



Question Everything

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Maeve Byrne is on the run.

She's a hunted woman and she'll do anything to protect her baby daughter from harm. When she realizes that she's been found by people who wish her dead, she gets in her car and drives as fast as she can into the night. Unfortunately, all it takes is one unexpected curve in the road for her life to be literally upended.

Kyle Walsh is no stranger to bad luck. On administrative leave from the Boston PD, for an incident surrounding the unauthorized use of his weapon, he witnesses Maeve's accident and instinct kicks in; he runs to the scene to try and help her. But what he finds just doesn't add up and he becomes obsessed with figuring out just who this woman is and the story behind why she's in Boston. As she loses consciousness, she asks him to save her baby, and he hears her distinctive British accent. Kyle is intrigued by this beautiful stranger and is determined to unravel her secrets.

One big problem? Maeve doesn't remember anything from before the accident; not where she came from, not why she was driving the car or even her name. As she begins to question everything around her, he begins to question whether she's telling him the truth about any of it.

The other dilemma? He falls in love with her. And once he loses his heart, he wonders if he's losing his mind, as well...

Total Pages (Source): 37

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:33 pm

Maeve was sure that she was being followed when she ran from her hotel room.

While she couldn't see the dark vehicle trailing her own, now a mere two car lengths behind her, she could sense that it was there; she felt its shadowy presence.

Maeve knew that it was only a matter of time before it overtook her on this stretch of lonely highway.

She glanced quickly into her rear-view mirror, first scanning the road for the bogeyman she knew was out there, and then to the other mirror strapped over the headrest of the backseat.

It reflected the image of the infant in the carrier tucked safely into the rear passenger seat.

Her daughter was fast asleep, unaware of the danger outside their door.

Don't worry, Daisy, she thought.

I'll find a safe place for us to hide away.

Maeve was exhausted but had no time to dwell on it.

She'd hadn't slept on the flight, long as it was, spending countless hours walking Daisy up and down the aisle to keep her from crying.

The last thing she wanted was to be noticed; that would ruin everything.

Taking the redeye insured that most of the other passengers were asleep and didn't see her pacing through the aircraft.

She'd kept her auburn hair tucked under an indistinct baseball cap and wore the most benign outfit she could muster—black leggings, a black, baggy GAP sweatshirt, and a pair of Adidas Sambas.

Her goal was to blend in, to look anonymous, and hopefully, to pass as an average American woman traveling home with her infant.

When Maeve left London after months of careful planning, she had hoped that she would land at JFK and disappear into the crowd.

She'd had help obtaining a false passport for both her and for Daisy; a friend of a friend of her brother knew a man who traded in all sorts of illegally gained paperwork for a hefty price tag.

In the last four months of her pregnancy, she'd trained hard with a dialect coach, working to erase any hint of her native, upper crust British accent, not wanting to give herself away.

She had gone into hiding, staying out of sight of the ever-present paparazzi, moving around London constantly to keep her location secret and herself and her unborn child safe from harm.

It hadn't been easy.

If she didn't have her brother Finn's help, she could never have done it at all.

Once she cleared customs in New York, she had thought that she'd made it, that she was in the clear.

The agent hadn't even looked closely at her or her daughter, who was strapped into a soft cashmere wrap across her chest and then tied around her waist.

At least her baby's face, now nestled between her breasts, was hidden from view.

He just stamped her passport, barely suppressing his own yawn before moving on to the next person in line.

Maeve had memorized what she was to do next; Finn had drummed the instructions into her head.

She claimed her luggage as it traveled around on a squeaky rubber belt in the baggage area, popping open Daisy's pram once it appeared and balancing their bags across it.

She had seen photographs of the outside of the airport and knew where the taxi stand was located; all she had to do was get there, give the driver an address on the Upper East Side of Manhattan and they'd be on their way.

Gathering her breath, she pushed through the revolving door, careful not to topple the pram and get stuck in the exit.

It was sunrise and the sky was a beautiful shade of pale lavender.

The pastel tone gave Maeve hope that maybe, just maybe, she'd made it to the infamous land of the free, because freedom was all she ever really wanted.

That, and a life without the worry that Daisy's father would find them and come claim his daughter.

If that were to happen, Maeve knew that her own life would be over. Without her precious baby, she would not be able to go on.

As she made her way to the line of yellow cabs hugging the curb, she waited patiently for her turn to secure one for her ride into Manhattan. An older woman a few feet ahead caught sight of Maeve and said, “Would you like to go ahead of me? I mean, traveling alone with the baby can’t be easy.”

“You’re not in a hurry?” Maeve asked, testing out her practiced, flat, Midwestern accent.

“Oh, no dear. I’m just going home. Besides, I’d hope that if my daughter-in-law was traveling alone with my grandson, that someone would do the same for her. Just putting that good vibe out into the universe.”

“Thank you. I will go ahead of you then. Maybe I can get us to Manhattan before she wakes up.” Maeve tilted her chin toward the cashmere wrap she wore. She was relieved that Daisy’s face was still hidden from view.

She squeezed the pram by the kind woman on the narrow sidewalk, bumping into the stranger as she went by.

The woman reached out a hand. “Do you need some help, dear? She asked as she reached for one of Maeve’s bags.

“So sorry and no, thank you,”

Maeve replied, a bit too sharply.

She regretted her biting tone immediately but kept walking toward the waiting taxi.

The driver stepped out to help her with the luggage.

After she saw that all was secure in the boot of the car, she slipped into her seat and

gave the driver the address, turned to offer a brief wave to the woman behind her before the car jerked forward and they were on their way.

Thirty-five minutes later she was once again on a strange sidewalk, opening the door of a dark metallic gray Rav 4 fitted with Wisconsin plates.

Finn had arranged for the vehicle to be safely parked there for her; he'd given her the fob the night before she left London.

How he was able to purchase and register the car was still a mystery to her, but she was grateful for his many connections and that he'd remembered a safety seat for Daisy.

She'd strapped the baby into the carrier, then walked behind the SUV and popped the tailgate open.

She lifted the luggage and stowed it away, then folded the pram and lay it on top of the bags.

Looking for oncoming vehicles, she gingerly stepped out, reminding herself that traffic here flowed differently than at home.

Instead of looking right she looked left, and when the street was clear she quickly made her way to the driver's side and climbed into the seat.

Turning the engine over, she plugged her destination into the navigation system, that address courtesy of Finn's network as well.

She pulled out the burner phone he'd given her and sent the text he'd asked for, letting him know that she had arrived safely and was in the car on the next step of her journey.

With a deep breath, she pulled into the northbound lane and began to make her way.

As the day went on, Maeve made as few stops as possible, resting only long enough to feed and change Daisy's diaper, watching the cities disappear behind her, feeling the road flatten under her wheels as she drove through the small towns in Connecticut, finally crossing the border into Massachusetts.

Once dusk dissolved into evening, she thought about where she was scheduled to stop for the night. She knew it was near Boston in a funny sounding place named Quincy. She made it into the hotel parking lot, unloaded only her essentials and checked in to her pre-paid room. She was looking forward to finally getting some sleep. Of course, Daisy had other plans. After a day of being confined in her car seat, the baby was thoroughly confused. She was wide awake, leaving Maeve no choice but to stay up with her.

Finally, at four thirty the next morning, Daisy fell asleep. Maeve hoped she'd catch a few hours of rest as well, but as she was about to get into the waiting bed, she was startled by the shadow she spied through the space under her hotel room's door. She quietly tiptoed to the peephole and peered into the hallway. There were two men there, each in a crumpled dark suit, deep in quiet conversation. She felt her heart race in her chest. Could she have been found? Think, Maeve, think. She forced herself to stay calm. She knew she needed an escape plan. Wait. That woman on the taxi line, the one who let her go ahead. Was she involved in this somehow? Had she followed them, tipping off the men in the hallway to where Maeve had taken Daisy? She was exhausted. None of her thoughts made any sense. But now, what was she to do?

Maeve needed to act, and act quickly. After a few minutes, she repacked the diaper bag and small soft duffle with their overnight clothing, throwing in her toiletries and what little else she'd brought into the room for the night's stay. Then she readied herself to run. She put the cloth carrier on, secured it and put her sleeping daughter back inside. Once her hands were free, Maeve picked up the bags, slung them over

one arm and did the only thing she could do to cause a diversion and enough chaos to slip past the men in the hall. She grabbed a magazine from the dresser, the kind that hotels leave around, outlining all the fun activities in the local area, reached into her purse for a book of matches and lit one corner of the glossy paper until it flamed. Then she held it under the sprinkler in the room and waited for the fire alarms to sound.

It felt like forever before she could cautiously open the door to her hotel room. She had stood inside the closet – the only place where she could keep both Daisy and her dry once the hotel’s sprinkler system engaged – knowing that the two suspicious men would have left, not wanting anyone else to see them loitering around in the hallway. She understood just how these thugs worked, having had her run-ins with them while living in London. They never wanted to take a chance on having someone get a good look at them. All the better for them to remain anonymous, living in the shadows of normal everyday life.

Once she saw pajama clad patrons hurrying toward the staircase, she easily folded herself inside the crowd. She made it to the ground floor level and stepped through the emergency exit into the cool late-night air, spotted her car, and made a beeline to it. Quickly unlocking the doors remotely as she drew near, she first strapped Daisy into her seat, all the while trying to settle her own overworked heart.

Stay calm, she admonished herself. She could hear Finn’s words echo through her brain: “If ever you’re in a pinch, take it one simple step at a time. You know what to do. You’ll be safe enough if you don’t lose your head. Remember --if you find yourself in a pickle, just go slow.” She took a calming breath just thinking about her brother’s advice, imagining his steady voice, then she turned the engine on and slowly pulled out of the parking lot, careful not to bring any unwanted attention to herself. Fire trucks made their way up the opposite end of the driveway, lights blazing, sirens blaring as they came to put out the “fire” she’d left behind.

At first, she thought she might have been in the clear. She turned onto the near-empty highway and stayed within the speed limit, afraid of hidden policemen looking to fulfill their monthly quotas of speeding violations, hoping to stop some unsuspecting driver at this ungodly hour. Finn had warned her of these types of situations and had made her repeat a slew of instructions back to him before she'd left London. "Don't drive too fast, use the burner phone if she needed to reach him, stay on course, and follow the detailed route that would bring her to the border between the United States and Canada. Cross over and continue to Port Hope, a small town outside of Toronto." The safe house was there. Finn's people were there, ready to help her disappear. Once there, she could let go of the icy fear that gripped her very soul.

The headlights behind her seemed routine at first. After all, she wouldn't be the only person with a place to be as night morphed into day. But then they got closer, and closer still. Finally, she was able to make out two men in the front seat of the car behind her.

It was them! The men from the hallway of her hotel!

She no longer had a choice. She fully depressed the gas pedal, and immediately felt the SUV respond, pulling ahead and putting a bit of distance between her and the threat trailing her. Her brain was moving at the same speed as her vehicle, thoughts of what to do next flying across her mind at an unrelenting pace. Do something, do something, she repeated to herself. Then she saw the exit sign for Fenway Park. She didn't signal, she didn't switch lanes. She gripped the steering wheel as tightly as she could.

