force. “The hell of it was, I argued for a good six hours she was alive still. I felt her bond, knew she wasn't dead. Then, while sitting in that damn prison cell, I felt our bond go dormant and...”

Abby gave him a hug. I could tell she was hurting and mad on his behalf. I was too. The police massively screwed up on this. His sister might still be alive if they'd listened to him and chased after her.

“It's...a lot, I know.” Dwayne grimaced. “I wish I could help more, but I literally have no idea what happened to her or if anyone wished her harm.”

“Was she dating anyone?” Donovan asked, pausing in his writing. “An ex, maybe?”

“Tye was asexual and aromantic. She never had an interest in dating.”

Well, that knocked the possibility right out.

At this point, it was better to grab his case files and start poring over them. Dwayne had told us all he could.

“Donovan, you got a client intake form on you?”

“You know I do.”

I figured. Man carried absolutely everything in either his pockets or messenger bag. The Havalis took the motto “be prepared” to a whole other level.

Donovan whipped out the paperwork, handing it and a pen to Dwayne. “Fill this out, sign it, and we’re officially on your case.”

“Sounds perfect.” Dwayne set to scribbling.

Now, first step was calling Borrowman. I needed those case files and he could get them for me. It was late enough I figured most of the Psy office had quit for the day, but I could catch them up and start in on files tomorrow.

Dwayne signed, gave the form back to Donovan, he and I both signed as well, then paperwork went back into the bag. I reached across the table to shake Dwayne’s hand.

“It might be slow going, nothing about the law is fast, but I promise you I’ll stick with this case.”

His handshake was firm in return. “Thank you.”

Lopez stopped recording, putting his phone away and promising, “I’ll email this over to Sho tonight.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it.”

Dwayne reluctantly got up and Lopez escorted him out. I understood the reluctance—he was finally with people who believed him—but I couldn’t help him by staying here with him. Getting him out took priority.

It had to be hard, too, trusting strangers he barely knew. In his shoes, I’d be worried

as hell. All I could do was reassure him.

“Donovan, can you make a note to update him regularly?” The waiting would be hell on him; I didn’t want that.

Donovan snorted like I was being funny. “Like you’re not going to call him daily with a check-in.”

“You do know me so well. All right, for now, let’s go home. Donovan, Borrowman?”

“Yup. Soon as we’re out.”

Abby followed us out of the room, asking as we walked, “Who’s Borrowman?”

“Detective Harry Borrowman is a very dear friend at the precinct and someone we rely upon when there’s trouble. He also hates Solomon’s guts.”

“Okay, but can I get the full story on this Solomon guy on the way back to my car?”

I slid past the first security door, shooting her a pitying look. “Oh, kiddo. Solomon is not something you can explain in one short car ride. But I’ll give you the condensed version.”

Could someone please accidentally on purpose run the man over? Solomon’s death could only be viewed as a gift to humanity.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:47 pm

I saw Abby to her car, and she took off for home with a wave. She was such a good kid. I felt the need to introduce her and Skylar to each other. Abby had the same vibe, and those two would probably become thick as thieves.

Okay, she was off, and Jon was inside making dough for pizzas, meaning I needed to get toppings together.

My phone rang in my pocket. Since it was far safer to answer it out here rather than in the house, I pulled it out. Huh, not a number I knew. Didn't mean much in my line of business, although I admit if I saw it was a spam caller, I answered in Tagalog. If I got them to hang up, I won. It was my own personal game.

“This is Havili.”

A smooth contralto voice answered. “ Hello, I'm Corporal Christine Knolton. Do I have Master Sergeant Donovan Havili ?”

Now that was a rank I hadn't been called in a long time. “You do.”

“ Oh good, I hoped I had the right number in my records. Sir, I'm calling with a rather unique request. I understand you were injured in London while saving a mother and child from an acid attack ?”

My scars flared and ached for a second from the trauma reminder. The pain was a visceral thing, my heartbeat racing from adrenaline I didn't need. It took me a second to find my voice. “Also correct.”

“ I’m calling because the mother you saved has reached out to the army trying to track you down. She and her daughter have moved stateside and want to reconnect with you. She wasn’t sure how to reach you. ”

“Wait, Simin and Eshaal are now living here? In America?”

“ I understand it was a recent move. First thing they did once they got settled was try and find you. They’re very eager to reconnect, sir. ”

So many emotions I couldn’t easily identify hit hot and hard, tangling into this knot I couldn’t quite swallow around.

“Do you have their contact information?”

“ I do, sir. I can email it to you, if you’d like .”

“That’d be great. What email do you have on file for me?”

She told me, but it was one I no longer used. I had her send the information to my Psy email instead, as that one I paid religious attention to. She repeated it back to me, which was correct.

“Thank you for reaching out, Corporal. I appreciate it. If they call in the meantime, tell them I’ll contact them shortly.”

“ That I can do. Have a good day, sir. ”

“You as well.”

I hung up and just stood there breathing. I didn’t know why I felt so overwhelmed. I’d never once blamed those two for what went down. They were as much victims as

I was of one man's cruelty. Still, for some reason I felt nervous at the idea of seeing them. Not even I could explain why. I simply did. I wanted to talk to them, at the very least, even if we didn't meet up.

On autopilot, I put my phone away, but I kept standing there. Like I wasn't sure how to move with all the emotions rampaging through me.

The back door popped open, and Jon stuck his head out. "Donovan, why— Oh shit! What the hell happened?"

Of course he could tell in a glance my emotional state. Some days, I was so thankful he could read me like a book. It saved me from having to untangle everything in my head and try to force it out through words.

"They're trying to find me."

"Who? The Mafia?"

Funny. "Simin and Eshaal."

I saw the light click on in his head. "Wait, the mother and daughter you saved in London?"

"Them. They've moved here, and they reached out to the army to connect with me. I...I'm happy they remember me and want to speak with me, but it's also..." I wasn't sure how to frame it all into something that would make sense.

He came straight over and hugged me hard around my waist. "It's all right to feel overwhelmed. I'm sure the memory is hitting you hard right now."

Yes. That was it precisely. The memory of the panic, the pain, the outrage I'd felt in

that moment when I'd fully realized what had happened. The anger. The shame of the scars I knew I'd carry and have to explain away the rest of my life. All of it.

Jon spoke softly, calmly. "Do you still feel those scars cost you something you can never regain?"

I knew he could read my answer without asking, but I appreciated he asked, regardless. Putting the feeling into words helped like nothing else could. "Sometimes, if I'm being honest. It's rare these days, but when we meet someone new, I can see their initial knee-jerk reaction of fear. I'm reminded of those early days out of rehab, when I was trying to rebuild my life and kind of failing at it."

"I know you give me the credit for turning your life around, but I've never fully agreed with you there. It's your own lovable nature that draws people to you. And that I can't take credit for." He looked me dead in the eye. "The two you saved will not look at you in fear."

A startled breath escaped my throat. I genuinely hadn't realized what was making me jittery until he said it. Then it was all too obvious. "Is that what this is? My fear of being rejected by them?"

"From what I can see."

I didn't doubt his eyes. I shook my head at myself. "My rational mind is scoffing at the idea. Why are fears so irrational? You're right, those two would never be afraid of me. We survived too much together for that to happen."

He smiled and hugged me tightly around my waist. "You're loved, Donovan. Always. The next time such fear pops its head up, stare it back down."

"Yeah." I hugged him back, letting my head rest on his for a moment, soaking in the

comfort and reassurance. “I’ll do that.”

Those clear blue eyes looked up at me and then Jon nodded like he’d made a decision. “Come on. You need an outlet.”

I had no idea what he meant but was game to follow. Let’s face it, there were very few places I wouldn’t follow Jon, including Hell itself.

He took my hand and drew me inside, then straight up the stairs and into our bathroom. Still had no idea what he was doing until he turned the shower on, warming up the water.

Oh. Sexy shower time? I was down. Honestly, being touched sounded like the best way to release some emotional overload. And the reassurance he could give me was something I craved right now.

He grabbed the hem of my shirt, tugging it upward, and I eagerly helped him shuck off clothes. The second his own shirt was off, I dove into a kiss, Jon kissing back. I could feel his smile, knew he was happy his plan was working.

Finally, all those pesky clothes were off, tossed carelessly onto the floor. I seized his bare hips and walked him backward into the shower, unable to stop kissing him. Unwilling to, either.

I backed him right into the tile, barely remembering to close the door behind us. Hot water hit our skin, splashing in all directions, and it soothed me. Settled me in a way I didn’t expect or understand. Every time I’d gotten into the shower with Jon, only love and comfort had come out of it. Maybe that was what my body remembered and responded to.

His hands roamed over my back, my chest, trailing down until he gave my ass a

loving squeeze. It felt good, of course it did, and I responded in kind. I trailed hot kisses over his cheek, jaw, moving down to his neck. I knew exactly where to touch to get the best reactions from him.

A hot hand wrapped around my dick and smoothed over it, stroking. It felt insanely good and I groaned. I absolutely had to return the favor. I dropped my hand to his cock and started teasing him up to full hardness.

Jon seemed to take this as a challenge—he moved his other hand to my balls, massaging them, and damn, that felt amazing. I was thoroughly enjoying the attention. I knew how to make it even better, too.

Shifting my stance a little for balance, I grabbed him by the back of his thighs and lifted him up so his back was braced against the tiles but our dicks were aligned. He put his hands around both our cocks, caging them together.

I started shallowly thrusting, rubbing up against him. It felt incredible. Absolutely incredible. Pleasure spread through my body in gentle pulses, growing hotter with each thrust.

Jon let his head drop back against the tile, panting, clearly lost in pleasure. I loved seeing him like this. Loved knowing I could make him feel so good his brain switched off. It was empowering.

Tension built in my groin. I knew I was getting closer and closer to climaxing and wanted to make sure he was in the same state.

“You going to come soon, babe?”

He gave a jerky nod. “Soon. I-I need—”

I knew what he needed. I thrust up into him, harder, sparking firmer contact, and that was all Jon needed. He came with a hoarse shout, thighs trembling in my hands.

My thrusts became jerky—unable to stabilize myself under my frantic need for a climax—and I groaned against his shoulder as I came all over his stomach.

A warm lassitude swept through me, and I gently set him on his feet but kept him close. Frankly, I wasn't sure who was supporting who, with both of us leaning against each other. It was a touch too hot, between our overheated bodies and the hot water, but I was loath to move and break the moment.

Against my neck he murmured, "You feel better."

Of course he could tell. I responded anyway. "I do. Not as overwhelmed. You can always use sex to calm me down, by the way. A-plus method."

Jon snickered, snugging me in a little closer via his arm around my waist. "Noted. Honey, you don't have to contact them if you don't want to. You know that, right?"

"I do, but I want to see them. The memory of everything that happened just came rushing back, is all. It was a bit much all at once."

"Ahh. That's understandable. Why don't you sleep on it tonight? Contact them when you feel ready to."

It was a good suggestion. "I think I will. I'm so happy their lives are improving, too. It makes it worth it, y'know? Everything I went through was worth it."

"I think they want the same for you. The reassurance that your life improved afterward, and you're not in a dark space."

Now there was food for thought. Trust Jon to give me a different perspective. Then again, with the way he constantly studied humanity, it was no surprise he understood the psychology of humans.

My fiancé made a dissatisfied noise. “Water’s getting colder.”

It was now lukewarm at best, which was our warning. “Let’s wash up a little, get out. Pizzas await us.”

“That they do.”

I reached for the bodywash, but even though I didn’t say anything, I knew whatever I decided, Jon would support me one hundred percent.

And that made all the difference in the world.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:47 pm

Last night had ended okay, and Donovan was a lot calmer this morning. He'd worked through his irrational fear, and I saw him emotionally preparing to get in touch with the mother and daughter. I was incredibly proud of him. He'd been through a lot, my Donovan, but he wasn't the type to let anything stall him. He knew he had my absolute support, whatever he chose to do, and I could tell he felt stronger because of it.

I didn't push him to do anything right away, as he should have the grace to do things when he was ready. Instead, we went to work. I sat in my office like a good little mentor, all the while trying to catch Abby up on everything she needed to know. Donovan had squirreled himself into the corner of our office, dealing with emails based on all the typing.

Abby was a pleasure to work with. She was eager to learn, studious, and had a wonderful personality. I wanted her to succeed in life with every fiber of my being. I also wanted her to be safe, much safer than I had been pre-Donovan, hence the need for this particular lesson.

Abby sat in the chair in front of me and made the two-finger H sign against her chest. "Like this?"

"That'll work. Donovan can pick up on it."

"Okay, so I use help for...what?"

"Anything. Everything. The help sign is for when things are going down and you need him, but you're trying to not be obvious about it."

“Got it. And the T sign is for a heads-up?”

“Basically. It’s not that trouble is incoming, it’s because you see the potential for it.”

She nodded and made a note. Abby was a visual learner, much like me, so writing everything down helped it stay in her head.

Without turning around, Donovan pitched in, “Most cops will know these signs. Especially the ones who work with Jon on a regular basis, they’ve picked up on them. So it’s not just me you can use them with.”

Abby jotted that down too, her lines looking a little relieved. “Sounds great. I don’t want to take you away from Jon if he needs you.”

Oh. I guess she’d been worried about that. “Naw, don’t worry. Donovan’s perfectly capable of protecting two people at once. In fact, he can even be in two places at once.”

Now this, Donovan turned at. He gave me an exasperated look. “What am I, Superman?”

“You’re not?” He was so fun to tease.

I wasn’t completely kidding, though.

A single rap sounded on the office door and our receptionist, Marcy, stuck her head in. “Detective Borrowman is here, and he said he’s got case files for you. I put him in the conference room.”

“Yes! Thanks, Marcy.” Finally, we could get started on our case.

“For which person?”

I stood, already feeling antsy and ready to dive in. “Our client. Dwayne Evans.”

“Yes!” Abby popped up like I had, already beelining for the conference room. “I want him out soon.”

“Me too, kiddo. Me too.”

Donovan followed right on our heels, but interestingly enough, Borrowman was halfway in Carol’s doorway, asking her to join us. If he was asking for her, then there was something wonky going on here. More than I already knew, anyway.

Borrowman had been on a weight loss journey, and I could tell it was working since he appeared trimmer. I think he’d gotten a haircut recently, too, as his dark hair was gelled. He looked sharp in his dark navy suit and well rested.

“Borrowman.”

He turned, giving me a wave. “Hey, Bane. Oh, who’s this?”

“This is Abby, my apprentice.”

“Ah-ha,” he intoned, offering a hand to her. “We meet at last. I’ve heard lots of things about you, Abby.”

“Me too.” She shook hands, a delighted smile on her face, but then, she knew in a glance Borrowman was good people. She’d dressed for work today in a jean skirt and white button-down, but I could tell Borrowman saw a teenager, not a psychic on the job. “Nice to finally meet you. Will you help us with Dwayne’s case?”

“That’s the goal. I understand you were the one who first spotted him?”

“I was.” Abby’s chest thrust out. She was very proud of herself.

As she should be.

We congregated in the conference room, and that was when I had to sigh. There were at least eight boxes full of evidence and reports, all waiting to be gone through. I wanted Dwayne out of prison, I really wanted that, but looking at this mountain of paperwork to slough through made me want to binge watch a show or something.

Abby hadn’t seen a full case record yet and she stopped dead in her tracks. “ All that’s case related?”

“Yup. Got a few more boxes in the car, actually.”

“I can give you a hand,” Donovan offered, to the surprise of no one.

“Sure. Let’s haul them in.”

Abby looked like she’d just been given a final project, due in two days, with no warning or prep. Which was pretty much the case.

I put an arm around her shoulders and guided her to a chair. “Here’s the thing they never accurately show on TV. Crimes produce paper. All the paper. Boxes and boxes of paper. A small case will produce about a thousand pages of reports.”

The way Abby looked at me, she really, really wanted me to be exaggerating. Her eyes pleaded for me to stop joking.

“I wish I was kidding, but that’s the fact of it. I kinda expected this much to go

through, but..." I looked around at the boxes, knowing more were coming, and sighed from the depths of my tired soul. "It's going to take a while. Fortunately, we have a team of people to do it."

Borrowman and Donovan came back, Donovan carrying three boxes to Borrowman's one because he was sexy and strong that way. I loved it when he did something like this and I could watch all those lovely muscles flexing. Yum.

Whoops, better stop, couldn't be drooling over him in the office.

Carol came out of her office at a speed walk, dress flapping around her ankles as she moved. She wore heels to offset her short stature, and she was actually wearing makeup today and had attempted to tame her brown curls. Ohhh, in her lines I saw she had a date later today. Made more sense why she was so dressed up.

"Carol, they tell you anything about this?" Borrowman asked as he set the box down on one of the only clear spots on the table.

"Basics. Dwayne's innocent of the crime, and we're working a cold case. Pretty much all I got." She huffed bangs out of her face and sighed. "I really need a haircut. Anyway, can I have a CliffsNotes version?"

Abby perked up as well.

"I didn't work this case, so CliffsNotes is about all I can offer." Borrowman sat at the head of the table, a resigned air about him. His line of determination pulsed, growing stronger. "First thing, this case was Solomon's."

Carol groaned and flopped over the table. "Nooooooo."

"Sorry. I'm not thrilled either."

I'd been sidetracked before I could fully fill Abby in on Solomon, so I did that now. "We have a long, long history with Detective Solomon and none of it is good. He's the type who grasps at straws and leaps to conclusions, so most of the cases he's worked end with him arresting the wrong person. Usually, someone is able to untangle the mess and let the innocent party go, but not always. That's how we have situations like Dwayne's."

Abby's expression twisted up into a disgusted scowl. "And they let him keep his job?"

"We're pretty sure he has dirty pictures of someone's wife." Donovan sighed gustily before prodding Borrowman. "What else do you know?"

"Bit of information about the victim." Borrowman flipped through his own notes as he spoke, the yellow pad rustling as he went from one page to the next. "Tylesia Evans, aged twenty-three, never been in a romantic relationship. She'd been her brother's anchor from the age of eighteen, they went to the same college, and she had a job in the same department as him. They lived together. She was, by all accounts, an amazing person. She volunteered as a life coach at a women's shelter on her off time. Truthfully, the evidence on this was weird. There were hateful texts between brother and sister, but they only showed up on the victim's phone, not on Evans's. GPS showed he went from house to river, but his work colleagues insisted Evans was there all morning from seven-thirty until arrest. Security video from his workplace was dismissed because Evans is a Coder and thereby able to mess with it."

I blinked. "Uhh...something's really weird with the picture you're telling me. Dwayne mentioned to us that he didn't lose the bond with his sister until hours after he was arrested."

"Huh. Now that's interesting information too. Means she was alive until that point. One of my main issues with this case was how circumstantial it all was. This is why I

called in Carol.” Borrowman lifted a finger, grinning. “The victim’s body was never found.”

Ooooooh. “A missing body could make the case for us.”

“It could indeed. Carol?”

“Oh, I’m all over this.”

“I’ll be your witness.”

“Please and thank you.”

I made a snap decision to include Abby. It would be good experience for her. “Can we join in?”

“Let’s make it a party,” Carol invited.

Excellent.

I ushered Abby up and over into Carol’s workroom. It contained a gigantic map, crystals all over the place, and the other paraphernalia she used to focus. She had six chairs lining the wall for whenever we needed to use them.

I’d explained to Abby before how when we looked for evidence using psychic ability, we had to have an officer of the law as a witness that no hanky-panky was going on. This was the first time she’d see it in action because we’d been primarily doing a lot of interviews and practice.

Abby hadn’t spent a ton of time around Carol before now, but as a Reader, she also didn’t do the awkward getting-to-know-you phase. She dove right in with her usual

candor. “Miss Carol, can I ask questions?”

“Sure.” Carol paused in setting up her crystals to give Abby a quick smile. “I can do this in my sleep.”

“Cool. So you’re obviously looking for the body. What all do you need to do that?”

“A name normally suffices. If it exceeds my comfortable range, then something else to boost helps. Something that belonged to the victim, or a picture of them.”

Borrowman pulled out a picture from the file in his hand and passed it to her. I caught a glimpse of it as it was passed over. Tylesia had been a very pretty woman. Oval-shaped face, hair in a short pixie cut, her eyes more golden than brown. She was laughing in the picture, a puppy licking her jawline. “She could be hundreds of miles from here, so I figured a picture would help.”

“Oooh, yes.” Carol accepted the picture, put it squarely in the middle of her table, and then cracked her neck from side to side. “I think I’m ready to start.”

Borrowman leaned over to turn her camera on. Yes, I was on the opposite side of the room from said camera.

We went through the spiel of time, date, and license numbers for everyone. Then Carol flicked her fingers and really got to work. I could tell from her lines and her expression that she was one hundred percent focused.

Said focus also only lasted one second, then she pulled back with a growing frown that beetled her eyebrows together. “Um. Guys, this is weird.”

“I don’t like weird.” I said this with conviction. “Weird causes problems.”

“Trust me, I know. But I can’t find her.”

Her statement hung in the air for a moment, like a joke that had fallen flat.

“What do you mean, you can’t find her?” Borrowman asked, probably hoping she was kidding. “You can find anyone.”

“I’m not entirely infallible,” Carol retorted, leaning back from the table. She still wore a puzzled frown. “If someone’s been cremated and their remains scattered to the four winds, I can’t point to an obvious spot and say ‘here’s the body.’ But this doesn’t feel the same. This feels like nothing. Like I hit a brick wall before I could do more than start the car.”

In my years of working with her, never had I heard her say the like before. She clearly had never experienced this before, either, as confusion ran rampant through her lines.

“Does that mean she’s possibly alive?” Abby posed the question, glancing around at all of us. “But Dwayne felt the bond break. So it’s not possible, right?”

“I don’t even know what to say to that.” Carol stopped the search entirely, now glaring at the picture as if this was somehow its fault. “Borrowman, what about the rest of the evidence?”

“I basically skimmed the file while pulling stuff for you guys, so I don’t know the nitty-gritty, but I do remember her clothes and a weapon were found buried in the backyard. Presumably the clothes she wore the day she went missing. Grab those?”

“Grab those,” Carol confirmed.

Really trying to boost her search, huh? Although, if she could find the source of the

weapon, that would be helpful. Might as well use Borrowman while she had him.

Borrowman was back in a jiffy and handed her the clothes. Carol snapped on gloves before she took them out of the brown envelopes, placing them on top of the picture. Nothing fancy—a pair of jeans, basic red T-shirt, and leather sandals. Then she started in again.

Only to stop a second later with the same frustrated frown. “Nothing on the clothes. Same block.”

“This is getting weird,” Donovan muttered under his breath.

It was beyond weird, in my opinion. Also intriguing.

Carol was taking it personally, like a gauntlet had been thrown down. She thrust out a hand and barked, “Weapon.”

Borrowman also snapped on gloves before he swiftly handed the weapon over to her, taking the clothes and picture back in exchange. When she pulled it out of the envelope, I was a little surprised to see a hand axe. It was something you’d take camping to chop up firewood. It wasn’t a “normal” murder weapon, in my experience. Although people would grab anything at hand in the heat of the moment.

Carol put the axe down on the table, cracked her knuckles like she was going into the ring, and then started again. She really hated being thwarted.

A taut second later, she paused, head tilting to the side. “Borrowman, what was the address for where the clothes were found?”

“Um. One sec.” He flipped the folder open and read through it before saying, “324 Maple Court. Here in Nashville.”

She stared at the map a little harder. “Reading says this thing originated in the house’s backyard.”

I looked at the axe, which was clearly manufactured, with its black handle and red and black blade, and had a mental huh ? “No way the axe was made in the backyard.”

“Not by usual means.” Donovan stroked his chin. “Is it possible someone rubbed their energy off on this thing? Okay, that sounded weird coming out of my mouth.”

“I don’t know if you even can.” Carol glanced up to meet Donovan’s eyes. “Although, this is reminding me of the head-boppin’ case we had up in Clarksville.”

“Yeah? Same feeling?”

“Pretty similar. These results don’t even make sense. I will swear to you this axe was made in that backyard.”

Now didn’t that beat all.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:47 pm

After being with Jon for so long, I could safely say it was never a good thing when the psychics had “unusual” readings. Nine times out of ten, it meant trouble was heading for us on the northbound express. This made me especially nervous because not only Jon, but also Abby, depended on me for protection.

I was thinking I really needed to hijack my father to help with Abby....

Borrowman had his thinking cap on, as he was already moving to the far end of the room, pulling his phone out as he moved. Everyone did that when around Jon—I recognized its significance. “I’m calling Grant.”

Ooooh, now there’s a good idea.

Abby leaned into my side and asked in an undertone, “Who’s Grant?”

“Grant Walker is one of the best Dreamwalkers in the world,” I explained. “There’s no one he can’t find. His range is insane. I think he can cover most of the US.”

“Pretty much,” Jon confirmed. “He said his range is about two thousand miles.”

Abby jolted, jaw dropping. “T-t-two thousand?”

“Man’s a machine. Thankfully, he’s saved a lot of lives with his ability. Missing Persons adore and worship him. Now, fun fact. He’s actually dating and anchored with my cousin.”

For some reason, Abby looked even more envious. “He got a Havili?”

Uh...I didn't know how to take her reaction.

Jon laughed like he understood exactly what she meant. "He did, lucky SOB. He'll become family sooner or later, if their lines are anything to go by."

I leaned around Abby to study his face. What had he picked up on that I hadn't? Far as I knew, those two weren't engaged. They'd barely been dating two weeks.

Seeing my expression, he winked at me, looking smug. Bastard. He did know something and wasn't sharing. Jon kept maintaining he wasn't a tattletale, but he could at least tell me .

I tuned back in to Borrowman's conversation across the room. I could only hear his side, but it sounded positive.

"Yeah? That would be awesome, man. Yup, at Psy. Okay, see you soon."

"He's in Nashville?" Grant had to be if he could get here soon.

"We're in luck. He was standing witness at a trial." Borrowman put his phone back in its protective EMP case. "He's wrapping up over there now, said he could swing by. I think I may have accidentally made this a competition by telling him Carol got stonewalled."

Sounded like Grant. The man did take pride in his work.

For some reason, Borrowman took his phone back out of the case. I wasn't sure I trusted his expression, either.

"What?" I prompted him.

“I’m calling a judge.”

Carol and Jon whipped around to look at him, both protesting in near unison.

“Surely not—”

“That won’t fly—”

Borrowman did not look at all concerned. “I don’t think you understand just how much weight your word and Grant’s combined has. Any law enforcement officer knows to trust you. If I have three of you saying this woman isn’t dead, and the man sitting in prison is innocent, I bet I can get this case officially reopened.”

You know, he was probably right. Jon’s word alone was enough to convince most judges. His reputation was quite hefty. But if you added in Carol’s—who was infamous for finding evidence and bodies no one else could— and Grant’s? I knew very few judges who wouldn’t take their word for it.

Borrowman looked all cocky while tacking on, “Plus this was Solomon’s case.”

“Man makes a good point.” We all knew to question Solomon’s work. He was a shit detective. Borrowman was right to make the call.

Maybe this would be the case that publicized how bad Solomon was and got him kicked off the force for good. A man could dream, couldn’t he?

Jon sat back, one leg crossed over the other, with a screwy tilt to his mouth. He was wearing one of his favorite outfits—dark wash jeans, baby pink button-down shirt, and white vest. Reminded me of the day we met. He did look very good in it. “Now, the question is, will this impact going to Brandon’s paintball game or not? I give it even odds.”

“Aw shit, I didn’t think of that.” Brandon’s birthday party loomed ever closer, and I still hadn’t gotten the man a present. “Don’t jinx it, babe.”

“Trust me, I have no intention of doing so. Let’s just make sure it doesn’t.”

Truly. Although how we’d prevent it if disaster struck was anyone’s guess.

Carol clapped her hands together. “All right. Since we’re waiting on Grant, and sitting here does nothing, let’s go be productive. Abby, man the whiteboard.”

Abby looked game but also confused. “Okay.”

Jon led her out, heading for the conference-slash-war room. He spoke over his shoulder as he walked. “As we go through all of the files, we’ll be throwing out things we find. Timeline, for instance, and key players. We’ll also be putting up people’s pictures so we can see what everyone looks like. Your handwriting is better than ours—”

He was not kidding, but it was also a really low bar. Sharon ended up writing on the board most of the time because everyone else wrote in hieroglyphics.

“—so it’ll be best if you play scribe.”

Abby looked happy just to have something productive to do. “Sure.”

Carol was a genius. It was a good way of keeping Abby actively in the loop while also teaching her how we analyzed case files. Plus we might actually be able to read the whiteboard this time. It was a win-win-win.

I poked my head into Sho’s office as we went, and Tyson’s, calling them in. Tyson had only just gotten in, his coffee cup glued to his hand, but he tiredly gave a nod and

waved me on. He'd join us presently.

He might have had a point on the coffee thing. Mountains of boxes awaited me, after all.

I helped move some boxes off the table so we had room to spread things out, then sat at the very end near the whiteboard. Mostly so I could help Abby if she needed it. Jon sat next to me. He always chose to do so unless I had electronics in my hands.

Abby picked up a marker and then seemed uncertain on what to do next. For her sake, I offered suggestions.

"Abby, here's how we normally lay things out. We know there's going to be a timeline, right? See that yardstick? It's there to help draw a straight line."

Grateful for the direction, she grabbed the yardstick. "What else?"

"We always have a section for people, mostly the key players, and any key evidence we have on hand."

Tyson chose to join us, spotted Abby at the whiteboard, and nodded approvingly. Tyson was the type to be a mentor, and I knew he approved of Jon taking Abby on as an apprentice. "Abby, if you could keep a section free for the questions, too, that'd be great. We always have questions while going through evidence, and sometimes we get lucky enough to find the answers."

I snorted, as that sounded about right.

Abby paused in her drawing of the line to look at him. "So on TV when they have everything wrapped up in a court case?"

“Fantasy. Pure fantasy. Half the time, we don’t even know the motive.”

“Oh. Sounds tough.”

“Welcome to the real world, kid.” Tyson looked at the boxes and sipped his coffee. “Starting to wish this was an Irish coffee. Is this for the Evans case?”

“That’s the one.” Jon encouraged Tyson to sit next to him. “Want to help me compile an interview list?”

“Sure. I have enough brain power for that.”

Abby took all our suggestions to heart and not only drew a timeline, but she also blocked off sections and labeled them. She managed to draw straight lines on the first try while juggling a yardstick. Kid had mad skills.

“Hello, hello!” I heard from the doorway.

Grant waved as he came in. He looked better than I’d ever seen him, but I knew why, too. It wasn’t just the dark blue suit he wore for court, or the way he’d tamed those curls of his into a loose sweep. It was the lack of dark circles under his brown eyes. Used to be that if you put Grant into a white shirt, he could pass for any panda in a zoo. But now, with Alan as his anchor, he slept solid. Well, when he wasn’t getting pulled out for emergencies.

Speak of the devil, there was my cousin. Alan used to be a professor, and he still dressed the part in his cardigans and slacks.

Grant paused just inside the doorway, looking everything over. “I’m told you’ve got a cold case of sorts and you can’t find the body?”

“That’s about the size of it.” Borrowman snagged some of the victim’s clothes and rounded the table, heading for Grant. “Carol did her best, but she was thwarted. I’m starting to think this girl isn’t dead.”

“Ooh, love me a good plot twist. Okay, where can I nap?”

“We have the nap room,” Jon reminded him.

Grant put a hand to his heart and mock-reeled. “I get an actual bed? No way.”

Considering the many, many weird places he’d been forced to take a nap during his career? Yeah, beds were probably few and far between.

Borrowman and I went with him, mostly to witness it, and I handled camera. There wasn’t a camera in the nap room for many obvious reasons.

Grant promptly took the shirt out of the bag, plopped down on the bed, and scooted around to get comfy. Alan took up position nearby, as any anchor would do, casually leaning against the wall. He hardly needed to stand guard here, but I knew anchor instincts at play when I saw them.

Borrowman and Grant did the date, license numbers, etcetera spiel. Then Grant sucked in a breath and closed his eyes, settling in for a quick nap.

“Always amazes me how fast he can fall asleep,” I observed to Alan in a hushed whisper.

“I know, me too. Was that girl Abby?”

“Ah, I forgot, you haven’t met her yet. Yeah, that’s her.”

“I’d love a proper introduction after this.”

“Sure.”

I was going to say something else, but Grant abruptly opened his eyes and sat up. Uh. Surely that hadn’t been long enough. He’d only been down thirty seconds.

“The game’s afoot, as Sherlock would put it.” Grant’s expression waffled between intrigue and irritation at being thwarted. “First of all, this girl isn’t dead.”

Borrowman pumped a fist in the air, vindicated at being right. “Could you get a lock on her?”

“No,” Grant admitted. Ahh...the reason he was irritated. “But the fact I was able to get on the dream plane and search means she has to be alive. That would be impossible if she were dead.”

A plot twist for sure. I was relieved to hear she was probably alive, but at the same time, what could keep both Grant and Carol from finding her?

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:47 pm

Judge Agatha McClain was a woman who took no bullshit. She'd been a judge for two decades, knew everyone in the business, and likely had a black book of dirty secrets somewhere. She was one of my favorite judges to work with, not going to lie. I was very impressed Borrowman had gotten an appointment with her so quickly, though, as she was also crazy busy.

I brought Abby along. I wanted her to see this part of the process and meet the judge. Abby, knowing of the appointment, had worn a pencil skirt, white heels, and a dressy white top. She looked incredibly cute and professional.

We met in the judge's office, which was across from the old courthouse, as the place was too old to support everyone working there. Her office was tastefully appointed, with judge's paneling on the walls and beautiful landscapes. It smelled of beeswax, so likely someone had cleaned in here recently.

Borrowman greeted her as we entered. "Hi, we're here."

"So I see." She looked over her specs and waved us all in. Judge McClain was obviously in a more relaxed mode. I normally saw her in suits, but today her greying blonde hair was in a loose curl around her shoulders, and she wore jeans and a red cardigan to ward off the office chill. "Plus a new face. Hello, young woman."

Abby was a little shy but rallied. "Hello, Your Honor. I'm Abigail Moore. Jon's my mentor."

"Ahh, the Reader apprentice I've heard so much about. Delighted to meet you. Come, sit, sit." She moved around her desk and to the sitting chairs arranged around a coffee

table, encouraging us to all sit as well. “Abigail, before we start on the case, tell me more about yourself. Are you interested in this line of work?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Abby answered politely while taking a seat next to Donovan. “I think it’s both awesome and I like the idea of serving the community. I never thought I’d be able to study under Jon, but he offered, so I leapt at the chance.”

“Smart of you to do so. How old are you?”

“Seventeen, ma’am. I’ll be a junior in high school this coming year.”

“Is that right? Then we’ll be able to work with each other on a consistent basis soon.” Agatha sat back with a satisfied smile. Her lines were full of pumpkin orange anticipation. “I can only imagine that if I have two gifted Readers, we’ll be able to put away that many more criminals, which sparks joy. Abigail, are you going to do any schooling?”

“Um, I’d love to do criminal law.”

“I think that’s wise. Leave your phone number with me before you go. I’ll make sure you’re a scholarship candidate.”

Abby lit right up at her words. “You mean it?”

“I do. We need more psychics and women in the law field, so I’m going to sponsor you, if you don’t mind.”

“Not one bit.” Abby’s smile stretched from ear to ear.

Now, I’d not expected this plot twist, but I could understand the judge’s reasoning. Having Abby fully educated and ready to go could only be a boon for the police

force.

“Good. We’ll talk more about it later.” With a satisfied air, Agatha sat back, crossing her legs comfortably. “Now, let’s switch to the main topic. I understand Solomon did something stupid again.”

I laughed, mostly in a sour way. “Has he ever done anything smart?”

“Not noticeably.” Agatha tsk ed, expression irate. “The man drives me to drinking most days. Part of the reason I was willing to hear you out was because I knew this was one of Solomon’s cases. I did look at the brief you sent me, Borrowman. I do see why the man was given a guilty verdict, as the circumstantial evidence is rather damning. But you couldn’t see any guilt in his lines, Jon?”

“I could not,” I confirmed. “Actually, Abby was the first one to spot him.”

Agatha flashed Abby a thumbs-up. “Good job.”

Abby grinned back. “Thanks. He’s not guilty of anything, Your Honor. He’s a genuinely good person.”

“I don’t know if the man’s even had a mean thought about someone,” I confirmed. “Also, no motive to hurt his sister. She was his anchor and he misses her dreadfully.”

Agatha was listening carefully, hands folded over her stomach in a thinking pose. “What else?”

“Well, some of the evidence isn’t viable.” Borrowman pulled out several things from his bag, laying them on the table. “Here’s what we’ve got to show. The murder weapon was apparently made in the backyard. Carol couldn’t trace any other origin point for it—”

Agatha let out a surprised huh sound, eyes widening. “You’re kidding.”

“I wish I was. Also, she can’t locate the body. She tried that first.”

Donovan lifted an attention-drawing finger. “We also asked a favor of Grant Walker, which he was happy to do, and we got another plot twist. He could connect to the dream plane but said he couldn’t trace her location.”

Agatha stared at him like she expected a punch line to make an appearance any second. “Grant. Our Grant Walker?”

“The same.”

“The man who has an insane range and can find anyone on earth? He said she’s alive, but he can’t track her? Hoooo boy. That’s...that’s something, right there.” Agatha abruptly sat forward, picking up the typed witness statements and scanning through them. Her face soured as she read. “I see. You’re able to discount half the evidence that locked this man behind bars, and you’ve barely started investigating.”

“About the size of it,” I admitted.

“How can anyone possibly hide a person from both Carol and Grant?”

“I wish I knew.” I splayed my hands in a helpless shrug. “Trust me, this is the weirdest thing I’ve heard in months. And I hear a lot of weird crap.”

“I bet you do.” She set the folder down, lips compressed into a tight line. “I see Solomon did his usual trick of finding someone to pin the blame on and didn’t actually investigate. I’ll hang the man by his balls over this one. He made a colossal mistake here, as this case received national coverage.”

Eh. It had?

To be fair, I rarely watched the news.

But that meant we had lots of witnesses to Solomon's stupidity, which filled my heart with joy. Maybe we could finally kick this man off the force.

Borrowman put yet another folder in front of her, this one full of pictures. "To make things even weirder, the blood splatter in this case makes no sense. Forensics only found two spots—some drops on the garage floor and traces of blood in the shower drain. Nowhere else."

Which was impossible. Blood didn't clean easy, so carting a body around through the house and not getting blood anywhere but those places? Not happening.

"There's too much here that doesn't make sense." Agatha gave a nod, standing and then making her way back to her desk. "I'm reopening the case. Keep me posted on your progress. I'm very eager to have this sorted out."

I mentally punched a fist in the air. Yes! Dwayne would be so excited to hear about this.

Feeling like I could press my luck, I asked, "Can we have Dwayne transferred out of max security and get him a therapist?"

"I'll send over the request myself," she promised me.

Y'all, today was a good day. One of those days where justice triumphed and good things happened. Hopefully this was a harbinger of how this case would work out in the end.

We all thanked the judge profusely for her help, she got Abby's number with the promise they'd talk later, and off we went. Really, us getting thirty minutes of this woman's uninterrupted time was something of a miracle.

I felt like skipping out the door. Not only did we get our case officially reopened, with Dwayne soon to have the help he needed, but Solomon was in trouble~ Na na na na na~

Petty of me, yes, but there wasn't a soul who wouldn't celebrate if he quit the force tomorrow.