At the very last second, she turned it hard and took the ramp that led to the city streets. Looking quickly in her mirror, she knew that the men missed the exit, but

she didn't have time to feel relieved. She had underestimated the angle of the ramp; it was a much sharper turn than she'd anticipated. She could hear the screech of her

wheels and could feel the SUV's tires take the curve too fast, lifting slightly off the pavement. For a minute, she thought the truck might turn over and she could feel the panic rise into her throat. Just when she had almost regained control, she misjudged her speed once more. A tree was rapidly coming into view, and she knew that unfortunately, she was going to hit it.

I'm so sorry Daisy, she thought .

She closed her eyes and waited for the inevitable crash. She had no way to know that the only connection to her old life – the burner phone -- had fallen out of her bag as it hit the floor of the car and was jammed underneath the seat on impact, forgotten, and soon to be left behind for good.

What happened next was a blur. There was a man. He pulled her out of the vehicle. She could feel his strong arms around her body and wanted to crawl inside of his embrace. He gently lay her down on the street, hovering over her, telling her not to worry. She didn't want to worry, but then oh no , Daisy!

"The baby, the baby, please save my baby!" she implored in a voice that felt detached from her body. She watched as his eyes went to her midsection.

"No," she was able to whisper. "The car seat..."

She knew that he went around to open the rear passenger door and heard him say, "Your baby is fine. These things are designed for situations exactly like this."

"Thank God," was all she said before her lids fluttered shut.

The last thing she remembered was the understanding in his striking green eyes. Then everything went black.

CHAPTER 1

K yle Walsh bolted awake to find himself on the sofa drenched in sweat. The blue light from the television burned his eyes as his head turned toward it, a familiar infomercial blazing across the screen.

This wasn't an unusual occurrence. In fact, it had happened all too often these past few months. He always woke with a start to the sales pitch of some man or woman hawking useless junk to the other insomniacs who had tuned in on these restless, late nights. He rubbed two fingers along his forehead, feeling the ever-present drumming there, just underneath the skin. He needed Advil and a long run to shake off his discontent in the only way he knew how.

He stood and stripped off his soaked tee shirt, tossing it to the floor as he went into his bedroom to try and find something clean to wear. It would be a struggle, as he could not remember the last time he'd done any laundry or eaten a real meal, for that matter. Ever since the "incident," he'd been tossed into a never-ending cycle of doze, wake, and repeat. True rest was a thing of his past. He fumbled around in the dark before he gave in and turned on the light next to his bed. There were piles of dirty clothes, squashed water bottles, an almost finished fifth of scotch, and stacks of crusty plates everywhere. He knew it was time to do something about the mess, but now was not it.

Finding the half-empty pill bottle on his night table, he quickly popped open the top and poured three blue gel capsules into one hand. He threw them into his mouth and swallowed them down without any water. They lodged in his throat for a moment before they slowly headed south. That done, he felt the need to get out of his condo as

quickly as possible before the walls closed in on him. Grabbing the shorts and a shirt from the top of the large, crumpled pile on his desk chair, Kyle grimaced at the smell as he pulled the soiled fabric over his head and down past his nose.

Okay, buddy. One more run, then enough is enough. Like it or not, it's laundry day.

It wasn't as if he had anything better to do with his time. Since "the incident" he'd been on administrative leave with no end to that in sight. He was living in his own version of Dante's circle of hell. Until the department's internal investigation was over, he was stuck waiting to hear if his badge and gun would ever be returned to him. Hell, for that matter, he questioned if he'd be allowed to rejoin the force and once again do his job as a detective.

He'd been over what had happened hundreds of times, but for the life of him, Kyle had no idea what made him fire his weapon on that fateful night. He was sure that the perp was holding a gun, aimed directly at Kyle's chest, but when the smoke cleared, the only gun was the one in Kyle's hand. The young man he'd shot had been brandishing a plastic, toy weapon which Kyle had mistaken for the real thing. Luckily, Kyle's bullet had only grazed him. It had all happened so fast that he'd barely had time to do more than react; however, that didn't matter. He'd been a beat cop and then a detective for almost fifteen years. It was his job and responsibility to know better, to stay cool and calm and to never fire his gun unless necessary.

From where he stood now, Kyle was certain that this mistake would haunt him for the rest of his life, no matter what decision the review board returned with – he would be the guy who wrongfully shot a teenager who was merely holding a toy. When he had come home that night, he'd packed up his personal gun, the one he kept in his night table drawer and used when he went to the range with his brothers. It was the same model revolver that they all owned. He put it in his safe with the boxes of bullets he kept at home. He didn't want to hold it or see it again.

He left his bedroom and carefully picked his way around the trash that was strewn all over the floor of his condo. Lacing up his sneakers, he sighed. If there was one virtue Kyle truly lacked, it was patience. Grabbing his keys and his phone, he head out into the chill of the late-October morning darkness.

When the pounding of his feet overtook the drumming in his head, he knew that he was only running away from his hellish reality for a short time. In the inky darkness before the dawn, Kyle put his head down and moved faster, putting as much distance between his current life and his past mistake as humanly possible. It was the only way he could relieve the torment he felt so deeply in his soul.

Thirty minutes later, he turned off Huntington onto Fenway. He had been raised in this south Boston neighborhood. His parents still lived in the house where he grew up; his aunts, uncles, cousins, and large extended family were deeply rooted in this part of the city. There was not a street or alley he didn't know, and while the route for his run varied, it always seemed to lead him back here. It was a good distance from his current home downtown near the precinct, but the exercise always made him feel better, especially once he was done. He had made it almost to the intersection where the highway dumped out onto the street when he saw a dark gray Rav 4 in the distance taking the exit ramp a little too quickly. As he watched, it careened off the curb and swerved uncontrollably for a moment, almost turning over before barreling over the sidewalk and hitting a tree. The sound of metal crunching against the immovable object was both loud and jarring.

Instinct kicked in and Kyle ran as fast as he could toward the accident, grabbing his cell phone out of his short's pocket and dialing 911. When the call connected, he said, "This is Detective Kyle Walsh. I just witnessed a 10-41, possible code two. I need assistance immediately. EMT and back-up."

"Stay at the scene. I've got a pin on your location coming in now," the operator said. "Ambulance is three minutes out."

“Got it.”

He disconnected the call and reached the vehicle, trying to see if the driver needed help getting out. There was a woman slumped over the wheel, blood pouring out of a large gash on her forehead. The airbag had deployed, and smoke had filled the cabin. He quickly tried to open the door, but it was locked. Knowing that time was an issue, he banged hard on the window, trying to rouse her. The police cruiser dispatched to the scene would have an X-Pole, the device they could use to safely break the glass, but for now, if he could wake her, he could direct her to unlock the door so that he could get her out of the car.

At first, she didn't move, but with his insistent banging, she began to shift around frantically in her seat.

“Help me,” she said frantically. “Someone, please. I need help!”

“I'm right here,” Kyle screamed, trying to get her to turn his way. When she did, he could see how pale she looked. There was a lot of blood pouring from her injury, soaking her shirt and baseball cap, matting her auburn hair that had come loose beneath it. He realized that it would not take long for her to pass out again. “Can you unlock your door?” he yelled. “If you unlock it, I can get you out of the car.”

He saw her move her hand toward the handle and heard the click of the automatic release. A scant minute later, he had the door open and was unfastening her seat belt, checking to see if she had any other injuries. He didn't want to move her if she had broken a leg or an arm, and he was worried about her neck and spine as well.

“Do you think you can swing your legs around? What hurts?”

She shook her head, and the blood splattered down her sweatshirt at an alarming rate.

“The baby. The baby. Save my baby,” she cried in a distinct British accent.

Kyle looked at her abdomen, but it was flat. If she was pregnant, she wasn’t very far along.

“The EMTs are on the way. They’ll check you out with a monitor. It will be okay.”

“No,” she replied. She shifted around enough to point toward the rear of the vehicle.

“The car seat...”

He looked behind her and for the first time noticed the infant seat strapped in there. There was no sound coming from it. Kyle determined that she could move her limbs on her own, so he scooped her into his arms and slowly sat her down on the pavement. Then he moved around to the rear passenger door and opened it. Tucked inside the seat was a small baby, a pacifier still in its mouth, blue eyes wide open and staring right back at him. He reached in and undid the seat from the base, pulling the child out to show the woman.

“Your baby is fine. These seats are designed for situations exactly like this,” he said, hoping to reassure her.

“Thank God,” was all she said before her eyes fluttered shut and she slumped forward, lapsing back into unconsciousness.

Just then Kyle heard the alarms and in what seemed like seconds later, he was surrounded by flashing lights, men and women in uniforms running toward him.

The calvary had arrived.

CHAPTER 2

By the time the EMTs had gotten the woman into the ambulance and the responding police officers had taken Kyle's report and called for a tow truck, it was no longer dark outside. The sun peeked over the horizon, a red haze dimly illuminating the wakening harbor in the distance. There were small pieces of metal strewn in a scattered pattern on the pavement and distinct tire marks led to the tree that would need to be cut down to prevent it from falling on an unsuspecting citizen.

Kyle sat down on the curb. He felt spent. He knew he couldn't run all the way back to his condo; he was exhausted from the events of the morning. Luckily, he had his wallet and a Charlie card for the T tucked inside. He'd take the train home. He had grabbed the base of the car seat out of the crushed vehicle before it was towed away and knew that the ambulance had taken the victim to Brigham and Women's hospital. It was the closest level one trauma center, and while he didn't think her life was in danger, she had what looked to him like a nasty cut on her head. He wasn't sure if she'd need stitches or not.

He decided that he would get a coffee, take a shower, start his laundry, and pay this woman a visit. Even if she decided to replace the car seat because of the accident and no longer needed this base, he'd go just to be sure that she was okay. It would give him something to do that didn't involve laying around his condo feeling sorry for himself. It was the first solid plan he'd come up with in days.

He stopped in at a Dunkin before getting on the train at the Lansdowne Street station. The brightly colored orange donuts on display reminded him that Halloween was around the corner.

He ordered a black coffee and paid for it before stepping back outside to walk toward his train. Once onboard, he sipped slowly at his hot drink as the T headed downtown, people watching as the car bumped over the tracks. Kyle couldn't help but wonder about the other riders. It was an occupational hazard of sorts, always keeping an eye out for someone about to do something dangerous, or illegal, or just plain stupid. Generally, large groups of teenage boys were his target, but for today, it was just businesspeople headed to offices that joined him on the train.

Nothing to see here, he thought as he allowed his mind to drift to the woman he'd helped just hours ago. She had hit her head hard against the steering wheel, probably right before the airbag deployed. She was lucky if she didn't have some skin burns as well as that large cut on her forehead; he'd seen the aftereffects of those car safety devices, and while they did work, it was not without some minor injuries, often to the face and hands.