We paused outside on the sidewalk, with Borrowman lifting a hand to pause us. "Before I lose you, can you follow me down to the station? Got a guy in for questioning."

"Sure." Borrowman had bent over backward to be helpful on my case, so it was only fair I supported him on his. "Actually, sounds great. I can show Abby the ropes on how we do interviews."

"Then let's go."

Abby looked excited too. She really did love this line of work, and her enthusiasm showed.

We all piled in our respective cars, driving the short distance to the precinct, then unloading. Donovan walked Abby through the process of signing in.

Borrowman showed me to the first interrogation room, so I slid into the viewing room on the other side of the mirror. I say "slid" because I did my best to not touch the door, and Donovan shielded me from it just in case. Abby slipped past too. She was hot enough the door was at risk from her as well. Just not immediately, unlike

me.

Abby looked all around the dim room, noting sound equipment and walkies, taking it in. “So it really does look like this? Not just in TV land?”

“Nope, not just on TV. I mean, police procedurals in movies are rarely right, but the way a station looks is usually not too far off.”

She pointed at the glass. “But if we’re on this side, how do we communicate with Detective Borrowman?”

“That’s where I come in.” Donovan picked up one of the walkie-talkies from the charging station and wagged it in the air. “We use either this or my cell to speak to Borrowman. He’s got a Bluetooth earbud that lets him hear everything.”

“Ooooh. This is spy level.”

“Pretty much.” I, too, enjoyed the clandestine nature of it. I think all our inner children liked the idea of being sneaky.

Borrowman entered with his suspect, they both got situated at the table, and I took a minute to evaluate the suspect. On the surface, he looked like a blue-collar worker, one of those hardworking men you’d see at church every Sunday. Below the surface, though...phew, Lord Almighty. The only other narcissist possibly worse than this man was Rodger, and that was saying something.

I didn’t say anything. I watched Abby instead. She had good instincts with lines, it was simply experience she needed now, so I wanted to give her the chance to figure things out on her own, if possible.

She stared hard at the man, eyes narrowed, upper lip curled in disgust. “Yikes. He’s

as bad as a villain of the week.”

I started laughing. Donovan damn near doubled over, leaning against the glass.

She blinked at both of us, innocent and confused. “What?”

“Abby, that has to be the best description ever.” Donovan straightened, still laughing on an internal level, bright yellow all in his lines.

“Pretty damn accurate, too.” I must remember this description later.

Borrowman had done the whole time and date thing. Now he was in full interrogation mode. “Mr. Addiman, I think you know why you’re here.”

Addiman just glared. Nothing to say yet.

Borrowman made a show of flipping through the police report in front of him. Rather thick report, too. “So far, I’ve got video evidence of you stalking your ex—”

“She’s not my ex! She’s my damn wife!” Addiman snapped. “And I didn’t tell her I wanted a divorce. She doesn’t get to leave unless I agree to it.”

I pursed my lips in a soundless whistle. Woaaaaow. Good job, lady, escaping this psycho.

“A marriage certificate isn’t a bill of sale,” Abby muttered in disgust.

“You’ve got that right.” Donovan also glared at the guy.

Why was I even here? Pretty sure Borrowman had this guy squared away with evidence, but I was also sure he’d brought me in for a reason.

Borrowman kept his voice level, body posture easy, like he had all the time in the world. “That why you tried to burn the house down with her in it?”

Oh shit. This wasn’t a stalking case. This was attempted murder. I paid better attention, and yup, there it was, tangled with the scarlet rage in his lines. The greyish white had been buried for a second there. It was clearly visible now, though.

Addiman seemed to realize he might be in trouble as he abruptly switched tunes. “Ha! If she was in a burning house, she deserved it, but I had nothing to do with it.”

I gestured for the walkie, and Donovan held it up quickly. “Lie.”

Borrowman didn’t bat an eye; he just kept going. “Have you been up to the family cabin before?”

“Sure.”

“Beautiful country up there.”

Addiman didn’t trust this casual chitchat but went along with it. “Yeah, it’s real pretty. Hunting’s great too.”

“How often you been up there?”

“Maybe a dozen times over the years. Hard to get off work, you know.”

“And it’s some distance away from your house, right?”

“Yeah, about a two-hour drive, with traffic and all.”

“That why you have to stop for gas?” Borrowman pulled a photocopy of a receipt out

and shifted it so Addiman could see it. “This gas station is about five minutes from the cabin.”

And the plot thickened.

Addiman stared at the receipt like it would bite him, given the chance. “I went up that way to see if she was there, sure. I didn’t stick around, though. I had work the next morning.”

Pigs fly, too. “Lie.”

“Bet it was easy to light the cabin on fire,” Borrowman mused, like he hadn’t heard anything. “Log cabin, old wood, probably didn’t take more than a spark. If not for the sprinkler system installed inside—which was a smart precaution—whole thing would have gone up in minutes. Having been inside, you’d have known that. So was this another scare tactic? Or were you actually trying to kill her?”

Rage and the sage green of apprehension mixed like a Christmas cocktail in Addiman. Man was not as smart as he thought himself to be.

“You got nothing on me, Cop!”

I gestured for the walkie and said, “It was a scare tactic, but if she died, he wouldn’t have been too upset about it.”

Borrowman shook his head in resigned disgust. “You’re acting like this, and you wonder why she left you.”

“She left me for another man!”

“Stella isn’t with anyone else, man. She just outright left you.”

Addiman scoffed at Borrowman's words, unbelieving.

Abby leaned into my side and whispered, "Is that anxiety I'm seeing in his lines?"

"The sage green? Yeah. Usually, anxiety means he's hiding something that will absolutely nail his hide if we can figure out what it is."

I had an idea of what it was, but I was curious if Abby would also pick up on it.

"Do they have kids?" Abby abruptly asked.

Ah-ha, she had picked up on it.

"Ask Borrowman," I encouraged her.

Donovan held up the walkie-talkie and Abby repeated the question. "Do they have kids together?"

Borrowman was a veteran at this, so he didn't look at the mirror, but from the way his head drew back for a second, he wasn't expecting Abby to talk. But he dutifully repeated the question. "You got kids, Addiman?"

"What? No."

Lie. Oh, I thought I knew what went down and why.

"Lie," Abby stated bluntly. "He's got at least one, and another romantic partner."

I seriously wanted to hug her. Good girl, she'd picked up on both.

Borrowman needed no further help from us. He put two and two together very

quickly. He sat back with a half laugh, darkly amused.

“Okay. Now I get the full picture. You and your wife had a prenup—at her family’s insistence because they didn’t trust you. Good call on their part. Prenup says if you cheat, you’re not getting anything. Am I right?”

“Shut up, man.” Addiman looked outraged but also a little scared now.

“But you did cheat and knocked some girl up, and your ex found out about it. Right? Which is why you’re doing everything to get her back or just get rid of her altogether.”

“I said shut up !”

“Baby born yet? Or girl still pregnant?”

“You can’t just make up a story like it’s true!”

“Not born yet,” I said into the walkie. Then I had a sudden, sneaking suspicion. “Ask him if he’s got a second phone.”

Borrowman didn’t miss a beat. “Do you have a second phone?”

“No!”

“Lie,” Abby and I said in unison.

“Ah-ha, that’s why you think you can get away with this.” Borrowman shook his head and stood. “I’ll bet you used your second phone to not only hide the affair, but to navigate your way to the cabin that night. Welp, guess I get to go find a phone.”

Addiman panicked. Outright panicked. Man was so many shades of green he could be mistaken for a tree. I had a hunch and on the spur of the moment asked Borrowman, “Ask him location. I think it’s at work.”

“You hide the phone at work somewhere? Desk maybe?”

Addiman didn’t answer this time, only glared.

“Bingo!” Abby clapped her hands together and then rubbed them like an evil villainess. “Definitely in his desk.”

“Looks like it.”

Donovan relayed for us. “Both of them said it’s in the desk.”

“All I need to know.” Borrowman turned and left.

Now I completely understood why Borrowman had us come in for this. He needed more evidence. The gas station receipt would only be circumstantial at best.

Donovan replaced the walkie and ushered us out the door as well. Borrowman met us in the hallway at the top of the stairs, far enough away no sound could leak through the doors.

“Thanks for the assist,” Borrowman said in greeting. “I knew he was hiding something, I just couldn’t figure out what. I didn’t suspect an affair. He’s also guilty of stealing a lot of his ex-wife’s jewelry, most of it heirlooms, and she’s taken him to court to get it back. I thought that’s what he was hiding, as it’s worth about five hundred thousand.”

Whoa, that was a lot of money. “He’s probably trying to keep it to pay for the divorce

and new baby.”

“Likely. I’ll get a warrant and go look for the phone.” Borrowman offered knuckles to Abby. “Good job.”

She bumped, grinning. “Thanks. It was actually fun.”

“Feel free to come and play anytime.” Borrowman winked. “I’m off, thanks again.”

It was late in the day, basically quitting time, so I suggested, “Home?”

“Sounds good to me.” Donovan was already plotting steaks. Not that he had a specific line for it, I just knew him that well.

Abby pointed to the vending machine at the base of the stairs. “I’m going to grab a drink first, I’m beyond thirsty.”

“Go for it.” It was hot today. I’d get a drink too, but naw, I’d be home soon. She still had an hour’s drive.

Abby bounced down the stairs, pulling out her wallet from her back pocket as she moved.

“She really is good, isn’t she?” Donovan asked me in a low voice.

“She’s a fucking natural. She wants to be good, and it shows. Criminals won’t stand a chance against her.”

“I look forward to the day we can unleash her on the world.”

“Me too.” I felt like a proud parent.

In a second flat, I saw the Havili protective instincts flare to life. Eh, what? What was going on?

Before I could do more than turn my head, Donovan was racing down the stairs. What was— Oh. Abby had been cornered by someone at the vending machine, a sleazy looking guy with stringy hair and clothes three sizes too big. She was half turned, and I think trying to tell the guy to back up—I saw her lines flare with anxiety and irritation—but the guy didn't move.

Donovan didn't say a word. Just stopped at Abby's back and loomed over the guy.

Sleazeball looked up, and up, and up some more into that angry face and abruptly swallowed before backing up.

“Hey, brother. Hey, man. We ain't got trouble here, right? Just wanted to talk to her.”

Donovan didn't say a word, only pointed— go .

“Yeah, man. No problem, no problem.” Turning on a heel, he raced off to the other side of the bullpen.

Man was stupid to mess with a teenage girl in a police station but apparently had enough survival instincts to not take on Donovan.

Yeah, let's go home. I did not need any other excitement today.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:47 pm

Once we got home, things became calmer, which was good after the many plot twists of today. I'd promised our mothers to finalize a guest list today, since we were quickly approaching our wedding, and they needed a head count for the venue. After we ate dinner, I sat down with my list, Jon sat down with his, and we had our legs overlapping on the couch as we silently worked.

The cats sensed not only people but paper, so they were all over this job. I had one tucked under my arm as I tried to write. Which, let me tell you, was cute but not helpful.

Jon blew out a stressed sounding breath. I glanced up, not sure what that was about.

"What?" I prodded him.

"Huh?" He looked up, baby blues blinking, then he shook his head. "No, sorry, lost focus for a second. I was thinking about Dwayne's case."

"Ohhh, for a second there I thought you were stressing about the list. Okay, which part of the case?"

"The bond, truthfully. Dwayne's adamant that he can't feel his sister, the bond's dormant. I can even visually confirm as much. But if Grant's right, then Tylesia is still alive. So how in the hell did their bond go dead?"

"It's really a puzzle." I certainly didn't have an answer for it, either. "Like one of those catch-22 situations."

“That’s exactly what it feels like to me. How can a psychic not know if their anchor is alive or not?”

“For that matter, how can Grant not lock onto a person’s location? Surely he’d know if they were merely out of range. Like, in Mexico or something.”

“Oh, I’m sure. He was quite confident on that part.” Jon rubbed his nose and left an ink stain behind on the side of it, which was beyond cute. “There’s something majorly wonky about this situation. I have a feeling it’s going to keep me up all night until we figure out the answer.”

“Curiosity getting to you?”

“Partially, yeah. Plus I feel so bad for them both. If she’s really alive, then she’s been in captivity away from her psychic for a year, which just sounds hellish.”

I tried to imagine that—being away from Jon for months on end, unable to escape a prison not of my making—and shuddered. I’d go insane. Climb-the-walls insane. Jon was pretty empathic to people most of the time; I wasn’t surprised this bothered him so much. There wasn’t a lot we could do about it, either.

“All we can do is try and find her. Dead or alive. We’ll figure out the method as we go.”

“Yeah. You’re likely right.” Jon rubbed his nose again. “Shit. Solomon needs to pay for this regardless. He put a woman in danger and threw an innocent man in jail. Surely this time we can get him fired.”

“At the very least. Having Judge McClain out for his blood also weighs heavily in our favor.” I caught his free hand, giving it a squeeze. “Try not to focus on only one thing. You don’t want tunnel vision.”

“Crap. Good point. Tunnel vision on this case is what landed Dwayne behind bars to begin with.” Jon squeezed back, nose wrinkling. “What did I do before I had you?”

“I ask myself that question a lot, and frankly, the answer usually scares me.”

Jon laughed, eyes sparkling, the sound of his laughter rich and warm. No denial over there, I noted. Seriously. Jon was immensely determined, so I knew he’d been mostly okay on his own pre-me, but at the same time, it was amazing how much he’d had to struggle on a daily basis just to exist. I never wanted him to be alone again.

We couldn’t move without disturbing cats. And frankly, Shazam felt like the weight of a thousand suns on my thigh, so I lifted Jon’s fingertips to give them a kiss before letting go.

Back to lists. I had all the family I was close to, friends, and such on my list. I looked it over, couldn’t think of anyone else, then realized I was an idiot.

“Uh...babe, whose list should have Psy people on it? I want our colleagues there too.”

“I already have them on mine.”

“Ah, good, then they’re taken care of. Oh, did you remember to get our FBI—” I cut myself off when my phone rang in my pocket. It was a tricky thing, levering up to one side so I could ease it out without disturbing a cat, but Shazam clearly wasn’t willing to move anytime soon. He simply went with the flow. I almost dropped the phone once it was out of the case, though. Simin was calling me. I’d saved Simin’s phone number but hadn’t used it yet. I was...honestly rattled to have her call out of the blue.

“Babe?” Jon sounded alarmed.

“It’s Simin.” I sucked in a breath and manned up. Well, I tried. Nerves were still tangling like a bad acrobatics act, to be honest. I answered anyway. “Simin?”

There was a delighted cry, like an aborted squeal. “Donovan ! Finally, I reach you. How are you ?”

The obvious happiness in her voice relaxed my taut nerves like nothing else could. I matched her energy, unable to stop a grin from stretching ear to ear. “I am amazing. How are you, Simin?”

“Also amazing. Donovan, there’s so much to tell you. I don’t want to do it over a phone, I want to see you. I want to see with my own eyes that you’ve healed. ”

She was the same woman I knew years ago. The same person whom I’d defended—an action I couldn’t ever fully regret. The relief coming in on the heels of such a revelation felt like it would bowl me over. I looked up and met Jon’s eyes, saw him gazing warmly back at me. He could see perfectly well my nervousness had decreased by half.

I answered her as best I could. “I want to see the two of you as well. Where are you living now?”

“We are in North Carolina. Near the Tennessee border. ”

“Oh! You’re not too far away from me, then. I live in Nashville now.” I ran a hand over my nonexistent hair, thinking of logistics and timelines, and had no idea how I’d manage to fit in a road trip to go see her. “Simin, to be honest, I’m buried in work and wedding planning. I—”

“YOU’RE GETTING MARRIED ?!” The accompanying squeal was unearthly. “Donovan ! I must meet— Wait, her or him ?”

I belatedly remembered confessing to her once, before leaving England, that I was bisexual. She'd taken it very well. It made it easier for me to answer her now. "Him."

"I must meet him ! And when is the wedding, I'm coming. Eshaal would be beside herself if we didn't come ."

"Uh, well, we don't have a set date yet. We're thinking September. I'd love for you both to come, though."

"We will. And if you're so busy, we'll come to you. "

I didn't expect the offer and startled a little. "You sure?"

"After all you've done for us, I think a simple drive isn't enough to repay you. " She laughed like I was being silly. "We'll come to you. Pull out your calendar, find an evening. I want to have a long dinner with you. "

She really hadn't changed. I put the call on speaker so I could pull up my calendar, and we conferred about dates and times, finding an evening that worked for us both. Then we just chatted, talking about everything and anything, and it was nice. So nice, to reconnect with a friend who had changed my whole world. To hear she was doing so much better herself after that disastrous event.

While talking, Jon sneaked my list out of my lap, and I watched as he wrote down "Simin and Eshaal." For that, I high-fived him and got a grin in return. I might be a bit nervous still about seeing them in person, but right now? Right now, I couldn't think of ignoring them after Simin had reached out like this. I didn't want to. If seeing them triggered anything, I'd make sure I had a therapy appointment lined up for the next day.

I wasn't going to let fear make decisions for me. Fear was a bad advisor. I wanted to

reconnect with these two. I wanted to fold them into my life moving forward. And hopefully, after we met in person, that was precisely what would happen.

For now, though, I was going to enjoy talking with a long-lost friend.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:47 pm

Interviews for Dwayne's case were very easy to set up because the people in his life were eager to help. I appreciated it, as they bent over backward to be accommodating.

Dwayne's parents lived right outside Murfreesboro, so it wasn't much of a drive to get to them. Abby went with us, and honestly, at this point? I didn't think I could stop her. She was fully invested in proving Dwayne innocent.

We pulled up to a horse ranch—it had a large red barn and everything. It was a sprawling place, with old trees, a white farmhouse, and several dogs that greeted us with barks. Any kid would love growing up here.

Maybe this was what Donovan and I should do in our retirement years. Live in a farmhouse and raise dogs. Sounded like heaven to me.

The dogs were excellent doorbells for their owners, and people came out quickly to stand on the porch.

Getting out, I waved to them. "Hi? Mr. and Mrs. Evans? I'm Jonathan Bane."

"Oh!" Mrs. Evans rushed off the porch, and for a woman in her sixties, she could sure give a track runner competition. She had her dark hair buzzed short, makeup on, and she clearly worked hard because this woman was all muscle. I wouldn't take her on in a dark alley, that was for sure.

She latched onto my hand, looking me right in the eye, and I could tell I was a harbinger of hope for her. She glowed with it. "Thank you. Thank you so much. My husband and I will do everything in our power to help you."

I gripped her hand firmly, smiling back. “I know you will. First, the person you must thank is Abby. She’s the one who spotted your son and sent up the alert. Abby’s a Reader like I am.”

Mrs. Evans immediately switched to Abby. “Girl, I want to give you a hug.”

Abby laughed and threw her arms open wide. She got hugged tightly, rocking back and forth, and the happiness in that moment was something I wished I could bottle and keep.

The father wasn’t far behind his wife, and he shook hands with me too. “Cassius, nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you, sir. This is Donovan, my anchor and fiancé.”

Cassius shook hands with him, too, getting his measure. Donovan was used to this; everyone did it upon first meeting him.

“You all call me Serena,” Mrs. Evans encouraged, ushering us into the house. “I’ve got iced tea and warm blueberry muffins waiting inside.”

If we were getting fed, we were definitely on this woman’s good side. I didn’t doubt that.

“We asked our daughter’s best friend to stop by,” Cassius informed me as we walked toward the house. “Nina and Tylesia had no secrets, so I think she’ll be more helpful to you than we will be.”

“I actually wanted to talk to her next, so that’s extremely helpful. Thank you.”

“We’ll do everything we can,” Cassius reiterated. “Anything to get our boy out of

prison. We never believed he killed his sister.”

I could see that, the strong belief pulsing in him. In this case, it was warranted. “We’ll help you.”

He smiled, and I had a feeling such a smile was rusty, but then again, he hadn’t had anything to smile about in the past year.

The farmhouse looked very comfortable. It was country style, with the quilts hanging on the walls and the lived-in furniture. We were taken through the living room and to the outer patio area, where the tea and muffins were set out on a long glass table. Phew, I could relax here. I wasn’t sure if I could’ve stayed inside their house without nuking something.

We settled at the table, the branches overhead swaying in the light breeze, and it was so incredibly peaceful. Especially with a dog promptly using my foot as a pillow. My cats were not going to be happy about that later tonight.

“First.” Donovan pulled out paperwork and offered it to Cassius. “It’s hard for us to see Dwayne right now. He’s being transferred out of max security to another section of the prison—”

Serena interrupted, confused. “I thought he had to be in max because he’s a psychic.”

I winked. “Got a judge to sign off on that yesterday. He’ll be moved to another section and given a therapist.”

My words were too much for Serena and she came around the table to hug me. Woman was a hugger, apparently, but I didn’t mind. I hugged her back.

Donovan continued as if he hadn’t been interrupted. “You said over the phone you’d

be willing to pay some of our fees, and I just need you to sign the contract. Also, we bring good news. The judge officially reopened his case.”

Cassius pulled the paperwork straight over and started reading through it.

I gave him a second while I drank some good iced tea and devoured an excellent blueberry muffin. Damn, these were amazing. I wondered if she’d share the recipe. Probably, in this frame of mind.

Serena finally sat with us, sitting right next to Abby. Her lines were full of tangerine orange curiosity, interwoven with shamrock green trust. “Abby, you’re high school age, aren’t you?”

“I am, yeah. I’ll be a junior. Right now, I’m an apprentice, with Jon teaching me. It’s why I was in the prison to begin with. I was learning alongside him during parole hearings, and while we were walking out of the prison, I spotted Dwayne. He glowed so brightly, and there wasn’t any sign of crime or guilt in his lines, so I told Jon.”

“That’s how it happened.” Serena sat back, satisfied with the story. “I’m glad you were there.”

“Me too.”

I felt like we were in a good spot to start an interview, although I kept it casual. People talked more and tended to remember more when they weren’t stressed out. “So, before everything went to hell, when did you last speak with your daughter?”

“Oh, I want to say it was two days before.” Serena frowned, casting her mind back. “Close to that time. She was wrapping up a training course for her job—she worked alongside Dwayne—and was celebrating the end of it. She was happy.”

Grief welled up. It had to be hard for a parent to lose a child. I didn't want to give her false hope by telling her something was very awry with the way her daughter disappeared. It could be she was dead, but honestly? I didn't know what to believe. I had some very conflicting signals on the matter. On the one hand, the bond was acting like it was severed. On the other hand, Grant said it had not. I had no idea which was right, and I didn't want to be irresponsible with my words.

Cassius tapped something on the contract. "Why is this downpayment section marked out?"

"Dwayne said he'll pay us once he's out," Donovan explained.

"The hell he will." Cassius snorted, outraged over the idea. "I'm paying to free my son. You wait right here, I'll grab my checkbook."

Well, Sharon would be happy to hear that. Not to mention Jim. Getting paid was always a good thing for us.

While he left, Abby spoke with Serena. "Dwayne's all right. He's super excited that we met him and believe him. He looked healthy and everything, so you don't need to worry about him."

I could see in the parents' lines they visited with Dwayne often, but I didn't want to interfere with the assurance Abby wanted to give them. It was kind of Abby to reassure a mother her child was okay.

"Thank you, honey." Serena hugged her around the shoulders. "I do feel better hearing that."

Cassius came back with not only his checkbook in hand, but a girl whom I only knew from pictures—Nina, Tylesia's best friend. Nina was slim, with copper skin, her hair

in small braids that turned blue toward the end.

“Nina’s here,” Cassius announced, as pleased as if he’d manifested her himself. “Nina, this is Donovan, Jon, and Abby. They’re the ones working on setting Dwayne free.”

She shook all of our hands, her lines both vindicated and pleased. “About time someone believed he didn’t do it. Thanks for taking on the case.”

“Thanks for coming,” I said, encouraging her to sit across from me with a gesture of my hand. “I was going to contact you next, so this saves time. First, I understand you and Tylesia had no secrets?”

“None. We talked about everything. Even boys, although she wasn’t as interested.”

“Why’s that?”

“Tylesia is—was—asexual and aromantic. Had absolutely no interest in dating. But she was always up for being my wingwoman if I needed one.” Nina drooped a little, sadness etching into her lines. “If she wasn’t with Dwayne, we did everything together. I miss her like I’d miss a limb.”

I could see her pain, and my heart broke for her. “I’m so sorry. If it helps, we know Dwayne didn’t kill her. In fact, a judge has officially reopened the case for investigation.”

Nina punched the air. “YES! Wow, you really have worked a miracle already to get that done this fast.”

“What can I say? We’re motivated.”

Donovan, at my side, quickly corrected, “No, not that amount. We’re giving you a friends and family discount.”

“Eh?” Cassius paused in writing the check, looking confused. “Why?”

“Solomon.” Donovan huffed out an annoyed breath. “The detective who was in charge of your children’s case is the worst buffoon of a policeman the world has ever seen. We’ve undone many of his cases in the past. We feel like anyone victimized by him has joined the We Hate Solomon club.”

Serena’s voice screeched upward. “You mean this man’s well-known to be stupid and he was in charge of my child’s future?!”

“Believe me, no one’s happy about him still working as a detective.” As an aside, I said, “Although this case might be the one to break his career. Because it was so well televised, the fallout when he’s proven incompetent to the world will not be pretty. Let us all pray this happens.”

“Amen.” Cassius huffed, red anger pulsing through his lines. “But I’ll pay you the full amount. You’ve already done work to help my boy, after all.”

If he wanted to, I wouldn’t stop him.

I went back to the interview. “Nina, think hard. Was Tylesia at all disturbed the day before she disappeared? Anything troubling her?”

“No, nothing like that. In fact, we were planning a party at her and Dwayne’s place because she’d finally finished a course that nearly melted her brain. We were all going there so we could play video games, binge eat too much food, just have fun.”

So this came with no warning? Hmm.

Abby surprised me by asking a question. “If she was ace, she probably didn’t have an ex, right?”

“No ex,” Nina confirmed. “She never dated.”

“What about stalkers?”

“I don’t think so. I mean, she had guys who flirted with her and didn’t take it well when she wasn’t interested, but no one was pushy about it after she rejected them.”

I didn’t completely write off a stalker because people didn’t always realize they were being stalked. I could see why Solomon leapt to blame Dwayne for all this if there weren’t the obvious suspects to be had.

Which did beg the question: What happened to the daughter?

Serena grabbed my hand and stared at me earnestly. “I looked up your agency after Donovan called, and I saw you have a woman who specializes in finding people. Can you have her search for Tylesia?”

It was the obvious question and I hated to answer it. Again, such hope might bite us all in the ass later. “Carol already tried. I say ‘tried’ because there’s something unusually wonky in your daughter’s case.”

“Wonky?” Serena didn’t seem to like the sound of that.

I didn’t blame her. “It wasn’t just her. I asked a favor of Grant Walker—you know who he is, he’s the one who finds most of the missing kids in Tennessee, you see him on the news all the time—and he tried searching for Tylesia as well. He said he couldn’t trace her, but he could almost get a lock on her. Ma’am, I’ll be honest, I have no idea what that means. Neither did Grant, nor Carol. It was a first for both of

them. Whatever happened to Tylesia is very, very weird.”

“Then is she...alive?”

“I don’t know.” It was the truth. “I don’t know that she’s dead, either. Right now, everything is a question mark. What I do know is that we’re all very invested in finding an answer to this.”

Serena looked hopeful again. “You can’t blame a mother for hoping her little girl is alive.”

“No, ma’am, that I can’t. I will say, don’t put all your faith in the possibility until we can prove it one way or another. Solomon did such a shitty job investigating, right now we’re having to redo all of his work.”

“I understand, and thank you for the candor.” Serena looked toward her husband and got a nod, as if they’d had a full-on conversation. “We’ll do whatever we can to help you.”

“Appreciated. Focus now on keeping Dwayne’s spirits up. You’ll be able to see him much easier than before.”

“We’ll do that.”

I wasn’t the only one at the table hoping that, against all odds, Tylesia was alive. Whether such hope became reality was yet to be seen.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:47 pm

The game was on .

I would not be taking prisoners at this time.

I heard shuffling to my right and ducked in the nick of time. The wooden walls around me gave some cover, but not a lot, and for a man of my size, folding in to fit behind something was a challenge. Also, playing paintball with a former SWAT (Brandon), a former SEAL (Quinn), and a former ranger (Garrett) was challenging enough. Throw in Eli, who kept hiding extra ammo in her fake arm? Eli was going to wipe out all of us.

Aaron and Skylar were camping out in the treehouse above, sniping, which was entirely unfair and would be their downfall eventually. Camping out in paintball was never a good idea. Sho had tried the first round we played, and I noticed this time he kept his feet on the ground and his back to his boyfriend's.

Honestly, I was surprised we got Sho to play. He was such a computer geek, it was rare for him to do something physically active. He was certainly having a blast. He had dust smeared all over him and one bright red splotch from the first round, which he wore like a badge of honor.

Peeking around the corner, I gauged my next move. We'd split into two teams, changing up from the first round, which meant I had Sho, Garrett, and Booker on my side. Teams were uneven with nine people playing, but that was fine, I didn't mind. I spotted Sho up ahead; he was also hunkered down behind a wall and peering out. It was strange to see him in something not a hoodie, and his skin looked very pale under the T-shirt. He really had to get out in the sun more.

Okay, this might be a trap, but it looked like people were changing positions. I'd be wise to do the same.

I darted out, intent on getting across the open lane before someone took a shot at me. I nearly missed the timing by a hairsbreadth, for the next thing I knew, I felt a paintball whiz past my ear. Damn, that'd been close.

I made it to the next bunker and looked up, only to see my future niece waving cheerfully, her red hair escaping out from underneath her baseball cap. Oh, I'd get Skylar for that later. For some reason, she saw it as a challenge to get me, when really our target should be the birthday boy.

A gun went off in a quick stutter, followed by a victorious laugh and a groan of dismay.

"I'm out!" Booker called as he abruptly stood, walking toward the edge of the field. He was sans glasses, his taupe skin looking darker than usual with all his recent time out in the sun. "Dammit, Wife. Really?"

Eli cackled some more. She wasn't even ashamed of herself.

I heard Brandon snickering too and that was about to be his downfall. I'd lost track of him, but now I knew which area he was in. Sounded like he was a little to the left of me, maybe near the fence line.

I did a Russian dance move, squatted down on haunches and extended a leg out, easing my way over while keeping my head down. I did not trust Skylar one bit. For that matter, her father wasn't much better.

Reaching the end of my bunker, I eased an eyeball around it. I didn't see Brandon, per se, but I could hear him shuffling around over there. He said something in a quiet

rumble, and while I couldn't pick up words, the voice confirmed it was him.

I lined up my shot and waited for him to make a move.

Wait for it...

Wait...

Seconds that felt like eons passed as sweat trickled down my neck, the sun overhead hot and high. I didn't let it distract my focus.

Wait...

A hint of a sleeve, then a shoulder, and I pulled the trigger.

In seconds, bright blue paint hit the shoulder squarely and Brandon let out a groan. "Who the hell just shot me?"

I grinned, pulling back before I revealed where I was. Got him! Playing paintball with Brandon wasn't complete until I'd shot him. It was a brother thing.

Grumbling, he walked off the field.

All right, my life was now complete. Ooh, wait, no. There was birthday cake waiting for us at my parents' house. I must consume sugar, then my life would be complete.

I felt a paintball hit me squarely on my back. Dammit. I growled a few choice words before standing and looking around for who had— "Quinn, really?"

He grinned, did a little waggle of his fingers, then rolled into the tunnel for more coverage. I was amazed that between his stocky build and almost six-foot frame, he

managed to fit in there.

Apparently, I had been too complacent after shooting Brandon. That was on me. Sighing, I stood and called, "I'm out!" Then I walked off the field.

"Awww," Skylar complained. "But I wanted to shoot you."

"Get in line." I shot her the bird and she laughed, not at all bothered.

Brandon was outside the fence, leaning against it, cellphone to his ear. He had those long legs of his crossed at the ankle, body weight against the fence, and he'd ditched the helmet at some point, showing his very sweaty, messy black hair. He didn't look bothered, so odds were it wasn't a work call.

"Yup," he said to whomever it was. "We're almost done with this game. We can wrap it up and head over. About thirty minutes? Okay, see you soon."

"Mack?" I guessed.

"Mom," he corrected. "Barbecue and birthday cake are waiting for us. Seriously, Bro? You had to shoot me?"

"I couldn't sleep well otherwise." I somehow managed to say this with a straight face.

"Some brother you are."

"Just wait until you see my birthday present for you. All will be forgiven."

Brandon eyed me sidelong. "You're not going to tell me, are you?"

"When the hell have I ever spoiled a surprise?"

“Figures.”

There was a raucous cheer and a lot of groans. Oh, sounded like the game just finished. I popped my head back around the fence to see for myself. It only took a glance because Eli was once again all smiles, gremlin that she was, and everyone else looked at her with varying levels of frustration. Those apple green eyes of hers were sparkling with laughter, and she kept patting her metal arm like it was the key to all success in life.

“Eli won again?” How was it the smallest person here was the hardest one to defeat? Or maybe it was because of her small size that she was harder to hit.

Skylar shook a finger at her. “There will be a revenge match.”

Not at all threatened, Eli wagged her eyebrows in return. “Bring it.”

I had a feeling paintball games were going to be a tradition for this group. There were worse ways to bond with people than shooting them, right? Right.

Brandon called out, “Air conditioning, barbecue, and cake await us! Everyone head to my parents’ house!”

The summons instantly put people into a better mood, and we all headed for our vehicles. I’d driven my truck today since Jon had the Power Wagon. I tried not to feel sad about him driving his own vehicle, but I loved that thing. I might have to sell my truck and find one for myself.

With it being a Saturday, traffic was crazy, but not crazy-crazy like it was during the week. I made it to my parents’ house without too much trouble, finding Jon and Mack already there. They’d bowed out of paintball, as it wasn’t their thing, which was fine. I also suspected Mack was up to something. He and Jon had been co-conspirators for

weeks leading up to this.

As usual, with Jon over, my parents had set up everything on the back deck. It was easier for all parties involved if he wasn't in the house.

And it was quite the setup. We had not one, but two grills going, with corn on one and all sorts of tender meat on the other. Mom had gone the extra mile on the cake, making two triple-layer cakes to accommodate all the guests, although only one of the cakes had candles. Shame, that. I would have loved to see Brandon try to blow out two groups of candles at the same time.

I'd ditched my paintball gear before coming but still had dirt and paint smudges on me, so I was careful when I greeted Jon with a kiss so I didn't ruffle him. "Hi, babe. Now do I get to hear what you and Mack have been plotting?"

"Not yet." He grinned, immensely pleased with himself. And Brandon hadn't even seen the gifts yet.

I shrugged, went inside the house to wash the worst of the dirt off in the kitchen sink, then came back out to find everyone had arrived in the two minutes I'd been gone.

"Everyone here?" Mom called. "Oh good. All right, Brandon, happy birthday!"

We sang "Happy Birthday," Brandon acting like a conductor to a grand orchestra as we did so, ending in the traditional Cheeeee hoوو ! Well, the mainlanders didn't think it was traditional, but I had grown up doing it, so...anyway.

Brandon laughed, blew out the candles, then straightened up like a kid expecting prezzies. "Presents! I'm dying here. Mack's been snickering and plotting behind my back for weeks."

Mack solemnly pulled out a very large rectangular present wrapped in cartoon ghost wrapping paper. No idea where he even found that. The box was long enough for a gun, or something along those lines, so I was very curious what it was.

Tearing into it, Brandon sent paper flying everywhere, then popped open the Prime box. Only to stop abruptly, face lighting up with unfettered delight.

“This is the best super soaker ever ,” he breathed.

I leaned over his shoulder to get a better look. It was indeed a super soaker, but only in the strictest meaning of the word. I’d never seen something like it. It had a long barrel, but it wasn’t made of plastic, with dual tanks sitting on top, painted a dark grey color that was still transparent enough to see water levels. The whole thing had steampunk vibes and honestly had Booker’s fingerprints all over it.

“Booker made it custom order,” Mack announced, chest puffed out. He was pleased with himself and rightly so. “This one is guaranteed not to leak.”

“It damn well better not,” Booker muttered at the end of the table. “Brandon, I made most of it from resin, so it’s sturdy enough that if you drop it, no harm. There’s a switch so you can go back and forth between the tanks, and we had a cross engraved onto the gun itself, so whatever water you put into the gun is automatically holy water. Plus—Jon?”

Jon promptly whipped out his present from the stack and handed it over. Ah-ha, the mystery was about to be solved.

Brandon tore it open and then cackled. Looney Tunes kind of cackled. It took me a second to realize what I was seeing, then I laughed myself. Now that was genius.

Jon had customized a paintball ammo holder so that it held a dozen small tubes, but

instead of paintballs, the tubes were filled with salt. Well, half of them were. The other half were empty.

Pointing at the empty ones, Brandon asked, “Water?”

“Yup. Tubes were also special made to not leak. You can insert them into the top, screw it right in next to the tanks, so you’re able to add either salt to the water or just add in more water. Should tide you over in a tough spot.”

“You guys, this is seriously the best idea ever. I’m now looking forward to our next ghostly encounter.”

The present was very well thought out and executed. Bravo to the three men for putting this all together. I didn’t know how anyone else’s presents could possibly top them, but I hoped mine would be appreciated just as much.

Other presents were given, Brandon pausing to appreciate each one, and they were good ones. My gift was two tickets to see Josh Johnson, the comedian. He’d be here in Nashville next month, and I knew Brandon really liked him. Plus it doubled as a date for him and Mack, which, with their hectic schedules, was hard to pull off.

Then we got to cut into the delicious cake, paired with ice cream, of course, and just sat and enjoyed our family and friends. All in all, it was a truly excellent day. Which made me think, maybe we should do something more like this for our wedding? More of a party and less of a traditional wedding. We’d already been so frustrated trying to lock in the traditional wedding things; perhaps a change of pace altogether would work better. A low-key event, with all our nearest and dearest, sounded like the less stressful party to plan. Right now, if we weren’t at work, we were planning a wedding, which wasn’t sustainable.

Something to talk over with Jon, for sure.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:47 pm

Monday hit bright and early, as usual. Too early. Not-enough-caffeine-in-my-system kind of early. Ugh. Why, Monday, why?

I wanted to set a good example for Abby, truly, but coffee first.

Abby was one of those naturally morning people, so she followed me into the break room, a bounce in her stride.

“Jon, my dad’s offered to represent Dwayne if he wants.”

For a full second, her statement made absolutely no sense. Then brain cells chose to rub together for a second and I remembered Abby’s father was a lawyer. “Abby, that’s great. Let’s see if we can email Dwayne later with the offer.”

Now that Dwayne wasn’t in max security, he got an hour of computer time every day, so email was one of the easier ways to keep him updated. I hadn’t thought of legal representation yet, but Abby clearly had.

She leaned against the counter as I doctored my magic bean juice. “I told Dad all about him, and he was really upset. Said the law shouldn’t be treated like a bully stick.”

I snorted because her description was dead-on.

“So he said, if Dwayne wanted, he’d take the case pro bono and help clear his name. Also said he’d be happy to sue that bad detective.”

My hand stilled in stirring as a vision suddenly hit. Solomon. In court, being sued, because of his jackassery. Oh yes. I could absolutely get behind this. “We are definitely emailing Dwayne later today because both those things need to happen. It’s about time someone took on Solomon.”

“From everything I’ve heard? Absolutely. The judge we saw really hates him too. Can we get her as a judge for the case?”

“If the heavens are willing.” Should I encourage stacking the odds against Solomon in court and rigging the system? No. Would I? In this case, yes, and I was not at all ashamed to do it.