There was something about her that intrigued him. Had she fallen asleep at the wheel? It didn't seem likely, knowing that she'd just come off the highway. Was she under the influence of alcohol or drugs? Also, unlikely. He didn't smell any booze on her, and she had a baby in the car, so drugs didn't seem feasible, although he knew that he couldn't rule it out. Did something jump out at her, causing her to swerve? It was possible, he could imagine a raccoon or a small fox on the loose, but again, unlikely in the city. What could have happened? He shrugged his shoulders and figured that he'd just ask her when he saw her later. For some strange reason, he felt compelled to find out more about her. Snapshot visions of the accident scene remained in his head, and something just didn't add up. There was something behind those deep blue eyes of hers. He didn't just want to check in on her. He wanted to know her story...

Two loads of laundry and a long hot shower later, Kyle felt somewhat human again. His house was still a mess, but he would take care of that later. For now, he got into his car and drove over to the hospital, parking in the visitors' lot. He had no reason to

leave his Mustang in the emergency bay area; those spaces were meant for detectives working a case. You shouldn't be here. You're not on the job right now, remember? He shook his head against the thoughts that threatened to strangle him. Taking a deep breath, he told himself that he'd be returning to work soon. The investigation would be over, and he'd get his badge back.

He pulled his long legs out of his car and onto the pavement. There were so many times where he'd come here on a case; he knew all the security guards and most of the nursing staff. He squared his shoulders and walked through the automatic glass doors to the admitting desk. The pretty blonde nurse working there sat up taller when she saw him standing in front of her.

"Kyle! Long time, no see!! You still owe me a beer, you know."

He couldn't help but notice how her big brown eyes narrowed with that all too familiar predatory gleam, but he forced a smile. "You're right, Gretchen, I do. We'll have to make good on that real soon."

"Are you working today?" she asked.

Was she really that clueless? His case had been all over the news when it happened. Or was it more about getting that drink and seeing where it might lead them? He shook his head.

"Actually, I'm looking for someone. A patient was brought in earlier. Car crash victim with a baby. She had a head lac, the baby seemed fine. Any idea where they might be? I want to make sure she has this..." He held up the car seat base.

She gave him a wry smile. "I'm sure you know that once a safety seat has been in a crash, it can no longer be used, right?" She began to type something into her computer, scanning the screen in front of her.

“Is that true? Thanks, Gretchen, for letting me know. I’ll dispose of this, then.”

“You’re right. If you want to go question her, she’s in treatment room seventeen. You’re right. A Jane Doe with a head lac and a concussion.”

“Thanks again. I’ll go check. And don’t forget about that beer. I owe you!” Kyle was sure that Gretchen wouldn’t let him forget. She flirted with him whenever he came into the ER during her shift. He quickly dumped the base of the car seat into the large trash bin in the waiting room and made his way through the double doors that led from the public area to where patients were cared for; this space was brightly lit and chaotic. The medical staff here always seemed to move at a more intense pace, rushing between treatment cubicles, the sound of monitor alarms and raised voices all around him now. The bays were marked with numbers at the top of each area. He found number seventeen; the curtain was closed. For a minute, he wasn’t sure of what to do. He didn’t want to disturb her, but he most definitely wanted to see her again. Drawing in a deep breath, he pushed aside the stiff blue cover that protected her privacy and stepped into the small cube.

It was dark. He could see the woman asleep in the bed, a puffy bandage covering her forehead. There was a small crib crowded in next to her, a baby resting within. He had to admit to himself that he was disappointed; for as much as he wanted to talk to her, he also knew that he shouldn’t wake her. He turned to leave when a soft voice asked, “Are you my doctor?”

It took a moment for Kyle to register the fact that she no longer had a British accent. In fact, she sounded vaguely unidentifiable, most certainly not from Boston, New York, or anywhere else he could quickly place. For a minute, he thought he was with a different patient, but there was a number seventeen over her bed and an infant in her room. She had a forehead injury and the same auburn hair as the victim he’d pulled from the car that morning.

“No. No, I’m not a doctor. I’m a detective with the Boston PD. I helped you out of your vehicle this morning.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t remember much about the accident,” she replied in a voice not louder than a whisper. She looked pale and small against the hospital sheets.

“Do you mind if I turn on the light?” he asked, curious to be sure that this was the same woman.

“Actually, I do. I have a monster headache, and the baby is sleeping,” she said, motioning to the crib.

He nodded. “I just wanted to be sure that you were okay. You hit your head very hard. There was a lot of blood.”

“That’s what they told me. I just don’t recall...”

“Are you from around here?” he asked.

“No, I don’t think so. I don’t remember much. The nurse told me to give it time and my memory will come back.”

“Well, I don’t think you’ll be going anywhere for a while. Your car was totaled.”

“Great. That’s going to be messy I suppose,” she said gently reaching up to feel the bandage on her head, and grimacing.

“That’s what insurance is for,” he said, trying to lighten the mood. “You might need to stay in Boston for a few days. I don’t think the doctors will let you drive right away. There are strict guidelines for concussion patients.”

She turned her head toward her pillow, but that didn't stop him from seeing tears form in her eyes. He felt an overwhelming need to look after her. Maybe I should let her stay with me for a bit, he thought, and then wondered if she'd find that offer too forward. He didn't want to scare her. He asked, "Do you have someone you can stay with? You might need help with the baby in the next few days."

She didn't answer.

"You really can't be alone with a head injury. I should know. I used to play ice hockey. Got knocked around all the time. The headaches can be intense." He paused and feeling more confident than he had in days then said, "I have an idea. Give me a minute."

He ducked back outside to look for the detectives he knew were still there to get a gut check from them. He may have just come up with a solution for them both.

CHAPTER 3

Kyle had to adjust his eyes to the brighter lights in the hallway. He walked over to where the two detectives he'd met earlier that morning at the accident were standing. As he got closer, he could hear them discussing what to do with the Jane Doe behind the curtain and her child.

"Excuse me, fellas. Any update on the identity of the accident victim?"

"Hey, are you Walsh?" one of the men asked him. He had lost most of his hair to middle age, a ring of grey circling his head. He was looking down at his notes. "You called in the crash, right?"

"Yeah. I was out for a run and..."

"Wait," the other man said. He was holding a cup of coffee, and it sloshed over the side of the cup as he motioned with it. "Walsh. I know you. It was the accidental shooting, right? I heard buzz around the station that you're getting reinstated. About time."

"Thanks, but..."

"Oh yeah," the balding detective said. "I remember that case. Kid had a toy gun. Hey man, any one of us could have been you that night. I'm Kelly, by the way. This is my partner, McCormick."

Kyle nodded his head in acknowledgment.

Kelly continued. “Fucking paperwork takes forever. Done your gun range test yet? Or did they make you see the shrink first?”

The last thing Kyle wanted to do was discuss his case in a crowded hallway, but he knew that if he didn’t answer their questions, they wouldn’t answer his.

“Seen the shrink. Just waiting for the date of the range test.”

“I’m sure it will be any time now. We need you back, man. Too much crime and too few of us,” said McCormick.

“Yeah,” Kyle said. “But about this Jane Doe. Did you find anyone who’s been looking for her? She must have been heading somewhere. She has that little one. There’s got to be some family out there.”

“No, no ID. No missing persons. Nothing,” Kelly told him.

“Yeah. We can offer her a spot at the women’s shelter, or if she wants to go to a hotel, I guess that’s an option. But we’ve got to move her out of here, and soon. The doctor has cleared her to go. The department doesn’t have the resources to keep her here at the daily rate, if you know what I mean,” McCormick said.

“She can come stay with me,” Kyle said a little too quickly. He could immediately tell that he’d surprised these two men with his response. “I mean, I’m not back at work yet, and she’s got no one. I can work the case offline until I go back full time. I’m bored as shit at home anyway. This will give me something to do and take this case off your plates.”

“Oh man, if she agrees to that it’s a problem solved for us,” McCormick replied enthusiastically.

“It’s a little bit of an unconventional approach, don’t you think?” Kelly asked Kyle with tone of doubt in his voice.

“Yeah, I guess so. But I’m from a big family. I’d have plenty of help,” Kyle responded.

McCormick nodded, clearly wanting to lighten their load. “Sounds like a plan. If she agrees, we’ll sign off on it.”

“Go talk to her,” Kyle said to Kelly, sensing his discomfort with the suggestion. “It’s an option, that’s all. If she’s fine with it, so am I.”

The two men ducked inside the curtained cubicle to talk to the woman in question.

Alone in the hallway, Kyle started to mentally draw up a pro and con list based on the offer he’d made to take this stranger home. On the plus side, it would keep his mind off the range test he so dreaded. He didn’t have a concern about his skills, he knew his muscle memory was still there. His fear sat in the pit of his stomach, threatening to rise to his throat. Would his judgement be faulty should another opportunity arise where he had to draw his weapon? Would he make another mistake, maybe one with a more tragic outcome? He shook his head as if the movement might force the bad ideas out of his brain, thinking now of the con side of the argument. His life was already a shambles. This guest in his home would certainly add to the knee-deep chaos he found himself in. Things really couldn’t get much worse...

Just then Kelly and McCormick stepped back into the hallway.

“Okay, Walsh. She’s confused, but she wasn’t opposed to your idea. It’s best if you ask her yourself, though, just to be sure. If you find out who this Jane Doe truly is, add it to our report. You’ll find the file posted under my name.”

“Of course. I’ll do that,” he said and watched as they turned to walk toward the elevators before he re-entered the cubicle to see if the patient was amenable to his idea.

He glanced over at the stranger in the bed and smiled at her, hoping to put her at ease. She was pretty and vulnerable, a combination in a woman that he tried his best to avoid ever since his break-up with Meghan. He preferred his encounters to be with ladies of a like mind, those just looking for a night tangled in his sheets with no strings attached. He shook his head. It wasn’t hard to find the type of woman he wanted in this city, asshole. So why did you open your big mouth and offer to take this one home? Wasn’t life complicated enough right now? Or maybe cracking this case would be the thing to finally put you back to work. Damn it!

When she looked at him, her blue eyes seemed to see straight through to his soul.

“I told the other men that I don’t remember anything. I wish I did,” she began.

“I know. I wanted to talk to you about something else.” He drew in a deep breath. “If you don’t have a place to go and the thought of a random hotel or a woman’s shelter isn’t appealing, you can stay with me. I have the room for you and the baby and I’m sure it wouldn’t be for long. You’ll remember everything you need to know in a few days. You just need to rest and stay off your feet. And if you’re worried, I’ll have my sister stay with you and I’ll go to her place.”

“Why would you want to help me?” she asked, burrowing further into the thin hospital blanket, clearly unsettled. “You don’t know me. I’m a complete stranger. Besides, I don’t even know your name.”

“Let’s change that. My name is Kyle Walsh. I’ve lived in Boston for my entire life and have a large and extended family that would love to help you out. Take a chance and tell me your name.”

“My name?” She struggled to sit up, but once she did and settled once more against the pillows she said, “That might be problematic. For the life of me, I can’t remember it.”

Kyle looked at her and felt nothing but sympathy. She looked so small in the hospital bed. “You can’t remember your name? That’s okay. Give it some time,” he said softly. “How about the baby? Do you remember your child’s name?”

“No.” The word signaled the woman’s emotional distress.

“Did the police bring any of your belongings with you? A purse or a wallet?”

“I don’t know. I feel like I’ve lost track of time all together. How long have I been here?”