“Cool. Then I’ll text my dad later about it.” Abby seemed quite pleased with herself.

Sho popped his head out of his office. “Jon, Abby, got a sec?”

Whenever he said something in that tone, one loaded with suggestion and possibly bad things, I knew shit was about to get interesting. “Yup, coming!”

“Conference room.”

I figured. That way I could be on the opposite end of a projector while he showed me things. Sho was very careful with his tech.

I gathered up coffee and apprentice and away we went into the conference room. Donovan was already there, so I sat next to him.

Abby was excited about her idea and relayed it to Donovan. “My dad offered to be Dwayne’s attorney. Can you help me email Dwayne later?”

“Sure. That’s a great idea.”

“And we want to sue Solomon for damages.”

“Oh hell yeah.” Donovan’s smile stretched from ear to ear, lines sparking with joy. “You just put a sparkle in my day, which we need because from what Sho mentioned to me, this is about to get weirder.”

My high fell about three notches. “Nooo, this case is already weird to begin with! We don’t need more weirdness!”

“I know, but...Sho?” Donovan turned to him, indicating the floor was now his.

Sho had the projector on and his laptop hooked up, so he brought up what seemed to be the first forensics photo of cleaning supplies. It was one of the more damning pieces of evidence, used to show the murder was premeditated.

“First, this can’t be proven.” Sho sounded irate merely saying those words. “There’s no financial history for Dwayne proving he bought these supplies. Ever. I went back two years and couldn’t find any trace of this exact purchase. It’s possible he pulled out cash and paid for them, but I’ve yet to find a cash withdrawal that would cover all the supplies bought. I’m, like, ninety percent sure these supplies are in the same category as the murder weapon—made on the spot.”

I felt a sort of surreal sense of resignation crash over me. “Solomon didn’t even check purchase history, did he?”

“Doesn’t look that way. From what I can tell, no one did. They were in Dwayne’s house—ergo, he must have bought them. Literally as far as the thought process went.”

Abby bristled at my side, outraged on behalf of her friend. “We need to sue Solomon for a lot .”

I offered a fist and she bumped it. We were united in the cause of making Solomon exceptionally sorry for this.

“Gets better. For us, at least.” Sho pulled up another window. “Now, one of the things that puzzled me was the GPS history showing Dwayne went to the house that day at the time he did, because we have eyewitnesses swearing he was at work since seven-thirty, right? Not to mention security footage putting him at work. So I really dug into this GPS history and...there’s nothing attached to it.”

I didn’t get what he was driving at. But then, my understanding of tech was at a kindergarten level at best. “Nothing...what’s nothing?”

“Ah, right. You don’t get metadata. I’ll dumb it down.”

“Appreciated.”

“So when you do any kind of search on a computer, it’s connected to the internet, right? We tech people refer to it as an IP address. It’s like a physical address of what internet connection you were using for the search.”

That much I understood, so I nodded.

Warming up to his genius, Sho pulled up the details of the search block. “See here? There’s nothing listed for the IP address, which isn’t possible. You can’t search out an address using the ether, it has to connect to something .”

Now I got it. Damning evidence, right there.

Abby burst out, “Wait, even the GPS history was made up? Duuuuude.”

“Now that takes skill.” Donovan leaned back in his chair, frowning at the screen. “I

can see how it was overlooked, though. No one really thinks to look that deeply into online history.”

“Except Sho.” Abby beamed at him. “Sho, you’re really smart.”

He blushed a little under her praise, lines sparking with pride and pleasure. “I live to serve. But if you think this was a cool trick, just wait. There’s more.”

I couldn’t imagine how there’d be more, but knowing Sho, he had another rabbit to pull out of the hat.

“Some of the other evidence they used against Dwayne were a few volatile text messages between him and his sister. Dwayne swore he didn’t send any of them. Now, here’s the metadata behind the texts. Also the metadata behind his GPS history of him ‘dumping’ the body in the river—which is why the body was never recovered, or so Solomon argued—and the GPS history of him leaving and going back to work. See anything in common?”

I was looking but not seeing. Other than the fact that none of it was connected to an IP address.

Donovan abruptly let out a whistle. “My god. They all happen within seconds of each other.”

Eh?

I narrowed my eyes and really focused, skipping from one box to another, checking out the time stamps. Only to see what Donovan had just said. The GPS history was seconds apart from each other. The text history was actually the last of them, done thirty seconds after the GPS history showed Dwayne supposedly returning to work.

Now that was friggin' impossible.

"The GPS history I can kind of see," Donovan muttered, "but they really should have looked at the time stamps of the text history. That would have showed if our victim was actually alive when Dwayne was at work or not."

"They really should have. No one did, sadly."

Abby practically vibrated with outrage next to me. "You can say that, but I think they should have checked the GPS history better, too. I mean, Dwayne's cool, but he's not Superman. It's not like he can be in two different parts of the city in thirty seconds!"

"That alone is a good argument for a retrial. Much less everything else." I rubbed my hands together with glee. "If they can use circumstantial evidence to lock him up, us dismantling said evidence is an excellent way to throw the verdict and sentencing out. Oooh, Solomon, I thank you for being an arrogant know-it-all."

"Only good thing that's coming out of this." Abby abruptly stood, her lines sparking hot red. "I'm getting a drink. I need to calm down before I punch something."

I let her go without a word, still thinking. "Sho, can you assemble all of this into a presentation? Something we can show a judge or use in court?"

He gave me a casual two-finger salute. "Yup, consider it done. In fact, I'd be delighted. Also, let me know if Dwayne accepts Abby's dad as his lawyer. I can start funneling information over to him."

"You bet."

I was still flabbergasted about all this. I knew the case against Dwayne was sloppily thrown together, but still...this was beyond sloppy. This was so stupid, which I

supposed described Solomon to a tee.

Donovan's phone rang and he scooted back from the table, his chair rolling and then fetching up softly against the wall before he pulled his phone free to look at the screen. "Huh, Archer's calling. Be right back."

I let him go, my focus remaining on this stupid evidence which wasn't nearly as damning as it appeared on the surface. "I've got to wonder what kind of psychic can manifest this kind of stuff. It has to be manifested."

"Got to be," Sho agreed promptly. "No other way to do it. Didn't you tell me Alan is researching all the different types of psychics and making, like, an encyclopedia of them?"

"I did. And yes, he's the perfect person to ask this question."

"Let me talk to him. Alan and I will research the psychics and come up with a list of who in the area can manage all of this. I know you said there's no obvious connection to someone else killing Tylesia, but maybe she had a stalker they didn't know about."

"I'd give that theory very high odds. Sure, do it. Tell me when you've got a list."

Sho flashed me a thumbs-up, then paused uncertainly. "Uh, what are the odds Alan's asleep right now?"

"He's on Grant's sleep schedule."

"So who the fuck knows?"

"Pretty much. Try texting first."

“Yeah, probably the safer bet.”

My eyes were drawn back to the screen and those ridiculous time stamps, and I had to wonder: Was this whole case just an elaborate series of smoke and mirrors? It certainly felt that way.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:47 pm

Archer normally called if there was a. a case he needed Jon's help with, or b. he was in the area and wanted to catch up. I was okay with either, although I was hoping it was Option B considering everything we had on our plates right now.

I stepped into the office before answering. "Hey, Archer, what's up?"

"Nothing much. How you doing, Donovan?"

"Well, Jon's managed to find a nationally famous cold case to crack."

"So same old crazy?"

"Pretty much, yeah. He's got an apprentice, you heard about that yet?"

"What? Wait, there's another Reader in your area?"

"Sure is. Abby. Really sweet kid."

"Huh. Well I was actually calling 'cause I'm in the area and thought we could do lunch. But now I insist on lunch. I want to meet this kid."

"Lunch sounds great. In fact, if you'll swing by Psy and do us a favor, I will buy you sushi."

"Deal. What's the favor?"

"Do a reading on some evidence for me. I'm pretty sure all of it's fake."

“Part of that crazy case you mentioned?”

“Got it in one.”

“Now this I must see with my own eyes. I’m about thirty minutes out, be there soon.”

“Looking forward to it.”

Jon and Abby joined me in the office. “Archer’s on his way over here,” I told them.

Jon blinked. It wasn’t often I could surprise him, and honestly, it was always funny when I did. “He’s in Nashville?”

“Yup. Not sure why, probably for a case, knowing him, but he’s swinging by to look at our evidence and see if he can pick anything up from it. I promised him sushi for the favor.”

“Hell yeah.” To Abby, Jon explained, “Archer’s a friend of ours. One of the best Psychometrics you’ll ever meet. He can pick anything up and get a reading on it, a literal visual of what the person was doing or where they were when touching a specific object. Forensics love him to pieces.”

“Oooh, that sounds awesome. I get to meet him?”

“He insists on meeting you,” I told her. “He’s very excited that Jon has an apprentice. I expect him soon. Now. Abby, as a heads-up, Archer is legally blind and has a guide dog. You know the rule with guide dogs?”

“Yeah. Don’t pet them, they’re working.”

Good, glad she knew the basics. “In this case, Steve is a lovebug and wants all the pets, but do ask Archer first. You don’t want to distract Steve.”

“Got it.” Abby gave a firm nod of reassurance.

I was all set to say something else when my phone rang again, this time Lauren calling. What was this, hot potato?

“Hi, Lauren.”

“ Hi, sweetie. Jon nearby ?”

“He is.”

“ Put the call on speaker, then. ”

“Sure.” I put it on speaker and held it so Jon could talk into it without actually touching it. Very delicately maintained distance, that.

“ So I have bad news for you two. Your two venue picks are a no-go. There’s absolutely no dates available at all this year. Best I can do is next year. ”

“Ouch.” Well, there went that idea. I was not waiting for next year. No siree.

Jon made a face, his nose all scrunched up. “Not the news I wanted to hear, but thanks for checking. All right, we’ll discuss and come up with a plan B.”

“ Sorry. Let me know if there’s another idea you have in mind. Otherwise, I’m just going to start googling places .”

“Sure.”

“ Bye for now. Love you .” Lauren hung up.

My fiancé and I shared a long look. Neither of us were pleased. I also didn't have another idea in mind. Frankly, I didn't care where we got married so long as I got Jon at the end of the day, but I did want a good party to celebrate. After everything we'd been through, we'd earned a party.

Since we had nothing to do before Archer arrived, we sat there tossing ideas out. Nothing sparked joy, though, and it was honestly a relief when I heard Archer's and Estrella's voices from the front reception area.

I popped up and headed their way, waving in greeting. “Hi, welcome.”

Archer looked like his normal self, dark hair tied in a low ponytail, although he was in dark wash jeans and a white polo today instead of his usual suit. He was holding Steve's harness, letting his dog guide him. With every passing year, his eyesight got that much worse, his reliance on Steve heavier. I understood his psychic sight grew stronger, too, likely to compensate.

Estrella was in a summer dress and white sandals, hair done up in a loose bun, and looking quite pretty. She shot me a brilliant smile. “Hi, Donovan.”

“Come on through.” I waved them in, ushering them into the conference room where all the evidence was still spread out. “Knowing you, Archer, you'll be done in five minutes flat.”

“One can wish. I'm hungry, I want my sushi.” He turned his head, and I'd swear to you for a second he could see perfectly. “Oh my. You must be the apprentice.”

I half turned to spot Abby right behind me, Jon hovering in his office doorway. Abby stared at Archer with wide eyes, almost like someone had bonked her on the back of

the head. Jon had looked at Archer the same way during their first meeting, so I wasn't too surprised by her reaction.

I put a hand on her shoulder and drew her in closer. "Archer, meet Abby. Abby, these are Special Agents Archer Lewis, Estrella Flores, and Steve. Don't shake hands with Archer."

"Please and thank you." Archer partnered this with a warm smile. "I get far too much information from you if I do. It's a distinct pleasure, Abby. I'm delighted there will be another Reader like Jon."

"Nice to meet you." Abby gave herself a shake, smile turning genuine. "All three of you. Can I pet Steve?"

"Please pet Steve. But let's get to where the evidence is first so I can get settled."

"Okay."

To my knowledge, Archer had never been to Psy before, so I led the way into the conference room. I helped guide him into the right chair, mostly by guiding Steve, with Estrella throwing a blanket over it first, which was par for the course with Archer. He did not like touching other objects directly, so he carried around his own blanket and sleeping bag to ward off psychic imprints.

With him settled—the evidence arrayed around him—we all retreated to the other side of the table to give him room to work. Steve promptly abandoned his master for Abby because scratches were clearly a priority. I watched him roll onto his back for belly rubs, and the second Abby started in, his tongue lolled out of his mouth.

No dignity for this one. None.

Estrella sat at the head of the table, legs crossed, a woman perfectly at ease. “So, Abby, how did you and Jon meet?”

Since Archer and Estrella hadn’t been part of the haunted tree fiasco, they hadn’t gotten more than the basic rundown. Abby was happy to fill them in on the details, with Estrella asking questions here and there. I let those two talk, with Abby also asking what Archer could do and why he had a blanket over the chair.

Honestly, it was good for her to be exposed to all psychic types so she could learn the dos and don’ts. I wasn’t about to interfere.

Archer abruptly lifted his head, a perturbed frown gathering his brows together. “I’ve got another twist in the plot for you.”

Jon’s excitement abruptly switched to resignation. “Nooo, I don’t want more plot twists, I want answers!”

“Too bad. No answers for you. For real, though, this blood is fake.”

I tried to absorb this. Kind of failed. “We talking Hollywood fake, or...?”

“It might as well be. It is blood, that much is for certain, but there’s no sense of a living being attached to it. It was made, somehow.”

What was this, some kind of bad sci-fi drama?

“You need me to be an official witness for this?”

“Yes,” I answered firmly. The more evidence we had to throw the previous case out, the better.

Archer wasn't done. He pointed to the murder weapon on the table. "For that matter, it has the same psychic signature as the weapon. Both were made by the same person. Jon, what the hell have you gotten into?"

"That is very much the question." Jon wiped a hand over his face. "My god. I don't even know what to do with that information even though I half suspected you'd say as much. Tell you what, Archer. Let's go get sushi. I'll fill you in as we eat."

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:47 pm

I had a flash of inspiration overnight, so on our way to the prison, I had Donovan call Gonzalez. My inspiration might be screwy because asleep me could not be trusted, but it didn't hurt to ask. Frankly, any clue we could find to unravel this mess was a point for our side.

Donovan held the phone up on speaker so I could talk and drive. It wasn't like we were going anywhere fast in this bumper- to-bumper Nashville traffic. Just easing along. Abby sat in the back seat—we were in the Humvee today—and listened in closely.

The FBI agent answered promptly. “ Havili. Tell me something good .”

“Actually, it's me calling.” I was used to saying this because duh, I couldn't call people directly unless I was home. “Hey, man. You got a minute?”

“ For you, always. Just tell me it's not an emergency .”

“Not something where I need you on a plane immediately, at least.”

“ Praise Jesus. All right, hit me .”

“First, good news. I have with me my apprentice. Say hi, Abby.”

“Hi!” She sounded quite chipper. “I'm Abby, a Reader like Jon, and he's teaching me.”

I swear to you, even though I couldn't see him, I think Gonzalez just about pissed

himself in joy. “ Abby, I am so incredibly glad to know about you. Don’t you want to be a federal agent ?”

And that was why he was pissing himself in joy, right there. “Gonzalez, first of all, I already gave you Luka. Must you be so greedy?”

“ I must, yes. ”

“Secondly, she’s still in high school. How about you do a recruitment pitch after she graduates?”

Abby wasn’t done. “If you can find me a Havili as an anchor, I’ll say yes.”

Donovan started laughing.

“ Kid, we all want a Havili. Trust me on this. Unfortunately, there’s not enough of them to go around. But you and I are definitely going to talk more about this later. Including just how close your ability is to Jon’s. ”

“Oh, she can do everything I can do except a level three reading.” Fortunately for her. Damn, I hated doing that. Donovan hated it even more than I did, which said a lot. “She doesn’t run quite as hot, either. She can handle electronics somewhat, which is beyond lucky. By the time she hits eighteen, I’m fully confident she’ll be able to handle anything thrown at her.”

Abby leaned her head against my shoulder in a side-backward hug. “Awww. Thanks, Sensei.”

Brat. I snorted. “Anyway, on to the second reason I’m calling. There’s something weird going on over here.”

Gonzalez gave the sigh of all sighs, like he was already regretting answering the call.
“ Seems to be the week for them. Hit me .”

“Got something of a cold case here. A man’s in prison who’s completely innocent of the crime. Did you hear anything about the psychic who killed his anchor?”

“ Oh, yeah, that made headlines for a while. Wait, the guy’s innocent ?”

“Completely. Turns out all the evidence used to lock him up is fabricated, too.”

Donovan leaned in to add, “He means that literally. The blood, the murder weapon, the GPS history—all of it was psychically made. None of it is real.”

A low, long whistle from Gonzalez. “ Now that’s an interesting plot twist. Also not great for the guy behind bars. You sure about the fabrication ?”

“Dead sure. Psychometric Special Agent Archer Lewis confirmed it for me.”

“ Damn. Yeah, can’t argue there. He’d know. ”

“Gets weirder,” Donovan deadpanned. “We don’t know if the victim in the case is actually dead or not. Carol tried to find her body but couldn’t. Grant Walker tried to track her, and he said he could almost connect but couldn’t trace her. Which isn’t possible if she’s dead.”

“ The hell ? You’re shitting me !”

“Gospel truth. Gets weirder. Dwayne, the psychic, swears their bond is broken. Which, as far as I know, can only happen if someone broke it or someone died. So she might be dead, she might be alive, and we have no idea which is true.”

“ Okay, I’m now very invested. I take it you want Marc to try tracing the maker ?”

“Please? We have very, very little to work off right now and any clue would be helpful.”

“ I gotcha. We’re a little tied up over here, but tell you what. Send the evidence to me via courier. He’ll do his best with it when he gets a chance to try .”

Donovan started texting Tyson to gather the evidence.

“All I can ask. Thanks, man.”

Abby piped up over my shoulder. “Do you know of a psychic who can make things like this?”

“ I do not. I’m now intrigued, though. I’m definitely going to ask around and see if anyone does. ”

“We talked to Alan—Grant’s anchor—who has been doing some research on psychic types, and he’s put together a short list of psychics who can. I can have someone send it over to you. We’re just curious if you know of anything else aside from what he’s dug up.”

“ Wait, he’s putting together a full psychic list ?”

“With anecdotes.”

“ I will get Alan federal funding if he gives us a copy. I’m not kidding. ”

“I’m sure he’ll take it.”

Donovan gave me a nod like he was already planning on passing the offer along. He was good on the uptake like that.

“Havili, shoot me Alan’s phone number. I want to talk to him myself.”

“That I can do.”

“Thanks. I’m now super intrigued. Get me that weapon pronto.”

“Sure thing. Tyson said he’d run it over to you, so expect it tomorrow.”

“Will do. Hang on a sec.” The sound through the phone became a bit muffled for a few seconds. “Gotta run. Keep me posted.”

“We will. Bye.”

Donovan disconnected the call and then started texting over information.

“Gonzalez seems cool?” Abby asked.

“Javier’s very cool. We love working with him. Which doesn’t happen a lot, but when it does, it’s usually because shit has hit the fan.”

Donovan snorted in wry agreement. “Like when crazy people go around attacking women for no reason.”

“Hush. I’m trying to purge that one from my memory. Anyway. His husband, Marc, is a very powerful Tracer. I’m really hoping he can get us a lead.”

“Me too. Dwayne needs it,” Abby said.

She wasn't wrong there. We had to find the real perp, and Dwayne's sister, if we were to ever fully exonerate Dwayne.

We finally, finally got to the right exit for the prison. Freedom from I-24! God, I hated that freeway.

It took a few minutes to reach the prison itself, then we unloaded and did the song and dance of signing in to visit. I wanted to see for myself that Dwayne was doing better, but we also had several things to run by him.

Donovan had called ahead, so they knew we were coming to visit him. This time, we went into a different wing of the prison and to a much more open visiting room. Nothing high security—instead it had a more comfortable setting of table and chairs without handcuffs being involved. Dwayne was already in the room waiting on us when we arrived.

Abby slipped by Donovan and went in for a hug. “Hi, Dwayne!”

Dwayne gave her the most genuine smile I'd seen him give, hugging her back, lines sparking chartreuse with happiness. “Hi, Abby. Thanks for coming.”

She tilted her head back to look up at him, not letting go of the hug. Something of a feat, as he was a good six inches taller. “You're doing better.”

“I am. Lots better. My parents came by yesterday and visited me. Your dad did, too. We signed an agreement so he'd represent me.”

I was delighted to hear the news. I knew he was in good hands there.

Abby bounced a little on her toes. “He told me so last night. My dad's the best. I'm glad you agreed.”

“Trust me, I was glad for the offer.” Letting go of her, he held out a hand. “Jon, Donovan, great to see you.”

I shook his hand, making my own evaluation. He did look better. Like he’d been sleeping better, his lines calmer. Didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out why. “We’re hoping to run a few things by you, get your take.”

“Sure, anything I can do to help.”

We all settled around the table and I pulled out the list from my messenger bag. “First, I don’t know if anyone’s said this to you or not, but all the evidence they found was fake.”

His brows compressed. “Fake?”

“Psychically made,” Donovan clarified, relaxing next to me. “As in, a psychic made it on the spot. The GPS history, the weapon, even the blood. None of it’s real.”

“I’ve had three different psychics confirm this.”

Dwayne looked like someone had just smacked him on the back of his head and his brain needed a second to reposition itself. “Damn. I knew something had to be off, as I didn’t do any of what they accused me of, but still...just, damn. I didn’t expect it to be made up like that.”

“Trust me, none of us did. We’ve done some research on what kind of psychic types are even capable of doing it, as well as who’s in the area who fits the bill. There’s apparently a few who can manage this, although I’m not sure if it’s a complete list.” I slid the list of names over to him so he could peruse it. “Anyone leap out to you?”

Dwayne pulled the sheet closer and examined it for a long minute before slowly

shaking his head. “No. No, I don’t recognize any of these people.”

Dammit. I’d been hoping for something.

“Did your sister have anyone interested in her? A stalker or anything?” Abby asked.

“No, not that I know of. And we had no secrets between us. Tylesia would have told me if someone was bothering her.”

Had a feeling that would be his answer, but I was glad Abby asked.

Dwayne’s frown indicated he was thinking hard. “There were people who showed interest in her, but she always kindly turned them down. No one got any traction with her. It’s why I’m still so confused on why this all happened. Tylesia just didn’t do anything to warrant an attack. She didn’t have enemies who hated her enough to wish her dead.”

Most of the time, murders were open and shut because whoever did the killing was obvious about their motivations. This was one of those rare times when it wasn’t the case. I didn’t actually want this case to be the outlier—made it harder for us to solve.

Dwayne’s eyes came back up to mine. “What now?”

“We’re still digging for clues,” I assured him. “I’m sending the weapon to a friend of mine, an FBI agent who is a Tracer. I’m hoping he can get a lock on the person who made it. In the meantime, we’re turning over every rock that looks even remotely suspicious.”

“We’re close to having enough of a case to overturn your verdict.” Donovan gave him a reassuring nod. “We can prove at least half of the evidence used against you isn’t real, after all. The rest is so circumstantial it shouldn’t have held up in court to

begin with.”

Preach. “Even if we never figure out exactly what happened to your sister, I’m confident we can get you exonerated and out of here.”

“I’ll take the win, but...” Dwayne looked between the three of us, smile sad. “I’d really appreciate it if you can figure it out. I’m not sure if I’ll ever sleep well until I know what happened to Tye.”

Fair. In his shoes, I’d be just as obsessed with finding out what happened to my sister. “Trust me, we’re all very motivated to figure this out. We’ll do our best, man.”

“That’s all I can ask.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:47 pm

With everything going on, the week flew by, and before I knew it my dinner with Simin and Eshaal was upon me. I was nervous as hell, and I couldn't even explain why. The phone call with Simin a week ago had done a lot to reassure me, but I still harbored this nervous feeling about seeing them face-to-face. She'd said she wanted to see me healed—and I was, but the scars were still there. Would she be disappointed? Or sad to see such a stark reminder of that painful day? I didn't know how I'd react if she was.

I sat in the parking lot of the restaurant where we were set to meet Simin and Eshaal feeling like my stomach was trying a new origami knot. Thankfully, Jon had driven us here because there was no way in hell I could have focused on the road.

Also, Jon didn't chide me for my nerves. I was sure he could see them, but he also seemed to understand they were there and weren't going away with a pep talk.

"Ready?" he asked me gently.

No. "Yes."

"You're a cute liar."

"Thanks, babe." I sighed heavily.

I forced myself out of the truck. Only way up was through, right? I didn't know if that phrase applied to situations like this but...either way, I had to move.

Jon slid his hand into mine as we walked toward the restaurant doors. I felt better

with the contact, lacing our fingers together. It was comforting because I knew that no matter what happened, Jon had my back. He always did. It was one of the many reasons why I wanted to marry this man.

We'd chosen to go to Buca di Beppo, an Italian restaurant where they served family-sized portions and didn't have too many pesky electronic things to worry about. It had a very relaxed, quiet atmosphere and was somewhere that was easy to hold a conversation. The familiar surroundings helped some. A little.

We reached the waiting area to the left of the hostess stand upon breaching the doors, and it was there I spotted them. It took me a second, and I did a double take, as neither Simin nor Eshaal were in traditional dress. Instead, they were dressed like American women, wearing pants and without any head coverings—Eshaal even sported a Mandalorian shirt. Eh? I mean, they both looked radiant, but I was surprised.

“Donovan!” Eshaal leapt off the bench and ran straight to me, throwing both arms around my waist.

I felt Jon let go of my hand and step away, and I hugged her back on instinct, looking down at someone who had been a little girl and was now a young teen. “Eshaal? My god, you grew.”

She tilted her face up to grin at me. “I did!”

Simin came in closer, joining her daughter in the hug. This close, I could see the barest traces of the scarring at her temple, but hers had faded better than mine had. I couldn't see any of Eshaal's, of course, with her wearing pants. The worst of her scarring had happened on her thigh and calf. She really did look like an American teenager, with her glossy hair in a bob and pierced ears.

The second I had them close, I felt all those nerves just...fade. Like a tide rushing out, they were gone in an instant. I didn't know why some part of me had felt they'd be disappointed to see me. It was a fear I had harbored, and now that I was in this moment, I couldn't explain why I'd ever felt that way. Not when there was so much joy in this reunion.

Simin's eyes were bright with unshed tears as she beamed up at me. "Finally, we find you again. You disappeared once you left for the States."

"Yeah, a lot of medical treatments and rehab kept me busy." Plus the pain had sucked the energy out of me. I didn't want to say as much. "But you two, you look amazing. How did you end up here?"

"I remarried." Simin half turned and gestured to the man who had been waiting with them. "Meet my husband, Matthew."

This man was very obviously American by birth. His sandy blond hair and fair skin were a dead giveaway. I was avidly curious how these two had met, but that was a conversation for the table. For now, I let go of Simin so I could shake his hand.

"Matthew, great to meet you."

"And you. I've heard nothing but praise for you, and after hearing how you protected my wife and daughter, I'm wholeheartedly glad to meet you in person."

I loved how he said that, like Eshaal was as much his daughter as if he'd sired her. Simin's first husband might have been a piece of shit, but I had a feeling her second husband was worth his weight in gold.

Eshaal whispered, "Who's that?"

Ah. I gestured Jon in closer. “Everyone, meet my fiancé, Jon. Jon, this is Simin and Eshaal.”

Simin latched onto Jon’s hands, looking him over with growing delight. “Jon, it is a pleasure to meet you. We worried for our Donovan, hoping he could meet someone to look past his scars, so it’s a joy to us that you did.”

Oh, if she only knew.

Jon clasped her hands in return, expression soft and warm. “It didn’t take a second to look past his skin, trust me. I’ve always wanted to meet you and Eshaal as well. I’m glad you hunted Donovan down and made this meeting happen. Shall we all grab a table?”

“Yes, we should.”

Habit poked me reprovably in the back of the head. Shit, must do that first. “Uh, everyone, Jon’s a psychic. Your electronic devices are not safe around him. I’ve got an EMP-shielded bag you can put everything into while we have dinner.”

I swear to you, it was like something clicked in Matthew’s head. He looked at Jon with new awareness. “Oh my god, you’re Jonathan Bane.”

“That’s me.” Jon shrugged, smiling.

Simin didn’t make the connection and whispered to her husband, “Who?”

“The Reader who’s always making headlines in criminal cases,” Matthew said, filling her in. “He’s nationally famous for being able to read anyone in a glance. Wow. I did not expect to ever meet him in person.”

Jon took the whispering in stride as I gathered up phones and watches, putting them into the bag. Then I handed it to Matthew for safekeeping, as I doubted he would want me to hold it.

Eshaal bounced over to the hostess and asked for a table. I kept studying her, trying to reconcile the scared little girl I'd once met with the vibrant young teen in front of me. She looked so much healthier, freer, and my heart relaxed seeing her like this.

As we followed the hostess to a table, I signaled Jon with my eyes and jerked my chin subtly toward Matthew. He okay ?

Jon gave me a reassuring nod.

Phew, good. I'd hoped my first impression of the man was right, but Jon's assurance put me fully at ease.

We were escorted to a table that sat six and got comfortable. Eshaal sat right next to me, Simin across from me, which neither of our partners minded. I was just as eager to speak to them, so I was glad for the seating to be arranged this way.

"Simin, how did you and Matthew meet?"

"We met in London, after you went home. He worked in the embassy building, and I was constantly in and out of there for a few months, trying to get my visa straightened out. We kept bumping into each other." She gave him a sweet smile. "He asked me out for coffee and it was the best date I'd ever had."

Probably the only date she'd ever had up to that point, considering I knew her first marriage had been arranged.

"I rushed things a bit," Matthew admitted. "I was working as an ambassador's aide,

and I knew I had a time limit. But I was able to convince her that I adore both her and Eshaal and I couldn't imagine leaving them behind in London. We had a courthouse wedding in London, then a proper wedding celebration here with all of my friends and coworkers. Both of them wished so much you could be at the wedding, but we didn't know where you were."

"Probably still in rehab. I was there for a good year before I was released."

Simin looked visibly upset. "Oh no. Donovan, did it take that long for you to heal? I thought you got all your treatment at the London hospital."

"Yeah. Sadly, the hospital in London only released me so I could get more treatment in America. But I'm fully recovered now. Once I got my feet underneath me, I moved back in with my parents temporarily. That's how I ended up here in Nashville. I was job searching, trying to get back to real life, when I interviewed for a position at a psychic detective agency." I shot Jon a warm smile. "And met him."

Jon picked up the story smoothly, sharing my smile. "I knew in a glance how amazing he is. I insisted he be hired. My boss was worried about me—I have something of a track record with criminals attacking me—so he said if I was so sure of hiring Donovan, then he could be my bodyguard and assistant. With us working side by side, it didn't take long for us to fall for each other."

Took about ten minutes on my side. Man was easy to love; I had no defense on that score.

"When will you get married?"

"September is our goal. We're trying to lock down a date and a venue right now. I hope you three can make it?"

“Four,” Jon corrected in a factual tone.

Eh? The hell was he saying?

Simin’s jaw dropped. “I’m barely showing!”

Ohhhh. Jon did another Jon-ism. “Simin, you’re pregnant? That’s great!”

Simin looked pleased but also shocked on some level. “Jon, you can see that?”

“I can see a lot. Sorry, I forget what I’m told and what I’m just seeing.”

I loved how he was downplaying this. “Assume you have no secrets, it’s the better bet. He does this all the time. But I’m really happy for all of you, congrats.”

Eshaal did look excited about the news. “I always wanted a sibling. I finally got one thanks to Dad.”

Awww, she really had accepted Matthew fully as a parent. I was glad about that, too.

“What else can you see?” Simin prompted Jon. “Gender?”

“Hmm, a bit too early to tell. Healthy, though. Glowing with health.”

His response pleased Simin enormously. “My doctor said so, too, but strangely I feel better hearing it from you.”

Matthew seemed intrigued by this, but there was also a strange expression on his face, one I had a hard time deciphering.

“Can you really see everything?”

Jon waffled a hand back and forth in a seesaw motion. “Yes, but I can’t always pinpoint what I’m seeing. Emotions don’t always come with signs and a roadmap, so while I can often see what the emotion is, and what it’s connected to, sometimes I’m making an educated guess. If you’re wondering if it’s all right to ask that , then please do. He’ll be overjoyed.”

Again, more Jon-isms. I had a feeling I was somehow the topic though. Gut feeling, nothing else.

It seemed to reassure Matthew, as he shared a very loaded glance with his wife before turning to me. “In truth, after we learned we’re pregnant, we thought of asking you to be the baby’s godfather.”

Of all the things I had expected him to say, it wasn’t this. For the second time that night, pure joy hit me, and I could barely restrain myself from reaching across the table and hauling them into a massive bear hug.

“I—I—yes. Absolutely yes.”

They looked happy but relieved, too, and it was the relief that didn’t sit well with me. I could feel those Havili instincts kick right in. “Why, is there a problem?”

“Kind of,” Simin admitted to me, face screwing up in a pained grimace. “After everything that happened in London, I’m no longer in contact with my family. They wanted me to withdraw the charges, forgive my husband, and get back with him.”

“The hell?” I blurted out, a little too loudly for a restaurant, but I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “After what he tried to do to you?”

“It’s part of what made me break fully from my culture and religion.” Sadness filtered through her, shoulders slumping. Matthew put an arm around her shoulders

and hugged her. “How could I reconcile with either when they were the very things used to force me into such an abusive relationship to begin with? I’m not saying it’s the right choice for everyone, but for me and Eshaal, I think it was. I honestly feel breaking away from it all was the best thing for us. Eshaal and I went through therapy for a while. I think we’re both far better for it.”

I could tell they were. “I’m glad you did.”

“As for me,” Matthew chimed in, “I’m an orphan. I don’t have any relatives that I know of. Ever since marrying, we’ve both been worried about our child. Well, children now. What would happen to them if something happened to us? Simin wanted to ask you to be our designated guardian of the kids, just in case. I felt it a bit much to spring it on you.”

“Not at all.” I said this firmly because I meant it. “I’m glad you did. And please put me down as guardian.”

Jon nodded along with me. “I’m more than fine with this. I mean, I hope it never comes to that, but I don’t blame you for making plans, just in case. You really can’t anticipate what lies ahead.”

I knew such words for fact. I’d had no idea going in for a job interview would help me meet the love of my life and future husband. Even a prophet couldn’t anticipate everything.

“Speaking of things wanting to be asked...” Jon looked right at Eshaal. “Ask.”

Eshaal blinked, then abruptly looked shy. “Is it okay?”

“Of course.”

What the hell were these two talking about?

Turning to me, Eshaal asked, “Can I be your flower girl at your wedding?”

Now how in the world could I say no to that? “I’d love for you to be.”

She gave a little chair dance. “Yaaaaas.”

A waiter came to take our order, the conversation naturally pausing there. With all of this news out, I honestly couldn’t remember being nervous anymore. It felt so natural to sit here with my friends, talking of the future, planning for joy. I should have never lost contact to begin with. I’d missed so much of their journey to this happy life they had now.

One thing was for sure: I wouldn’t let go of them again.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:47 pm

To say Donovan was elated would be missing the mark by a country mile. He glowed with joy, contentment, and a myriad of other emotions. I didn't think he realized how heavily it had weighed on him to be in the dark about the mother and daughter he'd saved until that weight was lifted from him. I distinctly saw in his lines the easing of his burden, replaced with simple, pure happiness.

Seeing him this happy made me horny. Not going to lie. I was a simple man with simple buttons, what could I say?

Donovan was driving, mostly because we'd taken the Power Wagon, and he loved driving my antique truck more than anything.

"I'm so glad you were with me." Man was practically bouncing in his seat. "I don't know if they'd have asked me to be a guardian if you hadn't been there. To your eyes, does it look like Matthew really loves those two?"

"Adores them. They can do no wrong as far as he's concerned. I pity the person who tries to date Eshaal. He has high standards for his little princess."

"It looked that way to me, too."

"Plus there's now you to contend with."

Donovan laughed and didn't even try to deny his protective instincts. "Simin's first husband was an asshat, but I really like her new husband. Ooh, we should invite them to go camping with us. I bet they'd like that. We'll need to do a lot of outings with the kids, too, so we've got a good relationship with them."

I was fine with all that. I'd never thought kids would be in the cards for me, just because my work schedule was insane. And sometimes people shot at me. But this was different, this was spending time with kids when my schedule was open. I could be the fun uncle like I was with Skylar.

Donovan was busy over there scheming about how to involve the family in our wedding. It was cute listening to him throw one idea out after another, but I could tell that if I let him keep going like this, he'd never get to sleep tonight. He was too wound up with emotions. All of them good—although there was a trace of regret winding through—but still. He was more hyped up than a three-year-old after a weekend at grandma's.

Hmm. Seemed like I needed to wear him out once we hit home.

Oh darn. Shucks. It was fine, I could totally take one for the team.

I let him talk on the way home, mentally planning my approach. Donovan couldn't rest until he was sure all the doors were locked and the place secure, so I let him do that once we got home. I went upstairs ahead of him, prepping the bed, pulling out handcuffs, making sure the new bottle of lube had the seal taken off. Y'know, the usual before hot monkey sex.

Then I stripped, tossing clothes in the hamper, getting all those pesky things out of the way.

From the bedroom doorway, I heard Donovan call out, "Hey, babe? Why is the—"

I stepped out of the bedroom, not at all shy about being naked in front of him, and watched as his question abruptly died on his lips. A spark of lust and interest went through his lines before becoming a full-on blaze.

“Oh,” he breathed, taking me in with growing delight. “That’s why. How is it every time something makes me super happy, you get horny?”

“You have no idea just how sexy you are when you’re happy,” I informed him, crossing the distance to him so I could get hands in action. Those clothes he was wearing were very nice, but right now they needed to be off .

He, of course, wasn’t upset about this and just grinned. “You’re so strange sometimes, but okay, I’m going to go with the flow on this. I can tell from the handcuffs that you have a game plan.”

“Oh, I definitely do.”

I reached for the top button on his shirt, undoing each one and kissing the exposed skin.

“First, I get you naked.”

Kiss.

“Then I’ll put the blindfold on you.”

Kiss.

“Then lay you out on the bed.”

Kiss.

“Handcuff you.”

Kiss.

“And spend as much time as I like doing whatever I want.”

Fingers carded through my hair, gripping there as I got his waistband undone. It was a little hard to read his lines from such a close angle, but I didn't need to. The way his breathing had changed, the warm touch of his hands, all told me everything I needed to know.

Operation Turn Donovan On: success.

He eagerly helped me get his clothes off, which I tossed carelessly to the side. With him naked, I could see he was already starting to stiffen a little, and his cock was not something I could resist even on the best of days. I knelt on the carpet and got my mouth over the tip, hands on his thighs to help balance myself. He tasted of warm skin, making a sound of pure pleasure as I ran my tongue around the tip. Just teasing, really, getting him fully on board.

I wasn't about to let him come yet.

When I pulled free, he made a disappointed noise, but we both knew I wasn't anywhere near done with him yet. I got zero resistance to putting the blindfold on him. I tried not to cackle as I led him onto the bed and got the handcuffs on him, but it was hard. He was just so fun to sex up and tease, okay? I was only human.

I put him face down because tonight? I wanted that ass. I was going to take my time getting there, but it would be mine in the end.

With a single finger, I traced down Donovan's spine, seeing him shiver with anticipation. Something about the blindfold heightened his senses and made every touch so much more powerful. I loved putting it on him for that reason.

In a soft voice, I commanded, “Spread your legs for me.”

Donovan audibly gulped before shifting his knees wider. Yeah, baby, I'm going to wreck you tonight and you're going to love every second of it.

I placed a kiss at the base of his spine as a reward. My hands found his thighs and I stroked them firmly before spreading both ass cheeks wide. Such a pretty hole waited for me, already flaring in hunger.

Teasing a little, I turned my head and gently scraped teeth against his ass cheek.

Donovan jerked, his whole body flexing. "Hngh!"

What a delightful sound. Let's see if I could get him to do it again. I bit harder this time.

"Huuuungh."

Oh, I could. Must do that more often, then. Right now, though, I really wanted to eat his ass.

Teasing some more, I swiped my tongue along his crevice before blowing air over it, just to see and feel him shudder. I knew he loved the feeling, so I indulged him when I could. Then, and only then, did I trace his puckered ring with the tip of my tongue. The tight ring of muscle contracted under my attentions, and paired with the soft pants and sounds Donovan made, it was a very heady combination.

I slipped my tongue inside, gently fucking him, feeling the way he clenched and shuddered with pleasure. Nothing was more intimate in my mind than doing this very thing because there was no personal space when your tongue was literally in someone's ass.

I shifted one hand under him, finding his balls, rubbing and massaging them. I could

tell his dick was rock hard. He kept making these hungry sounds, almost pleading, like he couldn't take any more pleasure, but he didn't want me to stop at the same time. I loved it when he got to this stage.

“—lease—”

Hmm? He was saying something, or trying to.

“Please.” This was said on a pant. “J-Jon, please—”

Such delicious begging. Should I tease him some more? Just because I loved the sound of him begging for more.

“Please, please, pleasepleaseplease—”

Dammit, now I was too turned on to keep teasing.

I pulled free and snatched up the lube, impatient now to get inside of him. I'd worked him loose enough, I thought. I put the nozzle of the container right up against his ass and squirted lube inside, then tossed it on the other side of the bed, not caring where it landed. I was half hard just from indulging myself in Donovan's reactions, so it took nothing more than two strokes using my hand to get fully erect.

Shuffling on my knees, I shifted upward, orienting myself until I had the tip of my cock right against his opening. With one hand on his lower back, I pushed in ever so slowly.

A high-pitched whine escaped Donovan's throat.

Knowing full well he was all right, I nevertheless gave in to the devil on my shoulder.

“Too much? Should I pull out?”

“Don’t you fucking dare,” Donovan said with a groan. “You’re such a fucking tease.”

I cackled and didn’t deny it.

Damn, he felt amazing. So hot and tight around my cock. I took my time entering him, enjoying the way his channel flexed around me, accommodating me. Ah, there, I was fully in now.

After being with him for years, I knew precisely where his sensitive spots were, and I also knew what angle drove him wild. I was perfectly positioned for it, so I drew back and thrust in very deliberately.

Donovan’s back bowed, his head digging into the bed under the force of me nailing his prostate. His lines were like a smorgasbord of sensual delight, happiness, and pure love for me. I seriously indulged in making love with this man because of moments like this.

I slid out, did it again, watched as a new wave of pleasure hit him with all the finesse of a steamroller. Again. And again. Perfection. Pure, sensual perfection as I watched the man I loved more than anything come undone underneath me.

Donovan clawed the pillows, the headboard, the sheets—anything to help find purchase. He was deliciously close to climaxing, and honestly, so was I.

I deliberately pulled almost free, only the very tip of my cock still in him.

“No, don’t pull out!”

Making sure my angle was correct, I slammed back in with absolutely no finesse whatsoever. Ugh, that felt good. It felt more than good.

A cry escaped Donovan. He shuddered underneath me, his ass clenching tight around my cock, and it sucked me right into climaxing as well. I poured myself into him, hips jerking instinctively, my vision going dark around the edges as I spent myself.

Mmm, glorious. Blindfolded Donovan was absolutely too appealing for his own good. I simply must do this more often.

“Babe?”

Oh, right, I was collapsed over his back and still half in him. He couldn’t be comfortable like that. Problem was, my body was riding the wave of afterglow and absolutely not willing to move.

“Gimme a sec,” I requested, trying to summon the energy to move from somewhere.

“You can take a few minutes, I’m good. I just wanted to say, if this is how you react when I’m happy? Then I’m going to be happy from now on.”

This man, seriously. I lifted up enough to kiss his shoulder. “Deal.”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:47 pm

The problem with being oh-so-powerful me was that there was always this point in a case where I couldn't help. In fact, me trying to help would actually cause problems, hence people would very nicely boot me out. At this stage, I was used to it, but it did make for a boring workday now and again.

Today was an exception to the general rule because today I had an apprentice to entertain me!

This apprentice thing was really working out in my favor.

Donovan wanted to get some paperwork done, which meant computer, and I shouldn't be in the office. That left me and Abby to do our own thing, and for Donovan's sake, I promised not to follow serial killers. We had something of a food mall-slash-park near the office, about a block over. It wasn't a huge stretch of space, but it was large enough people would sometimes sit and eat lunch. I took Abby there, bought us some snow cones, and we did some "training."

Training sounds so much better than killing time on the company dime, doesn't it?

Abby ate her wedding cake snow cone, eyes zeroed in on a young mother with a baby on her hip. "Huh."

There was a lot to huh about with her, so I prodded. "What?"

"The kid on her hip isn't related to her directly. Looks like...a relative's child?"

She was close. "Husband's child."

“Ohhh. Makes sense, yeah. There’s red lines all twisted up with the husband line. She’s really mad with him about something.”

So far she was doing great. “What does that red line connect to?”

“Uhh...” Abby squinted and took a bite of her snow cone before answering. “Is she planning on leaving him? There’s the sage green...of apprehension? Hot pink of disgust, that’s pulsing. Pumpkin orange of anticipation.”

“It’s a pretty good guess. Usually the combination of those three indicate a break in the relationship and she’s got an escape route planned. Just hasn’t put it in action yet.”

“Is the child an affair baby of the husband’s?”

“Hard to know without seeing the husband. Likely so, though. See how the hot pink line is connected to the child?”

“Ohhhh. Yeah, you’re right. She’s not mad at the kid, though.”

“She’s smart enough to realize the baby’s innocent in all this, but she can’t help but feel disgusted with the situation.”

“My money’s on affair baby.”

“I’d bet right alongside you. But this is one of those things where you need to confirm it first somehow.”

“So say I see this in an interrogation, what would I do?”

“Normally, I tell the person running the interrogation to ask a question. Those

questions will either light up new lines hiding in the background, or the person themselves will reveal information. Now, if you're running the interrogation, you can just ask directly."

"Got it. Wait, you run interrogations sometimes?"

"I do. Depends on the circumstances. Borrowman likes to run his own and have me lurk, which is why you've only seen me in the observation room."

"Oh." Abby sat on my words for a second and absorbed them.

I pointed to a man talking on the phone who walked past, his attention clearly on the phone call and little else. "What about him?"

Abby switched focus and stared at him for a long second. "He's really upset about whatever he's talking about. He's all purple and red, so it's making him sad, too. Both lines are tied into..."

I didn't blame her for taking another second. It had even taken me a second. Kind of a complicated case.

"Family? And work, somehow. Oh!" Abby sat up abruptly. "Family-run business."

"Bingo."

"Something's gone wrong, and he's arguing with a family member."

"Bing bing. I'd give you a cookie if you didn't already have a snow cone."

"Ha! I'm getting good at this. The more you practice, I guess."

“You are. In another two years or so, with more experience under your belt, you’ll read people as good as I do.”

For some reason she didn’t look satisfied by my praise. “But I can’t do a level three reading like you can.”

“Trust me, kiddo, you don’t want to, either. It’s absolute hell on the body.” I shuddered at just the memory.

“But didn’t it help crack open several cases when you did it?”

“Yeah. I’m not arguing the results, but the method is extremely hard on me physically. Not to mention Donovan loses his shit every single time.”

“Yeah, I can see that.” She gave a sage nod. “His protective instincts probably go haywire.”

“That’s a nice way of putting it.”

“But he still lets you do it?”

“He’s my partner, after all. Serious negotiations go into it every time someone even brings up the possibility. I also try not to do it for my own sake. Being in pain for two days straight isn’t anyone’s definition of a good time.”

“Fair.”

I spied a good candidate walking along the sidewalk. He looked like an average guy on the surface, but below that...oof. Yeah, no. “Abby, snap a quick picture of that guy, then try to read him.”

She promptly did so because she was a good little apprentice. “Why am I taking a pic...oh. Wow. His lines are awful .”

“Yup. Now, read him first.”

“He’s guilty of a lot. His lines are all black and grey, twisted up with red and...is that a dark pink?”

It was hard to read lines when a person was so pitch black. It was part of the reason why I’d pointed him out to her, to get practice in. The colors were all muted and you had to really look to figure it out. “It is.”

“So, he’s absolutely disgusted by something but it’s tied in to...anticipation? The hell?”

“Normally I see lines like those in someone who’s either stalking or about to attack someone else. They hate their target but are looking forward to doing damage to them.”

“So I should send this to Sho.”

“Yup. Immediately.”

“On it.” Abby’s fingers were lightning fast as she texted the picture to him. “Do I need to say anything?”

“Location of where we spotted him helps some. If we can get a name, that’s even better, but honestly, Sho doesn’t really need it. He can find anyone with a picture.”

“He’s good like that. Oh, I got a thumbs-up.”

“Then he’s already researching the guy or will in a second. He’s got a whole system down for when I report people like this, so we don’t have to do anything else.”

“Cool. I’ll remember that if I see someone.”

“Do. Don’t try to follow them, either. Just snap a picture and let Sho handle it.”

She looked at me like I’d just said something odd. “Did you use to stalk these guys until you could get a name?”

“Why are you so quick on the uptake?”

“Ooooh, I bet Donovan was pissed when he realized you did that.”

“‘Pissed’ is one word for it, yeah.”

She cackled, amused at my misery. Such a bad apprentice.

Still, I was pleased she was getting the hang of this. Abby had already developed a sense for reading before she’d apprenticed with me, but the more I worked with her, the more insight she gained into what she saw. Honestly, I felt like I just needed to give her more practice and correct any wrong assumptions she made. Girl had it mostly figured out already.

Now, wait until we got into animal training. That was a whole different ballgame.

“All right, next,” I said, encouraging her.

For some reason she stared at me hard. “Hmm, male in his late twenties, local to the area, is stunningly in love with his fiancé, has two cats—”

“Hardy har har, you’re not funny.”

Abby giggled, eyes dancing with laughter. “You’re an easy target.”

“Listen, young grasshopper, you’re not supposed to tease your master.”

“But you’re fun to tease!”

What a cheeky apprentice. What was I supposed to do with this girl, seriously?

The phone rang in her hand, but it wasn’t Sho calling. In fact, her phone didn’t recognize the number. I tilted my head so I could read the screen better.

“That’s Marc’s number,” I said with surprise.

Abby gave me the strangest look. “You have phone numbers memorized?”

I just looked at her, expression dry.

“Oh. Right. Uh, I’ll accept.” She did so and then put it on speaker before holding the phone a little farther away from me.

She had learned. A dead phone would do that.

“ Hey, Abby, this is Agent Marc Gonzalez. Donovan said you and Jon were out training ?”

“Yeah, we’re at a park nearby. Jon’s sitting next to me.”

“ Excellent, is this call on speaker ?”

“It is.”

“ Even better. Jon. What the hell are you guys into now ?”

The way he asked this question made me think he’d found a good lead. “Did you find something?”

“ Oh, I found something. You all were right on the money when you said the murder weapon was made. That was obvious in a second flat. You were dead right to send it to me. I can trace it. ”

A thrill shot through me, like lightning in a bottle. I was so excited I could barely sit still. “You can find who made it? Please tell me you’re not pulling my leg.”

“ I not only can trace it, I did trace it. Now, it was just for a split second. I don’t know how, but the psychic who made this has some kind of barrier or shield up, so I couldn’t get a firm lock on him. Energy feels male, at least. I think I understand now what Grant Walker meant. But I did get a lock, and it wasn’t in Tennessee. ”

Thoughts ricocheted around in my head. The fact Marc confirmed a shield up around the psychic made me both happy and frustrated because dammit, they’d be really hard to find if they were under protective cover most of the time. But also, not in Tennessee? The fuck? “Then where the hell are they?”

“ Georgia. ”

“Uh. Um?” Damn. If he’d changed states, maybe that was why Tylesia didn’t register as “dead” until hours after Dwayne’s arrest. Took a while to drive down to Georgia, after all.

“ Somewhere middle of the state. Best I got before it was locked down. But you know

what this means, right ?”

The realization hit me like a ton of bricks. “They crossed state lines. This just became a federal case.”

“Yup. I’m on my way. Expect me no later than tomorrow and get someone to send me a more thorough up-to-date report on this case. We’ve got a psychic perp to catch .”

I got Marc to help me hunt this bastard down? So much joy right now. So much. Federal agents after our perp meant we’d get his ass locked up sooner rather than later, and I was all for that.

“I’m looking forward to it,” I purred. “See you soon.”

“Yup. Thanks for taking the call, Abby. Please save this number.”

“You bet.” Abby hung up and then looked me over from head to foot. “You just got really happy.”

“Marc is an amazing man and agent. He’s a pleasure to work with, and we’ve never failed to find the perp when he and his husband work with us.”

“Ohhh.” Abby lit up, lines sparking with anticipation. “Does that mean we can maybe find out what happened to Dwayne’s sister soon?”

“That’s my hope.”

“Can I email this to Dwayne? As an update?”

“Sure. I think he’ll be happy to hear it. We’ll call his parents, too, and let them know

this case just became federal. I'm sure Marc will want to talk to them about all of this. For now, though, let's get back to the office. We've got colleagues to update and hotels to book for Marc's team when they come in."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:47 pm

Gonzalez and Marc came in with all the energy of a summer storm. They were both outraged and intrigued by the whole case, which pretty much matched our feelings on it. I knew the second they hit the door, the work would really begin. It was why I'd organized a phone conference with Dwayne so he could be told this was now a federal case. We wanted to wait and catch him up all at once.

Gonzalez had texted they were on their way, so Sho and I pulled all the case files and evidence to the conference room, then laid it out and got it ready for them. I heard them before I saw them and stood, greeting them at the door.

"Havili." Marc approached first, all smiles, and shook my hand. He looked as attractive as always, his mink black hair swept out of his face and his ready smile charming. "Good to see you, man. I understand you popped the question."

I didn't know why everyone assumed I proposed. I mean, I'd planned to, but that wasn't how it'd panned out.

"Actually, Jon proposed."

Marc's head jerked back in a double take. "No kidding?"

"No kidding."

He leaned sideways to look past me. "Jon, you're smarter than you look."

"Hey! I'm not a complete idiot."

Marc laughed, clearly enjoying the teasing.

Gonzalez hip-bumped his husband to the side so he could shake hands with me, too. He was as short and stocky as his husband was tall and slender, and clean shaven for once, as he normally kept stubble. “Hey, Havili. I hope you understand we’d love to be at the wedding.”

“Of course! Once we have a venue and a date locked in, we’ll send out invites.”

“Awesome. Now, where’s this apprentice Marc spoke to?”

I moved away from the door to let them in, waving to Abby. “That’s Abby. Abby, this is Marc—he’s a Tracer—and his partner in every sense of the word, Javier Gonzalez.”

Abby popped up and came around the table to shake hands.

Marc held her off with a stayed hand. “First, you look like you run hot. Are you as bad as Jon?”

“No, no,” she assured him. “Your phone’s safe from immediate death. If you want to sit next to me, though, I’d put it in a case. I leave mine in a case all the time.”

“Okay. Just double-checking. Hi, Abby.” Marc shook hands with her, and the longer he looked, the more delighted he became. “You and I need to talk about FBI recruitment after this meeting.”

Jon, still seated, drawled, “Thou shalt not have mine apprentice until she’s out of high school and at least legal.”

Marc ignored him. “We’ve been dying to get Jon as an agent for years, so you? The

one who can actually use tech? You're a godsend. Doesn't a guaranteed job that makes 80K out of the gate sound like the best idea ever?"

Abby's eyes narrowed. "I'd normally say yes, but your lines are speaking of greed."

Ha! Take that, Marc. You couldn't ever negotiate with a Reader and come out with your initial goal intact.

He groaned. "Of course I'm greedy. You'd cut my casework load in half."

"That's kinda what I thought." Abby pursed her lips, then relented enough to agree. "We'll talk later."

Marc was instantly back to all smiles. "Okay!"

"First, though, help me solve my case."

"Your case?" Gonzalez asked this question even as he took a seat. "I thought it was Jon's."

"No, no," Jon corrected. "Abby was the one who initially found the guy in prison and alerted me. She and Dwayne are very good friends now, and she's determined to not only exonerate him, but also to find the missing sister. This is very much her case. I'm along for the ride and to sign paperwork."

That about summed it up, yeah. Some days I felt like I was around for the same reasons.

"Well, that's even more awesome." Gonzalez pointed to the chair Abby had just left, coincidentally the one to his immediate left, and encouraged her to sit. "Tell me about it. I read Sho's brief on the way here, but what's your take on Dwayne?"

Abby took her chair and dropped into it. “I know for a fact he’s law-abiding and just the best guy ever.”

“Damn. Okay, so he’s absolutely not involved in any of this shit.”

Jon supported this with a nod. “Correct, I verified that with my own eyes. We have a conference call scheduled so you can ask him questions yourself.”

“Look at you guys being all efficient. Okay, let’s do that. What time’s the call?”

“In about twenty minutes, but we can push it forward.”

Gonzalez waved this off. “Let me get some housekeeping done first.”

Oh, right. We’d need to sign some forms to be taken on as FBI consultants for this case. Jon would have to sign for Abby as a guardian, too, and walk her through the forms so she knew what she was looking at. Good thing they’d come in a little earlier.

We sat, did the paperwork, and Gonzalez bounced out the door to the scanner-slash-copier so he could send it all in. By the time that was done, we were ready for the call, so I patched it through and then connected it via Bluetooth to the speaker in the middle of the table. Jon wisely stayed on the far end, away from all tech, keeping a safe distance. Well, hopefully safe; sometimes tech just had it out for him.

The phone picked up and Dwayne’s voice came through loud and clear. Also hopeful.

“ Hello ?”

“Hi, Dwayne,” Abby greeted cheerfully. “You’re not going to believe the update. It’s lit .”

Couldn't argue there. "We're all here, as well as new friends. Right now, Abby, Jon, and I are all here, plus FBI Special Agents Javier and Marc Gonzalez. Marc is a Tracer, if you know what that is."

"I do ." Excitement trickled into Dwayne's voice as he talked. " Wow, nice to meet you, Agents. Uh, I heard my case went federal. Are you here to tackle it immediately ?"

"You could say that. I feel like this needs a drumroll." Abby went pat a pat a pat on the tabletop. "Turns out, the weapon found in your case was made by a psychic. AND according to Agent Gonzalez, the person who made it is in an entirely different state."

"Legally speaking, since this is now an open case, that makes this an FBI case. Plus, it involves the kidnapping of an anchor, so it's very much in our jurisdiction," Gonzalez explained.

" That's...crazy. I'm sitting here feeling like I'm on one of those 'Gotcha ! ' prank reality shows. "

"Pretty much how we feel about it," Jon mumbled. Then he raised his voice. "Dwayne, we're all in really good hands here. I've worked with these two before, they're good friends, and honestly, I reached out to them for help figuring out where this weapon even came from."

" I'm really thankful. What can I do to help right now ?"

"First, some information." Marc used a glove and pulled the supposed murder weapon out of his bag and put it on the table. "Then we do questions. Right now, I have the murder weapon on the table, and to be honest, I don't think it's killed anything. Not even a bug."

Uh. Seriously?

Abby pointed at the axe and demanded, “Are you sure?”

“Look, no matter how careful a murderer is, it’s really, really hard to get bloodstains off something. I can trace whatever small amount is left behind. There’s blood here on the axe, but it doesn’t connect to anything. The blood is as fake as the weapon itself.”

I let out a low whistle. Not surprising but good to know. Also, Marc saying it was fake had a lot more weight than your average psychic because he was FBI. It was his job to stand as witness to such things in trials. Dayum, this was going in all the right directions.

Marc seemed pleased by our reaction. “Told you guys this one was jacked up. It’s why Javier called and asked what the hell we were getting into because this shit’s weird .”

“No kidding,” Abby breathed. “Okay, but do you know what kind of psychic can do this?”

“I sure do. They’re called Materializers. It was not on your short list that Sho gave me, but don’t feel bad, they’re rare. Most of the time, they get recruited into areas like the medical field. After all, with some training, they can create simple bionics, limbs, and whatnot, all perfectly sized for the individual.”

“There’s a Materializer in France who works as a fireman,” Gonzalez pitched in. “He’s exceptional in the job because he can create whatever he needs in a pinch. Doors and windows all blocked with fire? Okay, no problem, he creates a new door into a building to rescue the people. It’s crazy what all Materializers can do.”

Sounded that way. Damn. I might need to get online and do some digging.

“Now, I will say, Materializers have to pass all the same psych evaluations and such that most licensed psychics do. So if they’re proven to be unstable for whatever reason, they’re not given those high-stress jobs.” Gonzalez grimaced. “And sometimes, psychics go rogue like everyone else. I think this might be one of those cases.”

Marc leaned forward toward the speaker. “Dwayne, think hard. Did you have any association with a Materializer? Did your sister?”

There was a pause, which meant Dwayne really was thinking about it.

“ I don’t...think so ? If someone had the ability, they certainly never showcased it around me .”

Kind of expected this answer.

“Okay. That’s fine, just keep thinking about it. We’ll take any lead right now. The good news is, we can prove it wasn’t you who did this. After all, you’re licensed, so we know for a fact you don’t have this ability. That plus the witness testimony and footage putting you somewhere else should be enough to exonerate you.”

A choked sob sounded through the speaker. Poor Dwayne, my heart just broke for him. He’d really had a terrible year.

“ Thank you ,” he choked out. “ All of you. You’ve really gone the extra mile for me and I appreciate it more than anything .”

“Trust me, this isn’t over yet, but we’re happy to help. Now.” Marc sat back a little. “While I was trying to trace this thing, I did get something of a hit. It was very brief.

About fifteen seconds altogether, but I did get something of a location for our perp. They're in Georgia somewhere. Know anyone from Georgia?"

" Uh. Well, my aunt, but she wouldn't have anything to do with this. She was devastated when Tylesia went missing. She's also in a wheelchair, so... "

"Likely not the culprit. Dwayne, as painful as this question is, is there any chance your sister set this whole thing up?"

" No way in hell ." His answer was strong and immediate. " Tye loved me to pieces, and I her. Besides, I always told her, if she didn't want to be my anchor for whatever reason, I'd break the bond and let her go. She was adamant she didn't want to leave. This wasn't her doing ."

"Okay. I had to ask, you understand. Now, the good news is, there's not many Materializers. Perhaps a dozen altogether in the US."

Oh? This was really good news. The fewer there were, the easier it would be to sort through them.

"Honestly, him materializing everything instead of sourcing it is going to be in our favor. The perp was too clever for his own good."

" You know ? That sparks joy ."

Marc grinned like a kid with a new Lego set. "Doesn't it, though?"

" Does that mean you can just look up Materializers who live in Georgia and find him ?"

"Well, we can't assume they live in Georgia. Could have just been passing through.

What I'd really like to know is how I'm being blocked from tracing him. It's a mean feat, and honestly, I've only had one other case where it happened. If this asshat is blocking not only me, but also Carol and Grant Walker? Then they're doing something hinky."

Hinky sounded about right.

Jon had his thinking cap on, I could tell from his expression.

"I think," he opined, "that if we can figure out how the shielding works, then we might be in a better state of either finding the perp or finding a way around it. Might be something of a tough road, though."

Gonzalez winced. "Yeah. I've already spent hours talking this over with Marc and not coming up with an answer, but maybe someone else will come up with a great idea. In the meantime, we've got a dozen people to interview and sift through. One way or another, we'll figure this out."

"I'm counting on you. Um. Quick tangent, but with you two here, can I have you as witnesses in my civil case?"

Civil case? Oh, right.

Seeing Marc's and Gonzalez's confusion, I clarified. "He's suing the detective who declared him the perp to begin with. Name's Solomon. We have a long, long history of Solomon screwing people over, and this is one of those times where we have him caught red-handed, so Dwayne's pursuing a civil case against him."

Marc's grin turned feral. "Oh, I do like to take the arrogant ones down a peg. I'd be happy to be a material witness for you."

“ Thanks so much. I really appreciate it .”

“Trust me, this will be fun. All right, Dwayne, we’re going to hop off. My husband and I have to plow through all of this material to see how much of it is useful, useless, or something we can use against Solomon—that’s his name? Right, against Solomon in your civil case. We’ll touch base with you the second we have more questions, okay?”

“ Sounds great. Thanks again. Bye, guys !”

“Bye.” I reached out and ended the call.

Marc and Gonzalez looked at us. We looked at them.

Abby cleared her throat. “Um, so, it sounds like even you’re not sure Tye is actually dead. So how do we prove whether or not she’s alive? And how do we track down the Materializer short of interviewing people all over the country?”

Jon let out a decade’s worth of sighs. “One question at a time, Abby. One question at a time.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:47 pm

I was in the shower, getting ready for work, when the love of my life walked into the bathroom with phone in hand and an intrigued expression. I stopped soaping the bod for a second, reading his lines through the foggy glass with some difficulty, then gave up. This was one of those moments it was just better to ask.

“Babe, what’s up?”

“So I was just doom scrolling for a bit while waiting on the coffee maker,” Donovan prefaced, still glancing at his phone. “And I stumbled across this list of ten fun and unusual weddings to have? I really like one of them. It is an indoor idea, though; I know we were going for outdoor.”

“Considering our approach to a typical wedding has not been working, I’m all ears.”

“Well, this one couple rented out a whole pizza joint. One of those upscale pizza places, and it had an arcade and everything in the back. Then they upped the fun factor by making it a costume party.”

I froze, overtaken by the image of my nearest and dearest dressed like sexy nurses and Batman while having the best pizza party of their lives. It was like being struck by the lightning of a good idea. “Oh my god.”

“See?! Isn’t it an awesome idea?”

“I love that so hard. Seriously, it would be a super kid friendly wedding that way, and we wouldn’t have to worry about people getting bored. And it’s casual enough people can just pop in and out without feeling obligated to stay the whole time.”

Donovan was not done yet; he was on a roll this morning. “I was thinking, what about Sammi’s?”

It made perfect sense as soon as he said it. We’d tried a new pizza place about three months ago. It was in one of those converted warehouses, looking all upscale and modern without being stuffy. Plus I thought there was a second floor to the place. “Didn’t it have retro videogame machines up on the second floor?”

“I think it does, or something like that.” Donovan looked pleased I liked the idea so much. “Want to swing by on our way to the interview and ask if we can even rent the place for an event?”

“Absolutely. Get breakfast done. I’ll be down in five minutes or less.”

I started soaping with more vigor. Had to get out quick. I had a good idea to explore and hopefully lock in.

Good to my word, I was shaved, dressed, and downstairs in five minutes flat. Donovan had made French toast and sausage for breakfast, which we ate quickly. I gave the cats a goodbye rub—they were lounging in their window cat tree, perfectly content to be lazy slobbs the rest of the day—and then we were out the door.

The pizza parlor in question wasn’t too far away, but with Nashville morning traffic, it took us more than a hot minute to get there. It was a relief to finally arrive and find parking. Right until I realized it was eight in the morning and pizza parlors weren’t generally open at this time.

“Babe. We’re both dumbasses.”

Donovan gave me a confused look. “Eh?”

“It’s eight in the morning, are they even open yet?”

“Oh. Shit. I was so excited I didn’t think about the time. Uh, we can try calling? They might be here and doing prep work.”

Bless this man’s brains. “Call.”

I was parked right next to the building, so for the safety of his phone, Donovan hopped out and made the call. He tried to put distance between me and his phone when he could just to buy it a little more life. I couldn’t really hear him, but he lit up with a smile and waved me out, so it must have been good. I turned off the engine and met him on the sidewalk.

“I was right, they’re inside prepping dough right now. Owner said come to the door, he’ll let us in.”

“Awesome.”

I had a skip to my step as we headed to the door. I couldn’t help it, this was genuinely one of the most fun wedding ideas I’d heard of, and I reeeeaaly hoped it panned out.

The owner was a short guy, with thick dark hair under a hairnet, a stained white apron on over jeans and a polo shirt, and happiness sparking in his lines.

“Hello, hello, I’m Sammi. Welcome.”

Italian, no question; his accent alone backed up what I was seeing in his lines. Well, that explained why the pizza was phenomenal.

I shook hands with him, knowing he’d be open to hosting a gay wedding and not worried about that. “Hello, Sammi. I’m Jon, and this is my fiancé, Donovan.”

He shook both of our hands, looking a touch intimidated by Donovan, but not overly so. “Hello. You said on the phone you wanted to rent my place for an event?”

“Well, we’re hoping we can rent it for our wedding, actually.” Donovan looked at me for some reason while he said this. “We want to do a costume pizza party for our wedding and we really love this place, so we’re hoping we can rent it for the day.”

Sammi’s dark brown eyes went saucer wide and he just about exploded into chihuahua levels of joy. Booty shake included.

“You want me to host your wedding?” He threw both hands into the air, saying something in Italian that sounded like a prayer of thanks, then paused us. “Hold on, hold on, I must tell the wife. WIFE!”

From the back kitchen area, I heard a woman say something in an exasperated tone before she stuck her head out of the two-way metal door. She was even shorter than Sammi, her dark hair up in a bun and glasses perched on her nose.

“What?”

“They want to host their wedding here,” Sammi relayed, still bouncing with happiness.

Sammi’s wife did an abrupt about-face in attitude and was now fully invested. She came directly to me, hand outstretched.

“I’m Amelia.”

“Jon, and this is my fiancé, Donovan.”

She shook hands with Donovan, too, but demanded, “You really want to do it here?”

“Honestly, ever since we found you guys about three months ago, you’ve become our go-to for pizza. We thought having a costume party in a pizza place would be a really fun time for all. And your restaurant is upscale enough for a wedding without it looking chintzy.”

Donovan was laying on the praise, but every word of it was true. This place had old-school brick walls and exposed wooden beams with a polished concrete floor. The furniture was a very modern look, and it would be easy to decorate the space.

Both Amelia and Sammi looked proud of the fact we loved their food enough to want to do a wedding here. I supposed it was quite a feather to tuck in the cap.

“We would be honored,” Amelia declared. “I agree, it sounds like a very fun wedding. We do offer event packages—”

Eh? Really? Well that made things simpler.

“—but I think for this it’ll be more like two days. You’ll need half a day to decorate and another half a day to break everything down, right?”

A fact I hadn’t considered and felt stupid for not doing so. “You’re absolutely correct.”

“Then, hmmm...does four thousand sound all right?”

Considering the two venues we’d earmarked were twice the amount? “Absolutely.”

Amelia beamed, glowing with happiness and anticipation. “I think this will be fun! Let’s do it. We’ll still have to take online and pickup orders on your day, though.”

I waved this off. “Of course, you’ve got a business to run. That’s fine. I’ll try to get

RSVPs to tell you what kind of pizza people want.”

Donovan nodded along at my side. “Great idea, that way you guys know what all to make. We don’t want to do anything formal, so let’s just do a pizza buffet. Uh, do you guys offer gluten-free and vegan options?”

“We do!” Sammi puffed out his chest. “My gluten-free pizza is popular.”

Perfect. I had some loved ones who couldn’t do gluten or dairy for a variety of reasons, so I was relieved Sammi could accommodate.

“Give me a date and a contract, and I’ll be happy to sign this very second.” I was not kidding. I was absolutely ready to lock this in. We still had to get invitations out, after all.

Amelia darted back toward the kitchen, and likely her office, intent on getting us a form.

“What day are you looking for?” Sammi asked. “And how many guests?”

“About a hundred and fifty guests, some of them kids.” Donovan was able to rattle this out off the top of his head, since we’d just finished our guest list the other night. “September is our month, date flexible. And can we do a lunchtime wedding? Say, eleven to three o’clock?”

“Sure, sure. I think that’s reasonable.” Sammi whipped out his phone.

I automatically took three steps back. Let’s not kill the nice man’s phone while I asked for a favor.

He seemed puzzled and Donovan leapt in with an explanation.

“Sorry, forgot to warn you, he’s a psychic and runs hot. He kills technology just by brushing past it, so make sure to keep a three-foot distance if you’re using a phone or something.”

“Ohhhh.” Sammi glanced at his phone and took another step back of his own accord. “Warning taken. All right, let’s see here. You want a Saturday?”

“Please? I know those are pretty busy days for you, but not everyone can take off work.”

Sammi wasn’t the least bit miffed. “It’s fine, it’s fine. Hmm, I have two birthday parties that month, but September 25th is free.”

“Perfect.” That was actually the date I’d wanted in the beginning. “Lock that in. And we can come in Friday evening to decorate some?”

“Sure.”

He was being so kind and flexible, I felt like hugging the man. Probably would have if it wouldn’t kill his phone.

Amelia came back with paperwork—fortunately, it was an actual paper form, not a tablet or something—and I promptly filled that sucker out, signed it, and gestured for Donovan. “Babe, card. Let’s get a deposit down. A thousand work for you guys?”

Sammi had no issue with the amount, and Amelia dragged Donovan to the cash register so he could use the card. I felt absolutely beside myself. Finally we had a venue and a date locked in! That had been much, much harder than it should have been. Ridiculously so. I now completely understood the need for wedding planners.

With paperwork signed, a deposit down, and a date set, we felt ready to actually go to

work now. I gave Amelia and Sammi an air hug, as they were hugging-type people, which made them laugh. Then both put their phones further away on a table before giving me a hug for real, which was sweet of them. I was as excited about the upcoming party as they were.

I really wanted to dive into planning now, but it wasn't feasible. I had an interview this morning with one of the very few Materializers in the area. They were barely even in the state—they were up in Clarksville. Gonzalez had asked me to do all the interviews within driving distance, and I'd agreed, helping to split up the workload. Even if it did mean a lot of driving in our future.

Clarksville wasn't much of a drive, relatively speaking. About an hour and a half in traffic. Donovan was a good travel buddy, so we were chatting, him taking notes on decoration ideas and texting the moms about our score. Date and venue, booyah!

It felt like we were on the road five minutes when we hit the Clarksville city limits. Donovan navigated me off the freeway and into more of a city outskirts area.

Francesca Harlington was our interviewee this morning. She worked at a veterinary hospital that specialized in rehabilitating amputee animals. It was also a wildlife sanctuary, so I got quite the fun view as we drove up the long, winding driveway, as the cages lining both sides were filled with animals. Birds of prey of all feathers, a zorse, and whoa— “Is that a tiger?”

Donovan peered in the same direction. “It sure is. With a bright pink peg leg. Huh.”

Folks, I have officially seen everything.

I finally got to the end of the driveway, which dead-ended at a very large, blocky, red-brick building. It looked new to me, maybe two years old at most, so this place hadn't been here long.

We hopped out of the Power Wagon, and Donovan gave Francesca a call. All said and done, I did not like going into hospitals. Too many delicate pieces of equipment I didn't want to replace. There was an array of benches outside the front doors, so I settled there, as we'd arranged to talk outside.

The woman of the hour waltzed out not two minutes later. She was in a lab coat, her braids pulled in a thick ponytail, wearing sensible shoes and jeans. I took one look at her and knew she wasn't the culprit. This woman wasn't even the type to hit someone when she lost her temper.

Donovan stood up and ran interference for me. "Hi, Francesca? Donovan Havili, thanks for meeting us. Just as a precaution, do not let Jon anywhere near your phone, watch, or any other electronics."

She shook hands with him, smiling and at ease. "No worries, I left them all on my desk inside, just in case. I took your initial warning to heart. Hi, Jonathan Bane?"

"That's me." I stood and shook hands with her too, before gesturing for her to sit next to me. "Sit, please, I need to pick your brain."

"Sure. Donovan said over the phone that there was a case with a Materializer involved?"

"Yup." I judged it smart in this case to just be upfront with her. She might think of something I didn't know to question. "Do you remember the case about a year ago where a psychic was accused of murdering his anchor, who was also his sister?"

Surprise flitted through her lines. "Oh shit! Yes, I remember the case. Wait, I didn't think the guy was a Materializer."

"He's not." I felt a dry, dark sense of humor bubbling up in me. "He's innocent of the

crime. We're the firm he hired to clear his name."

"Oh ." She packed about twenty pounds of innuendo into a single syllable. "Well hot damn, tell me how I can help."

"So we've recently discovered the weapon, evidence, and even the blood splatter were all materialized. But honestly, we barely knew enough to figure that out. Please, tell me how your ability works."

Donovan interrupted. "Also, do you mind if I record this interview? Just so we don't forget something later."

"That's fine," Francesca assured him before focusing back on me. "All right, to answer, materializing depends solely on how powerful of a psychic you are and how well you can mentally picture something. Say you're a weaker psychic—you might be able to do something simple, like materialize a pencil, or something with up to four layers."

"What do you mean by layers?"

"It means the amount of material in something. So, like that pencil—there's the wood on the outside, the eraser on the end, the metal holding the eraser, and the lead inside, right? So there's four layers."

"Ahhh, I got it. Please continue."

"The more complex the thing, the more energy and mental focus it takes to pull off. I'm a mid-grade Materializer, so I can do things like make prostheses. But if it gets over ten layers, I am shit out of luck. I'd have to create it piecemeal and put it together."

Fascinating. I seriously didn't expect that answer. "So, say, a hand axe?"

"Easy. Even a base-level Materializer can make one."

"Blood?"

"Not so easy," she said. "Blood's a my-level-and-higher thing. Also, the more complex things you make in a day, the more draining it is. I can do, at most, twenty prostheses in a day, if that tells you something. But that's a rough day for me. I try to keep it around ten or fifteen."

I felt like I was in a lecture and should be taking notes. "Say you were a high-tier Materializer, what would your limit be?"

"Hmm, somewhere around thirty or so? Maybe more if they run as hot as you. There's limits even for them, though. Like, trying to materialize a phone, or a tablet, would be way too difficult."

"Too many layers?" Donovan asked.

"Bing bing, give the man a cookie. It comes down to a cost-slash-benefit ratio on a lot of things. Is this worth me creating it, or would it be simpler to just go buy the item? Often the answer is go buy it."

Her explanation completely made sense to me. She was really giving us some great answers, which helped narrow the field some more. I already knew I was looking for a mid-tier Materializer just because of the blood.

"Does it require prep?"

"Hmm, yes and no. If I'm making something I never have before, I really study the

blueprints of it before trying to make it. Since I'm limited on how much I can make in a day, I try to get it right the first time. I usually don't succeed, mind you, but I do try. As for having the raw sources on hand? Naw, don't need any of that. My imagination and willpower are enough."

"Okay, switching topics slightly, is making physical things all you can do?"

Francesca blinked like I wasn't making sense. "What else...do you want me to make...? Can't make all dreams come true."

"Not what I meant." She was funny; I liked her. "Can you shield against another psychic?"

Francesca immediately shook her head. "Absolutely not. Not how my ability works. Even if I tried to create a physical shield to hold off another psychic, it would only be for physical attacks. I assume you mean like if someone—let's say Grant Walker—was searching for me?"