“Since early this morning. It’s almost six pm now.”

“I see. Who’s been watching the baby?”

“I guess the nurses have, but I’m not sure. Do you want me to find out?”

He watched as she looked him over. He could only assume that she was trying to figure out what to do next.

“If you wouldn’t mind asking one of them to come in here. I want to be sure that my baby is okay.”

“I will, but I can tell you that the child was secure in the car seat after the crash. I was the first person on the scene. Not a scratch on him.”

“I don’t remember much, but I’m sure she’s a girl. That much I do know.”

“Funny how the brain works, huh? We remember such random stuff.” He felt somewhat chastened and hoped he hadn’t upset her. “Let me see if I can find someone who might help clear things up.”

At the same moment that he turned to exit the space, the curtain parted, and an older nurse appeared holding a bottle. She wore a stern expression, and her eyes narrowed when she saw Kyle at the foot of the bed.

“Detective Walsh, I didn’t realize you were back at work. Maybe you can fill in the blanks for our patient. She can’t seem to remember much about who she is or the accident.

Ignoring the small detail of him not being back at work yet, Kyle said, “I plan on trying to figure that out as soon as possible, Pattie,” he said. He’d tangled with the stern woman many times over the years. She was all business and no nonsense in her approach.

“You better make it quick. The doctor is working on her discharge papers now. I think some of your colleagues were trying to figure out where to send her, but I didn’t see them outside. Doesn’t much matter. She can’t stay here. The ER is slammed.” Then she turned toward the woman in the bed. “How’s your head feel?”

“It hurts.”

“I can give you something for the pain. You’ve been prescribed Tramadol if you think it might help.”

“Tramadol? I’m still breastfeeding.”

“Never mind, then. You can have more Tylenol if you’d like.”

“That sounds good. I have to be able to feed the baby,” she said, struggling to sit up straighter.

“No, you don’t for right now. That’s why I’m here,” Pattie said. “I fed her formula earlier and she drank it, no problem. I changed her diaper as well, and I can do that again.”

“Or I can do it,” Kyle chimed in.

Both women looked at him, but the nurse spoke first. “I won’t refuse that offer. I’m handling as much as I can right now.” She passed the bottle over to him. “I assume you remember how to do this, right? How old is your youngest nephew?”

“He’s almost a year old now. And yes. I’ve got a ton of experience with littles. Piece of cake.”

“Great. I’ll be in with home care instructions in a bit. In the meantime, Kyle, there are diapers in the bottom drawer of that portable crib. Wipes as well. And thanks for the assist.”

Kyle thought that Pattie almost smiled, but instead just turned to leave. For the first time since he’d entered the space, he looked over at the baby. She was kicking her legs and sucking on one hand, not making a sound. His nephews were loud; his first thought was that girl babies and boy babies were very different. He put the bottle down on the side table near the bed, then he reached in and picked up the infant.

There was a chair fitted tightly in between the wall and the crib. He sat down, nestled the little girl in the crook of his arm and reached for the bottle. Once settled, he put the nipple in her mouth, and she eagerly began to drink.

“I have to admit, you do look like you know what you’re doing,” the woman in the

bed said.

“I told you. I’m a pro. My sister has four of these little people running around her house. We’re a loud and expanding family.”

“Did you mean what you said earlier. That you really wouldn’t mind if I recuperated at your place with a baby for a few days? Or at least until I can drive again. And get a new car.” She paused. “What about your wife? Will she be okay with you bringing me home”

“No wife, just me,” he said simply, and he looked down at the baby who was drinking at a steady pace. “We’re going to need to figure out exactly who you are. You can’t go anywhere until you come back to yourself and know where you were going.”

She looked at him and for a moment, he thought he saw something flash across her eyes. He hoped it was a memory of who she was and not pity for his single status.

“What is it?” he asked. “Did you remember something?”

“No. It’s nothing. I think I will take that Tylenol when the nurse comes back.”

“Right. When I’m done feeding this one,” he said, using his chin to point at the baby, “I’ll call my sister. She has a car seat installed in her minivan that the baby can ride home in, if that’s okay with you.”

“I don’t see that I have another choice,” she said, her eyes flicking to his and holding his gaze with an intensity that he didn’t anticipate. “Thank you for wanting to help me,” she added softly.

“It’s in my blood,” he said, hoping to convince this woman that she was safe with

him. “I come from a long line of public servants. Almost my entire family has served as a firefighter or cop. It’s what we do.”

“Well, I wish I could tell you what it is I do. Maybe it will all come rushing back to me.”

“I’m sure it will. In the meantime, rest some more. As soon as the paperwork is done, we’ll be on our way.”

He turned his attention back to the baby. It felt good to have a purpose, even if this particular type of responsibility was exactly what he’d been avoiding his entire adult life.

CHAPTER 4

Kyle looked down at the infant who had greedily finished the contents of the bottle and was now sleeping contentedly in his arms. Looking at her button nose, eyelids fluttering as if in a dream, Kyle thought back to the time when he assumed that maybe one day, he'd be holding a little person of his own. He had been engaged to his high school sweetheart Meghan right after his graduation from the police academy. He'd seemed to be following the trajectory he'd always imagined he would, the path familiar to everyone else in his family -- marriage, house, a bunch of kids -- but then Meghan had a change of heart. In a tearful conversation she confessed that she didn't want to be married to a cop; the fear of him not coming home was overwhelming and she decided that it would not be the life for her -- she'd never survive that sort of stress.

As devastated as Kyle was at the time, he realized that she had a point. Every time he put on his uniform, there was the risk that someone would take a shot at him, and then that would be that, lights out. So instead, he'd filled his nights with random women. He avoided the multiple attempts his sister made to set him up with a friend of a friend -- he was no longer looking for that type of commitment. After all, maybe Meghan was right. His line of work was dangerous and dragging someone else along for the ride wasn't fair to them. He remained single and now, he grimaced, he could add almost unemployed to that label.

Pattie returned, pushing the curtain open and holding a packet of discharge instructions and a paper cup in one hand, pushing a wheelchair with the other. The woman in the bed stirred and tried to sit up.

“Go slow there, dearie. You have a concussion, and any quick movement is going to make you dizzy,” Pattie advised. Then she added, “I took the liberty of going to the lost and found to get you some clean clothes to wear home. We had to cut your sweatshirt off and your pants were soaked with blood. This isn’t fancy, but it will have to do.” She dropped a pair of black pants with an elastic waistband and an oversized gray sweater on the bed. “I can help you get into these, if you’d like, after you take this Tylenol.” She passed to cup to the woman in the bed.

Kyle took that as his cue to leave the space. “The baby and I will wait for you out here,” he said, stepping into the brightly lit central area of the emergency room, the stiff blue curtain of the cubicle closing behind him. Just then he realized that he hadn’t called his sister. He fished his cell out of the front pocket of his jeans and with his free hand hit her number in his contacts. She answered on the second ring, but he could hear the chaos behind her, his nephews whooping it up in the background.

“Sibby, I need a favor. I’m at Brigham’s and I need a ride.”

“What happened to your car? In the shop again? I keep telling you that the classic piece of shit you call a ride is not worth keeping. I –”

“Let me stop you. My car is fine. I have a situation. I met a woman this morning and she has an infant and no car seat. Can you come here with the minivan? Drop her at my place?”

For a moment there was no sound from his sister’s end of the call, and then he heard a big crash from somewhere in her house.

“Boys! Are you kidding me right now? Did I tell you to stay away from the table or what? Those papers are important! Wait until later when your father gets home from work. There’s going to be trouble, I promise you! Go to your rooms and do not come out until I tell you to. NOW!”

“Maybe this isn’t a good time,” Kyle began, “I’ll call Devon.”

“No, your partner is probably at the precinct doing both your work and his. And actually, it’s the perfect time,” his sister replied calmly. “If I stay here, I’ll kill those three boys. I spent all morning organizing those receipts so that I could get a jump on our taxes, and now I’ll need to start over. At least the baby is sleeping. I’ll call mom to come upstairs and watch them for me. She’s way better at it, having dealt with the likes of you, Conor, and Tim.”

Kyle smiled. There were five of them all together. Tim was his youngest brother, now a firefighter in Medford. Siobhan and Conor, who was a desk sergeant at his local precinct in Cambridge – they were the oldest. Kyle was in the middle, and the baby of the family was his other sister Millicent, or Millie for short, now a senior at Boston College, studying forensics. His parents had sold their large home a few years ago and moved into the bottom floor of the mother/daughter house that Siobhan and her husband Shaun had bought expressly for this purpose. Siobhan had reliable babysitters on the premises and their folks had a home to age in place around family. It was a tremendous win-win all around.

“Are you sure you can leave?”

“Of course. Besides, you’ve got me plenty curious as to why you’re with a woman who has a baby needing a car seat. This ought to be good.”

Kyle looked down at the sleeping bundle in his arms. “Well, it is interesting,” he said. “I can fill you in once you get here.”

“Give me ten minutes. I’ll let you know once I’m out front,” she said before hanging up abruptly.

Kyle smiled to himself. This stranger better have packed some patience. Between his

sister and their mother, she'd have more help than she could have ever asked for.

Pattie accompanied them to the front door of the hospital, pushing the patient in the wheelchair and barking out instructions as they went. "Watch for headaches," she repeated. "If you have increasing pain, come back to the emergency room. There will be bruises that appear within a few days, across your chest and arms from the seat belt, and be sure to put Neosporin on those face burns three times a day to help them heal more quickly. The stitches on your forehead will dissolve, keep the bandage dry and remove it in two days. No need for a follow-up appointment. Any questions?"

The woman shook her head to indicate that she didn't have any.

Then the nurse turned to Kyle. "I can't let you drive out of here until I see that a car seat is properly installed in your vehicle."

"Really, Pattie? Sibby will be here with her minivan. You know that she has one for Aidan. He's only a bit older than this little girl." He nodded his chin toward the baby.

"I don't make the rules, Kyle. I just enforce them. You understand. You do the same thing out there on the streets."

He smiled at the older woman. "If you ever decide to give up nursing, I'm sure we can find you a job on the police force," he joked.

"Ha! I'm eighteen months out from retirement. I'm not switching careers now."

They both turned their attention to the hospital entrance and watched as Sibby pulled her silver Toyota Sienna up to the front and jumped out, then came around to open the sliding door that revealed a rear-facing child safety seat.

"Hey Pattie, long time no see," Sibby said to the nurse.

“True. What’s it been? Ten months since you had Aidan. Planning for another yet?”

“Yes, to the ten months, not sure about having another. At least not anytime soon.” She smiled at the woman in the wheelchair. “Hi. I’m Sibby, Kyle’s sister. And you are...”

“I’m not sure. I know that sounds weird, but it’s the truth.”

Sibby looked up at Kyle who said, “That’s part of the whole story, Sib. I’ll explain it all to you as soon as we get to my condo. For now, can you strap the baby into the seat? I’m not sure what...”

“Of course. Give me that precious bundle.” She took the baby from him with the confidence of a seasoned parent and had the child comfortably positioned and ready to ride in a matter of minutes.