"Exactly what I meant, yeah."

"No way in hell could I hold him off. My ability just doesn't work that way."

"That's really good to know." It also narrowed down some possibilities. "Francesca, do you mind if we tap you for follow-up questions? We're still trying to find the Materializer behind all of this, and right now, I don't know what else to ask, but—"

She held up a hand. "Absolutely not a problem. Makes me mad someone is using their ability to cause harm. And I feel sorry for that poor man who was wrongfully convicted. I'd be happy to answer any questions you have."

"Thank you so much. I really appreciate it."

Her head canted a little. “You know, most people ask why I’m working with animals instead of helping people.”

This prod amused me. “You like animals better than people. And honestly? Most days I agree with you.”

She laughed out loud in delight. “You’re all right, Jonathan Bane. Call me anytime. I’m really invested now.”

“Trust me, we will. In fact, we’re doing an appeal of Dwayne’s case soon. Can I ask you to be a material witness?”

“That was almost punny, but yes, I take your meaning and would be happy to. I think I’m the closest Materializer you’ve got to Nashville.”

“You’re not wrong.”

Her lips lifted in a bare smile. “Then please do call on me. I’m happy to see some real justice served.”

Yup, as expected, Francesca was my kind of people. Could I keep her? I really wanted to keep her.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:47 pm

After three interviews with Materializers, we had a good baseline of what they could and couldn't do. It didn't solve the problem, though, of how this particular Materializer was shielding against Grant and Carol.

Time to figure this out.

The entire Psy staff was called into the conference room because for this, the more brains, the better. Even Tyson was here, and normally he was out doing consulting work. He was looking sharp today, his greying hair in a new cut with a fade, wearing a blazer instead of his usual polo, so he might be consulting later today. We piled into the room, Sho getting both Gonzalezes on speakerphone. Jon kept firm hold of his coffee thermos as he settled at the head of the table.

I looked sideways at my fiancé, mostly in amusement. Did he think the caffeine boost would give him insight? Seemed like wishful thinking, but I wasn't about to tell him that.

"Before we bring this meeting to order," Jon drawled out, "I'd like to make an announcement."

Garrett put both hands over his mouth and squeaked, "Oh my god, you're pregnant!"

"Shut it, you. Donovan and I managed to lock in a date and venue. Please save September 25th. We'll get official invitations to you soon."

Our parents had been both relieved and excited by our choice. Our mothers especially, as they'd been working hard trying to find a venue and hadn't had much

luck. When I'd explained to Mom what we wanted to do, she'd immediately been on board. In her own words, she thought the idea super fun and was already dreaming up her costume. Lauren was the same. All we had to do now was get invitations out and figure out decorations.

"Delighted to hear it," Jim informed us, beaming. Whenever he smiled like that, he looked like an affable bulldog. His salt-and-pepper hair going steadily more grey didn't help the impression. "We'll put it on the calendar. This formal?"

"Think costumes," I corrected him. "We're renting out a pizza parlor with an arcade upstairs."

"Oh hell yeah," Garrett enthused. "Now this is my kind of wedding."

Sho shot him a look from the side of his eye like he took note of Garrett's reaction. Beside me, Jon choked a little and was trying to hide a grin behind his coffee cup. He had without a doubt picked up something from Sho's reaction, but I'd have to get him alone if I had any chance of prying it out of him.

"Any costume?" Sharon mused.

"Don't dress up like a bride and we're good." Honestly, Jon and I didn't care, we just wanted people to have fun at our wedding. "That's all we wanted to say this morning. We can talk weddings later. Let's figure out how this douchecanoe is blocking everyone from finding him."

Carol crossed her arms over her chest, visibly fuming. "I've been trying off and on. I have no idea how Marc was able to locate him even for a brief second. It's seriously pissing me off. I hate being thwarted."

"I don't think anyone enjoys that." Jim rubbed his fingertips together, clearly thinking

hard.

Sho checked his phone before grunting and putting it back in the EMP case. “Grant said he’d swing by in about an hour. He wants to help brainstorm. I think he’s taking this personal too.”

I was somehow not surprised.

Tyson, who was on the far end, requested, “Recap for us. Can a Materializer do any kind of shielding?”

“Not one whit,” I said. “They’re a purely physical type. They can create stuff, but anything like shields is way outside their purview. Even with creating things, it can’t get complicated. Anything over ten layers, and it’s increasingly difficult to make. Damn near impossible unless you’re very strong.”

From the speakerphone, Gonzalez’s voice came through clearly. “I doubt this guy is that strong. He’d be licensed if he was and easier to track down.”

“Good point. Unless he failed a psych eval.” Jon pursed his lips. “Which, if he’s kidnapping people and faking murder scenes, he probably did.”

My money was on that for sure. Although people could do some really wacky shit without actually being mentally unwell. Didn’t make them any less crazy, in my book.

“So we’re banking on the fact he’s mid-tier?” Abby had a notebook in front of her and was jotting things down. “Hmm. Okay, I don’t know where that leaves us.”

“Hear me out.” Sho lifted a finger, eyes narrowed in a way that indicated he had his thinking cap squarely on. “There’s two physical shielding systems we all know and

use. First one is what the prisons use to keep psychics contained.”

I nodded, following along with this. It was true, prisons did have a separate ward for the psychics because of that shielding system. I forgot what it was called off the top of my head, but it was meant to dampen all psychic abilities and keep them from being able to break out of prison with their powers. The generators for it were absolutely insane, something you’d see at a high-security bunker, and not easy to duplicate. You had to have a master’s in engineering just to be able to operate it, or so I’d been told.

“I don’t think a Materializer could begin to duplicate the prison system,” Jon said, although he seemed intrigued by the concept. “Way too many layers.”

Sho shook his head. “If they were trying to create it whole in one shot, sure. But if you knew how it was put together, couldn’t you create each piece and assemble it?”

Damn. Man had a good point there.

“Sounds feasible,” Tyson said. “It’s like ordering in all the parts to a car and putting it together. More difficult than just buying it? Sure. Doable? Absolutely. People do this all the time.”

“ I’m sold ,” Gonzalez stated. “ We’ll put it on the list of people to look out for, anyone who was a former employee of the businesses that make those things. ”

Might as well cover all bases, I guess. “What’s your other thought, Sho?”

“Well, our meditation room works off similar tech. We block all other energies from going into the room to shield the occupant, right? But it also works in the reverse, that all energy of the person inside is blocked from exiting as well.”

See, this was why I wanted a group meeting. People thought of things I didn't. I trusted Sho to understand the mechanics of things and be able to throw ideas out on the table.

Jon looked at Carol. Carol looked at Jon. Whole telepathic exchange going on there. Then Jon nodded and stood.

"Give me five minutes for setup," Carol requested, also standing.

"Wait, what?" Jim looked confused.

"I think they're going to test the theory right now," I narrated, mostly for the benefit of Gonzales and Marc, who couldn't see the interaction. "If Sho's right, Carol won't be able to find Jon."

"I'm game to test it," Marc answered. "In fact, I think I still have Jon's business card somewhere in my bag. I might try tracing it to him and see if that works."

"Great," Sho encouraged. "The more we test this theory, the better. Abby, can you sit here and relay to them if this is working or not?"

"Sure."

I got up and followed Carol because curiosity killed the cat and all that. Jon went into the meditation room. Probably to kick back on the bed and relax while waiting. I certainly would, in his shoes.

Carol was lightning quick setting up, and she didn't take five minutes, I'd tell you that much. More like a minute flat. She had those crystals and a map on the table like the pro she was. Then she flicked her fingers, got her powers engaged, and went to work.

Only to stop right away, eyes nearly crossing.

“Holy shit. Sho’s right, I can’t detect him at all.”

I stood in the doorway, so I called to Abby, “Carol can’t find him!”

I could hear her relay it to the two agents still on the call with us.

Garrett jogged to the meditation room and opened the door. I could hear him talking with Jon, and apparently so could Carol, as she tried again, then grunted with satisfaction.

“Okay, I can trace him, but it’s fainter. He’s still mostly under protection.”

Totally thinking aloud, I mused, “I wonder if that’s how Marc was able to detect our perp for a split second? An open door?”

“It could very well be.” Far from seeming pensive, Carol looked delighted, with some consternation mixed in. “I’m sitting here kicking myself, wondering why I didn’t think of this sooner. We’ve had experience with these rooms for how many years? Searched for how many people? But I do think Sho has found the answer to the mystery.”

“Sure seems that way.”

I ducked back out of the room, intending to ask Sho where and how this shield on the meditation room worked, but only made it to the door of the conference room when I heard the front office door open.

“Hello, all!” Alan called. “We are here early. Find anything yet?”

“Might have.” I kept walking to meet them partway, happy to see Grant here already. We were on a roll, or at least, if this worked on Grant, we’d be on a roll. “Grant, we’re testing something. We think the protections on our meditation room are similar to what the perp is using. Want to test it?”

He looked better than I’d ever seen him. Grant had clearly gotten some good rest recently, and I knew whom to thank. Man was downright bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.

“Sure! Uh, who’s playing my practice dummy?”

From inside the room, Jon called, “I am!”

“Good, give me something.”

Garrett went inside, and while I couldn’t see easily into the room from this angle, I could sure hear the action.

“Nooooo, why are you taking my coffee?” Jon whined.

“Would you rather go shirtless?”

“In this case, yes!”

Garrett had no sympathy. “Tough luck. It’s not like you’re coming up with anything brilliant anyway.”

“So mean!”

Garrett passed the cup over to Grant, who took it with laugh lines crinkling up around his brown eyes, apparently entertained by this exchange. I gestured him into the

office I shared with Jon, then showed him to Jon's chair. "He sits there. Try napping."

"Will do."

Many a parent would kill to have Grant's ability to catnap. Man was a pro. He settled into the chair with the coffee mug and I could almost count it down. Three, two, one...and he was out. He stayed like that for about thirty seconds, and I could tell it wasn't going well by the way his brows beetled together. Definite frown there.

Then his eyes popped open again.

"That...felt exactly like how the perp blocked me. Huh. I think you guys have figured this out."

I pumped a fist into the air, elated. Finally, a clue! Then I wheeled around, first popping my head into the meditation room.

"Jon, it worked. Grant couldn't find you, and he said it feels the same way."

Jon sat on the edge of the bed, and the second my words penetrated, he hopped right off. His delight was obvious. "Yes! All right, go tell Marc."

Happy to do so, I backed out and went to the conference room. Abby, Tyson, Sharon, and Jim were the only ones still in there. "It worked. Grant couldn't find him," I said.

An evil cackle came from the speakerphone.

"Now that," Marc declared, "is the news I want to hear. I tried it from my end and was still thwarted, so I think this is the answer. I love that you guys figured this out. This system, is it easily bought or made?"

“No idea,” I admitted. “But I can ask Sho to look it up.”

From the hallway, I heard Sho’s voice calling out, “I’m already looking it up!”

I immediately amended my statement. “Looks like we’ll have a short list of companies, costs, and whatnot for you by the end of today.”

“ I seriously love Sho. Can I keep him ?”

“Only if you want to face my wrath,” Jim drawled.

“One question, though.” Grant took a seat next to me. “While it’s true I couldn’t locate Jon, you’d have noticed long before now if your anchor bonds cut off while in the room. No one would use the meditation rooms if it affected bonds. So I don’t think this system would be enough to cut off an anchor.”

Damn, that was a good point. “You still sure Tyelesia is alive, though?”

“I’d bet both legs on it.”

That sounded pretty sure.

Sho waltzed back into the room with a printout in hand. “This is a quick and dirty list. Also, I heard your objection, Grant, but I still think this is the right track. Prison systems have an additional security setting than the one they actually use. The highest setting lets no psychic power through—not even a bond.”

I whistled low, surprised to hear that. “Seriously?”

“They don’t use it because it’s considered inhumane,” Sho explained.

Well, yeah, it would be. Any psychic cut off from their anchor like that would go through some serious withdrawals and mental trauma.

Gonzalez let out a low whistle. “ Learn something new everyday. I’ll keep this in mind but I think we’re definitely on the right track. ”

Marc sounded a bit too pleased over there. “ I’ve got two more interviews lined up in this state, then I fly to the third, but we’re making progress on narrowing the list down. Javier had to take a call, but once he’s done, I’ll have hubby call the companies and get a list of who all bought one of their systems in the past year. ”

Which should be easy enough to do. It would be sold to an individual, not a company, so that narrowed the field of possibilities drastically. And hopefully? This would lead us to him.

Short of the perp messing up and just standing around in the open, I didn’t know how else we were going to locate this SOB.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:47 pm

Saturday finally dawned. It was wedding prep day now that we had our location and date set, which meant getting invitations out and planning for all the ceremony stuff. I was so excited to do this, I could barely get to sleep last night.

I'd dreamed of wedding ideas, and fantasy, and costumes. I'd woken up with ideas.

Which should scare everyone. Kekekekeke.

We ate breakfast, played some with the cats. They were complaining they were being neglected, which was their usual song. I could pet them all day and they would tell me they were neglected, so...

By that time, our mothers had arrived. With things. Many things. In boxes I helped carry in, and from the weight of the boxes, this was either gold bricks or paper. Likely paper considering we were doing invitations. Mom was the first one through the door, Donovan following behind.

Mom had a definite bounce in her step as she put things down on the bar.

"Donovan, the box in your hands has all the mailing labels."

I gestured toward the box I'd just set down. "What's in here?"

"The invitations."

My eyes about bugged out of my head. "Mom! You've only had three days to get them printed!"

She just laughed. “I found a local place that does overnight turnaround. You already approved the design, after all.”

Well, I had, but...seriously? I didn't know you could get things printed so fast!

Curiosity compelled me to open the box and take a look for myself. We hadn't wanted the invitations to look serious, considering the theme of the party, so Donovan had suggested using our two cats as models. I'd instantly loved the idea. So those two were on the front of the invitation, which was made to look like a postcard, with our return address on the back right so people could check a box and RSVP without much trouble, and a link to RSVP online if they preferred.

On the back side, it read:

Our humans have decided to tie the knot!

We invite you to eat pizza, play games, and celebrate the wedding of

Jonathan Bane

And

Donovan Havili

On September 25, 21.

The rest was time, location, and a request to RSVP by either website or returning the postcard.

I blinked. Blinked again.

“Uh...we have a website?”

“Skylar’s contribution,” Mom explained while plonking herself onto the barstool. “So we can have people upload any pictures they take and such.”

“Ohhh.” Trust my niece to think of that. “Cool. I’m all for it.”

Donovan doubled back outside to help his mother and then returned not a minute later.

Alani came in with Donovan closely on her heels, in a summer dress with her hair up in a bun. She held a huge three-ring binder, the front reading Fairy Tale Pending . I seriously loved this woman.

She stood on the kitchen side of the bar, set the binder down, and beamed.

“Jon, I think this idea is brilliant. I’m glad you agreed with my son.”

“It sounds like a fun party, and really, that’s what a wedding should be, right?”

“Absolutely. I do need you two to make some official wedding decisions, though.”

I mean, I kind of figured on that one. “Sure. Oh, we told you the officiant’s going to be Grandpa, right?”

Alani blinked like this was news to her. Oops.

“Your...wait, which grandfather?”

“Neil’s dad,” I clarified. “He used to be a minister, actually, so he’s properly licensed to marry people. When we told him we were engaged, he almost pleaded to let him be

the officiant, and I'm happy for him to do it."

"Oh, Jon! How sweet of him. Okay, an officiant was one of my main questions. I'll write that down." Flop went to the front of the binder, and she grabbed a pen from some inner pocket divider and jotted that down. "All right, we've got our ring bearer—as Mack insisted on prancing down the aisle—and flower girl set. What music do you want for your entry?"

Here I paused and looked at Donovan. We'd been debating on music.

"Well"—Donovan looked right back at me—"we've got it narrowed down to either 'Happy' or 'Sugar' by Maroon 5. Honestly, I've been leaning toward 'Sugar.'"

He was? I could tell from his lines he meant it. "I have too."

Alani busted out laughing. "That is somehow so appropriate for you two. I love it. Okay, we'll use 'Sugar.' Do you want music playing during the reception time?"

"Sure. But, like, mix it up. Use a bunch of movie theme songs and stuff. Nothing sappy." I was terrible with sappy anyway, but every time I tried to do something like that, it usually blew up in my face. Let's not taunt the wedding gods. "Oh, and uh, I guess kid friendly? Since we'll have a few there."

"We'll manage it," Mom promised. "Actually, we can set Skylar to putting a playlist together for us."

"Perfect." God bless nieces. What would I do without Skylar? "Okay. Uh...what else?"

"Honeymoon?"

“We’re going camping at Fall Creek Falls,” Donovan said.

I personally loved camping, which everyone knew, but in late September? The fall leaves would be stunning. It would be the perfect honeymoon in my opinion.

“So where are you sleeping the night of the wedding?”

I stared at her and felt duh brain hit out of nowhere. I hadn’t even thought about it. Um. “No idea?”

Alani just shook her head, exasperated. “Young couples never think about this when planning a wedding. You’re so busy trying to get to the day, you don’t think about after.”

“Guilty,” I admitted.

Donovan had his thinking face on and hummed. “What if we pack all our camping gear into the Humvee? Then we can leave for Fall Creek Falls directly from the wedding.”

It was a three-hour drive, but our wedding was supposed to end around three in the afternoon, so we’d have plenty of time to get down there and set up before night fell. I perked up. “That’s a great idea. Let’s do it.”

“It will mean needing a designated cleanup crew,” Donovan mused.

Alani waved this off. “I’ve already got cleanup organized.”

Yup, she’d been in the army, all right. Woman knew how to deploy the troops. I was so so grateful she had everything under control.

Mom pointed to the invitations. “Talk and work.”

“Yes’m.”

We made an assembly line. I put stamp on card, passed it to Mom. Mom stuffed invitation in envelope. Donovan put mailing label and stamp on envelope. Done ones went into box. With three adults working on the task, it went by pretty quickly.

While we worked, Alani asked questions about what we wanted to wear, what we wanted the decorations to be like, dessert table, etcetera. She suggested getting plain white cakes from a good bakery and then using fresh flowers to decorate. It’d turn out pretty and wouldn’t cost an arm and a leg. I’d seen this before at a friend’s wedding and agreed right away.

The more we spoke about ideas, the more excited I got. I never thought I’d get married, honestly. Still kind of felt like I was dreaming some days. Especially since I’d get to be married to him . Who wouldn’t want to be husband to Donovan Havili?

“Now we get to the tricky question.”

I paused in my stamping to look up at Alani, who seemed very hesitant. Almost nervous? I couldn’t imagine why, but it was somehow connected to me.

Whatever it was, I didn’t do it. I had no idea where the body was buried, either.

“Name change?” Alani asked slowly, her eyes weighing every nuance of my expression. “Donovan said he doesn’t want to change his.”

I knew his preference. We had discussed names before.

Before I could get my mouth open, Mom quickly said, “Don’t feel like you need to

stay a Bane. Your father actually regrets not taking on Neil's name."

What I was about to say got completely sidetracked, and I snapped around to look at her. "Wait, what?"

She grimaced. "I called him last night to talk about this. I didn't want any pressure put on you to do something to please him. He told me up front the only reason why he didn't change his name was because he felt obligated not to. But he regrets it now, especially since he has such little connection with the Bane family."

Well, shit. I hadn't known that. Seemed like I needed to call my father later today.

"So I don't want you to think you have to keep yours."

I held up a hand to stall her. "Mom. I know."

She blew out a relieved breath, hand over her heart. "Oh good. Then what do you want to do?"

"I want to change it to Havili."

Donovan still wore that proud smile, like he had when I'd first told him my decision. To me, it had been a no-brainer.

Mom looked relieved as well, and Alani wore the same proud smile as her son, so I knew they were fine with it.

Not wanting Mom to leap to any conclusions, I filled her in. "I'm like Dad. I don't have any connection with the Banes. Why should I continue to carry their name? Besides, who doesn't want to be a Havili?"

“People in straitjackets,” Mom agreed bluntly.

Alani and Donovan laughed outright, tickled at our opinions. Well, it was the truth. I refused to be apologetic about it. I wasn’t even inviting anyone from the Bane family to my wedding, aside from Dad, because I hadn’t seen them in decades. I didn’t even know how to get in touch with most of them.

Alani reached over the counter, grabbing me by the shoulder so she could haul me in and kiss my forehead. Which really made me happy.

“Welcome to the family, then. I’ll make sure you have the paperwork to do that.”

“Thanks, Mom.” I grinned back. I knew I was loved, but it was still nice to hear.

“Jonathan Havili,” my actual birth mother murmured aloud, like she was trying it out. “It does have a nice sound to it. It will mean changing everything. Social security card, driver’s license, all of that.”

I smiled at Donovan because the paperwork was his job.

He just shook his head, already resigned. “Don’t worry, I’ve got it.”

See? This marriage thing was working out in my favor already.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:47 pm

I dubbed today Dirt Day. Why? Because our entire focus today was digging up all the dirt possible on Solomon to a . throw out his case and prove Dwayne innocent, and b . get the man fired. So fired he was actually caught on fire would be my choice, but I'd make do with him at least no longer being able to throw people into prison. He clearly didn't have the judgment for it.

We had absolutely everyone over at the house—Captain Olivia Livingston, Borrowman, Abby, her father, and Sho—because we all had beef with this man and wanted him gone. It said something when even the police captain wanted a detective gone.

Jon had made pizzas for the lunch meeting, a whole array out on the bar and pre-sliced, with drinks and such as well. The cats were currently draped over Abby without any shyness whatsoever, and I'd fetched her a TV table so she could at least eat while my furballs tried to adhere to her.

Sitting next to her, Olivia got comfortable. She'd given up on her half-moon glasses and was apparently wearing contacts, which really enhanced her green eyes. She'd also dyed her hair recently, the color now a dark brown instead of greying.

I decided to compliment her. "Olivia, you're looking beautiful today."

She preened a little. "This is why I like you, Donovan. You say sweet things."

"My pleasure."

She turned her head and observed Abby for a moment before asking me, "Is that

normal?”

“Our cats love her. Abby can do no wrong in their universe.”

Abby giggled, pleased with the attention. A little too smug, that one.

Her father cleared his throat. Craig had stayed at the bar but was oriented on the stool so he could see most of the room comfortably. He was in a very relaxed mode, just jeans and a T-shirt, his dad bod clear. Really, the only thing I saw in common between him and Abby was their thick, curly dark hair.

“Just so I’m clear. Every single person in this room has had awful experiences with Detective Solomon, to the point of wishing he’d not been born. Even you, ma’am?”

Olivia nodded, her expression short. “Especially me. I spend far too much time and effort cleaning up after that asshole. I was, in fact, gathering evidence all this time to do a justifiable firing. Then when Donovan called and explained what you wanted to do, I immediately decided to join forces with you.”

“I’m delighted to hear it, but can I know why?”

“Two reasons, really. I feel like after all that man did to Jon, Jon deserves a good shot at him in return.”

Something about that rubbed me wrong. Don’t mistake me, Jon absolutely deserved a shot or two, but her tone suggested I should know something. Some detail that would make perfect sense of her statement.

Catching my expression, Olivia’s head canted a little to the side.

“Don’t you know? He almost released the man who shot Jon.”

He...what?

HE FUCKING DID WHAT?!

“Shit,” Jon groaned. “Olivia, that’s precisely why I didn’t tell him!”

I set my plate hastily aside before standing, damn near hyperventilating from the abrupt rage that coursed like boiling oil through my veins. Jon’s hands latched on to mine and he forced my eyes to meet his.

“Donovan. You will not end up in an orange jumpsuit and leave me at the altar. Got it?”

I understood what he was saying. I did. The logical part of me did, at least. Ninety percent of me didn’t understand this at all and wanted to take Solomon out as painfully as possible. Bad enough he disparaged Jon and treated him like a fool, but he’d gleefully tried to assist the man who had hurt him? This asshat wouldn’t know what hit him. I just had to—

Craig’s voice was calm, authoritative, and years of being in the army made it impossible to ignore him. “Donovan.”

I looked up toward him automatically and found him giving me a reassuring smile. There was anger in that smile—nothing happy about it—but then, he owed Jon massively for training Abby, if nothing else. Plus, I knew he liked and respected Jon, so he wouldn’t be happy to hear this either.

“I promise you, we’ll land him behind bars for malfeasance and gross misconduct,” Craig swore to me. “For what he did to Dwayne, he deserves it. For what he did to Jon, this is just karma hitting him.”

I heard what he was saying, but my temper didn't want to bend on this. I looked back at Jon, who was staring up at me in blatant worry, which undid my anger more than anything else. I could never do something to hurt Jon. Even when I felt justified in doing so, I just didn't have it in me. My anger didn't dissolve, but I banked it. For now. Later I might need to go pound on a punching bag until I felt better.

"Okay." It wasn't, not by a longshot, but I blew out a breath and tried to pretend. "Okay. But I want him buried."

Craig's laugh was on the ugly side. "Trust me, with his superior and a police captain testifying against him? With this public of a trial? Man won't be hired to clean up dog shit by the time I'm done with him."

Now that I liked the sound of. Let him rot in prison somewhere, and barring that, he could turn criminal to make ends meet and still end up rotting in jail. It was a nice mental image I could get behind.

Jon released a breath, the tension in his shoulders dropping. Those clear blue eyes were no longer clouded with worry. "Good. Thank you."

"I'm still mad you didn't tell me," I warned him.

"I know. But I didn't want you behind bars for attacking a cop, and with your protective instincts..."

He was right to worry. I couldn't fault him there. And if that was the worst secret he kept from me, we'd be fine. Still. It really grated he'd not told me.

Olivia rose and put an arm around my back, her eyes on the floor. Comforting me but embarrassed at the same time. "I'm so sorry. I wish I could have done something. I wasn't police captain when that happened. I was promoted shortly after, and by then,

my hands were tied. It grated on all of us, what happened. The best we could do was transfer Jon's case to Borrowman, as he took it seriously."

I'd wondered. This explanation made sense. Still...it brought up another question. "Just who is he sleeping with that he gets by with so much?"

"Oh, no. He's related to the mayor," Craig said. "Illegitimate son."

The room went dead silent.

I gaped at the man like he'd just announced he'd met an alien the other day. "I beg your fucking pardon?"

Jon also looked intrigued, like this was something he'd seen hints of. Which, knowing his eyes, was likely the case. He also resumed his seat, tucking both legs up under him on the couch, showcasing his knees since he wore shorts. Why were his knees sexy? Or maybe just everything about Jon was sexy.

"I'd suspected he was an affair child, but I didn't know he was the mayor's," Jon said.

"How do you know?" Olivia demanded.

"My dad. I'm a second-generation attorney, and my dad was hired by the mayor's first wife to represent her in the divorce. It was Solomon's birth that triggered it. Part of their settlement was she wouldn't talk about the kid or tell people he cheated on her, as an affair would affect his image. As long as she didn't talk, she got set alimony for the rest of her life."

Oh my god. It kind of all made sense now, though. That was exactly how Solomon acted. A rich man's bastard who was mostly ignored while growing up, except when

he got into trouble. Daddy would swoop in and take care of it, mostly to protect himself, and then disappear again. Solomon learned nothing from the experience and continued to act out. It was an age-old vicious cycle. I certainly wasn't excusing him. Man was old enough to have learned better at his age.

Craig wagged his eyebrows mischievously. "I inherited all of my dad's old files when he retired. Made for some delicious reading."

I bet they did.

"Dad, you're such a drama llama." Abby sighed.

"Guilty. Anyway, that's why he's been able to get by with so much."

"I knew he had backing," Olivia grumbled, now glaring at the floor like it had somehow offended her. "But I didn't know how or who. Good to know. I'd been prepping to take him down, but honestly, I wasn't sure if it would really stick. Just disciplining him usually causes me trouble. I don't want him fired. I want him unable to work as a detective ever again. It's the other reason I wanted to join in with you. Your appeal for Dwayne will be nationally covered. What better way to show the world just how inept Solomon is?"

"Couldn't agree more." It was all logical and well thought out, which meant I hoped it would pan out that way.

"Generally speaking"—Craig ticked things off on his fingers as he spoke—"you can get a detective fired if he's doing unauthorized exercising of power, not doing his official duty, violating a law, and engaging in bribes. Olivia, how much of that can you prove?"

"All of it," she stated confidently.

I did something of a double take. Whoa, really? I'd suspected most of those, but...
"Bribes too?"

"Bribes too. Not in cash. Instead, he has people who do him 'favors,' but they're bribes. I've got video footage and even one email chain—thanks to Sho—proving it."

Sho had his mouth full, but he looked wickedly smug.

Of course Sho found all that. Of course he had. No one was surprised.

"Well, damn. I expected a lot of witness testimony, not this." Craig perked right up.
"Awesome. Makes all of our lives easier. Olivia, do you have it with you?"

"I don't, but Sho brought a copy."

Sho dug a thumb drive out of his pocket and tossed it lightly to Craig, who caught it easily. "Plus some other goodies on there. I've got video and audio evidence of him harassing Jon on the job, too. Some of it's years old, from when Jon first started at Psy. The email chain I got because he was incredibly stupid. Had me use his iPad for something in an investigation and didn't close out his email first. I just forwarded that to myself. He's a careless, careless man. Likely because Daddy has always cleaned up after him."

"Just...damn. I love working with you guys." Craig put the thumb drive in his briefcase. "I'll review it all later. For now, we have a court date set for the appeal. I need a list of the material witnesses you guys can offer."

This was news to me. "Wait, we have a court date?"

"We do. Sorry, did I not tell you? It's on Thursday, which is why I wanted this meeting."

Man sounded like he had a term paper due, but don't worry, he'd basically written it already. Craig was not at all worried. "Uh...that okay?"

"Sure. I have plenty of evidence to prove Dwayne innocent. I'm confident on that part. But I want to showcase Solomon's idiocy at the same time so we can bring a civil case against him. Two birds, one stone kind of thing. Really, the initial court hearing is to justify to the judge that we can appeal, and there's enough evidence. Rarely does an appeal happen in a single day. We'll likely be in court for three or four days before getting a verdict."

Ahh, now that made more sense to me. Nothing about the law was fast.

I heard the back door open and headed that direction, curious who would just waltz in. It usually meant Skylar, but not always. In this case, I saw long red hair and instantly relaxed.

"Hey, Skylar. Were we expecting you today?"

"Not really," she admitted, tossing her keys into the key basket near the door. "But I had some things I wanted to run by you and Uncle Jon. For the wedding website, y'know. Are you two busy?"

"Kinda, yeah, but do you want to join us for pizza before going?"

"Sure!" Skylar was always up for some pizza. She bounced right in like she owned the place.

Let's face it, she pretty much did.

I took her in hand for introductions. "Everyone, this is our niece, Skylar. Sky, have you met Olivia?"

“No, but I’ve heard of her. Nice to meet you, ma’am.”

“And you,” Olivia answered readily. She looked Skylar over with interest.

“This is Craig, he’s an attorney we’re working a case with, and that’s Abby, Jon’s apprentice.”

“Oh! I finally get to meet you.” Skylar quickly zoomed around to the front of the couch where Abby sat.

Abby had been loath to move earlier, afraid of disturbing the cats. Now she set them both aside, nudged the table away, and slowly stood. Slowly because her full attention was on Skylar and not much else. Abby’s eyes were saucer huge, and to be honest, I wasn’t sure if the kid was still breathing. She was wholly entranced and not even able to hide it.

It took Skylar a second, then she seemed to suddenly sync with Abby’s mood. As wholly entranced as the other, coming in closer, grasping both hands to pull Abby fully to her feet.

I heard Jon behind me suck in a very sharp breath, but I didn’t need the nonverbal cue to understand what I was seeing. Jon had worn that exact expression when he’d first met me. Anyone with eyes could figure this out in an instant.

A psychic had just found her anchor.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:47 pm

Our meeting was abruptly hijacked. Craig was no longer in the right mindset to concentrate, for one. His baby girl had suddenly zeroed in on someone else, and he was maybe having a small crisis about this. Having your near-adult daughter latch onto another person would do that to any father.

Donovan stepped out to call Natalie and tell her to get her ass over here.

Me, I grabbed Olivia and Sho and made sure all their information and evidence would get to Craig. Sho assured me he had it, no problem, which was likely the case even without my interference. Man knew what he was doing. Olivia, for one, seemed highly entertained to see a psychic find her anchor, but she also realized now was not the time for her to linger. She gave me a hug, a pointed good luck, then skipped merrily out the door. Sho more or less went with her.

Now I had two teenagers, a father who didn't know how to feel, and a very amused fiancé. Not exactly how I'd envisioned the afternoon going. Best laid plans of mice and men and all that, I guessed.

While waiting on Natalie to arrive, I slid over to Craig's side and tried to talk him down from the ledge.

He looked at me with a desperate, pleading expression. "Abby can't possibly know in a glance like that. Right?"

"Sorry, man. She absolutely can."

He deflated a little.

“It’s part and parcel of being a Reader,” I explained, still sympathetic to the shock his system had just taken. Like a sucker punch, no less. “We can tell instantly. It’s part compatibility, part seeing the full nature of the other person, but also we can tell after reading them how well their nature fits with ours. Sometimes, it’s a little harder to see the forest for the trees if we’re directly involved. I knew from the second I met Donovan that he was the most incredible person I’d ever know. But dummy me didn’t realize he was mine until three weeks later. At least your daughter is quicker on the uptake than her master.”

Craig snorted a strained laugh. “Yeah. She’s always been a quick kid. Uh...tell me about your niece?”

“They don’t come better than Skylar. She’s incredibly tech savvy—in fact, she’s responsible for what little tech I have in my home—and she’s by nature both protective and caring. Donovan’s also been teaching her Krav Maga for the entire time he’s known her, so if something does go down, I’m confident she can punch it out flat.”

“I’m only partially reassured.” Craig rubbed his head. “Still, bonding right now is a bit too fast, right?”

“The thing is...no. Sorry, Craig, but when it’s right? It’s right. I bonded with Donovan without even realizing it. The girls are likely to do the same if they’re reacting this strongly to each other already.”

He made another pitiful sound. To my eyes, he looked all sorts of confused by this. Part of him was happy his daughter had found her anchor. That had been a worry he’d carried for a while. Another part was convinced she was too young; his baby girl couldn’t have possibly met her partner already. Another part worried about other things—I couldn’t get a read what all on.

Well, he likely had a lot to worry about as a parent.

“I mean, logistically speaking, how do I keep her and Skylar together on a day-to-day basis?” Craig seriously looked in need of a stiff drink. “We’re an hour and a half drive away, so they can’t go to school together.”

Man had a good point there. “We’ll figure out something. Don’t stress.”

From the couch, I was hailed.

“Uncle Jon?”

I crossed the few feet back their direction, taking the girls in as I did so. They looked blissfully happy, almost giddy with it. Scratch that, definitely too giddy to be sensible. They were sparkling so brightly with happiness their lines were a little blinding, to be honest. I felt the need to fetch sunglasses. Both were curled up together on the couch, holding hands, eyes completely on each other and nothing else. I could see sparks of attraction along their lines, so this was clearly not going to be a platonic relationship.

Yeah, let’s just not mention that to Craig yet. The girls could tell him in their own time.

I was really happy for both of them. Skylar was clearly over the moon. I’d been worried for Abby, not wanting her to experience the same hardships I had, and clearly she wouldn’t. She’d have an anchor from this point forward.

Donovan sat next to them on the couch, high-speed calculations going on over there. I knew what was going through that head of his. He was thinking of how much training he could cram into Skylar before school started back up. Ha! Looked like he had an apprentice now too.

Which meant I had to train apprentices, clear a man's name, and plan a wedding. All at the same time. Damn good thing the girls were cute, as they were certainly a lot of trouble.

"Yes, Skylar?" I stopped and stood in front of them.

"Pretty sure we're right, but double-check us? We are a match?"

Ah. It was only human to need reassurance, I supposed. I smiled gently. "You two are one hundred and twenty percent a match. I couldn't put a better one together if I tried."

Abby looked quite smug about this, like she'd known but felt justified hearing it.

Skylar blew out a low breath. "Awesome. Tell my mom that? She'll probably think I'm too young."

"Oh, I'm sure that'll be her first argument. Don't worry, I'll tell her exactly what I'm seeing." To Abby, I said, "Your dad's on board but worried about the logistics of keeping you guys together while in school."

Abby blinked, then her mouth dropped open. "Shit! I didn't think that far yet."

"We'll work it out somehow. It'll be fine. Sky, needless to say, you're now in training too."

She leaned sideways to put her head on Donovan's shoulder. "I can't think of anyone better to train me."

Not surprised by that, either. She was used to learning from him, so it should go smoothly. It did mean she was now involved in our day-to-day, as the best way to

learn was to shadow Donovan. I had no problem with him teaching her, but hopefully we weren't interrupting fun summer plans.

The back door opened with the force of Upset Mother Incoming and I winced.

"Donovan, just what did you tell her?"

"I got all of three sentences out before she hung up on me and raced here." Donovan shrugged. "Talk fast."

"Thanks for that."

I hurried for the hallway. Natalie didn't have a temper normally, so when it chose to make an appearance, explosions of atomic proportions generally happened. She did look fit to be tied, and like she'd been doing errands and stuff—she was in ragged shorts and a tank top, hair up in a messy bun.

"Sis, breathe," I encouraged her.

Her lines sparked with worry, outrage, and something else. Something lurked behind her worry that spoke of a deeper upset.

"What," she snarled between clenched teeth, "is going on?"

"Love at first sight."

That stopped her cold, and she came to an abrupt stop right in front of me. Her mouth worked for a second before she managed to get words out. "What?"

Skylar blew right past me, her hands latching onto her mother's arms. She was buzzing, nearly bouncing in place, her happiness still running hot in her system.

“Mom. Don’t be upset, nothing to be upset about. Come meet my Abby.”

Natalie looked down at her daughter’s face, still worried, but confusion was overtaking her anger.

“ Your Abby?”

“Well, she’s certainly not anyone else’s,” Skylar stated factually. “As soon as Uncle Jon tells us how to bond, we’ll do it.”

Slow down there, kiddo. You’re about to get me in trouble.

“We were waiting on you to arrive,” I cut in quickly. “To talk this all over. Abby’s father is here, too. Come meet him.”

Natalie followed me in, likely because she didn’t know what else to do in that precise second.

I introduced the two parents and let them commiserate with each other about how this had hit with no warning, and surely they should have had something of a warning. Then I snuck back over to the other side of the room, where Donovan sat, because he was the least complicated person to sit with right now.

Donovan pulled me in against his hip, only to whisper in my ear, “Explain this to me. I get why Abby’s all on board for instant bonding—she can see everything she needs to about Skylar. But why is Skylar on board with it?”

I just looked at him. Seriously? “Well, honey, why were you on board with bonding with me so quickly?”

He blinked. Blinked again. Then snorted a laugh. “Touché.”

“Skylar’s been around me enough to know that if a Reader reacts like this? Then they’re not wrong. That’s my guess. Plus, she’s confided in me several times she’s always wanted to be an anchor but didn’t think it was really feasible. It’s why she settled on working for the police instead.”

“Ahhhh. So this is literally a dream come true for her.”

“Basically. Although I just realized, they might still go police. With Abby bonded, they can totally go FBI now.”

“Oh. Shit. Uh...Gonzalez is going to be impossible to live with once he finds out.”

“Tell me about it.”

I glanced over to the parents’ side, but they seemed to be talking each other down. Good, good. It looked like they were working through the logistics of how to handle this now, so I deemed it safe to pull the girls in closer and coach them on how to bond.