Pattie locked the wheels of the chair and Kyle helped the woman stand. Slowly, they walked her to the front passenger seat of the minivan and helped her up into the vehicle. Then Kyle leaned over her and reached in, careful not to put any of his own weight on her. He pulled the seat belt across her chest and clipped it.

“Is this belt okay? Does it hurt?” he asked.

“It’s fine,” she replied. “I’m just so tired.”

“That’s to be expected,” Pattie chimed in. “You’ll feel better in a few days. Stay off your feet if you can, and take good care now.” With that she turned on a heel, unlocked the now empty wheelchair and pushed it back inside the building, disappearing from view.

Kyle turned back to the woman in the passenger seat. “Sibby will bring you to my

place. I'll follow in my car and meet you there."

"Thank you," she said, closing her eyes.

Kyle looked over at his sister who had climbed back into the minivan and was getting ready to drive away.

"See you there," he said. "Go slow."

"Yes, detective," Sibby said in a tone meant to kid him before putting the minivan into drive and pulling out and onto the road that would bring her to his home.

Suddenly, Kyle remembered the state of his condo, the mess he'd left behind. His sister was never going to let him hear the end of it.

CHAPTER 5

Kyle balanced the two bags he'd carried home from Market Basket as he reached into his pocket to retrieve the key to his front door. He had stopped near the hospital for some essentials – he knew that he would need more groceries than the basic eggs, bread, milk, and coffee he'd just purchased. He imagined that a baby would need diapers, bottles, and wipes at the very least. He could go back out later, or tomorrow, after the stranger gave him an idea what her necessities were. He hadn't lived with a woman in a long time but did remember that Meghan's list was always longer than his own.

Kyle put his key in the lock and walked inside his home. He was immediately met with the scent of antiseptic cleanser. He stepped into the kitchen to find Sibby wearing yellow plastic gloves that reached her elbows, scrubbing the inside of his sink.

"You should be embarrassed of your sorry self," she said, never lifting her eyes from her task. "You were raised better than this, brother."

"I know, Sibby, I'm sorry you walked into this mess without me. It's been rough, you know, with the investigation and all."

"You didn't do anything wrong, Kyle. I'm sure the facts will bear themselves out. But that's no excuse for this mess, anyway."

Kyle closed his eyes, knowing his sister spoke the truth. "Sibby, you're right about the way I let my place go." He shrugged his shoulders and added, "but the truth

remains. I fired my gun when there was no need. I'm willing to take my punishment. I just didn't think it would last this freaking long." He turned away, not wanting to look in her eyes and not wanting her to see the disappointment in his own.

Sibby lowered her voice. "Well, maybe now that you have company, you can put some effort into cleaning up around here. I wouldn't be helping you except for that poor woman out there. She told me what happened. She needs a quiet, clean place to rest until she can be on her way, and you and I both know that my house is always in a state of controlled chaos." She paused. "Who am I kidding? It's full out chaos most of the time. No matter. It's certainly in better shape than this." She spread her wet arms out wide, taking in the scope of the work she'd done in the kitchen. Then she asked, "Are you going to have her stay in your bedroom? You can sleep on the couch, or the pull-out sofa in your office."

Kyle's two-bedroom condo wasn't really designed for housing a long-term guest. He'd turned the smaller of the two bedrooms into a home office, with a sofa and a desk, bookshelves, and a small filing cabinet. There was a bathroom with a shower in the hallway outside the door. His bedroom had a king-sized bed with a modern, sleek mahogany wood headboard, a matching dresser and an ensuite bath with both a tub and a walk-in shower. There was a half bath outside of the living room, between the front hall and the kitchen. After Meghan left, he never really put all that much effort into decorating the place, but it was comfortable enough for him. When he was at work he could spend hours, even overnight shifts, away from here. In the weeks that he'd been home, all he'd done was trash the place. At least now he had good reason to clean it up some. He turned to his sister.

"I'll take it from here, Sibby. You go on home to the kids. Give them all a kiss from me."

"Well, you owe me some quality babysitting time for my work here today. Why don't you come for Sunday dinner. You know that mom and dad would love to see you as

well.”

He had to concentrate hard so that he wouldn't grimace at her suggestion. The idea of a loud Sunday dinner with his family would probably push him over the edge. He knew he'd face a round of questions about when he was going back to work, questions he still had no answers for. “We'll see, Sibby. Hopefully, I'll have this situation wrapped up by then.”

“This woman is not just a ‘situation’, brother. She may be a lost cause.”

“It's not as bad as you make it sound, Sibby.”

“Kyle. Have you gone mad? That woman has no idea who she is, or what happened to cause her accident. It doesn't get much worse.”

“Sure, it does. I've seen it be worse many times over. Besides, I'm a pretty good detective. I'm certain I can figure it out and have her back on her way in a few days.”

Sibby squared her shoulders and pulled herself up to her full height, which was a bit over five and a half feet. She smiled, her face brightening. “I'm glad you feel so confident. It's been a while since I've heard you sound that way.”

“Thanks for pointing that out,” he said with a large dose of sarcasm in the tone of his voice.

Sibby peeled off the gloves and left them to hang on the side of the sink to dry. “Listen to me,” she began. “Give her a little time. She has the wee one to consider. You have no idea how much stress the poor woman is under. It makes what you went through look like a walk in the park. Believe me, I know. A child that age doesn't sleep through the night, and sleep deprivation makes you do crazy things. Help her out by letting her rest. A full eight hours of sleep will go a long way toward her

recovery. I bet she'll remember more once she feels fully awake."

"I'll do that, Sibby. Thanks for the assist today."

"Of course. I'm always here for you, brother." She picked up her purse and slipped out the front door.

If Kyle was certain of anything, it was that his family would always have his back. They were a tight-knit bunch, and even when they overwhelmed him with their concern, he always had the knowledge that they'd do anything for him. He'd do the same for all of them.

He quickly put away the groceries, grabbed two large empty garbage bags from the box underneath the sink, and then made his way into the living room to check on his guests. The baby was still in the carrier, fast asleep, and her mother was dozing on his couch. Taking Sibby's advice, he was careful not to disturb either of them; he silently walked into his bedroom and began to clean up the mess he'd left behind.

An hour later, the garbage bags filled with the remnants of his life for the past month now tied and his remaining dirty laundry sorted, Kyle quietly peeked out into the living room. His guests were awake; the baby was happily feeding. He immediately felt like an intruder in his own home. He hadn't seen all that much, but he did get a glimpse at the rounded top of the stranger's breast. Her skin looked creamy and smooth, and he had to force himself to look away. It was such an idyllic and peaceful scene, so unlike his normal life; it stole his breath from him.

He backed up into his bedroom, stepping into the shadows so that he wouldn't disturb them, waiting for a signal that it was safe to return to the living room. When he heard a distinctive burp from the baby, he took it as a sign that the coast was clear.

He loudly cleared his throat and shuffled the garbage bags to make her aware of his

presence before he walked into the living room.

“Hello, ladies,” he said, happy to see that her chest was covered once more. “I’m glad to see that you’re both awake. Are you hungry?” he asked.

“This one just ate,” she said, continuing to prop the baby on her lap, rubbing the child’s back, “but I am famished.”

“I can make an omelet,” he offered, “with toast and tea.”

“That would be lovely,” she said. “Can I help you with that?”

“No, I’ve got it. You just rest here with the baby. It won’t take me long.”

“Would you mind holding her first for a minute? I really must use the bathroom.”

“Of course. Let me have her,” he offered.

The woman passed the baby to Kyle, and he gently lifted her up to his chest, where she gave him another loud burp.

As she stood, she said, “I guess you were right when you said you were good with babies. You made that look easy. Now, if you could just show me the way...”

“Oh, of course. There’s one over there.”

He pointed toward the half-bath, and she went off in that direction. Kyle walked with the child still resting on his chest and made his way to the kitchen. He nimbly opened the refrigerator, carefully balancing the baby as he pulled out the eggs, butter, and the milk container, placing them on his now clean counter. Then he reached up over the gleaming surface and pulled down a frying pan from one of the hooks on the rack

above it. He knew better than to try and make the eggs while he was holding the baby, so he sat down on one of the stools and took a good look at the child in his arms.

She was perfect. Round cheeks, wide blue eyes with specks of gold around her irises and fine, light brown hair with red highlights, the beginnings of a curl right at the base of her neck. Her small hands were clasped together, giving her the look of one more serious than her age would indicate; her wrists had little ringlets of fat that looked like the sweetest sort of bracelet. Suddenly, a small stream of milk escaped her mouth, and he reached across the counter for the clean towel Sibby had left there to wipe it away. She laughed, and his heart melted. It had been a very long time since he'd felt anything other than despair; this little girl was the opposite of that.

The woman returned from the bathroom at that very moment. "Oh," she said. "Sorry. She has a bit of reflux. Sometimes it makes her crabby, but you must have the magic touch. Here," she motioned to him. "I can take her."

Kyle reluctantly handed the baby to her mother. "Interesting that you can recall that detail."

"Mother's instinct?" she remarked sheepishly.

Maybe, he thought. Then he said, "You know, we've got to figure out both of your names. I don't know what to call you."

"True... I wish I could remember more. Maybe it will start to come back to me soon?"

"We can hope so. In the meantime, I can make a call and get whatever things you had in the trunk of that car brought over here."

“How do you know where they took it?”

“I’m a detective with the Boston police department.” Or at least I will be again soon, he thought.

“Oh, right. You mentioned that at the hospital. I’m still so foggy,” she said with a shrug. “It would be helpful to have my luggage. Maybe seeing my things will unlock this mystery.”

“I hope so. Let me do that now. Then I’ll make us something to eat. Excuse me for a minute.” He walked into his office, grabbed his cell phone from his back pocket and opened his contacts, hitting his partner’s name and listening to the call connect. He smiled as soon as the sound of Devon’s voice filled his ear.

“My man!” Devon exclaimed. “It’s so good to hear from you. What’s shaking?”

“Not that much, buddy. I’m still waiting on Internal Affairs. I feel like my whole life is on hold.”

“Word on the street is that you’re gonna be cleared. It’s just a matter of time and the completion of the necessary paperwork. Tons of paperwork.”

“Yeah, well, it can’t happen soon enough. But for today, I need a favor. I called in a car accident early yesterday morning and now I need some help identifying one of the victims.”

“You’re not on the clock, man. What do you mean?”

“I know, I know, it’s a crazy situation. The woman driving the car was knocked out and can’t remember her name or who she is, let alone where she was going or if she had any emergency contact information. I think that all her identification is still in the

car, which was towed to the South Street pound. Any chance you could drive over there and then bring her belongings over to me at home?"

"Why would you want her stuff? What's going on, Kyle?"

"She's here, with me. She had nowhere else to go. Besides. I've got nothing going on right now. I think I can help her, plus this is the kind of distraction I need right about now."

"Do you? "You've got some strange lady in your house? I don't like the sound of this, man. My spidey senses are tingling."

Kyle smiled to himself. Devon said exactly what he'd been feeling himself. Something weird was up, but everything happened so fast with this Jane Doe, and he hadn't had a chance to think it all through yet. What Kyle did know was that he'd really missed his partner and their antics more than he'd realized. He replied, "Then you're truly not going to like the rest of it. She has a baby with her, too."

"Oh, like that's not a red flag or anything."

Kyle could hear Devon's chair scraping backward on the worn linoleum floor of the precinct.

"Don't go anywhere, and don't let her leave. I'm on my way."

"Thanks man. I owe you a pitcher of Sam Adams." He stepped into the kitchen and pulled a frying pan out of one of the cabinets with a loud thud.

"You don't owe me anything, Kyle. But let me be sure that I heard you right. You're telling me that you have a woman in your condo and that she has a kid? 'Mr. I've been burned and never getting involved again' is playing house? Geez . This I gotta

see for myself. I'll be there as soon as I can."

CHAPTER 6

She sat at the kitchen counter with the baby asleep in the soft wrap against her chest, watching Kyle prepare their dinner. He moved around with efficiency; he had a graceful manner for a man his size. It was the first time she allowed herself to take a good look at him; he was handsome, with short, dark brown, cropped hair and a sprinkling of grey at his sideburns. His green eyes were friendly, his shoulders broad; he looked fit in an athletic sort of way. She focused on his strong hands as he easily cracked eggs into a bowl, whisking them briskly, then pouring them into the waiting pan. He quickly put bread slices into the toaster, depressed the lever to brown them and turned back to give his full attention to the contents of the frying pan, eggs now bubbling at the edges. He added a healthy amount of shredded cheese and then wiped his hands on a kitchen towel and looked up at her.

“I’m not exactly a gourmet cook, but eggs are my specialty. Would you like some tea? Coffee? Or maybe a glass of wine?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Maybe a little bit of wine? I hope that the baby is asleep for the night. It should be okay.”

“Sure. I have both red and white. Which would you prefer?”

“Are you going to have some?”

“Yeah, I think that I will.”

“Whatever you’re having would be great, then.”

“Red it is,” he responded, grabbing a bottle of Malbec from his wine refrigerator under the counter next to the sink and then taking the corkscrew out of a drawer and opening the bottle with a distinctive pop of the cork.

He poured each of them a glass and she grazed his against fingers with her own when he passed her the drink. They were warm and her reaction surprised her; she felt oddly attracted to him; he made her feel safe and she held on to that. That safety seemed important. She quickly took a sip of the ruby liquid, hoping to hide her sudden rush of feelings.

“That’s delicious. Thank you,” she said, all the while reminding herself that she was in no position to get involved with this man. She had too much to figure out, including where she was going and why she had that car accident. Not remembering was scary, and even more frightening was that she was now in this strange man’s house. He offered to help, she had nowhere else to go and absolutely nothing felt familiar to her. She was so confused. Why did he feel safe? Why was she feeling so scared if he felt safe? Was it the lack of memory that gave her this overwhelming sense of panic, or was it something else? Wait. He was speaking to her. Oh no. What did he just say?

“A made a phone call earlier,” he began, “to my partner. He’s going to bring your bags from the car. Maybe there will be a clue or two as to your identity.”

“He can do that?” she asked.

“Yes. He’s going to the impound yard now. He should be here shortly.”

“I hope I he finds my wallet. I must have had a driver’s license, right?”

“I believe that you did. If not, we’ll have to book you for violating our traffic laws,” he said with a wide smile.

“You’re making fun of me know, aren’t you?”

“That’s the hazard of coming from a large family. We’re always teasing each other.”

“It must be nice,” she said, furrowing her forehead. A random thought crossed her mind. She had a brother. Yes, she did! Where, though?

“Are you feeling some pain?” he asked. “Would you like more Tylenol?”

She realized that he was reacting to her expression. “No, no. I just had the overwhelming feeling that I have a family out there. I just can’t remember, exactly. It’s like a fuzzy memory or something.”

“Well, you did suffer a concussion. I think you’ll have more recall as time goes by. It’ll happen slowly. But I’m confident that it will all come back to you, don’t worry about it. You just need some real rest.”

“I hope you’re right,” she said.

She watched him turn the omelet out onto a wooden board and cut it evenly, placing each half on a separate plate. Then he reached back for the toast, put two slices on the board and slathered each with butter before giving her one and keeping one for himself.

“Would you like some strawberry jam?” he asked.

“No, thanks. I’m good with this.”

He handed her a napkin, a fork, and a knife. “Dig in,” he said as he cut into his own dinner. They ate in silence for a minute before he added, “You’ve got this mom thing down pat. I mean, your daughter seems happy and healthy, and you can eat dinner

while you wear her in that contraption.”

“It’s funny,” she said between bites. “I knew how this carrier worked without even thinking about it, but I can’t remember my own name. Weird.”

“Like I said. Don’t dwell on it. Besides, I’m here to back you up until you get better and remember everything else.”

“I will figure out a way to make this up to you,” she said, immediately regretting the words and stammering to cover their double meaning. “I mean, I’ll cook tomorrow. I’m sure I can remember how to make something simple, at the very least.”

“Don’t worry about that now,” he said with a smile.

She hoped he didn’t sense her unease.

He continued, “The best thing you can do for me is recover fully. I’ll feel like I’ve done some good when you’re all better, like I put something positive into the world.”

“I’m sure that as a detective you’ve helped a lot of people. That type of work is a lifetime of service to others, isn’t it?”

She watched as a painful shadow crossed his eyes and couldn’t help but wonder what he wasn’t telling her. Perhaps it was all the bad he’d seen on the streets of this city, or maybe he just didn’t like his work at all. A pervasive sadness hovered around him, and for some reason she wished that she could ease the pain she sensed sat right beneath his confident exterior.

“I’ve seen my fair share of both the positives and negatives of my job. But for right now —”

Just then there was a loud knock on the front door.

“That must be Devon,” he said as he made his way to the entrance of the condo.

If her brain wasn't so muddled, she might have believed that he was glad for the interruption. She turned on the stool to see a short, stocky black man, loaded down with luggage push a baby carriage across the doorway. She saw a woman's purse resting in the seat, a pink and white knitted blanket folded underneath. He stopped in the entryway, unloaded everything in a heap and stepped around her belongings with his right hand extended her way.

“I'm Devon Riley. And you might be...”

She just looked at him blankly.

“Ah, right. Still nothing, huh?” he asked her.

“No, not yet. Kyle assures me that I will remember, though. It will just take some time.”

“Well, this might help,” he said, stepping back over to the carriage and lifting out the purse. He brought the soft black leather hobo shaped bag over to her. “Open it. Perhaps you have a wallet inside with some identification.”

“Come to think of it, Devon, why didn't the uniforms who responded to the accident bring that bag to the hospital?”

“I asked. They were called to a shooting a few blocks away right after it happened. Plus, you were on the scene. Maybe they thought that you'd take it? I guess they didn't know about your —”

Kyle interrupted him before Devon could complete his thought.

“Right, right. They must have thought that I’d do it.”

“Anyway, it’s here, now. Open it up and let’s see what we find,” Devon said with a smile.

She could feel her hand shake a bit as she unzipped the bag. Inside she found a pacifier, some tissues, and a small leather makeup pouch, all of which she rested on the counter next to her now forgotten plate of eggs. She reached in once more and retrieved a matching leather envelope, tied with an elegant strap. She looked up at both men. “Perhaps there’s some sort of document in here,” she said, undoing the fastening.

She shook more contents onto the counter. Two US passports and a white, unsealed envelope with ten one-hundred-dollar bills which spilled out with her movements. She opened the first passport. It belonged to the baby: Sarah Mabel Sawyer. Date of Birth: May 9, 2023. Place of Birth: New York, USA. Then her own: Mia Elizabeth Sawyer. Date of Birth: November 15, 1993. Place of Birth: New York, USA. She read the words over again. New York, USA. That seemed both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time and she felt a distinct chill creep up her spine.

“Well, what’s your name?” Kyle asked, a wide smile on his face.

“Mia,” she said. “My name’s Mia, and my daughter is Sarah.” She read the documents correctly, but she had the most awful sinking feeling that she couldn’t express. What does it mean? she asked herself.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mia,” he said. “Welcome to my humble home.”

“Humble my ass!” Devon said. “This is a nice part of town. Shit, I’m stuck out in

Marlborough with my wife and kids living that suburban life. What I wouldn't give for a nice Back Bay pad like this one..."

"Stop complaining, Dev. You know you love it, coaching little league and all."

"Yeah, well, I suppose so." He turned his attention to the woman seated at the counter. "Any emergency contact information in there?"

She looked over the contents she'd spilled onto the counter. "Not that I see. This is all there is."

Well, don't worry. We should be able to track your family down now that we have your name and a location for you. I'll run it through the system tomorrow at the precinct and see what comes up."

"No need, Dev. I can do it from here. I still have – I mean, I have access on my laptop. I'll run it later."

"Okay, man. I guess I'll be going. I'm sure it's been a long day for you both." He stood up. "It was nice meeting you, Mia. Take care of that precious bundle you've got there," he said, nodding toward the baby still fast asleep in the cloth carrier.

"I will, Devon. Thank you again for all your help. It will be wonderful to wear some clothes of my own once more and it was very kind of you to bring all my belongings over here."

"I'll walk you out," Kyle said, throwing an arm around his partner's shoulder and leading him from the kitchen back to the entry hall.

She could hear them speaking in low tones at the front door, not able to make out what the two men were saying. She was confused about so many things. She reached

into the purse once more and pulled out a red leather wallet and opened it. She found the boarding passes from a flight that had left London's Heathrow airport two days before as well as a few hundred dollars in twenties and tens tucked inside. The money felt unfamiliar, but she couldn't place why it looked so strange. There were only two things in the slots reserved for credit cards: a New York State driver's license and a gold American Express card. She pulled out the license and first stared at the address, then the photo embossed in plastic. 217 East 76 th Street. Something about those numbers was vaguely familiar, she just couldn't bring anything to the forefront of her mind. However, as she searched the small square picture and recognized her features, there was one thing she knew for certain: Mia Elizabeth Sawyer was not her name. Not that it mattered. She still had no idea of who she was, or why she was here. She picked up her wine glass and downed the rest of the contents, then stood up to bring their plates to the sink. Wait. 217 East 76 th Street... An image of a yellow taxi flashed before her eyes. A car. Snapping the baby into her car seat. What else?

Something made her feel uncomfortable just looking at that address. She couldn't place it, but it made her feel like her life was in danger. Why then, did this stranger make her feel like he'd protect her? Why did he make her feel safe? She shook her head. None of this made sense. She glanced back at her license on the counter. She closed her eyes, trying to envision the street listed on the official piece of plastic, but the foggy image faded away once more. She let out a breath. She had no further recall, but maybe if she cleared her mind, it might come back. There's something important that I must remember. What is it?

"Don't worry about the dishes," Kyle's voice behind her brought her out of her thoughts. "Go through your stuff, find something to sleep in. I'll set up the Pack and Play for Sarah in the bedroom -- Sibby left hers for us to use, and then we'll all turn in. Tomorrow we can work on finding your family. I'm sure they're worried sick about you both."

She nodded, not knowing what else to say. She was glad that Kyle thought that there

were people somewhere missing her, but something deep down told her differently. She had the oddest sensation that she was running away from everything she ever knew. A shiver went up her spine. That wasn't possible, was it?