I explained what all went into it. I definitely wanted them to stay close to each other over the next month—at least—so their bond could settle. It would be more comfortable all around for that to happen. Both girls had vehicles, so they might be bouncing between Natalie’s house and Craig’s, but I’d let them figure everything out. My job was to make sure bonding and training ran smoothly.

Natalie did seem more settled, but her mom instincts were frazzled. She turned to me and pleaded, “Jon. Isn’t this too soon?”

I loved how she thought I had any control over this situation. “Nat, to my eyes, they’re already in pre-bonding stage. Absolutely nothing we can say will stop this. Also, no need to. They’ll be fine. We all might need a shot or three of whiskey after

this, but they'll be just fine.”

Skylar frowned at her mother. “Why are you so worried?”

“Just wait until you’re a parent.” Natalie sighed, head in her hand. “Then you’ll get it. All right, if we’re doing this, we’re doing it right. Sky, get on the family chat and tell everyone. We’ll have a party later tonight at Rodrigo’s.”

Ooooh, Brazilian food too? Damn, this day really was going to end with a bang.

Page 23

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:47 pm

I wasn't sure who was more excited today was D-Day. Well, no, that wasn't accurate. Dwayne was the most excited out of all of us. For a very good reason.

Today, we were in court to appeal his case.

Dwayne was still in an orange jumpsuit, nothing to be done there, but Craig looked snazzy dressed up in a new navy pin-striped suit, hair slicked back with gel. He also had three boxes of evidence and such with him, which I had helped carry in, so this man was super prepared.

Also with us were Grant, Francesca, Dwayne's parents, Nina, and the Gonzalezes. They'd swung back this direction specifically for the case. I was so glad to see Marc because an FBI agent's word had more weight in some ways.

Solomon was also in the audience, and I really hoped he took the stand. Just so Craig could tear him apart. Petty Crocker, that was me.

Jon was also in the witness section, ready to be called in. He wasn't sure how much weight his words would have, but I recognized the judge. The Honorable Yvonna Kauffman liked Jon very much and trusted him, so in this case? There would be a lot of weight.

Gonzalez slid in next to me, the wooden chairs not exactly comfortable, but they were what we had to work with. He leaned in and whispered, "Marc thinks he's got a lead on our perp."

Couldn't jump out of my chair, couldn't—but dammit, I just about did, I was so

excited. “Oh my god, is he sure?”

“If he’s not our perp, he’s a perp for sure. The guy’s basically a whole parade of red flags by himself. We’re in the process of tracking him down but swung by here first. Marc’s now chomping at the bit to get Dwayne free. Says it’s such an injustice, he can’t sleep at night.”

“I know quite a few people who say the same.”

The bailiff stepped forward and said loudly, “All rise! The Honorable Yvonna Kauffman is presiding.”

We rose. Poor Dwayne looked nervous as hell. I wanted to give him a hug. We got you, dude. We’ve all got you.

For an appeal trial, there was no jury. The main point of an appeal was to somehow prove either the law had failed, the procedure of the trial itself hadn’t been adhered to, or there was something wrong with the evidence. We were the plaintiff, and the DA’s office was the defense, as it was their screwup they had to defend. Craig was choosing to focus on the evidence issues. It was the clearest way to free Dwayne, and right now, that was all we cared about.

Going after Solomon’s ass came later.

“All may be seated,” the bailiff intoned.

Yvonna Kauffman was a very pretty woman, perhaps late thirties, and her olive skin and straight dark hair gave her a distinctly Mediterranean appearance. She had always been very fair in the cases we’d been part of, and I could tell she took note of me and Jon in the audience. Then she spotted Grant next to Jon and just about did a double take. Her eyes narrowed in a shrewd way, and I could tell she was already putting the

pieces together.

God, I loved this judge.

“Start recording,” she said. “We are here to hear the appeal of State versus Evans . For the record, Mr. Evans, who is your counselor?”

“My attorney is Craig Moore, Your Honor.” Dwayne’s voice didn’t betray his nerves.

“Plaintiff, would you make your opening statement?”

“I would love to, Your Honor.” Craig stood to address her. “I’ll keep this brief. Your Honor, our goal here today is to prove that the case against my client should never have ended in a conviction. The evidence against him in the original hearing was shaky at best, highly circumstantial, and outright ignored witness testimony and security footage putting my client on the other side of the city during the supposed murder of his sister.”

Kauffman lifted a hand to stay him. “I don’t normally interrupt opening statements, but I must in this case. You say supposed? Do you not believe this woman is dead?”

“We highly suspect she wasn’t killed, Your Honor. For one thing, there is no corpus delicti.”

Abby sat on the other side of me and whispered, “What does that mean?”

“Body of the crime,” Gonzalez answered, barely shifting his head. “It can be figurative and not literal, but your dad’s saying there’s no proof of a body.”

Kauffman’s bright pink lips pursed. “Is that why Grant Walker is one of your witnesses?”

“Yes, Your Honor.”

“Ho. Well, this case just got a lot more interesting. Continue, Counselor.”

“It’s actually our argument in a nutshell, Your Honor. We have many witnesses and proof that the evidence isn’t what it appears. We argue that my client was wrongfully convicted and ask his case be dismissed and he be compensated for wrongful incarceration.”

“I see.” Kauffman nodded approvingly—she hated the long-winded idiots. “Defense?”

The defense attorney was a young one, not someone I recognized, but he looked like he’d just passed the bar last week. Even his leather shoes were extra new and shiny. He stood to answer.

“The state maintains that the evidence produced in the original trial speaks for itself, Your Honor. Defense rests.”

Then he sat back down.

We all kind of just stared. Uhh...was that it? Brevity was all well and good but... Say something , man, and make it seem like you mean it. Unless he hated Solomon too and this was revenge? Because it was a beautiful way to do it.

Kauffman stared at him another second before clearing her throat. “Well. All right. Counselor, you may call your first witness.”

“Thank you, Your Honor.” Craig stood again, and even though the man’s back was to me, I could feel his grin. Oh no. Here we go. “We would like to call Jonathan Bane to the stand.”

Jon went up, was sworn in, then took his seat in the witness box. He was a veteran, having many cases where he'd been an official witness, so he wasn't nervous.

"Mr. Bane, for the record, you are a very powerful psychic Reader, are you not?"

"I am."

"You've testified in many, many cases as to what you read from people. Is that also correct?"

"Also correct."

"On the day of your meeting with Mr. Evans, can you tell me what happened?"

"I was at the prison assisting with parole hearings with my apprentice when we first saw Mr. Evans."

"Who's your apprentice?" Craig had to ask this to get it on public record.

"Abigail Moore."

Kauffman interrupted again. "Sorry, sorry, this is the first I'm hearing of this. Jon? You have an apprentice?"

He turned to answer her. "I do! She's in the audience now, actually. Wave, Abby."

Abby waved, a little shyly.

"She's as capable of reading people as I am. She'll be apprenticed to me until she finishes high school, and then look out, world. In fact, it was she who spotted Dwayne Evans first and brought him to my attention. She was very confused because

his aura is so pure, so bright, she couldn't see any hint of a crime in his history. Certainly nothing that would explain why he was in a max security prison to begin with."

Kauffman's eyes narrowed. "Moore. Mr. Moore, any relation?"

"My daughter," Craig admitted freely. "I took this case for her sake after she told me what she saw. I have no doubt in either her eyes or Jon's."

"Ah-ha. The case is becoming clearer. Continue, Counselor."

"Yes, ma'am. Jon, you said you looked at Mr. Evans after she brought him to your attention. What followed?"

"We arranged an immediate interview with him to hear his side of the story. I detected no lies when he explained what happened. In fact, his aura is so pure, I'm not actually sure he's even had thoughts of revenge. I know for a fact this man didn't murder anyone."

I heard some murmuring from the crowd. With this having been a nationally televised case, the appeal was getting just as much attention, and it was standing room only for some of the reporters. It was why I had saved Gonzalez a seat to begin with. I loved having all these people here for many reasons, but one of them was these guys were old hats at reporting on cases like these. They all knew Jon. When he said this man was innocent, that meant golden headlines for them.

"Thank you, Mr. Bane. Plaintiff rests."

"Defense?" Kauffman prompted.

The young attorney stood and approached the witness box. "Mr. Bane, I'm aware of

your reputation, but I've never met you before today. I must ask. Are you ever wrong?"

Jon knew precisely how to deal with that question. Lawyers in a courtroom loved to ask it.

He looked squarely at this man and rattled off, "Twenty-eight years old, from farther down south, likely the Florida area. Engaged, child on the way, stressed about money with both wedding and child in the near future. One of four children, the second to youngest, and smart enough to pass the bar on the first try. Had a cheeseburger for lunch that's not entirely sitting well and the Tums haven't kicked in yet. Someone as lactose intolerant as you are really should lay off the cheese. Well, sir? Did I get anything wrong?"

For a long second, the attorney just stared at him. Then sighed. "What can I say, cheese is my weakness. Defense rests."

I didn't think this man actually wanted this appeal to fail. Going out on a limb, here.

"Mr. Bane, you may return," Kauffman commanded. "Counselor?"

"My next witness is Grantland Walker."

A stir from the crowd behind me again. Grant was another household name; everyone was aware of what he could do and the fact he basically didn't have much of a limit in range.

Grant stepped up, got sworn in. He was also in a suit today and looked damn sharp in all black. I could tell Alan had a hard time keeping his eyes off Grant, and really, who could blame him?

“Mr. Walker, we all know what you can do and how far away you’ve found kidnapping victims.” Craig gave him a smile. “But can you give us a quick refresher course on how your ability works?”

“I’m basically a Dreamwalker, in a sense. If I hold something that belongs to the victim, I can connect to them on another plane, and I can not only tell their location but get a sense of what they’re thinking and feeling.”

“I see. Can you connect with a dead person?”

“No. I can’t even enter the dream plane. It’s like trying to take a nap but there’s a child poking you in the side. No way that’s happening. I can only connect to and find the living.”

“All right, thank you. Now, that said, you were called in by Jonathan Bane to try and locate Tylesia Evans, correct?”

“Correct. He had a hunch she wasn’t actually dead and wanted me to prove it in some way.”

“When Tylesia Evans first went missing, were you asked to look for her by anyone else?”

“I was not.”

“So the first person to make this request was Jonathan Bane?”

“Correct. I was actually close to his office when he made the request, so I swung by that day. He had clothes the victim supposedly wore on the day she went missing, and I used them to try for a connection. For the record, I think Jon’s right. I don’t think she’s dead.”

Now that really got the crowd going. People were talking over each other.

Kauffman banged her gavel sharply three times. “Order! Don’t make me throw you out.”

Craig looked very satisfied with this reaction. Even Kauffman was looking miffed at this news. As she should. This cast reasonable doubt on the very foundation of the case itself.

“Here’s the thing. I was able to enter the dream plane. I wasn’t able to locate her—there’s something blocking me from doing so—but I know for a fact she’s not dead. She can’t be.”

“What can stop you from finding someone? Say, a coma?”

Grant shook his head. “Not even a coma would do it. I’d still be able to find them. I’m not just saying that. I’ve worked three cases where that was the scenario. No, this felt more like she was under some kind of barrier. A prison’s barrier system, or the personal ones you can put up around meditation rooms, those are able to block me like this. I’m assuming it’s one or the other, but the last part’s speculation on my end.”

“I understand. Her being alive is not speculation for you?”

“No. No, it is not.”

“Plaintiff rests, Your Honor.”

Kauffman nodded, accepting this, her eyes locked on Grant. “Defense?”

The poor defense attorney stared at Grant for a second before shaking his head.

“Your Honor, I don’t know how to even begin arguing with Grant Walker , of all people. Defense has nothing to say.”

I mean, fair. In his shoes, I wouldn’t try it either. Grant was on the level of superheroes in this state. He’d saved more kids than a hospital full of doctors. Attacking him was almost like attacking Dolly Parton. Only a fool would do it.

“Then you may return, Mr. Walker.”

“Thank you, Your Honor.” Grant got up and went to his original seat.

“Plaintiff calls their next witness, FBI Special Agent Marc Gonzalez.”

Marc got up, then he was sworn in and ushered to his chair at the witness box. He’d chosen to wear his FBI badge and windbreaker. Likely to visually reinforce just who he was. Smart. Then again, Marc was always smart.

“Agent Gonzalez, it’s my understanding that after Grant Walker tried to find the victim, you were called in. Why is that?”

“Well, Jonathan Bane and I go way back. He’s helped me on several of my cases, and frankly, I’d walk through fire if that man asked. I owe him a lot. So when he asked if I could try to trace the owner of a murder weapon, I said sure without asking too many questions. I am a licensed Tracer, he knows this, so he wanted to see what I could find from the weapon itself.”

“I see. And what did you find?”

“It’s fake.” Marc shrugged, but I knew he was playing to the crowd. The judge was as invested as all the reporters. “The weapon itself wasn’t made in a factory, or by someone’s hands. It was materialized.”

“Can you tell me more about materialization?”

“It’s an especially rare ability. We have only a dozen people in the whole United States who can do it. Basically, they are able to materialize anything they can properly envision. Depending on how strong they are, they can make some pretty large or complex things.”

“And you’re sure the murder weapon was materialized?”

“Without a doubt. It didn’t lead to anywhere—an origin—or anyone. It just poof—existed. Also, a Materializer’s energy was all over this thing. It wasn’t even just the weapon. I checked all the other evidence and it was materialized as well.”

“When you say the other evidence, what do you mean?”

“The blood found in the drain, the GPS history on the phone, the electronic searches and orders, even the cleaning supplies. The only evidence not made up was the victim’s clothes. And let’s face it, people change midday for all sorts of reasons, so the victim could very well have voluntarily taken those off and the true perpetrator of the crime just took advantage of the situation.”

“I see. So there isn’t any evidence—except for the clothes—that can be accepted at face value?”

“Not a one.”

“Thank you. Plaintiff rests.” Craig went and sat back down.

The poor defense attorney didn’t seem to know how to refute this, but he gamely stood anyway.

“Agent, you say that you can trace something back to the person who made it. But in this case, wouldn’t the psychic who materialized these things be the creator? Why can’t you trace them down?”

“I tried.” There was a tic in Marc’s jaw. “Trust me, I’ve been trying. He’s under the same kind of shield or barrier his victim is in, we think. I’m having the same trouble Grant Walker is—he’s there, but I can’t make a connection long enough to locate him. But this I can testify to with absolute certainty: It’s not Dwayne Evans who did this. I’d have locked onto him immediately, if that were the case.”

“But he’s been in the psychic ward of a max security prison.”

“Not for over two weeks, he hasn’t. He was moved from max security when Jonathan Bane vouched for his character. I started searching for the real perp after he was moved. I would have connected to him if it was his doing.”

“I see. Don’t you think this sounds far-fetched?”

“Like a freakin’ daytime soap opera,” Marc said in agreement, surprising me. “I’m losing sleep, that’s how frustrating it is. But honestly? Jon’s famous for the crazy cases, so while I agree with you, I’m also not surprised.”

Again, fair. Jon complained about his reputation, but it was also accurate. His cases were nuttier than most. A certain exploding casino leapt to mind.

Attorney gave up again. “Defense rests.”

Craig popped up again. “Plaintiff calls Francesca Harlington to the stand.”

Francesca was in a blue jean dress with her makeup perfectly applied. She looked good without looking overdressed, and I had a feeling it was a calculated move on her

part. She was sworn in before sitting down, but she did look a little uneasy being up there. This was likely the first time she'd been in a courtroom.

“Ms. Harlington, you are a Materializer, correct?”

“Correct. I'm licensed and work as a prosthesis maker in a veterinary hospital.”

“Wow! So you're making things all day long. Tell me, what's your limit?”

“Well, I'm a mid-tier Materializer, and I can make around twenty things a day.”

Craig turned to the evidence table and picked up the axe. “Is this something you can make?”

“Sure. It's only two layers.”

“Explain that to me.”

“There's the metal itself of the axe, then the plastic grip of the handle. Exactly two layers of material. I can make up to ten layers.”

“What about the blood found?”

She waved this off. “Easy.”

“The cleaning supplies?”

“Yup, still easy.”

“Is there any evidence on this table that would be hard to make?”

“Honestly? Fabricating the purchase orders online. There’s a trick to that; you have to know what you’re doing. I was taught how to do it by my mentor so I would know what to look for in case of a scam. But it takes experience to know how to replicate it. Whoever did this, he knew precisely what he was doing.”

“Good to know. One final question for you. Is it possible for you to block another psychic from finding you?”

Francesca immediately shook her head. “No way in hell. Our ability just doesn’t work that way. Now, I can fabricate all the pieces necessary to build a machine, but I can’t just manifest it in one go. It’s too complicated of a machine. The generator to power it alone is too complicated.”

“I understand. Thank you. Plaintiff rests.”

Defense popped back up for the cross-examination. “Ms. Harlington, you said creating the axe and the blood would be very easy for you. Just how easy?”

She looked at him for a second. Sighed like he’d asked a stupid question, but she was being nice and not pointing that out. Then she looked straight at the axe, held out a hand, and poof , an axe appeared like it had always been there. The whole room jumped, even me, as I hadn’t realized it was that instant of a manifestation. Damn. She’d make an amazing stage magician.

“Does that answer your question, sir?” Francesca drawled.

Sheepishly, he accepted the axe. “Uh, yes. Your Honor, I’ll just, uh, put this on the evidence table.”

“Might as well, it’s evidence of a different sort now.” Yvonna seemed bemused by this turn of events. “Is there anything else you want to ask?”

“I, uh.” He looked like he desperately wanted to somehow turn this around but had no idea how. Then he deflated. “No, Your Honor. Defense rests.”

Yvonna tapped her finger to her chin for a moment. “Now. What I’m hearing is that none of this evidence is viable except the clothes. Grant Walker’s telling me this woman is likely still alive, just missing. I’ve got an FBI agent telling me the perp can’t be Mr. Evans, as he’s an entirely different psychic type, and the evidence doesn’t trace back to him at all. This case was grossly mishandled from the get-go, in my opinion. Some sort of Tracer should have been called in to find the body. And from my reading of the case last night, that didn’t happen. Defense, can you come up with a good argument as to why I should still treat this like a murder case?”

He shook his head helplessly. “To be perfectly honest, Your Honor, I was horrified by the sheer incompetency of the last trial. I can’t find a good argument to keep this man behind bars. It’s my belief he doesn’t deserve to be there.”

Now that was sad. When even the defense couldn’t find a pinky toe to stand on, you knew you done screwed up. Forgive an evil chuckle.

“Then I don’t see any reason for us to continue the trial,” Yvonna stated factually. “From what I can see, there’s not a single soul in this whole room who believes Mr. Evans guilty. I certainly don’t. Mr. Evans, I overturn your previous conviction and declare you innocent of all charges. This judgment is made with prejudice. You are entitled to compensation, which will be settled at a later date and outside of this court. Case dismissed.”

With prejudice? Oh hell yeah! It meant no one could appeal the case again. Dwayne was forever a free man and couldn’t be retried for this, no matter what people said.

The poor man burst into tears, probably from sheer relief. I would have in his shoes. I heard his family shout out in jubilation on the end of the row, which brought a smile

to my face. I was sitting right behind him, so I stood and wrapped him up in a bear hug.

“You’re free, man,” I whispered against his head. “You’re free.”

Page 24

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:47 pm

The day after Dwayne was proven innocent, there'd been a huge party at the Evans family home, and needless to say, we'd all been there. It'd been wonderful seeing him in proper street clothes instead of that hideous orange jumper. He'd worn a genuine smile the entire time, hugged everyone, and confessed to me how his old employer had already reached out and offered him his position back. Apparently, no one at his workplace had believed him guilty to begin with. They were eager to have him back.

The settlement for his false incarceration had been done last week, and Craig had been downright giddy with how much Dwayne had gotten. Of course, I wasn't privy to such information—it was Dwayne's business and no one else's. But he'd lost his house and car because of the arrest (no one to make payments on either), and he'd confided in me that he could buy whatever he wanted outright. And that was what he planned to do.

I personally couldn't be more pleased with how it had all shaken out. Craig had already submitted the paperwork to start the civil case against Solomon, which was just icing on the proverbial cake. The beatdown was a very long, long time coming.

I was a bad person because I not only wanted him locked up for all this, but I also hoped he got shanked in prison.

Today, on this glorious Saturday, I sat upon the couch with my niece and apprentice while Donovan was out playing basketball with his brother. It was a rare moment when Brandon and Mack were in town, so I didn't begrudge Donovan the fun. Right now, the girls and I were chowing down on some Chinese food and trying to come up with the right costumes for my wedding.

Easier said than done.

“You sure I can’t just wear a tux and slap a silly bow tie on it?” I asked again.

Both girls rolled their eyes so hard, they went off into the street. If you see them, they’re blue and green, one’s a little near-sighted. I’ll pay for shipping.

“No, that’s boring,” Skylar informed me again. “Why have a costume party for a wedding if you’re not going to take advantage?”

She had me there.

“I think I’m going as a psychic after all,” Abby muttered, scrolling through images on her phone. “I’ve got half this costume already. It wouldn’t take much more than a crystal ball and a hooded cape to do the rest.”

I was jealous of my apprentice right now. She’d found the right thing in ten minutes. Meanwhile, Skylar and I were still on the struggle bus.

“Did Uncle Donovan settle on something?” Skylar inquired.

I did a double take. “Since when do you call him uncle?”

“Well, he will be really soon, right? I call you Uncle Jon, so it’s only fair.”

“Please, please call him uncle for the first time when I’m there. Just so I can see his reaction. He’s going to be so happy.” I’d need to get someone poised with a camera too.

“Done. But what is he going as?”

“A knight.”

Both girls went ooooooh at the same time.

I nodded along because, yes, that costume was absolutely appropriate and he’d look insanely good as a knight. No doubts about that.

“Maybe I should coordinate with him?”

“You could be the prince he’s protecting?”

“Or king,” Abby tacked on. “Or do whatever is your favorite instead.”

Now, I had to admit the prince thing was very tempting. I’d run it by Donovan first, get his take on it, but I did see how that would look really fun together in pictures.

My phone rang on the kitchen wall. Setting my plate aside, I popped up and skedaddled over there to answer it.

“Hi, this is Jon.”

The sound coming through was a bit choppy but understandable.

“ Hey, Jon. Marc and Javier here ,” Marc said. “ We got a situation on our hands. Could really use you in the field, buddy. ”

“Oh shit, is this a now thing?”

“ Pretty much. Let me read you in. You know how I’ve got this one Materializer I’ve been trying to lay hands on, and he’s been evading me ?”

I'd first heard of this the day of Dwayne's court hearing. They'd been frustrated even then, as this guy was on the list of Materializers, but he'd lost his license due to stupidity. Now, he worked all over the place in any job he could land, which made him hard to track down. They were relying on the good old-fashioned method to trace his location. Namely, searching for hints of him through databases and socials.

Didn't seem to be going well.

"Yeah. I take it you're still not able to lay hands on him."

"I wish I could say otherwise but...yeah. Thing is, the more I try to catch this guy, the more suspicious he gets. Name of my suspect is Chad Holzer, aged twenty-three. He's a college dropout and working freelance as a stage magician. Now, get this—he went to the same college as Tylesia Evans. Plus, right now, I'm in Georgia. You see why he's my main suspect. "

I blew out a low whistle. Georgia was where we suspected Tylesia had disappeared to, so yes, I absolutely did see what he meant. "Tell me what you need and I'm there."

"I need two things. You and Grant Walker ."

I saw sense in it the second he said it. He needed me in order to prove whether this was our perp or not. He needed Grant to help track the guy down. Marc's tracing ability couldn't always take him to the perp in question, after all. Sometimes it led to whoever had left the strongest imprint.

I was all right with a road trip, but Grant...Grant was harder to take away for long periods of time. He was very much an emergency responder, so taking off with him for more than a day was generally difficult.

Perhaps sensing my hesitation, Marc hastily added, “ I honestly think with all three of us, we’ll be able to pin this guy in two days. Maaaaaybe a bit longer .”

“True, it’s hard to evade Grant for long. Tell you what. I’m game. Donovan’s out right now, but I’m sure he’ll be willing to do this too. Assume you have at least the two of us and that we’ll leave tomorrow morning. I’ll call Grant next and see if I can take him with me or not. Text Donovan where you want us to meet you.”

“ Done. I’d offer to fly you guys here, but... ”

“If you make me get on a plane, Donovan will end you. He just about had a heart attack over the last plane trip I was on.”

“ Hahahaha, fair. Very fair. Okay, keep us posted .”

“Yup, call you back shortly. Well, assuming I can get hold of Grant quickly.” Which wasn’t always the case.

I hung up, then dialed Grant’s number. Only, as I dialed, I realized I had an audience of two girls and two cats.

“We going somewhere?” Abby inquired.

“The two of you are not going,” I informed her firmly. “You are not at the level to chase down criminals in the field yet. Your respective parents would murder me if I even tried—”

“ Why the murdering ?” Alan’s smooth tenor answered.

Dammit, I hadn’t heard the call pick up.

“Hey, Alan. I was informing my apprentice and her anchor they’re not coming into the field with me.”

“ Ah, right, Abby and Skylar bonded. I’d heard. Congrats to them both .”

“I’ll relay that. I’m actually calling because I need you and Grant. Is he busy?”

“ Define busy .”

“Can I take him on a road trip for two to three days and it not be a problem?”

“ Hmmm...normally I’d say it’s problematic, but he’s hit the requirement .”

“Ahhh.”

Part of the procedures for being a licensed psychic with the government was being held to a very strict code on how much a psychic could use their ability before they were required to rest. It’d been necessary to input because some of us—especially people like Grant Walker—could easily be abused otherwise. His was a talent few others had, and it was lifesaving, so it was hard for him to say no. But the man wasn’t a machine. He had to rest sometimes. He had to take a break for his mental health, if not his physical one. Hence the reason for the requirement to begin with. For every forty hours he worked, he was obligated to take ten hours off. For every work week he completed, he had to take a day off. But if he hit a full one hundred and twenty hours without taking those breaks, then he was compelled by law to not work for a full week.

Grant hit the requirement all the time because he was constantly on the go. It was the hazard of being super powerful and awesome.

“How bad is it?”

“ He’s edging toward a hundred hours right now. Honestly, getting him away from here will make it much, much easier on all of us. He’s too accessible to everyone .”

“I’d point fingers, but I’m in that glass house with him. So you’re saying a road trip with friends is just what he needs.”

“ In a nutshell. He’s taking a nap right now—we were up until dawn this morning—but I’ll wake him up in about two hours and inform him we’re going. How about that ?”

“Sounds good to me. Um. We need to leave tomorrow morning, though. Want me to swing by and grab you? You can just ride with us.”

“ Sure, works for me. ”

Curiosity overcame me and I had to ask. “If it was an all-nighter, did you guys save them?”

“ Fortunately. It was a carjacking case, but there were twin boys in the back seat. ”

“Oh shit.”

“ Pretty much our reaction. Because the car was constantly moving, it took Grant all night to find the location when they actually did stop. Boys were okay. I mean, hungry, needing a diaper change, but otherwise all right. They’re not even two, so I don’t think this will be something they even remember .”

Fortunately for them. No wonder Grant had burned up so many hours, though. “I’m glad to hear it. Well, be ready to roll by nine. I’ll let you know if the plan changes.”

“ Will do. ” Alan hung up.

“Uh, Master?” Abby called from the bar.

“Yes, my young grasshopper?”

“Donovan wants to know why he got a random address from Marc.”

“Text him back and say we’re chasing down a perp tomorrow with Grant and Alan.”

“Okay.”

I loved apprentices who could text for me. Since I, y’know, couldn’t.

Even as I called Marc back to confirm Grant and Alan were available and coming with us, I had a feeling I’d spend more time on the phone coordinating with people than actually packing for this trip.

Hopefully, though, this would be the break in the case that we needed. It was all well and good to free Dwayne, but I was still half convinced his sister was alive. I wanted to catch the perp who did all this even if she wasn’t. A rogue Materializer loose in the world was the perfect nightmare fodder. No thank you. Seriously, no thank you.

Now. Hopefully, with mine, Grant’s, and Marc’s powers combined, we could catch this sonuvabitch.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:47 pm

I must say, doing a road trip with both Grant and Alan was much more fun than I'd anticipated. For one thing, Grant had some wild stories to tell, and he had a flair for telling them, so it helped the miles pass. For another, Alan had caught us up this morning on how much he'd learned from this case and a few others.

It was quite the update.

Jon was driving, which let me twist in my seat so I could more easily speak to the two in the back.

"What do you mean, you're going to get FBI funding for this book?" Out of all the things my cousin could've said next, I hadn't expected that.

Alan shrugged, but I could tell from that smug smile he was pleased with himself. "Gonzalez made good on his promise. I showed him a sample chapter—the one I wrote on Grant—and he went from interested to eager to have it. He somehow wrangled an appointment with the head of the FBI, and they're reviewing my rough draft right now."

"Holy shit, that's awesome!"

Grant snorted dryly. "Honey, tell him how big it is."

With all the psychic types, I expected large, but Grant's expression hinted at a freakin' tome. "How big?"

"It's at two hundred thousand words," Alan admitted. "Authors and publishers go by

word count over page count, but in layman's terms, about a thousand pages?"

I let out a low whistle. "Daaaaaayum."

"Rather hard to not let it balloon to that size. Each psychic type has a description of what they can do, their known limitations, an interview from a psychic of that specialty, plus a well-known case that showcases the ability. It's about thirty pages per type, thereabouts."

Okay, yeah. I could see how the thing went crazy out of control. "Are you going to have to break it up?"

"Size is partially why the FBI is now reviewing it. Ebook wise? No, no need to do that. But for print? No one wants to lug around a thousand-page brick. Although lugging around two books half the size isn't any better, so...honestly, I don't know what they're going to decide. However! Good news for me is, they've given me a royalty advance for it already. It's a very tidy sum. And I didn't have to sign away all rights to it, I can still publish it for public consumption. The FBI just gets it first."

"And he has to update it once a year," Grant tacked on.

"I do." Alan shrugged, clearly not bothered by this. "I'm not egotistical enough to think I've already found every possible psychic type. I mean, the Materializers are something I had no clue about, so I already have to update the draft. I'm not concerned about this. Well, my poor formatters are going to be tearing their hair out trying to keep page count down, but it is what it is."

How did I get such a smart cousin? You had to be damn good at your job if the FBI came knocking and then gave you money for your project. Just, damn. Totally impressed right now.

My phone rang and I answered it. “Hey, Sho.”

“ Hey, got a hit for you .”

I loved it when he said stuff like that. Sho’s intel was never wrong. “Hit me.”

“ Got a birthday party video, and facial recognition says this is the guy Marc’s been trying to find. I’ve already given him the video, and the poster’s contact info. He’s working on locking the party down. It was only posted an hour ago, so I don’t know if the party’s still going on, but maybe something there will give Grant a boost. I wanted to give you guys a heads-up. Should have a location really soon. You’re in the general area already, as this took place just outside of Atlanta. ”

We were maybe a half hour north of Atlanta already so that was great news to hear.

“Sho, you’re awesome.”

“ I do try. I’ll keep on this, but right now, this is my best lead for you .”

“And we appreciate it.”

My phone rang again, but this time it was Gonzalez.

“Sho, got to hang up.”

“ Sure, bye. ”

I ended the call and answered Gonzalez. “Hey. Sho just said he found a location?”

“ Good, you’re almost caught up. Just spoke to the woman who posted the video, she’s an aunt of the birthday kid. Said the clown they hired left twenty minutes ago but the party’s still going on. We’ve asked her to move it inside, which they’re doing

now. I'm shooting you an address. Meet us there. ”

“That we can do.”

“ Also, are you sure we can't have Sho ?”

“Pretty sure, man. Lots of people are very attached to Sho.”

“ Dammit. Fine. Meet you there .”

Sho had job security, if nothing else. The FBI would love to get their hooks into him.

The address popped up on my screen and I immediately opened Maps and got navigation started. When Sho said we were in the general area, he hadn't been kidding. Location was in Smyrna, which was north and a tad west of Atlanta. Sweet, that meant we were about twenty minutes away. Sho, bless your timing. Otherwise, we would have needed to backtrack.

“Babe, not this exit, but it's the next one you'll need to take.”

Jon nodded and flicked the blinker on. “Got it. Ugh, finally, a lead on this guy. I thought he was playing ghost or something.”

Certainly felt that way.

Jon drove to the address like he knew precisely where to go, and we almost beat Gonzalez and Marc there. They pulled in about twenty seconds before we did, so we parked right behind them. It was kind of a Keystone Cops moment as we all piled out of the car and toward the house.

A tall Black woman with a lot to love met us at the door, looking distraught. “Um,

Agents?”

“That’s us,” Marc answered, pulling out his badge to show. “Marc Gonzalez.”

“I’m Serena. Lord, y’all are scaring me. How bad is this guy?”

“Well, he’s not good,” Marc admitted frankly. “Which is why we’re trying to lay hands on him as quick as we can. We want to disturb the kids as little as possible. You said the party was in the backyard? Any way we can get there without going through the house?”

Please and thank you. That would make it easier for me to get Jon to the right place.

“Oh sure, sure. There’s a side gate. I’ll show you.” Serena stepped out, shutting the door behind her, and quickly went for the left side of the house.

We all followed her around through a side gate and into the rather spacious backyard. I saw plenty of indications a party had been back here, as there was a full table with desserts, punch, etcetera. A simple wooden stage had been set up for the show, and there was a collection of toys and such abandoned on the grass nearby.

Jon waved them on and focused on Serena, so I stood with him as well.

“Miss Serena, I’m Jonathan Bane, and I’m working with the FBI on this case. Can I ask you a few questions?”

“Oh, for sure.” She turned her attention to him, looking attentive.

“Thank you. I’m told Chad was hired to do a birthday show?”

“Something of a magic show, although he did wear a clown suit. Really, his price was

the most reasonable and he was easy to hire for this slot, so when I first came across him I was relieved. I'd been trying to find a stage magician for almost two weeks when I came across his listing. My nephew loves stage magic, you see."

"Can I see the listing?"

"I, um, don't know if I can find it again? I got it off Craigslist."

Oh. Shit. Well, the listing was probably long gone. "Don't mind that, ma'am. How did he seem to you?"

There was a shout of victory from Marc, and he just about did a happy dance right then and there.

I turned to look at him, caught his eye, and asked, "Materialized?"

"Yuuuuup."

"What's that?" Serena asked, tone confused.

Jon did and didn't answer her question. "This particular clown you hired is a unique breed of psychic. It's what Marc was checking for. Tell me about the toys that are littering the stage."

"Oh, well, that was part of the fee. He said for another hundred dollars, whatever toys he used as props for his show were something the kids could keep. I thought the toys were a great idea because, again, my nephew loves stage magic. It'd be something a 'real' magician used that he could play with. So I said yes."

It was an easy hundred bucks for the Materializer, considering he didn't have to purchase anything himself.

Serena seemed worried about this line of questioning because her agitation rose sharply. “Is that bad?”

“No, ma’am,” I assured her. “It might very well be our saving grace. You see that man with the dark curly hair taking a nap on the stage?”

“Oh, uh...yes, why is he doing that?”

“That’s Grant Walker.”

Her eyes crossed and she spluttered for a few seconds before she managed to get her jaw back in its socket. “Grant Walker’s in my backyard?!”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Holy shit. And I just made the connection—Jonathan Bane. I see your name all the time in the papers!”

Jon grinned. “I bet.”

“Fucking shit on a cracker.” She put a hand to her forehead, rocking a little. “Phew. Lord Almighty, I’mma need a pint of ice cream after this. This man must be very, very bad if he’s got you two chasing after him.”

“He’s certainly not good, ma’am. We suspect he’s kidnapped a woman and either murdered her or is holding her hostage.” Jon put a hand on her shoulder and said kindly, “No more hiring off Craigslist.”

She nodded vigorously. “No siree, I have learned my lesson.”

“Good.”

Grant popped up all of a sudden, huffing and puffing, and I could tell in a glance this was one frustrated man. In fact, I'd seen that reaction before. Was this our guy?

Without fanfare, Grant levered himself up with Alan's help and announced, "Good news is, this is our guy. Bad news is, I can't, for the life of me, get a lock on him."

Well. That was problematic. "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again?"

Grant blew out a breath like he'd been cursed with this problem even though he hadn't asked for it, and how dare someone thwart him.

"Yeah. I guess trying again is the answer. How many licks it takes to get to the center of the lollipop, that's my question."

"From the looks of it," Marc muttered, also looking very cross, "we're about to find out."

Jon abruptly asked Serena, "What did the ad say? Do you remember that at all?"

"I—oh, no, I don't—" Then she stopped dead, eyes flaring wide. "I'm a moron. I screenshotted the ad and sent it to my sister! It's still in our chat history."

I whipped out my phone, even as Jon hastily stepped several feet backward. "Ma'am, send that to me. In fact, save my number. You can always text me if you hear from him again or if you think of something else."

"Sure."

We swapped phone numbers, she forwarded the screenshot to me, and I sent it to Sho.

And with any luck, the guy didn't put a burner number on the ad, and we'd be able to

call him for a party request and lure him out. I wasn't holding my breath, mind you, because this guy was paranoid as hell. Still. With this many things connecting to him, hopefully we'd get a break soon.

Hopefully.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:47 pm

Not sure where to go, we ended up in a hotel nearby. Gonzalez got us three hotel rooms on the off chance we ended up staying here tonight, and Donovan and I ran out and got us all takeout for dinner, even though it was a bit early.

It was quite the sight, seeing Grant lying on a bed, dipping in and out of his dream plane while clutching a cheap child's toy. Marc sat on the other bed, toy in hand. I could see his lines flex with pure white as he tried every few minutes to get a lock. We'd have to go take their toys away at this rate or neither man would sleep tonight. They'd already been at this for several hours, only pausing for snacks or bathroom breaks, and showed no signs of giving up soon. I should stop them at the five-hour mark; otherwise, they really would go all night.

Donovan's phone rang and he leaned away from me in order to answer. "It's your mom," he said as he looked at the screen. "Hi, Lauren."

Mom sounded like she was laughing, a wicked tone of enjoyment in the sound.

"Donovan. Tell me Jon's nearby."

"He sure is. In fact, you're on speaker with him, Grant, Alan, Marc, and Gonzalez."

"Oh good. The more of a crowd, the better. Phew ! Y'all. Karma is a bitch and I love her to pieces. "

I sat up abruptly. This promised to be gold altogether. "What's happened?"

"Let me fill them in first. Did you all hear how I lost my house during the divorce

despite the fact my ex didn't own it with me the first ten years I had it ?”

“Uh, no?” Marc responded. “But that’s shitty.”

“ In the extreme. I had to split half my 401(k) with him, too, dirty bastard. Anyway, all the finances and such finally hit an end recently in court. I was disheartened but also willing to pay out that much just to get rid of Rodger. BUT ! Something beautiful just happened. Jon, you know how bad Rodger is with paperwork .”

I snorted. “Yeah, everyone knows that. He can’t even pay his bills on time.”

“ Well, guess what paperwork he didn’t think was important enough to do ?”

A slow smile took over my face because I could tell from my mother’s glee, Rodger had just pulled a Rodger-ism that would go in her favor. “Tell me.”

“ The house insurance. It was still in my name only. He’d paid the bill but hadn’t thought to update the company on our divorce. ”

Stupid bastard. Sounded about right, though.

“ Annnnnd ,” Mom intoned with the sound of a drumroll somehow mixed in, “ the house burned to the ground last night .”