Then an even more chilling thought crossed her mind. She went back over to her purse and sorted through the contents on the counter. A package of tissues from the airplane, the British Airways logo printed across the plastic front and a few loose, generic, red, and white mints wrapped in clear cellophane spilled out. Conspicuous in its absence was her phone. Everyone carried a cellphone these days. She should have had one, she was sure of it, and it would have been loaded up with her contacts. Whoever leaves home without their phone? she thought. Maybe someone who didn't want to be found...

CHAPTER 7

D aylight crept across her pillow, and she woke with a start. Nothing around her felt familiar; the mattress, or the prevalent musky, masculine scent that perfumed the sheets. When she sat up, she saw that the Pack and Play next to the bed was empty. She felt a jolt of sheer terror climb up her spine -- where was her baby?

She pushed herself up, not noticing that she was wearing only camisole top and pajama shorts and left the bedroom feeling her heart race. She stumbled into the kitchen to find Kyle holding Sarah in one strong arm while preparing coffee with the other. Her daughter was cooing, which immediately made her calm just a bit. Gathering her wits about her, she walked toward the sound of his low voice, singing something unfamiliar to her daughter. Just as she approached, Kyle lifted his head and saw her. She felt his eyes on her then, sweeping over her scantily clad body and landing on her face.

“Good morning,” he said. “I hope you don’t mind. You were sleeping so soundly that when I heard Sarah start to wake, I just wanted to save you from getting up, so I came in and grabbed her.”

“You didn’t need to do that. I can take care of her.”

“I’m sure you can, but doctor’s orders, you know. You still need to take it easy, stay off your feet as much as possible.”

“I’m really fine,” she responded, a moment too soon. She felt a wave of dizziness overwhelm her and she started to sway, grabbing on to the counter for balance.

“Mia, you need to sit down. Now ,” he said in a deep, commanding tone.

She had no real choice. She sank down into the seat closest to her.

“I don’t know why...” she began.

“Concussions are crazy, take it from me. One minute you feel like yourself and the next thing you know you can hardly stay on your feet. Plus, you need to eat something. What would you like?”

“I’ve been such a bother already. I hate to impose on you further,” she said, resting her head on her hands, leaning her elbows on the counter. Suddenly, her head felt too heavy to lift.

“No, no bother at all. Just hang on while I get this little one situated. He walked around the counter and into the living room where he’d placed a blanket on the floor near the couch. She watched as he put her daughter on it before walking back over to the kitchen.

“This will have to do. Sarah will be fine there for now.”

“Thank you,” she said softly.

“Now, do you like coffee? Tea? I can make us another omelet, or if you prefer, I can whip up some pancakes.”

“Quite the chef, aren’t you?”

“Comes with the territory. I’m from a large family. Everyone learned how to cook at an early age. Don’t be fooled...I only know the basics. I never progressed past the simple stuff.”

“Survival at all costs, huh?” She covered her mouth once the words left her throat. Why did I say that and why do I feel like that’s my life, not his?

“Something like that,” he replied, clearly not bothered by what she’d just said. “Now, what will it be?”

“Whatever you’re having will be fine. I think I have to feed the baby, though.”

“Right. Let me help you back into the bedroom. It will be more private for you both in there.”

He walked back around to where she sat and put a hand under her elbow, guiding her up. “How’s that? Still dizzy?”

“It’s better now,” she replied. “I think I’ll be okay if you bring the baby with you. I don’t want to take any chances.”

“Of course.”

He trailed behind her as she made her way slowly back to the bedroom, lifting the child up and bringing her along.

She sat back down on the bed and held her arms up to take her daughter from him.

“Hang on,” he said, pulling the pillows together and propping them against the headboard. “You need to get comfortable first.”

She smiled. He was a gentleman, that was for certain. Someone had raised him right. She settled herself against the pillows and said, “I’m good now,” and reached her arms out once more to take the baby from him.

“Here you go,” he said, passing the infant to her. “I’ll go make us some breakfast. Call me when you’re ready to come back inside. I’ll come get you lovely ladies.”

“Thank you,” she replied. Once he left the room, she lowered one strap of her camisole and positioned Sarah to her breast. The child latched on and began drinking immediately, clearly hungry.

“What are we going to do, little lamb?” she whispered to her daughter. “This man is lovely, but we’ve got to be on our way. If I could only remember what I’m supposed to be doing, or where we were headed. I’m sure I’ll figure it out soon, right?”

The child didn’t hesitate or stop eating; she merely gazed at her mother with trust and innocence as if to say, “I know, mom. I know.”

“I’m not entirely sure, but there’s something about this man. I think we’ll be good here until I’m back on my feet. I don’t know why I think that’s true, but I do.”

The baby looked up at her as if to agree.

“Let’s give it a day or so, and then we’ll figure out where we’re supposed to be. Does that sound good to you?” she whispered.

No response was necessary. She knew that for now, they had no other choice, just as she knew that despite not having her memory, one truth remained. Her daughter was the only person on earth with whom she had an unbreakable bond. Of that, she was certain.

Once the baby was finished feeding, burped, and changed into a clean diaper, she grabbed a sweater out of her suitcase to cover her camisole and slowly made her way back into the kitchen. The smell of pancakes hung in the air.

Kyle looked up when he heard her pull back a stool. “Why didn’t you call me? I would have come in and walked you out of there.”

“No need. I’m fine now. Just hungry. Breastfeeding seems to deplete me faster than I’d like to admit.”

“Well, let’s do something about that,” he said with an easy smile. He turned around for a quick moment and then returned, handing her a plate of fluffy pancakes stacked neatly in a tower.

“That’s a lot of food,” she said laughing.

“Well, you claim to be depleted. Let’s fill you back up.”

“Thank you,” she said.

He handed her a warmed pitcher of maple syrup.

“You never answered me before. Coffee or tea?”

All at once she was hit with the realization that at some point in her life, she would have requested tea with milk, but in this instance, she felt safer asking for coffee, even if she wasn’t sure why.

“I’ll have a coffee if it’s not too much trouble.”

“No trouble at all,” he replied, pouring some already brewed liquid into a large ceramic mug. “Cream? Sugar?” he asked.

“Just cream would be great,” she replied.

He swung around again and pulled a small clear glass pitcher out of the refrigerator and handed it to her. "Here you go," he said. "And by the way. I ran your name through the system. No hits. No one filed a missing person's report for you. You have no police record. Hell, you don't even have an outstanding parking ticket."

"So, is that a dead end?"

"That is, but I was about to Google you when I heard Sarah get up. I'll do that after we eat."

They ate side by side, seated at the counter, and after a few minutes of silence he asked, "Did finding your name on your driver's license jog your memory at all?"

"A bit," she lied. She couldn't tell him the truth. Mia wasn't her name. She had no idea what her name really was, but she knew that it wasn't what was printed on that small card.

"Maybe as the day goes on, more will come back to you. Time is the only cure for your problem," he said, swiping his forkful of pancake through a puddle of syrup on his plate.

"Kyle...what if it doesn't? What then?" she asked. Frightening thought, but she couldn't help herself. She felt a shiver run up her spine.

"Let's not go to the worst possible place. Let's believe that with some more rest and a little bit of time, all will be revealed," he said in a soft yet reassuring voice.

She wasn't sure if that was a good thing. She wasn't sure that she wanted all to be revealed. After all, the unknown was a scary place. But so were the shadows that lurked around the corners of her memory. The memory that was blocked. For now.

The days passed peacefully and without incident. It was already Saturday, almost a week since the accident. Her memory remained unrestored, and she felt fully unsettled.

Kyle had been a gentleman, giving her space to take care of the baby. He quietly took care of her, cooking their meals and making her feel like a welcomed guest in his home. She was beginning to think that even if she had no idea where she was supposed to be, she should find somewhere else to stay. This man was kind, but she didn't want to feel obligated to him. Plus, being around him, she was constantly aware of his maleness. He was attractive, and she found herself noticing small things, like the strong shape of his fingers and the broad nature of his shoulders and back. The way his tee shirts strained against his biceps made her stomach weak. She recognized the danger of getting more intimately involved with him.

Plus, he was trying his best to locate her family, and she had a bad feeling about that. She still couldn't put her finger on it, but she was sure that she didn't want him to uncover that part of her life. She was feeling certain that her family was the reason she'd been driving so fast that night when they first met after the accident.

For now, the baby was napping in the bedroom, and she was trying to clear her mind from the panic that seeped around the edges of her thoughts. She was deep in concentration journaling, trying to write down the details of her life now, hoping it would jog a memory of her past. She was so immersed in her task that she didn't hear Kyle step into the living room. When he sat down on the couch next to her, she almost jumped out of her own skin.

"Oh! I'm sorry. Did I startle you?" he asked.

"No, it's okay. I was just trying to remember more of where I was headed before I had the accident."

“Still nothing, huh?” He shook his head.

“I promise, I’d tell you if I could. Would she, though? A chill passed up her spine at her last thought. What was the secret that she was keeping? She knew that it was dangerous, whatever it was...

“Well, I’ve got just the thing to take your mind off your troubles. Come to dinner at Sibby’s with me tomorrow night. Meet the rest of my family. It will be loud and crazy, believe me. You won’t be able to concentrate on anything other than what’s on your dinner plate.”

“I don’t know, Kyle. I’ve imposed on you enough.” Do I really want to meet more people? I can barely keep myself together here with just him. It’s stressful enough, but he’s been so kind. How can I say no?

“This is one way to repay me. I don’t want to go either, but I promised Sibby.” He looked down at his feet and she sensed he needed her to be there.

“Well, since you put it that way,” she smiled. “Sarah and I would be delighted to accompany you.” Well maybe not delighted. Obligated is closer to the truth.

A smile crossed his face just then, and she couldn’t help but think that he looked so handsome this way.

“Thanks. You’re really helping me out here. But there’s something I have to tell you first, before you hear it over at my sister’s house.”

From the look in his eyes, Mia could see that whatever this was, it was troubling him. Everybody has a secret, she thought. I wonder if his is bigger than mine...

“You may be wondering why I’m able to be at home here, with you.”

“I noticed that you were here all day long, of course, but I didn’t want to pry,” she said. “I didn’t feel like I could ask you...”

“I want to explain,” he began, and then he recounted the night when the shooting occurred. He told her everything, how he was sure the young perp had a gun, how it turned out to be a toy, how devastated he felt when he saw the blood seeping through the victim’s shirt. He told her about his suspension pending the investigation and how he’d locked up his personal weapon as well.

“I don’t even know how I feel about holding a gun again, and that’s a liability in my line of work. More than that, it’s not who I am. I was raised around guns, my dad taught all of us how to shoot and how to take care of a weapon. He stressed safety first. Besides, it’s a requirement of my job and a massive responsibility. It should be so much a part of me to carry my service revolver that I don’t even have to think about it, but now I’m not sure...”

“Kyle,” Mia said softly, moving closer to him on the couch. “Don’t do this to yourself. You made a mistake, we all do. Besides, it won’t happen twice. This trauma you’ve lived through will prevent you from ever doing the same thing again.”