We all just kind of stared at the phone for a second before people busted out with either exclamations or questions. I couldn’t believe what I’d just heard. The house burned?! I wasn’t super attached to my childhood home, as it was the source of a lot of bad memories for me, but still...it’d been a perfectly nice house. I kind of felt bad for it.

“Was it on purpose, stupidity, or...?”

“ Stupidity, I think. Official report said the dryer vent was too plugged. He’d set the laundry to go before stepping out to get dinner. By the time a neighbor called the fire in, there wasn’t much to save. If he’d been home, he’d likely have been able to stop it, but... ” Mom cackled again. “ It gets better. Because the house is a total loss, including everything inside, I get the full insurance check. The insurance company doesn’t care if the house is technically in his name only. I’m the one with the policy, I’ve had that policy in place for years, so they’re paying me. Jon. They’re writing me a check for six hundred thousand dollars .”

Excuse me a second, I had to pick myself up off the floor. “Oh. My. God.”

Mom cackled again. “ Everything I lost out of my 401(k) I can replace, PLUS I can pay off my car in one shot. Ohhh, karma. I do love you, you sassy bitch. ”

It didn’t make up for everything Rodger had done to Mom over the years, but I admit, the karma was beautiful. “Welp. Guess he’s going to have to find a new place to live.”

“ It won’t be anywhere near Nashville ,” Mom stated plainly. “ Rodger never made enough to afford a house here. Frankly, if he’s careful, he might be able to find a room to rent somewhere. Or an RV. But even an apartment is out of the question .”

The full beauty of karma’s actions was becoming clearer now. Evil delight spread through me. I was, after all, my mother’s child.

“Mom. That’s beautiful.”

She laughed again. There would be no living with her after this, I could see it now.

Alan shifted out of his chair to come in closer. “Lauren. He’ll likely sue you for the insurance payout.”

“ Oh, I’m sure. He’s already threatening to do so if I don’t hand it over. ”

“Just to err on the side of caution, why don’t you contact Craig? If he can’t help you, he can at least help you get a good lawyer. The last one you had was a piece of shit.”

“ I can’t argue there. The man didn’t get nearly anything I wanted in the divorce. That’s good advice, Alan. I’ll take it. All right, I’ll let everyone go. I just wanted to share my fun news .”

“And we thank you for it,” Donovan said, also grinning. “Any time Rodger gets a smack from the universe, we prefer having a ringside seat.”

“ Me too ! Okay, night, everyone. ”

“Karma really is a bitch,” I observed as Donovan put the phone back in the case. “And I hope it visits Rodger more often.”

“Absolutely agreed—” Donovan cut himself off as the phone rang in his hand. “Well, we’re hopping tonight. This time it’s Sho. Hey, Sho, tell me something good.”

“ I’ve got two updates for you. ”

I went from gleeful to completely focused on Sho’s voice in a second flat. “Do tell.”

“ I had a hunch and showed Chad’s picture to Dwayne. Dwayne recognized him and not in a good way. Said the guy was pushy about dating Tye, didn’t want to take a no, and Dwayne had to step in and shut the guy completely down. Chad didn’t take it well and kept signing up for classes Tylesia was in. ”

“Motive,” Gonzalez purred, a happy man. “I do love motive, and rejected males are dangerous, dangerous creatures.”

Speaking as someone who dealt with insecure, rejected males, I knew very well how the type was. “Sounds like we definitely have our guy. What’s the second piece of news, Sho?”

“ Got another hit via my web crawlers. I narrowed the search to the greater Atlanta area, and not ten minutes ago, some amateur ghostbusters were going through the Atlanta Prison Farm. It’s very, very abandoned and only birds and weeds live in it. Great hunting grounds for ghosts, I guess, as there was a group of four kids that went in. But they were quickly chased out by a guy claiming to be a groundskeeper. They’re calling bullshit and posting the whole story online. In this case, they’re right—it’s our guy .”

We all just looked at each other.

I personally didn’t quite know how to feel about this, but excitement raced to the fore and claimed first place. “Let’s go check this out.”

“I’m all for it.” Marc rolled off the bed smoothly, feet hitting at the same time on the carpet. “Not like I’m getting through. Sho, you sure?”

“ He wasn’t good at hiding his face from the camera. Too mad. I got a full-on clear shot. I’ll shoot you guys the address. It is rather hidden behind a lot of trees, so if it gives you murder vibes, you’re likely in the right place .”

“Works for me.” I went looking for shoes.

“Grant and I are going to stay here,” Alan said. “Just in case Chad’s already moved on, we can give you an update on location.”

“Okay.” Might as well not put all our eggs in one basket. Made sense to me. Plus, it wasn’t like Grant or Alan were really used to confrontation. Better to let the other

heavy hitters (not me) handle this.

We all pretty much scrambled out the door, with me driving, just because it was easier all around. Of course, the second we were out the door, we hit Atlanta traffic.

Let me explain. Atlanta. This city did not sleep, ever; it was just as crazy at three a.m. as it could be at ten in the morning. It didn't matter that we were past rush hour at this point. Traffic was still on the crazy side. Plus, we had to drive toward the Constitution area, which meant going through downtown Atlanta. Really glad I wasn't in the Power Wagon, as the stop and go with a stick shift would have made this even less fun.

It took us an insane forty-five minutes to get over there, and the entire time I drove, I prayed. Please still be there. Please. Do not wander off, or get spooked by the kids seeing you, or whatever. Just for once stay put so Gonzalez can slap some cuffs on you.

"Turn right here," Donovan instructed.

I turned, but...wow. Talk about some dense forest and brush all around here. We didn't get very far before we hit a chain cordoning off the road. It said in bold letters RESTRICTED ACCESS, and there was a more permanent sign off to the right declaring anyone trespassing would be fined and possibly jailed. Clearly the signs stopped no one if kids were ghostbusting here.

"I can see why Sho warned us," Gonzalez muttered, his head craned to look between the front seats. "It does have murder vibes, doesn't it?"

"Straight out of a horror film," Donovan agreed.

The mistrust was bright in his lines. So bright, in fact, that I had a pretty good guess

what he'd say next.

"Babe. Please tell me this place isn't really haunted?"

"Can't see anything from here." Which was the truth and also the best answer I could give. I wasn't Mack, after all. I couldn't see ghosts easily. "Either way, looks like our perp might be here. I see car tracks leading farther in."

Marc hissed out a victorious sound. "Oh, he's here. I got a lock on him for a split second, and he's dead ahead somewhere."

I already had a hand on the door handle, but at those words, I quickly pushed it open. "In that case, let's go."

Page 27

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:47 pm

I eyed the open shell of a doorway with severe misgivings. That looked haunted. That looked super haunted. It was already dark; the buildings were overgrown with weeds and trees, casting shadows in all directions, which didn't lower the Jeepers Creepers vibes any. All the windows were busted out but there was very little graffiti to be seen.

I ask you, what kind of an abandoned place had no graffiti?

Places scary as hell, that's what.

"Come on, Donovan," Jon urged. He had a hand against my back, guiding me in.

I went, but with my feet dragging for all they were worth.

"Babe, level with me. This place is haunted, right?"

"I don't see ghosts."

That was a Jon-ism. I'd heard the same one before. It meant he was trying to soothe me while not lying at the same time. All it meant was he didn't see ghosts right this second. That could change at any moment.

I glared at my fiancé. "A state prison shut down thirty years ago and completely abandoned? No way in hell this place isn't haunted."

He just sighed. Like he didn't know how to respond, or at least didn't know what to say that wouldn't send me running for the hills.

I grumbled some more even as I kept my gun ready. Marc had said he'd pinged on the perp somewhere nearby, after all.

"I know so, so many people who can handle ghosts, and where are they? Not here. It's not cool, man."

"Don't bother the ghosts and they won't bother you."

"Mack said that last time. And then they started throwing gravestones around."

Jon grimaced. "You do have me there, but they weren't angry at you or aiming for you."

He did bring up a fair point, but still. Gravestones. Flying through the air. Very much a no thank-you in my book.

I held my silence as we breached the door. Ever have two instincts warring with each other and you weren't sure which one was going to win? I had one instinct insisting I stay right in front of Jon because if the perp popped out of nowhere, I wanted to be poised to respond. Then I had the other instinct insisting I stay behind Jon because he could see the aura of ghosts and could protect me.

Hey, people who love to say follow your instincts? Could use some guidance here, thanks.

So far, my protect-Jon instinct was winning, and we moved slow and steady through the doorway. This seemed to be some kind of a mess hall, judging from all the abandoned tables still neatly stacked in a row. The roof was shot, windows long gone, but the tables remained in place. Weird.

We kept going, through the next door, which I checked both ways before coming out

of. This one led into a wide hallway, with something that may have been administrative offices? Desks and abandoned file cabinets littered the area, half-charred files strewn about the floor. Inmate records, from the peek I took. Weird they didn't take any of those with them.

Jon kept his hand at the small of my back. It was an easy way for me to track where he was without having to constantly glance back, and I appreciated he remembered to do so in moments like these. Steadied my nerves. Some. Ten percent, maybe.

"No ghosts," Jon murmured.

"Thanks."

See? He did love me. I could use all the reassurance he was willing to dish out.

We kept walking. Marc and Gonzalez had split off to the other wing, and they'd call and let it ring three times if they found something there, so I had part of my attention on the phone in my pocket. I hoped someone found this guy soon. Just so I could get out of here.

How did this place get more creepy as I walked through it?

Which begged another question.

"Jon," I muttered.

"Hmm?"

"Explain this to me. Why do people like going into these places? I mean, it smells—"

Mostly of mold. I'd need a long shower after this.

“—and it’s creepy as hell, and people voluntarily go through places like this. Some of them do it just so they can find ghosts. I don’t get it.”

Jon gave me a pat on my back. “Takes all types to make the world go round.”

He wasn’t wrong, but... “There’s no other explanation for this?”

“It’s like pineapple on a pizza, love. Some people love it, some people will declare war over it. There’s no logic behind it. People love what they love.”

“I’m going to side with the haters on this one.”

“Yup, that’s fine.”

Part of the reason I was marrying this man was because he supported my absurdities.

I smelled and spied something nasty and sidestepped it, warning Jon. “I think that’s dog shit.”

“It’s something shit, anyway. This whole hallway’s bad. There’s layers to this like a freaking parfait made of shit in different stages of decomposition, and I swear it’s somehow getting worse. Hot shower after this.”

“Long hot shower,” I agreed. At the end of the hallway, I glanced both ways, grimacing. “Which way?”

“Er, right? Marc and Gonzalez are left.”

True, they had that area covered. Or so I hoped. Right it was.

We went right, still slow and cautious. Hurrying along in situations like this usually

made the situation worse. For one, you made a lot of noise by running, alerting whoever you were chasing. For another, you couldn't pay attention to your surroundings, and missing cues always bit you in the ass later. As much as I wanted to run—and boy howdy did I want to run— and get out of here, I couldn't risk it. I couldn't risk Jon by being careless. So I walked at a steady pace.

Jon's hand on my back abruptly grabbed my shirt and pulled me to a halt.

I stopped, looking at him sharply. "What?"

"Love, don't panic."

Oh shit. Please don't say what I think you're going to say.

"There is a ghost up ahead."

I whimpered. I couldn't help the whimper.

"I think it'll be fine," he assured me. "They're not even facing our way. They're...oh, they're moving. Uh, straight outside, actually. No longer in the building."

"You promise?"

"Promise, they left." He gave me a consoling pat. "Sorry, honey. You were dead right about it being haunted."

Now I really didn't trust this place. "Joouooooon, why do you keep bringing me into haunted places?"

"Exposure therapy is supposed to be healthy."

“Really? That’s what you’re going with?”

“It’s the thought that counts?”

“Thoughts don’t count.”

“My body count is lower than I expected, then.”

“Sorry for your loss.”

Jon huffed out a soft laugh. “Why are you such an asshole?”

“Hey, you are what you eat.”

He laughed a little harder, although he kept it hushed. We were trying to track a perp in here, after all.

“I swear I keep you around for the cheap entertainment.”

“Why else do you think I tried to put it in our wedding vows?”

“So glad I talked you out of it. We don’t have time to write wedding vows, anyway. Too much else on our plates.”

“You’re such a spoilsport.”

The banter helped take my mind off the fact this place was haunted as hell, but I kept my senses alert for our perp. Still hoped Marc and Gonzalez found the guy first, just so we could cut this canvassing down and get out of here sooner rather than later.

“I wonder where she is,” Jon murmured.

It took me a second to realize what he meant. “You mean Tylesia?”

“Yeah. Grant and Carol have me pretty convinced she’s not dead. If he’s hiding out here, odds are good she’s here too. I wonder if we’ll find her before we find him.”

Now there was a question for you. I hadn’t thought of that but...it was a good question. “I haven’t seen a single intact door since we came onto the property.”

“Neither have I. I would say a closed door’s a pretty good indication something’s off. So if we see a door—”

“Yup, we’re stopping.”

We reached the end of the hallway, meaning we were once again on the verge of going outside. There was another branch to the right, and that looked more like prison cells to me, although all the cell doors were wide open. The metal bars had withstood the test of time far better than the wooden doors, no surprise there. Glancing inside gave me the willies. Each cell was maybe eight by six, with nothing more than a bed, lavatory, and sink in there. Barely enough for a human to move around. And people still purposefully broke the law with the knowledge they could be stuck in these places for years? No helping humanity, I swear.

Speaking of...come on, perp. Where are you?

“Do you think if I call out Marco, he’ll go Polo?”

Jon snorted. “Do not tempt me.”

A sound came from the end of the hallway, the heavy tread of boots squelching in unpleasant things. Uh...? Doubt the noise was either Marc or Gonzalez; I’d get a phone call before they came in my direction. Just to avoid friendly fire, if nothing

else.

I lifted my gun up a little more, ready to aim dead center on whoever approached.

“Don’t fire, could be a ghost hunter,” Jon whispered.

I nodded in acknowledgment but didn’t shift my stance. If it was a ghost hunter, we needed to get them out of here pronto. If not, then that was likely our perp. I stayed still, waiting for him to appear, because moving in closer wasn’t going to help anything at this moment.

Seconds felt like hours as we waited in tense silence for this person to reveal themselves. Then I heard it, a deep voice muttering, almost in a rhetorical fashion.

“Fucking kids keep coming in here, don’t even know why. I’m sick as hell of chasing them off. There’s no trespassing signs for Christ’s sakes. They just ignore them. Makes me wonder why anyone put them up to begin with. I’m so fucking over this shit.”

Then he rounded the corner. The first thing I saw was the baseball bat in his hand. Well, he was armed, which meant he wasn’t fooling around. Then he came out properly into the dim lighting from the setting sun, and I got something of a look at him. He stood tall, easily able to look me in the eye, with a dirty cap pulled low, ragged jeans, and despite the heat, he had a worn-out black hoodie on. His skin was very pale, with very bad acne, and I saw hints of bright red hair that smacked of a dye job.

Jon hissed a breath in, and I knew without him saying anything, this was our guy. Good. Maybe I could get out of here now.

Douchebag stopped walking, his eyes clocking my gun, and he went abruptly still.

“Drop the bat,” I ordered him calmly. “Put hands in the air, then turn around. You’re—”

Swearing, Chad turned on a heel and bolted back the way he’d come.

Shit.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:47 pm

“GO!” I ordered, even as I took off running myself.

Donovan took off like a bat out of hell. A shot rang out, and I wasn’t sure if he was trying to warn the guy into stopping or alerting Marc and Gonzalez without pulling out his phone, but the asshat didn’t stop running. I knew the other two would come rushing over, though, and just tried to keep up.

Asshole ran like his life depended on it, but that didn’t really work against Donovan. My Donovan was in excellent shape, and with those long legs of his, not many people could really outrun him.

I think Chad realized this. He did this mid-twist thing that was almost impressive for a second before— bam —wall. Literally, a wall out of nowhere, blocking off the hallway.

Right. Materializer. Of course he was going to throw out magic tricks to block us and get away.

“Oh no you fucking don’t,” Donovan snarled.

Next thing I knew, my fiancé had hopped through one of the smashed-up windows and was right on the man’s tail all over again, having hopped back into the hallway through another window.

Now, I was athletic. That athletic? Uhh...seemed like a poor time to test it. Glass shards and all. Um, I was gonna pass on that one.

I ran back the other direction, for the doorway that led outside, because maybe I could go out that way and around the building. Find another doorway in. Maybe I could even cut him off. Flanking maneuvers for the win! If this worked.

Yes, there was a doorway! Hi, friend, nice to see you.

I dove through it, turned sharply, and started sprinting back the way I'd just come.

Through the windows, I could see Chad throwing up more things, trying to stop Donovan. Netting—which didn't work since it wasn't anchored. Donovan just threw it aside and kept going—then a huge bouncy house kind of inflated wall that filled the hallway, which also didn't work. Donovan shot it twice and it deflated rapidly. He shoved right past the tattered remains without it slowing him down much.

I gave Chad points for creativity. But I also remembered what Francesca had told me. A mid-tier Materializer could only do so many materializations in a day. He'd already done a birthday party earlier today. How much juice did this man still have in him?

Behind me there was the sound of footsteps rapidly approaching, and a quick glance told me it wasn't the perp somehow magicking himself out of the building. Gonzalez and Marc were racing this way.

"He's throwing up barriers in the hallway!" I called to them. "Gonzalez, flank!"

"Got it!"

Gonzalez blew right past me.

Look, I was in reasonably good shape. I couldn't help it these guys were showing me up so easily, okay?

I caught Marc by the arm before he could follow his husband.

“Wait,” I panted. “Wait, he’s trying to draw us away from her.”

Marc stopped, barely breathing hard. His dark eyes were sharp on me. “Really? You sure?”

“It was in his lines, from the brief glance I got on them. He’s running away from her. We need to go in the opposite direction.”

“Well, I trust Donovan to back Javier up, so let’s go find her.” Then he beamed. “Yes! I hoped she was alive, that Grant was right.”

“Me too.” I was relieved for the whole Evans family. “Let’s find her and prove it.”

“I’m all for that.”

“Which buildings did you check out?”

He pointed to the two larger buildings. With no glass on the windows, it was easy to see outside, even though it was growing darker very quickly. “The barn and the...I actually don’t know what it was, but it’s empty as hell. Just one big room with nothing but trash in it. We were heading toward the smaller building when we heard the gunshot.”

The building in question looked like a box, and it was the only one that seemed to have an intact roof. Now that was a strong candidate for stashing a person.

“Let’s go,” I urged.

We quickly left the building through an open doorway and jogged in that direction. I

heard more gunshots, but that was likely Donovan or Gonzalez trying to get past some kind of materialized barrier, so I wasn't too worried.

Marc jogged at my side, but he also had a phone up to his ear. I stayed three feet away to help protect his phone. I knew he'd reported this to the local FBI office before we even came in here. A courtesy call and a heads-up in case we needed backup.

I'd say this situation called for backup.

"This is Agent Gonzalez." Marc admirably kept his voice calm even while jogging. "I'm at the abandoned Prison Farm. We've found our perp, chase is ongoing, shots are being fired. Requesting backup. Yes, sir. Yes, sir, we have a good idea of where she might be. We're checking that out now. Two are in pursuit of perp. Yes, sir. Thank you. See you soon."

"They're coming?"

"They are. ETA about fifteen minutes. Let's see if we can find her before they get here."

"I'm all for it."

The building, now that I was closer to it, seemed to have been the clinic. Bars were still on the windows and probably why the windows were mostly intact, and the roof was still good. No, scratch that—the roof had been repaired. A bit shoddily, like the person who did it was following a tutorial but had no actual experience. Huh.

And lookee there! An intact door.

We were definitely closing in on something . If she wasn't here, this was at least

Chad's hidey-hole.

The door wasn't locked, fortunately, and we went right inside. The place was clean. Well, cleaner than the other buildings had been. Some graffiti on the walls, but no feces or broken furniture. Like someone had cleaned it out. Without a doubt Chad's doing.

The building wasn't large, maybe six rooms altogether, with some doors missing but others in place. Hmm. Okay, which door was our magic one, then?

From the far end of the hallway came some banging. Sounded like someone kicking at a wooden door, actually.

"That's her." Marc sped up and sprinted the rest of the way.

I was right on his heels because he was likely right.

A woman screamed angrily on the other side of the door. "LET ME OUT!"

"Ma'am?" Marc put a hand to the wood. "Ma'am, can you hear me?"

A pause, then a broken sob. "Yes. Yes, I can hear you. Who are you?"

"I'm Special Agent Marc Gonzalez, FBI. Are you Tylesia Evans?"

"I AM! Oh my god, you finally found me!"

"We sure did. Hang tight, we're going to get you out of there."

I punched a fist into the air, so excited I couldn't contain myself. We'd all been right. She was alive! Man, there was going to be one hell of a party when I got her home

again. I could see it now.

Marc looked around, casting about for something, then groaned. “I’ll have to go back to the car. There’s nothing here to break the door open.”

Well, he was right about that.

Marc turned to hightail it, but I suddenly realized he hadn’t really looked at the lock. The deadbolt faced our direction, like one on a house door would. It kept her in, but it didn’t keep us out.

“Wait, wait, Marc. I think we can just unlock it.”

“Eh?” He turned back, looked it over, then sighed. “I’m an idiot. Jon, do the honors?”

“With pleasure.”

I turned the deadbolt and opened the door, flinging it wide open.

There, in all her survivor’s glory, stood Tylesia Evans. I’d seen many a picture of her, and truthfully, she looked a bit rough. Her hair had grown long enough to become a knotted mess, clearly missing all the hair care routines of the modern world. She looked thinner, too, and she hadn’t had much weight to lose to begin with. Stress and trauma? I certainly couldn’t eat when stressed out. I saw no signs of abuse in her lines, except some malnutrition, which relieved me. Her emotions were running hot and wild. The need for revenge, for freedom, pulsed so strongly I could have seen it from space. I didn’t blame her, either; I’d feel the same in her shoes.

She was alive. The rest of it was just details.

“Tye”—I addressed her as her family did—“I’m Jon. A psychic your brother hired to

clear his name and find you. Come with me, please. We'll get you to safety and let you call home."

She sucked in a deep breath before nodding vigorously. "Yes. Please. And tell me you're going to catch that bastard soon."

"Our partners are already in pursuit," Marc assured her. "Backup is on the way. This way, please."

She came readily. I was sure she was sick to death of being in this place. It wasn't meant to be a prison, being a clinic, but the room was only a ten-by-ten space with a bed, a mini fridge, a TV, and a small bookcase. Ouch. I'd go stir crazy in here.

Tylesia latched on to my hand as we speedwalked out of the building, her eyes roving over me.

"You said Dwayne hired you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"That asshole said he was in prison. He gloated about it, how he'd committed the perfect crime and pinned it on Dwayne. I think he was trying to convince me that because he was smarter, I should choose him. You're telling me my brother isn't in prison?"

"We appealed two weeks ago," I explained, watching the relief flood her lines. "He was proven innocent. He's a free man and hoped we could find you."

Her eyes were bright with unshed tears. I could tell she was overwhelmed with all sorts of emotions and didn't blame her one bit. This poor woman had been through hell and back. The fact she was still standing and demanding answers spoke of her

resilience.

“Before you lock him up,” she informed us, tone hardening, “I’m going to punch that bastard dead in the face.”

“Frankly, ma’am?” Marc grinned at her. “I’ll testify you did no such thing.”

“Agent, you and me? We’re going to be good friends.”

Could I watch while she punched him? Because I really wanted to see her get some well-deserved revenge.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:47 pm

This mother fucker ! First it was walls, then it was bouncy house balloon walls, now he was just chucking things at me. Bats, chairs he picked up from the hallway, sand—anything and everything he could think of on the fly, apparently. Some of it nearly hit me, one of them I had to deflect with my arm—which fucking smarted—and I was all out of patience with this bastard.

Gonzalez had joined in on the chase about five minutes ago and was sprinting as madly as I was. He'd said something about Marc having Jon, so I wasn't worried about where my fiancé had gotten off to, but I was determined to bring this to an end.

We left the building through an open doorway, Chad running into the woods. This place had been abandoned for so long, the place was ringed with trees and dense underbrush. It would slow him down, sure, but it would also be harder to chase after him. I did not need to be running through Georgia woods, where ticks abounded, thank you very much.

Gonzalez abruptly stopped, pulled his gun up, and fired off two shots. They landed right next to the perp's head, hitting bark, and I had to admire the shot. Damn, he was good.

Chad abruptly stopped as well, catching himself on a slender sapling, panting hard. He was dripping sweat, his black hoodie sticking to him, and he was clearly out of juice. Both psychically and physically. Otherwise, he'd still be chucking things at me.

“Listen, I'm really tired of chasing you,” Gonzalez informed him flatly. “You make me chase you any more than this, I aim for your leg next.”

Chad straightened, taking off his hat and throwing it forcefully to the ground. Then he turned, glaring at us. He did not look great. Kinda like a druggie who was in need of rehab, six months of decent meals, and a long shower.

“You have no right to do this!” He threw his hands out wide. “Fine, I’m trespassing, but you don’t have to do this!”

“Dude.” I couldn’t believe my ears. “You really think we’re chasing you this hard because of trespassing ?”

He faltered at my question. Then all color drained from his face. I could tell he’d put the pieces together.

“We’re here because you’ve kidnapped and held captive Tylesia Evans.” Gonzalez was still in the no-fucks-to-give mode. “Put your hands on your head and walk toward me slowly. You’re under arrest.”

Idiot tried to bluff his way out of this. “What? Who’s Tylesia—”

“Don’t start with me, asshole. We know damn well she’s here. The best Tracer in the country told us you have her here.”

“You shoot me, I don’t tell you where she is!”

Wow, he sure changed tunes in a heartbeat there. I just rolled my eyes. Like we couldn’t find her. It wasn’t going to be hard.

“Gonzalez, cuffs?”

He took them out of his handcuff case with his free hand and passed them over to me.

Seeing the action, Chad protested louder. “I mean it! You cuff me, I don’t tell you where she is!”

“Dude, don’t be more stupid than you already have been.” I approached steadily, making sure I wasn’t in Gonzalez’s sights. “There’s not even roofs and doors on most of this place. You’ve put her in a place with a door on it. It’s not rocket science.”

His face fell. Like, I seriously think before I pointed it out, Chad hadn’t thought about that. Not the brightest crayon in the box, was he?

I slapped cuffs on him, and even though he tugged a little on my grip, he wasn’t really fighting me. More like a silent protest. Tough shit, dude. I do not care if you don’t like cuffs. Not after what you did to two innocent people.

“Havili, secure?”

“Secure,” I assured Gonzalez.

“Good. I’m calling Marc, then.” He fished out his phone from his pocket.

I heard sirens in the distance, and for a second, I almost dismissed them. But the longer I listened, the more I realized they were heading this direction. Did we have backup coming? I mean, we’d need a forensics team anyway, just to provide evidence in the trial.

“Hey, mi amor . How’s— Oh, so that is our backup? No, we’ve got him. Havili’s got a firm grip on him, too.”

You’re damn right I did. I wasn’t chasing this guy anymore tonight.

Gonzalez’s expression lit up. “You found her? All right! How is she? Well, yeah, I’d

be mad as hell too. Sure, sure, let's walk toward the front. I'll meet you there."

Chad slumped in my grip as all the fight went out of him. He didn't resist as I escorted him toward the main road. He apparently realized that with Tylesia found, there was nothing he could say or do to get out of this situation. He was absolutely correct. In fact, a judge and jury would throw this guy under the prison after what he did. Don't get me wrong, kidnapping a person and holding them captive was bad enough on a regular basis. But doing so with an anchor and framing her psychic for her supposed murder? The population as a whole had a very romantic notion of what an anchor-slash-psychic bond was. It was like telling someone Cinderella was stolen from Prince Charming after they were married and she was kept away from him, all while painting Prince Charming as the villain. Outrage was incoming on a bullet train.

Normally people like Chad got years in prison. But honestly, considering the severity of his crime, I wouldn't be surprised if he got either life or execution for this.

I'd try to feel bad about that later.

By the time we made it to where we'd parked our cars, Marc and Jon were already there. The backup FBI agents were scattering already, pulling out boundary tape, and the forensic guys were hauling their equipment out of their van. They were certainly not wasting any time.

I saw Jon and felt a sense of relief. I mean, I knew Marc would protect him if it came down to that, but I always felt better when I had eyes on Jon. It was a thing.

Next to him, though, was a petite woman who looked rough around the edges. It took me a second, as initially her back was to me, then I realized—this was Tylesia Evans. Wow, she was up on her feet and moving fine? She was one resilient woman.

The second he saw her, Chad started babbling.

“Tye, Tye, you have to talk to them.”

She turned, spotted him, and her face hardened. Now, I’d seen anger and righteous fury on a woman’s face before. Usually walking into a typhoon was safer than coming anywhere near her. And here the typhoon was walking toward me. Yikes, uh, someone help? Pretty sure she wasn’t mad at me, but still, I did not want to be in the blast radius.

Chad, being stupid, kept talking. “Tell them I brought you here because I love you, I just wanted to love you, and you were fighting with me—”

Tye reared back, fist clenching, and then slammed her fist right into his nose. It was an excellent straight punch. I admired its form and execution.

“You motherfucking asshole ,” she snarled. “I hope you rot in prison and someone makes you their bitch. I hope you feel every bit of the agony you put me through. Death is too good for you. The only words I’ll speak of you will be ones of pure, unadulterated hate, and I’ll make sure the entire world knows just what kind of person you are.”

Chad’s nose was bleeding freely, but I didn’t think the tears in his eyes were because of pain. He looked heartbroken that she hated him so much.

Oh. My. God. I stared at him, absolutely without words. Dude, you locked her up and forced a broken anchor connection, and you’re surprised she hates your guts? Was he hoping for Stockholm Syndrome or something to kick in? He must have been.

“I do not want to even breathe the same air as you.” She turned and gestured for the nearest FBI agent. “Ma’am, lock his ass up.”

The agent grinned and came at a trot. “With absolute pleasure.”

“Thank you.”

Chad was marched off to one of the cars. He was still shell-shocked and bleeding. No one had any sympathy for him.

Seeing as how Tylesia was obviously coherent, I thought it best to offer something. “Ma’am, I’m Donovan Havili, Jon’s anchor.”

Her eyes came back to me and softened. “Jon told me you were here, how everyone has worked for weeks to find me. Thank you, Mr. Havili.”

“You are more than welcome. Would you like to call home? I have your parents’ phone numbers.”

Her eyes turned abruptly bright with tears. “I would like that very much.”

I pulled out my phone and unlocked it, then found her mother’s contact before hitting dial. Then I passed it over.

She put it to her ear, staying close. The call was answered almost immediately and with her so close, I could hear it easily.

“Donovan, what’s the news?”

Tylesia’s voice wavered. “Mama?”

A sharp intake of breath and then Serena screamed, “TYE ?!”

“Yeah. They found me. They found me.” Tylesia was openly crying now, but her

smile was breathtaking in its joy. “They have that rotten bastard in cuffs, too.”

“ Oh my god, baby, are you all right ?”

“I will be now. I mean, I want a shower, a full day in a spa, and a week of just being with you guys, but I’m all right.”

“ Of course you are. You’re my daughter. Where are you, Tye ? We’ll come get you right now .”

“I...” She cast about, then looked at me askance. “I have no idea where I am.”

“Put it on speaker,” I encouraged her.

She promptly did so, leaving the phone in the palm of her hand.

“Hi, Mrs. Evans.”

“ Donovan Havili, I could kiss you for finding my little girl. ”

“I don’t think Jon would mind too much.” I laughed. “She really is okay. We’re dead center of Atlanta, at the abandoned old Prison Farm. I’ll text you the address in a minute. If you’d like, you can join us down here at the hotel we’re in. It’s a long drive for you guys, after all.”

“ Sounds marvelous, let’s do that. Tye, what can I bring you ?”

“My family, to start. But please, Mama, bring me fresh clothes? I’m deathly sick of everything here. And I’m dying to have my phone back.”

“ We didn’t get rid of a single thing of yours, don’t worry. We’ll pack up and be gone

within an hour. Donovan, you shoot me the address for the hotel, and I'll make arrangements to have a room there. And let's all have breakfast together in the morning .”

“Yes, ma'am. That sounds wonderful. If you want, you can keep talking to Tye for a while. I've got to check in with Jon.”

“ I don't want to get off the phone just yet. Tye, let me tell you all that happened while you were gone .”

“Yes, please! And tell me Dwayne's okay. I know our bond tearing apart like that had to hurt.”

“ Oh, baby, that's sadly not even the worst of it. ”

“Oh, Dwayne's calling! Hold on, I'm adding him to the call.”

I wasn't surprised Dwayne was calling. I was sure he'd felt the bond snap back into place, what that meant, and called me immediately. Fortunately, he got to speak to the person he really wanted. The thought made me grin.

I walked away and let them talk. Tylesia had been in an information blackout for months. Just wait until she learned all that had happened to her brother. Her anger would turn apocalyptic after, I had no doubt. She might try to kill Chad herself, and who could blame her? He must have been quite graphic in his description of how much her brother suffered with their bond 'broken,' although why he'd done that, I did not know. It certainly didn't help his case.

I trotted over to Jon, who turned to welcome me with a smile. He was proud of himself, as he should be, because he had unraveled one hell of a cold case. This one was going into the history books for sure.

“Tye talking to parents?” Jon guessed.

“Yup, her mom and Dwayne. They’re going to come down here and fetch her home again.”

“I do not blame them. I’d do the same.” Jon nodded, satisfied. “We did good here, babe.”

“We did super good. You going into interrogation tonight?”

“Yeah. I’m too curious to not get some answers, and I want this all on record before leaving.”

“Fair enough. Let’s hear what the asshole has to say for himself.”

Jon grimaced while looking around. “Whatever it is, he’s not going to be able to justify this .”

I snorted. “No. No, that he will not.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:47 pm

The FBI did not slack off when they had their suspect in custody. A female agent escorted Tylesia into the women's locker room so she could get a shower, borrow some clothes, and basically wash off the stink of captivity. They had to get her statement, of course, and run her through a basic eval and checkup before they could let her go home. Tylesia was all for writing out her statement and eagerly went where directed.

Me? Well, I got to go to ye old faithful interrogation room. Marc took point, sitting next to me at the interrogation table, with Chad sitting across from me.

The room was a standard ten by ten with commercial carpet and white walls, nothing in it but a table and chairs. Chad slouched there, eyes on the Formica top, a listless air to him. He looked apathetic on the surface, but his lines told a different story. The deep ultramarine blue of grief hung upon him like a dark cloud, all mixed in with the hot red of anger and the emerald green of fear.

Huh. Now there was an interesting mix. I'd seen something like this before, when a man had been wholly rejected by a woman he loved, but...these two weren't in love? Oooh bitch, I bet this was one-sided. Shit, I had a feeling I now knew the story.

Marc started us out. "Special Agent Marc Gonzalez is leading this interview. Date is August 1 st , time 11:13 p.m. With me is consultant Jonathan Bane. Interview is in regard to the Evans abduction case. Jon?"

I loved how he said he was leading the interview, but I got the first question.

Still, I did have an idea of where to start.

I kept my voice steady and calm. “Tell me what started this all.”

Chad didn’t lift his eyes from the table. “Does it matter? She hates me.”

“But you love her.”

His eyes filled with tears, bottom lip trembling. “I love her more than anything.”

Called it. This stupid bastard. I was filled with disgust already. And he hadn’t even told his story.

“That’s what started this, I guess.” Chad blew out an unsteady breath. He kept fidgeting, leg jumping up and down as he jiggled it, too agitated to settle. “When we were all in college, I saw her in one of my classes. She’s so vibrant , y’know? Spunky and beautiful, and I just wanted to be with her. More than anything, I wanted to be with her. I tried to play the long game. I would sit next to her and be friendly in class, and I tried to get to know her. At first, that seemed to work. Then at the end of the semester, I asked her out, and she turned me down. She was nice about it, but...I just didn’t get it. Why had she been nice the whole semester if she wasn’t interested in me?”

I swear to you, this was why women were so leery of the “nice guys.” They were so quick to make assumptions just because you were polite and smiled.

“I thought maybe she was dating someone. You can be interested in someone else while you’re in a relationship, everyone knows that. So I tried to be patient. I stayed friends with her, and kept signing up for classes I knew she’d need for her major, and kept trying. But it didn’t seem to matter what I did. She still wasn’t giving me the time of day. She kept rejecting me. Then she told me she was aromantic, and I didn’t know what the word meant. I had to look it up. But I saw it for the excuse it was. She just didn’t want to be in a relationship with me, for whatever reason, and that was her

go-to. She didn't see how perfect we were for each other; otherwise, she'd never have said that to me."

No, moron, she was really aromantic. Asexual, too. Wow, this man was past all saving.

I saw obsession in his lines. It wouldn't have mattered how Tylesia rejected him, he wouldn't have been able to accept it either way. Knowing this, I pushed him a little.

"So your first thought was...what? To kidnap her?"

"No!" He slammed both hands on the table with a sharp bang, then clenched his fists and forcibly calmed himself after that shouted word, but his voice was still rough.

"No. I tried getting her to go on a date with me first. She wouldn't even entertain the thought. Then I saw her around her brother. Didn't know he was her brother at first. I just saw how she looked at him. Like he was everything to her. I wanted her to look that way at me but she wouldn't...she wouldn't even entertain the idea of a friend date. I tried everything. But she just ignored me."

Marc shot me a look like he was already over this man's shit. Me too, brother. Me too.

"I had to make her see." His eyes shot up suddenly, locking on mine, as if he was desperate for someone to hear him. To understand him. "I had to get her away from him long enough for her to realize she was just under his thumb. I'd be so much better for her. But she wouldn't listen to me as long as he was around."

"So you kidnapped her?"

"WHAT ELSE WAS I SUPPOSED TO DO?!" He slammed his cuffed hands against the table again, crying now. Ugly crying, too. Snot and everything. "What else was I

supposed to do?”

How about taking the no? Seriously, when a person said no, that should be the end of it. My sympathy meter was at an all-time low here.

Marc pushed a little. “Did the plan to frame her brother come from the onset or...?”

“Oh. No. I didn’t mean to do that in the beginning.” Chad calmed a little. I could see from his lines he wasn’t lying. “No, I just wanted to take her away for a few days. Just so I could talk to her without him constantly interrupting. But the one time I tried to lead her away to my car, she threw my hand off and warned she’d call the police if I tried that again. And then her brother swooped in and grabbed her. I was so angry. So fucking angry with him for interfering AGAIN. I don’t think he even realized I was there, he was so focused on her.”

His story made sense to me because Dwayne barely remembered him. He hadn’t even thought of him as a suspect. Chad really hadn’t registered on Dwayne’s radar.

“I knew then I had to prevent him somehow from following after her.” Chad let out a bitter laugh. “What better way than to frame him for her murder? He’d be locked up tight, and finally, I could have Tye’s full attention.”

“Is that why you went through the effort of manufacturing all of the evidence? To make sure he was pinned for the crime?”

“Sure. It worked, too.” His lines abruptly went red hot with rage. “Until you entered the scene. How did you disprove all that?”

I pointed to Marc at the same time he raised his hand.

“That was actually me,” Marc said calmly. “I’m a Tracer.”

Chad's expression fell. "Oh. Shit. I didn't think you'd pull in a Tracer."

"Yeah, it was pretty obvious the evidence was all fake. You were keeping up with the trial?"

"I had Google alerts for it. Just in case. By that point, I was really losing hope. Tye still wouldn't talk to me." Chad's grief came surging back, burying his anger for a moment. "No matter how much attention I paid her, no matter what I said or did, she just spewed hate. I didn't deserve the hate. I took really good care of her."

The delulu was strong with this one. It was actually alarming how deluded he was, how hardcore he believed what he was saying. Marc caught onto it too, and he shot me a look like Is this guy nuts ?

Yes, but no. He was absolutely off his rocker, no question, but he knew what he had done. There was no excusing his actions.

I had to establish that in this interview. It was half the reason why I'd wanted to sit in on this. That and my desire to wrap it all up.

"Chad. You do realize that kidnapping her was the wrong thing to do?"

He nodded, still heartbroken. "At the time, it seemed like the only option. I knew she'd be mad, but I was so sure she'd forgive me, too."

It was hard, but I didn't roll my eyes. "You also realize you should have released her right away and set the record straight?"

"I...couldn't." Chad's tears started back up, and he was almost pleading with us. "I needed more time. I just...I just needed more time. Don't you see? She would have forgiven me."

Marc had apparently had enough. “Sir. Do you not realize who Jonathan Bane is?”

“He’s...a psychic. I know that. A Reader, I think?”

“Do you understand what that means?”

Chad shook his head uncertainly. “I know he can tell truth from lies.”

“I can do far more than that.” Time for a dose of reality. I wanted him to be fully aware of how badly he’d screwed up as he rotted in prison for the next fifty years. “I can read everything about you. How you’re originally from eastern Tennessee and the golden child of your aged parents. How obsessed you are with Tylesia even now. You rejected being a licensed psychic because you didn’t want to work for the government and your parents were outraged. You cut contact with them because of it.”

Chad went abruptly still. “No one...no one knows that.”

I tapped the corner of my eye with the tip of my finger. “I can see it all. Understand this, Chad. Tylesia wasn’t ever going to forgive you. She might have been indifferent to you before, but she hates your guts now. If we handed her a weapon and carte blanche, she’d murder you with a smile. No amount of time would overcome that.”

“You’re...you’re lying.” His face drained to a corpse-grey color. “Please tell me you’re lying.”

“You took an anchor from her psychic,” I responded quietly. “There’s an amazing love there. A loyalty and fierce protectiveness that can’t ever be erased, which is really why you wanted her so badly. Because you wanted her to be your anchor.”

Man looked ready to pass out. “Did she tell you that?”

“She didn’t need to. I can see it all in a glance.”

“I just...I just needed her. I needed her so much more than he did.”

Ah, and the truth finally came out. His obsession with her, his conviction of how much he needed her—it all made sense now. I’d shake my head at his stupidity, but I was too angry on behalf of the entire Evans family. I really wanted to take a clue bat and smack him a few times instead.

Chad’s head dropped. “And now I’ll never see her again.”

“Count yourself lucky,” Marc advised. “I think she’d murder you if she ever saw you again. Jon, anything else?”

“Naw, I have nothing else to ask him.”

I stood and left the room, leaving Chad behind. I’d definitely see him again in a courtroom setting. I’d have to testify to make sure this man was put behind bars. Did it make me a bad person if I was looking forward to it?

I checked my own lines. Naw, I was good.

Marc had more things to wrap up, so I left him to it. He didn’t need me for the rest of this. I met up with people in the hallway. Donovan put his phone away in his pocket as I came out. Gonzalez looked absolutely done. Just done.

“I cannot believe one man’s obsession caused all of this. So much unnecessary pain, time, money—all because he was set on having something he couldn’t. I really hate humanity some days.” Gonzalez glanced past us toward the closed door. “At least this will be an open-and-shut case.”

“Oh, for sure,” I agreed. “Too much evidence and witness testimony for him to skate around this. If he doesn’t get life, I’ll be surprised.”

“I’ll start a damn petition if he doesn’t get life.” Gonzalez was still mad as a hornet. “When I think about someone doing to me what that man did to Dwayne and Tylesia? He better get life.”

I really didn’t think a lesser sentence would happen, but we’d see.

“Well, on a different note”—Donovan seemed amused for some reason—“we’ve been kind of left behind. Tylesia is already on her way to the hotel. Grant’s been whisked away. Atlanta’s Missing Persons begged and pleaded, and he caved and said he’d help them until tomorrow morning.”

I had to shake my head. “Didn’t we bring him with us to give him a break?”

“Man’s a soft touch.”

“Apparently. Well, we’ll have to abscond with him tomorrow. He has no way back without us.”

“A fact Alan is counting on, I think. Let’s go back to the hotel if we’re not waiting on them. I, for one, would like a hot shower.”

I got instant agreements. Good to know we were all on the same page.

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:47 pm

Finally, we were home. We'd had a late breakfast with the Evans family, and it was so celebratory—so filled with love and hope and laughter—it had been kind of hard to tear myself away from it. In the end, the need to get home had set in, and we'd parted ways there.

Then I'd had to go rescue Grant and Alan, as Atlanta's Missing Persons department had not wanted to let go of him. Man had sadly worked most of the night, and the second he got into the car, he zonked. Slept all four hours of the drive. Alan did not look happy, so I had a feeling boundaries were going to be set. Really, I understood both sides. Grant had a hard time saying no when he knew it was a life-or-death situation. Alan's focus was on Grant's health. I wished them luck finding that balance.

We got home that evening after dropping Grant and Alan off. I wanted out of this car so badly. Words couldn't express how badly.

I pulled into my parking lot and whined to Donovan, "We have no food in this house."

"How about I run out and pick up something?" he offered. "I'm craving fries right now."

Fries meant Five Guys in our language. "Oooh, yes. Sold. Go. I'll feed cats and face their wrath for leaving them alone."

"Fair trade."

I handed him keys, kissed him, then bounced inside. Freedom!

The second I had my back door open, I heard light, feminine voices from inside. Eh? Who'd invaded my place? Then I recognized a laugh and went duuuuh . Skylar and Abby. I had asked them to look in on the cats while I was gone. They were likely over here doing just that. I forgot to remind Donovan to text them. Oh well.

“Hey, girls, we’re back!” I called.

Skylar’s head popped around into the hallway. “Hey, you sure are. Uncle Donovan said you found Tye, so we called Dwayne this morning and got the full story. You guys had a crazy time.”

“‘Crazy’ about covers it. How goes it here?”

“Well, we think we’ve figured stuff out. And the cats are fine, we’ve been playing laser pointer.”

“A favorite game.” One I sadly could not participate in, but I had feather wands, and the cats loved those equally as well.

I came in closer to have a proper conversation. Abby was still playing, casting the laser pointer all over the living room floor, sometimes the couches, and the cats were chasing it for all they were worth. They would definitely not hold a grudge against Donovan and me, as they’d be fast asleep after this. Bless my girls for wearing them out. Bless.

Deeming it not safe to sit on the couch, I took up a barstool instead and prodded Skylar, “What did you figure out?”

“How to handle the upcoming school year.”

Ah right, that had been a question. It wouldn't be comfortable for either of them to be apart for long, and a full school day for a newly bonded pair? Not in the cards. But there was such a driving distance—and Nashville traffic was so insane—that one of them commuting to the other's school was not the optimum option.

“So what did you guys decide to do?”

“Basically, we're going to act like we're shared custody kids.” Skylar laughed while saying this. “We'll stay with my parents during the school week, then stay with Abby's dad during the weekend.”

“My dad works crazy hours sometimes on cases anyway,” Abby explained to me, still zooming the laser pointer everywhere. “So it's hit or miss whether he's home during the work week. This just made the most sense to us. Plus, Skylar's school is better than mine, so it's a leg up for me.”

True, Skylar went to a magnet school. “And you're a shoo-in into the school with you two bonded, so no worries getting in.”

“Yup. We filled out the paperwork already, so we're just waiting for the official okay.”

“Also means we can spend after-school hours training with you,” Skylar reminded me. “Which was the other reason why we chose to do it this way.”

“Makes sense to me. I think it's smart, really, and the only long-term solution. When does this living arrangement start?”

“Start of school year. We're just going day by day at the moment.” Skylar shrugged. “Not like we're on a set schedule right now.”

“Also true.”

Skylar leaned in, wicked mirth on her face. “Did Uncle Donovan really go into a haunted building to find Tylesia?”

“He really did. I might have to put the man in therapy at this rate. He’s truly terrified of ghosts. I think, once we found Chad, he was so angry at the guy, he forgot the place was haunted for a few minutes. Did you hear that Tylesia punched Chad?”

“What! No, Dwayne didn’t tell me that part.” Skylar nodded in approval. “Good for her. I would have punched him too. Did you learn why he did all this? Was he in love with her or something?”

I shook my head. “Obsession. No gold in the man’s lines. He was convinced he needed Tye as his anchor more than Dwayne did. He was also convinced that if he just gave it more time, she’d forgive him. Even being punched didn’t deter his obsession.”

“Woooooow. Piece of work.” Skylar made a face. “If anyone ever does that with me, I’ll punch ’em first. Abs, you hear that? You spot any creeps, tell me. We’ll knock ’em out flat before they can get obsessed.”

Abby saluted with her right hand. “Roger that. Oh, Jon. Did you hear how much Dwayne got in the settlement?”

“Uh...no, I didn’t think it was right to ask.”

“A cool four million. He told me.”

I whistled long and low. Damn. I wasn’t saying it was a good idea to spend a year in prison for a payout, but for that kind of money? Tempting. Very tempting.

“He’s already been house shopping, since he lost his. He’s going for something with very tight security after all that happened. Said he’s going to pay for it outright, along with new vehicles for both him and Tylesia.”

“Awesome. I hope it’s a good fresh start for both of them.”

“I think it will be. They’re really excited about it all. Oh, and did you hear? Court date against Solomon has been set.”

An evil smile slipped out before I could stop it. “Nooo, I did not hear that. Wow, that’s quick. When is it set for?”

“Middle of this month. I think it’s August 18th ?” Abby did a little booty dance.

“About time someone takes him down a peg. I’m still really mad about what he did to Dwayne.”

“We’re all mad at him for different reasons, trust me.”

“I literally cannot wait—” Abby abruptly stopped, her lines blaring with fear and alarm as she stared right past me.

I whipped around, a knee-jerk reaction to see what had scared her so badly.

And came face-to-face with Solomon.

The man looked wild. His black hair was oily and slick, body odor horrible like he hadn’t bathed in days. His brown eyes were normally cold, but right now they looked bloodshot. Crazy. His lines flexed like a mad tapeworm on drugs, all fuchsia with loathing, scarlet with rage, but where his moral compass line should be, it sparked grey, as if it was no longer functioning. All those things were scary enough and would make me run for the hills. But to make it all worse, he had a gun up and

trained on me.

“You fucking cunt.” His breathing was more of a pant, indicating how hot his rage ran. “You ruin my life and you’re in here laughing it up?”

I had to get the girls out. That was my only thought. I had to get the girls out before he turned on them, too. Rushing him wouldn’t do a lot of good in this sense, and the risk of him hitting someone else was too high. Shit, Donovan wouldn’t be back for another fifteen minutes at least. I had to get the girls out, give them a chance to run; otherwise, we were all dead.

Fear beat in me like a heartbeat, but I stayed calm on the outside.

“Send the girls out,” I told him. “They had no part in this.”

“I send them out, they’ll call the police. I’m going to take my fucking time with you. Make you feel every bit of pain that you’ve put me through.”

Loved how the man was pinning the blame for his screwups all on me. Then again, he wasn’t able to self-analyze or admit to his own faults, so I wasn’t surprised. I just wished he hadn’t come down to this level. Threatening me was bad enough, but two teenage girls?

I had to keep him talking. I had to buy time until Donovan got here. It was the only way I saw out of this mess with none of us dying.

I could read this man like an open book, and I knew what buttons to push.

“So. You think I’m the cause of all this? What did I do, huh?”

Hatred flared in him, hot and fast, and he nearly trembled with it as he spat out,

“Don’t you fucking play this game with me! You’ve always been holier than thou. Acting like I’m an idiot!”

Uh. You are? Currently an armed idiot, which was not in my favor.

“The very first day you met me, you almost immediately dismissed me. Just looked me over, head to toe, and I could tell you thought I was an idiot even then!”

Dude. Anyone looking at you could tell you were a moron. Didn’t take a Reader. Man, it was really hard to bite my tongue. I wanted to tell him off, but I also was desperate to get my girls out of harm’s way.

“Then there was that first case you took away from me, where you turned it all up on its head. I swear you manufactured evidence just to make someone else the bad guy. Just to make sure I looked like an idiot.”

I sincerely didn’t remember which one he was referring to. “Which case?”

“Don’t fucking toy with me!” he screamed.

“I honestly can’t remember, Solomon. I’ve slept since then, so remind me. Which case?”

Solomon had always loved the sound of his own voice, so he was eager to tell me. It was one of those easy-to-push buttons.

“The one with the fraud at the city office! The ninety-thousand-dollar check that was given to the wrong woman.”

It took a second for his words to click. I wasn’t kidding when I said I didn’t remember which case he was referring to. Then it did and I rolled my eyes before I

could catch myself.

“Even now you’re rolling your eyes!”

“Solomon. Everyone could see that the woman you pinned the blame on wasn’t at fault—”

“She was the one who issued the check to the person!”

“She was also the one who reported the case to begin with. And gave evidence she thought it was a fraud case. With signatures from both of her bosses highlighting every single issue with the original filing for the check. It was obvious no one except her bosses—who didn’t want to accept the blame—thought she was the problem. You were buddy-buddy with one of her bosses, and that’s the only reason why you leapt on her as a suspect.”

“So, what? I’m just supposed to believe someone else over my friend?”

“When the evidence is right in front of you that he screwed up? Uh, yeah? I mean, seriously, you’re a detective. Aren’t you supposed to be able to discern truth from lies?”

Solomon laughed. It was a very ugly sound. “You always make me out to be the fuckup. You’ve turned the entire department against me! Captain Olivia’s suspended me, pending an investigation. A fucking investigation! Like I haven’t been on the force for over twenty goddamn years . Like I haven’t trained detectives through the years! Those same guys won’t even return a phone call now.”

I was pretty sure I knew who he was talking about. And they wouldn’t return a phone call from Solomon even before this all went down. They’d learned quickly his methods weren’t legit or even smart. In fact, one of them had gone to Borrowman and

asked to be retrained, which said a lot.

The gun started shaking in Solomon's hand. He was immensely upset, almost hurt. All that to say, his ego was very hurt.

The girls were behind one of the couches—they'd taken advantage of his preoccupation with me to hide. Hopefully one of them texted Donovan. Called 911. Something. This moment sadly illustrated just how sloppy Solomon was. Who threatened someone at gunpoint but failed to get anyone's cellphones? Lock down witnesses? Here he was reaming me out because he'd been painted as an imbecile, while simultaneously acting like one. I'd laugh if I didn't have a gun in my face.

"Every single time you come into one of my cases, you showed me up. And I'm not! A! Fucking! Idiot! I'm going to jail." He sobbed, tears and snot making a mess. "I'm probably going to jail. And it's all because of you! My dad's washed his hands of me, said this is too big, he's not going to get involved in it."

Ohhhh. Now this made more sense. The hurt was because of being abandoned by his father. Not anything to do with me directly. I was just the easier target.

"No one's on my side right now! No one's willing to help me! They all say I deserve this after all I've done. What have I done, huh? What have I done?! I put bad guys behind bars—"

More often than not, you put innocent people behind bars. Hence the problem.

"—and for that I'm ridiculed? I'm shunned?"

His hand holding the gun abruptly firmed. "You. You entering the scene is what caused it all. The second you came, people saw me as a screwup past saving. I kept getting called into the captain's office. I kept getting docked pay, reprimands, and

now...now I've lost everything. BECAUSE OF YOU!"

Shit. He was on the verge of exploding. I might have to rush that gun after all.

Sorry, Donovan. I know you don't want me to do that. But in a second, I might not have a choice.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:47 pm

Abby's text scared the living hell out of me. I called 911 right away, then Borrowman, telling them to get to my house ASAP. I sped out of the parking lot, forgetting about the food, just flooring it. I'd not driven this fast and recklessly in a long time, but I couldn't care about speed limits.

The love of my life was in danger. My girls were in danger. The terror of not being fast enough to get there, to stop it, ate me up alive. I prayed harder than I ever had before. Please let me be there in time. Please . I'd give anything to make it in time to stop Solomon.

Solomon was going to be lucky if he was still breathing by the end of the day.

I saw the bastard's car parked crooked behind Jon's Humvee. I parked even worse behind him, throwing the truck into Park, not bothering to turn off the engine. I jumped out of the truck and ran toward the open back door. Bastard hadn't thought to close it behind him, apparently.

His stupidity was to my benefit. It was hard to open that door without making a noise. And I needed to be stealthy like I never had before.

I eased up to the door, hand on my gun—then paused.

Shit.

Jon was in the line of fire.

I didn't think he saw me—his attention was solely on Solomon—but he stood almost

directly in my line of fire, which meant putting another gun into this equation was not the right call.

Okay, breathe. Breathe. You've got this. You've done tougher things than sneak up on a rotten, crazy bastard who's threatening your lover.

This pep talk didn't exactly work because I couldn't think of a damn thing worse than this moment, but I was determined Solomon wasn't winning this fight.

"No one's on my side right now! No one's willing to help me! They all say I deserve this after all I've done. What have I done, huh? What have I done?! I put bad guys behind bars—"

What the hell was this bastard saying? Sounded like he was properly wound up and trying to pin all the blame on Jon. Scapegoating never worked. I didn't know why he hadn't learned his lesson by now.

I did know he was being so loud he was covering any sound I might accidentally make. I eased up, boots going heel to toe in a rolling motion to erase any whisper of sound. My adrenaline was pumping so hard it felt like a heartbeat in my ears. Easy does it. Getting the drop on Solomon was the only way to get my family out of this safely.

"—and for that I'm ridiculed? I'm shunned?"

Where were the girls? I had no line of sight on them. I hoped they'd somehow taken cover. They must have, if Abby had managed to text me. I'd hug her for being so composed in a stressful situation later. And buy her ice cream.

Solomon's hand holding the gun suddenly tightened. "You. You entering the scene is what caused it all. The second you came, people saw me as a screwup past saving. I

kept getting called into the captain's office. I kept getting docked pay, reprimands, and now...now I've lost everything. BECAUSE OF YOU!"

My spidey sense told me he was seconds away from pulling the trigger. Terrifying, truly, and I felt sharp terror resurge like an acid wash down my throat.

I sped up a little, crossing the last few feet between us. In that second, Jon spied me. I could see it in the widening of his eyes, but my very smart fiancé didn't flinch or give me away. He instead snapped back at Solomon, keeping the focus there.

"You fucking piece of shit!" Jon stabbed a finger at him. "The only reason you even kept this job for so long was because your mayor daddy kept cleaning up after your useless ass!"

Solomon actually flinched back. "You know who my father is?!"

"Yeah, dumbass, we do. It'll all come out in trial."

"You can't do this! I promised him—"

I struck. One hand went for his throat, putting him in a stranglehold. He stank of alcohol, the smell assaulting my nose, but I didn't let up. He beat at my hand, the gun hand coming up and around. I latched on, able to grab his wrist, but not far enough to reach the gun itself to disarm him. Shit, why did this bastard have such long arms?

Jon pounced in the next second. He grabbed the gun and twisted, using the momentum against Solomon's fingers. The move was so perfectly executed Solomon instinctively let go of the gun rather than break his fingers, and in an instant, Jon had the gun.

I let go of Solomon's wrist, using my other hand to bear down harder on his neck.

Solomon scrambled, but it was hard to think when your oxygen was cut off, and aside from beating uselessly at my hands and kicking my shins, he couldn't seem to focus enough to do any real damage. I winced at the kicks, but I held my ground.

It felt like eons, but within a minute, he was on the ground, passed out cold. I stood there, shaking, panting for breath.

I could hear sirens incoming, but my attention wasn't on them. Solomon wasn't a threat at the moment, and I had to check on my family.

“Jon?”

He threw both arms around me, hugging me tight. I latched on, my hands not able to bring him in close enough. For a long second, we just held each other, my nose buried against his hair, breathing him in.

“I'm okay.” He turned his head, not releasing me, and called, “Skylar, Abby, it's safe.”

Their heads popped out over the back of the couch, and they took in the sight of Solomon with relief.

“Told you Uncle Donovan would take him out,” Skylar said matter-of-factly. “Good timing, Uncle Donovan.”

My head jerked back in surprise, not expecting her to call me uncle, but I was absolutely giddy because of it. Jon grinned too, but he wasn't surprised, which meant he somehow knew she now thought of me as her uncle. I seriously loved this girl.

I unbent enough to grin. “I do try. You two okay?”

“I mean, I’d rather not be under gunpoint again, but yeah? Abs?”

Abby stood up fully, and while she did look unnerved, she also looked mad.

“Donovan? Can we accidentally put a bullet in him before the police get here?”

So when Abby got scared, she got violent. Good to know.

Jon sighed and let go of me a little. Just so he could face the girls easier.

“Abby, let’s maybe not end the day with murder?”

“It would save us the cost of a trial,” she suggested hopefully.

Solomon groaned, stirring. It was unfortunate that when someone was choked out, they woke up as soon as the pressure was lifted. Without compunction, I coldcocked Solomon, and he was back out for the count.

The cops burst inside a moment later. Fortunately. Because frankly, I saw Abby’s point on this one.

I recognized the first two cops through the door. Franky and his partner, Shelly. I gestured to the unconscious man near my feet.

“It’s fine. He’s knocked out cold.”

They went from guns out to more relaxed, although Shelly still came straight for Solomon, pulling out cuffs. No trust there, huh? Well, I didn’t blame her. Rather, I was relieved to have him in cuffs.

“What the hell’s going on?” Franky demanded. Then did a double take upon seeing

Abby. “Shit! You girls okay?”

Abby waved him down. “We’re fine. He just yelled a lot and waved a gun, didn’t touch any of us. I feel like I need therapy after this, but it’s fine.”

She’d undoubtedly get therapy after this. No one should have to deal with an armed lunatic.

Jon sighed and started filling them in.

“Solomon snuck in the back door and told me he was going to kill me because I ruined his life. In a nutshell. I mean, he had a lot to say—”

“I recorded half of it,” Skylar offered.

Jon stopped mid-sentence, head whipping around. “You did what?”

Now, trust Skylar to have the wherewithal to even think of recording a raving madman.

Her expression was a thundercloud of anger. “If he did kill us, you think I’m letting him off scot-free? Hell no. I hit record as soon as we got behind the couch. Angled my camera so it caught him full-on while he ranted. Also caught it when Uncle Donovan got him in the stranglehold. The move was beautiful, Uncle Donovan. You’ll teach me how to do that next, right?”

“Uh...sure.” I scratched my head and looked at my niece and wondered where she got these nerves of steel from. ‘Cause I was still jumpy, not going to lie.

I felt sorry for anyone who messed with Abby in the future. They might not survive Skylar’s wrath afterward.

Sighing, Franky spoke into the walkie attached to his breast pocket. “Dispatch, can I get an ambulance at Jon’s place?”

The response was loud and clear: “ Did Jon get hurt ?!”

“No, Donovan got Solomon before he could do damage, but now Solomon’s out cold. We need a stretcher.”

“ Oh. Copy that, I’ll dispatch one to you. ”

I loved how no address was needed for us. Just “Jon’s place.” Should that worry me?

You know what, I chose to not stress about it. I had enough on my plate and only so many spoons available.

Shelly, very apologetic about the whole thing, spoke. “Sorry, everyone. You’ll need to come down to the station. File charges, statements, all that.”

“Yeah,” I agreed on a long sigh.

Jon also made a face, glaring down at Solomon. “I have to get into a vehicle again because of you, and I didn’t get my fries.”

“Babe. Are you seriously more upset about the fries than being held at gunpoint?”

“Of course I’m upset about the other, too.”

Really? ’Cause it didn’t look that way to me.

The ambulance arrived shortly after, hauling Solomon away. We gathered up Skylar and Abby, informing both girls to call their parents and fill them in. They’d need a

guardian to oversee their statement, and it was wrong to leave parents in the dark about what just happened, anyway.

I was more than peeved with everything that had gone down, but just as we got to the police station, Jon leaned in to whisper near my ear. “Hot monkey sex when we get back,” he promised in a low tone. “Because I, for one, could use it.”

I nodded vigorously. Me too. My adrenaline was still hopping and needed an outlet; otherwise, I’d be up half the night.

I wasn’t saying I wanted to marry this man because of how well he knew me, but it was a definite plus.

Abby opened the back door once we parked and she said with confidence as she disembarked, “Solomon’s not going to get out of this one. Asshole’s going to jail for sure.”

You know what? She was likely right.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:47 pm

Nothing about the law was fast. Anyone who worked in law would tell you that it could and had moved slower than cold molasses rolling uphill. So imagine my shock when Solomon went to trial one month after he tried to kill me.

I knew before this that I had a lot of friends in the judicial system. I didn't know how mad those friends were until I saw Solomon's court date. In fact, the civil case against him had been forcibly moved past the criminal date, as the judge wanted to try the criminal case first. Not an uncommon occurrence, and Craig was happy to wait. Solomon had shot himself in the foot here. He'd have been fired and fined for what happened to Dwayne, but it would have been hard to get him any jail time. But trying to kill me? Oh, he'd done fucked up good.

Today was the last day of the trial. The defense attorney had been good, no fault on him, and it was clear the mayor had paid for the best he could find. But there was too much evidence. Between Skylar's video (god above, I loved my niece for her quick thinking), the witnesses, the sloppy way Solomon had attacked me—there was just nothing to defend. They'd gone for a temporary insanity plea because what else could they do? But their argument had been beyond weak. Trying to blame all the events on me, and justifying Solomon attacking me, didn't work when there was plenty of evidence other people also had it out for Solomon. Captain Olivia was quite happy to take the stand and testify she had been building a case against Solomon for almost a year.

Solomon had a Pikachu face over that one, like it had never occurred to him someone would be gathering evidence to get him fired. It made me wonder—did he truly think I was the sole one out to get him? Was he that oblivious?

Obviously, the answer was yes.

To make matters better (for us), we had Judge Agatha McClain presiding over this case. The more she'd heard, the more unhappy she'd gotten. Right now, she was bouncing between glaring daggers at Solomon and smiling at the jury. Message was pretty clear: Bury the bastard .

"Defense, you may make your closing argument," Judge McClain said.

I was pretty sure the poor man had gotten the short end of the stick in the office because he looked quite unhappy to have to stand up and say anything. I could see from his lines he didn't like Solomon and didn't want to defend him, but he had a job to do. So he stood, straightened out his suit coat, and spoke.

"People of the jury, you've heard all the evidence. There is no doubt my client was in the wrong. But I plead with you to give him some grace. This is a man who was on the brink of losing a career he loved. One he'd invested decades into. Anyone faced with that kind of heartbreak and stress would go a little crazy. He's entirely remorseful for making the decision he did. But this man needs help, not a jail sentence."

Anyone would agree Solomon needed help. A lead injection to the cranium would be my suggestion.

"People of the jury, please show some compassion today and give your verdict accordingly. Defense rests."

Said a lot that the man couldn't come up with a better closing argument.

"Counselor?"

The prosecuting attorney stood. Now, I'd known Mike Halward for as long as I'd been working, and he was a salt of the earth man. What made him brilliant at his job was his bulldog attitude when taking on tough cases and his charisma when speaking to an audience. I saw that charisma on full display today.

"People of the jury, I think we've all been in high-stress situations in our lives." Mike walked up to stand in front of the jury, and he addressed them like he would a friend. He had that kind of tone to his words. "I mean, we've all been in danger of losing a job. Right? All worried about finding another one, being able to pay bills. We've all been in trouble with a boss at some point in our lives. Now, show of hands—how many of you thought to pick up a gun and point it at your scapegoat? What, none of you? Well, I think that pretty much says it all right there, doesn't it? That's the quality of man Detective Solomon is. He'd rather shoot an innocent man and threaten two teenage girls than own up to his mistakes. Now, the question I pose to you is: Do you want a man like this out there? Possibly hired on as a detective again? Are you going to let him get by with trying to murder people when he's having a bad day? I certainly wouldn't trust this man. I hope you see the wisdom of throwing him in prison. I can't imagine any of you wanting him out free, considering how bad his judgment is. That's all I have to say on the matter. Prosecution rests."

"Jury, you have heard the closing arguments. You may retire to the other room and deliberate."

Abby leaned in close to me. She was adamant about being here for the trial, and since it was a good learning experience for her, I had no problem with it. Besides, she deserved to see Solomon locked up. Skylar was on her other side, downright gloating.

"How long does a jury deliberate?"

"Totally depends on the case and the jury." I shrugged. "I've seen them deliberate for hours. I've seen them do it for minutes."

“What are they even doing? Just talking?”

“Talking to each other, looking over the evidence again, that kind of thing. They get to make up their own minds without hearing a lawyer trying to spin it.”

“Huh. I wonder how long they’ll take in this case?”

“Guess we’re about to find out. Usually the judge dismisses all of us if they’re going to take more than five minutes.”

The bailiff came back in and whispered something to Judge McClain, who smiled. There were some interesting things going on in her lines. I saw a lot of banked anger in the form of a light red, all mixed in with the bright yellow of pleasure. Uh? What had he just told her?

The jury marched back out and resumed their seats. Oh my god, are you kidding me?

Donovan, on my other side, whistled soft and long. “Wow. I don’t think they were in there even three minutes.”

He was right. Holy shit. If they only took three minutes, then Solomon was toast.

I quickly read through all the jurors’ lines and inner me cackled like a loon. Yeah, Solomon didn’t have a prayer.

“Jury,” Judge McClain drawled while looking them over, “that was a very short deliberation. Have you reached a verdict?”

The spokesman of the group stood to address her. “We have, Your Honor.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“We find the defendant guilty on all counts. We do not think there should be any leniency.”

“I understand, thank you.”

The foreman sat back down, looking quite satisfied with himself.

Judge McClain turned and pointed at Solomon. “Please stand to hear your sentencing.”

He stood, looking nervous as hell. As he should. Solomon’s life would never be the same after this. I, for one, was glad for it.

“This court finds you guilty on all charges. Your peers do not judge that you are due any leniency, and frankly, I agree with them. You cannot be trusted with any measure of power, not even the basic freedoms this country holds as self-evident. I am, sadly, restricted on how much prison time I can give you. Under TCA Title 39 and 40, I must give you one step below the maximum sentence. With that said, I sentence you to forty years in prison without the possibility of parole. This sentencing is done with prejudice.” She picked up her gavel and struck it sharply. “Dismissed.”

I didn’t do a happy dance, but damn, I wanted to. I’d known Solomon would get jail time. But Judge McClain was apparently done with his shit.

The bailiff called out, “All rise!”

We rose, and the judge left her chair and went into her private office, disappearing from sight.

I expected screaming from Solomon. Instead, I found him sitting slumped over the table. He was shell-shocked, for sure. In denial, like he couldn’t understand what just

happened or wrap his head around it. In fact, he was probably disassociating hard because all of his lines were very muted. He felt anger and a deep grief on some level, but he wasn't actively in touch with those emotions.

I felt no pity for him. He'd done this entirely to himself. Maybe, one day, he'd realize it, but I doubted that. He didn't have the self-analytical ability to realize it. And frankly? He'd done so many people wrong who were now behind bars, it wasn't likely he'd ever leave prison alive. Factor in his age and his horrible eating habits and vices, and he wouldn't make it to eighty years old. This man absolutely would die in prison, one way or another, and I was relieved he wouldn't pose a danger again.

Dwayne and Tylesia had sat behind us, and Dwayne leaned in to put a hand on my shoulder.

"You won. Congrats."

I half turned in my chair, ignoring all the other people rising and hurrying for the door. This case had also gotten a lot of media coverage, and the reporters were flocking for their offices.

Dwayne looked pretty happy. Then again, this case had been as much his as it had been mine, in a sense. Solomon had done us both dirty.

"I think we all won with this one. You won't continue with your trial." The decision was obvious in his lines.

He grinned. "No point. Can't do anything worse to this man than forty years in prison can. I've already been compensated by the state. What more can I do? Except torture him in a courtroom a little more."

Tylesia snorted. "I'd torture him some more."

Tye was apparently still feeling vindictive. I did not blame her.

“Not worth the money to drag his ass back to court.” Dwayne shrugged. “I’d rather move on from the whole experience.”

That was a very Dwayne answer.

Tylesia seemed to be much better since I’d seen her a month ago. Some therapy and being away from that lunatic had definitely helped. I still felt like she had a long road ahead of her to travel, but she was safe and with her family again, so she’d be fine. Dwayne was much the same. I’d encouraged both of them to share their story with Alan, partially for his ever-growing encyclopedia. Also in part because we’d learned through this ordeal that an anchor bond would feel “dead” if a strong enough shield separated psychic and anchor. People who operated those machines clearly knew it, hence why they didn’t use the highest setting, but they should have shared the info for the rest of us. Law enforcement especially needed to know, in case something like this situation happened again. It shouldn’t be taken at face value someone was dead if a bond was broken. It could very well mean a person was held captive. They also needed to know they can’t search for someone past a shield. Lots of info to pass along here.

Tylesia leaned sideways and addressed Abby. “You two good? School figured out?”

“Yeah, I stay with her during the week”—Abby indicated Skylar—“and we stay with my dad on the weekend. It’ll work out great. We’ve already done it this past month to test things out and it went fine. We’re juniors, so unfortunately we have to have the full schedule, but once we’re seniors, we can choose a fifth period elective of internship. So basically we’ll only be in school until lunch, then we’ll get out and go train with Jon and Donovan. We just have to get through this year first.”

“Smart. I look forward to seeing your names online in the future.”

“We’ll totally beat Jon’s record.”

I winced. “Dammit, Abby, knock on wood. I’m known for the crazy cases, after all.”

She laughed, not a care in the world.

Donovan silently urged us up with a hand under my elbow. It was true, another case was on the docket after this, so we shouldn’t linger. I popped up with him.

“At least the next exciting thing isn’t going to be a case,” Donovan observed. “You two are coming to our wedding, right?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world,” Dwayne promised.

“Good.”

It was going to be one hell of a party. Honestly, though? Being married to this man was what I looked forward to most.

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Nothing about our wedding was serious. Not the location, the costumes, none of it—except the vows and the marriage license. I took those pretty damn seriously. The rest of it, though? It was just fun. A true celebration.

Everyone was on time for the wedding. We'd rearranged the tables on the main floor so there was a pathway between them, with a red carpet we'd borrowed to make an aisle. People were seated at tables, ready and waiting. At the head, our wedding party stood on either side as witnesses, along with our officiant. Namely, Grandpa. He was all spruced up in his old army dress uniform, and he looked sharp.

He was not the only one looking sharp. I had gone for a formal knight costume, a blue cape, with 'chainmail' and all, a Styrofoam sword at my hip. Jon had landed on a king's costume and it couldn't have been more perfect. The gold crown studded with red gems set off the gold of his hair, his gold embroidered red velvet tunic hugged his torso, and the way his thigh-high black boots accentuated his legs made my mouth go dry. To top it off, a white cape swirled around his ankles. He looked downright stunning and regal. He took my breath away. It also made me think of roleplaying later.

"Sugar" by Maroon 5 was playing as we queued up at the kitchen doors for our grand entrance. Eshaal wore one of those super poofy princess-like dresses, had a gorgeous crystal tiara on, and she was armed with not one, but two wands that blew bubbles. We'd landed on bubbles to avoid having to clean up flowers later.

The grooms people all started walking. Abby in her crystal ball psychic getup, Skylar as an elf ranger (complete with ears). We had Ghostbusters, mimes, doctor, one sexy nurse (Garrett), all seriously marching along to the song. By serious I meant

everything but.

Our flower girl was poised. She heard the music and immediately went through the doorway. I'd instructed her to have fun, and she took me entirely at my word. She pirouetted out, bubbles twirling freely around her, and danced her way down the aisle. Occasionally she'd stop and aim bubbles at someone in particular, setting the crowd to laughing. Clearly, she was having a blast. Mack was right on her heels, also dancing, the rings in one hand while he had dancing cymbals on his right thumb and index finger, clanging along as he went.

Jon leaned in against me and whispered, "Want to dance too?"

A mental image sprang to mind. We'd planned to just walk, but... "We could totally tango our way down."

"Let's do it. Can't let Eshaal show us up."

"Damn straight."

Jon took my hand, and we went through the doors, then squared up in dance position. Fortunately, I knew how to tango, as he promptly took the lead and we sashayed our way down the red carpet. Again, people were laughing, some were clapping, and their joy was infectious. I chuckled along with them, enjoying the free-for-all of the moment.

Sadly, the aisle wasn't actually that long, so we ended up in front of Grandpa in about thirty seconds. I could have danced a bit longer.

The music faded out and Grandpa struggled to keep a straight face. I could see his lips twitching, though; it was definitely a fight on his end.

"Dearly beloved," he began, "and all you other rascals—"

The crowd laughed again.

Okay, so Grandpa wasn't taking this seriously. Good!

“—we are gathered here today because these two idiots have finally gotten their acts together. I know we were all wondering if that would ever happen. Fortunately, my grandson decided he liked Donovan enough to keep him, and here we are. I'm pleased to marry these two individuals. Now, serious face, let's focus for a minute. This is the important bit.”

I faced Jon, and all the love I had for this man just— bam —hit me all at once. It had been a long road getting to this point. Some days, I'd wondered if Jon would ever heal enough to trust in a future together. Now, standing here with him, I knew every moment of struggle had been worth it. The trust we had was unequivocal.

“Jonathan, do you take this man to have and to hold, to love without question, to stand beside during sickness and in health?”

“I do.”

Jon's smile was radiant. God, I swear, I fell in love with that smile. He'd always looked at me like this, as if nothing in the world could compare to me. How could I not love him as fiercely in return?

“Donovan, do you take this man to have and to hold, to love without question, to stand beside during sickness and in health?”

My own throat felt tight with emotion as I answered. “I do.”

“May we have the rings?”

Our ring bearers both offered up the rings. We'd chosen to replace our engagement

rings with newer, shinier versions. Mine was tungsten steel with a solitaire inset diamond. Jon's had more filigree to it—styles that suited us both. The metal felt strangely warm as Jon slid it onto my finger, like it had been poised and waiting to come home. The thought made me smile.

“Let no man rip asunder what has been promised today. I do mean that. Anyone who tries to home wreck, I will beat you. Take the warning. Jonathan, Donovan, you have shown your love and loyalty by joining hands and making promises of devotion, and you have sealed these promises by giving and receiving rings. By the power vested in me, I now pronounce you husbands. You may kiss your husband.”

Jon seized my head with both hands and kissed me soundly. I loved the taste of him. No matter how much time passed us by, his kiss still thrilled me. I hoped the feeling never changed.

People clapped and wolf whistled, and we pulled back to smile at the audience. I heard more than a few shutters go off as people took pictures.

“I present to you Mister and Mister Havili. Now,” Grandpa ordered, “let the party begin!”

People stood to offer congratulations, both our mothers were crying while hugging us, my father wasn't much better, and overall it was an outpouring of love the likes of which I'd never experienced before. I looked to Jon, making sure he wasn't overwhelmed, only to find him blissfully happy as he hugged his own father.

I knew our future would likely involve more crazy cases, and running around, and chasing after two teenage girls as I strove to impart all the skills they'd need to survive on their own. There would be chaotic days, lazy days, problems to solve, and joyous moments like this one. A full life with this wonderful man at my side.

I wouldn't change it for the world.