He looked up at her just then, his green eyes misty. He was so open and so vulnerable that it made her insides turn to liquid. She reached out and put one hand on his shoulder where she could feel the physical evidence of his stress and pain. “It’s okay, Kyle. You’ve done enough penance now. When you go back to work, which I’m sure will happen, you’ll start to feel like yourself again.”

They sat in silence for a long while before he quietly said, “Thank you for understanding. It means a lot to me.”

“Of course,” she said. She had the sudden thought that if she continued to sit next to him, something might happen between them. She wanted to reach for him and kiss

away his troubles, to feel more of his muscled body, share herself with him in the most intimate way. Instead, she asked, “Will you be okay if I go take a nap?”

When he looked up at her this time, she was sure she saw something else in his eyes, a longing of some sort. She wondered if the desire that she noticed there mirrored what she was feeling as well. She had better leave the room before she did something she’d regret. Her life was already complicated enough.

CHAPTER 8

As soon as Kyle opened the door to Sibby's house, he knew he was in trouble. His entire family was sitting in the great room, the Patriot game displayed on the large screen television. His brothers, Tim and Conor, sat on opposite ends of the sectional couch wearing their lucky team jerseys, and each holding a bottle of Sam Adams as they loudly rooted for their team. His brother-in-law, Sibby's husband Geoff, was trying to wrangle his sons as they ran circles around the room. His father was asleep in the recliner, oblivious to the sheer madness and noise around him; Kyle was sure that his mother and sister were in the kitchen arguing about how much more salt to add to the Sunday roast.

Kyle knew where this would lead. Inevitably, when the Pats lost to the Giants, there would be a lot of sulking and Monday morning quarterbacking all through dinner – or at least until Sibby told them to stop already and eat the food she'd worked on all day. Then Sibby would grab the saltshaker from their mother's hand, threatening to tell her mother's cardiologist about the woman's serious addiction to the seasoning, adding that the doctor would need to up the levels of the other woman's medications to prevent the stroke she was sure to have as she over-salted the meat on her plate.

Kyle let out a sigh. It was just another average Sunday afternoon with his family, except this week, he had a woman by his side, and to make it even more interesting, that woman had a baby with her. He thought for the briefest moment that he should just back up and go out the door, before they were spotted, but it was too late.

"Kyle," Sibby yelled out over the din in the room. "So glad you could make it. Glad you brought your house guest along as well."

He drew in a breath. “Hi, one and all. This is Mia, and the little one’s name is Sarah. Let’s give them a minute before you all descend like the locusts you are.”

“Come in, dear,” his mother said, stepping around him and heading straight for Mia. “So glad you could join us. Sibby told us what happened, the accident and all. I hope you’re feeling better now. I’m Colleen, by the way. And that sleeping beauty in the recliner is my husband, Tommy.” She turned to Tim and Conor. “Do you think you might turn the volume down some? You’re going to scare the wee one with the racquet you’re making.”

“Sure Ma,” Conor said. “Right after the next play.”

“Not later, Conor. Now,” his mother replied sternly and a second later, the sound was off as the picture still played.

Kyle watched as all eyes turned on Mia. He knew he had to step in before his family overwhelmed her entirely.

“Mia’s been through quite a trauma. Let’s give her some space,” Kyle said.

“Of course, Kyle. You don’t need to be the behavior police,” Tim kidded. “Unless you’ve been put back on the job. Has that happened yet?”

“Don’t be an asshole, Tim,” Sibby said. “If the disciplinary board had come back with a decision, we’d all know, right Kyle?”

Remembering the conversation he’d had with Mia, about his current work status, he felt his stomach turn. He had shared the information about the incident and opened himself up to her in a way that had surprised him. He had told her his deepest fear, that he was hesitant to shoot his gun, making him no longer fit to do his job. There was something about this woman that made him want to tell her everything and then

bury himself so deeply inside her that he forgot his own name. He shifted his gaze to her. From the way she locked eyes with him he could almost imagine that she knew what he was thinking, and it made the hair on the back of his neck stand up. He shook his head and quickly changed the subject.

“Will dinner be ready soon, Sib? I’m starving,” he said.

“Soon, brother, soon.” She turned her attention to Mia and led her over to the couch, sitting down herself and motioning for the Mia to do the same. “How are you feeling? Do you remember anything from before the accident?”

“Not really. I’m just grateful that Kyle has been so generous and has allowed Sarah and I to be his house guests. And Devon was able to retrieve my belongings from the car, so I have my ID now, my driver’s license and passport.”

“But you still don’t know where you were supposed to be going?” Sibby asked.

“No. I know that I drove up from New York but...”

“Please don’t tell me that you’re a Giant fan. That would be a big problem...” Tim said.

“A what?” she asked.

Kyle’s ears perked up. A New Yorker who doesn’t know who the Giants are? Maybe she’s not a sports fan.

“Just ignore him,” Colleen said as she swatted the back of her son’s head. “Leave the woman alone, now, Tim.” She turned back around. “And this must be Sarah,” she said looking at the baby in her newly purchased car seat, resting at Mia’s feet.

“Yes,” Mia said, bending over to unlatch the harness and lift the little girl onto her lap. “I’m so relieved that she wasn’t hurt in the crash. I don’t know what I would have done if she’d been harmed.”

“Of course,” Colleen replied. “We all do our best to protect our children, don’t we? And she’s such a pretty little girl.”

Kyle looked over at the baby. She was dressed head to toe in pink, her chubby fingers in motion, her feet kicking in excitement. She seemed to know that she was the center of attention and was relishing every moment.

“Thank you,” Mia said.

“Can I get either one of you a beer?” Geoff stepped into the room and asked.

“If you’re here, where are the boys?” Sibby asked.

“In their room on their iPads. I needed a break so I told them they could have fifteen minutes of screen time before dinner.”

“I hear you,” Sibby said nodding in agreement. “And speaking of dinner, let me go check. It should be near ready.” She retreated into the kitchen, their mother trailing behind her.

Kyle slipped into the spot his sister had just vacated on the couch and said to Geoff, “a beer would be great.” Then he turned to Mia. “Or wine, if you’d like a glass.”

“Just a glass of water, thanks,” she replied.

Geoff went off to get the drinks and once he was out of earshot and Kyle saw his brothers turn back to watch the game, he whispered to Mia, “They all mean well.

They're just a loud, crazy group of people. God love 'em, though. I know that I do."

"It must be nice to have a large family," she said.

"Maybe you have one too and they just don't know how to find you. I know we'll figure this out."

"Do you really think so? Then why didn't they file a missing person's report? Maybe you can find the answer to where I was meant to be going? Maybe there are clues at my New York address?"

"I'll ask Devon to check with his contacts at the Manhattan PD. It's a possibility..." Kyle said.

"I find it hard to believe that your people aren't looking for you. They must be frantic. If they file a missing person's report, it will trigger a notification to my email."

"Maybe," she said slowly, nodding her head. "Or that's the hope, anyway. But I'm not sure if there is anyone out there for me. That's possible, right?"

Just then Geoff returned with a bottle of beer for him and a glass of water for her, ending the conversation. But something about the way she'd asked that last question him gave Kyle pause. To him, the tone of her voice made it sound like she wasn't sure if she wanted to be found.

Dinner was the raucous meal it always was, lots of reaching across the table, loud conversation and the one or two glasses of spilled milk. At least no one was arguing tonight; they all seemed to be on their best possible behavior in honor of their guest. Kyle sat back, watching the scene around him. His mother had wrangled Sarah away from Mia and was cooing softly in the little girl's ear. His nephews were in their

seats, squirming, but sitting, nonetheless. Sibby kept running back and forth into the kitchen refilling bowls and platters; his brothers were debating the wisdom of the call of the last play of the Patriot game, happy that their team squeaked out a final minute victory.

In a rare moment of reflection, Kyle thought back to the conversation he'd had with Mia about his suspension from the force. She offered all the right sentiment, said supportive words, and didn't seem disturbed over the events as he explained them to her. Still, he had to wonder if she trusted him a little less now. For as heroic as he seemed to be surrounding her accident, he knew deep down that he was greatly flawed. He'd fired his gun wrongfully that night. If he got his badge back, he vowed to never make that same mistake again.

He glanced over at Mia. Her blue eyes sparkled in the light from Sibby's ornate chandelier, which hung over the dining room table casting prisms of light on the linen tablecloth. He'd brought this woman into his house and now she sat in the middle of Sunday dinner with his family, but he still knew nothing about her. It made him begin to question his abilities as a detective.

She looked up at him and smiled. He thought back to when they first met, when he finally opened her car door after the accident, and she spoke to him with a distinct British accent. Listening to her now, she sounded like she hailed from somewhere in the Midwest, with her flat, measured tone. Was he remembering it wrong? No. No, she sounded like someone who had spent her life in and out of fancy boarding schools. What was that about? he questioned to himself. Time to stop playing house and get into the database for himself to see if he could piece together this puzzle.

"Kyle, where are you, brother? I've been calling out to you to come help me in the kitchen," Sibby said, interrupting his train of thought.

"Sorry, Sibby, sure. What do you need?" He stood up and grabbed the now empty

plates closest to him.

“Start clearing and we’ll bring out dessert,” she replied, disappearing behind the swinging door into the kitchen.

He followed her and once at the sink, he carefully placed the Sunday china down. He turned to go and get more dirty dishes when she stopped him.

“Tell me. How long do you think it’s proper for you to have that beautiful woman in your home? You’re doing her no favors if you don’t track down someone who knows where she was supposed to be going when she crashed that car. You cannot seriously intend to have her stay forever. Have you considered that she might have a husband out there somewhere?”

“She’s not wearing a ring, Sibby. Plus, she would remember a husband, wouldn’t she?”

“C’mon brother! Take off those blinders you’ve got on. I mean, she’s pretty, and all, but still. She might just have a husband, and most certainly, that child has a father. What have you been doing all week? And by the by, I didn’t realize that the internet took off on Saturday and Sunday. Unless there’s something else going on between the two of you...”

“Sibby! Seriously? She has a head injury and a baby. I was busy taking care of them and just trying to give her a minute to collect herself and feel better.”

“Oh. So, you’re not attracted to her or anything? News to me.”

“What are you talking about? Are you really suggesting that I would make a move on a woman who can’t remember her own name?”

“Take advantage? No, brother. But find yourself lonely with an incredibly beautiful and vulnerable female in your home? That’s a ticket to disaster if I ever saw on, she said dryly.”

“Nothing happened and nothing will happen, Sibby.”

“Are you sure? It’s been a long time since Meghan left you and a whole lot of women in between that you haven’t brought home for Sunday supper.”

“I couldn’t come here tonight and leave her alone. She can barely take care of herself, let alone the baby.”

“As I said. A ticket to disaster. You’ve got enough on your plate with the investigation coming to a head. Find out who this woman is and send her on her way.”

“That’s the plan, Sib.”

“You know what they say about that, right? Man plans...”

“...and God laughs,” he finished her sentence for her. Leaning in, Kyle kissed his sister on the cheek. “Thanks for looking out for me, but I’ve got this situation under control.”

“It’s safe to assume that your lady friend and her daughter won’t be back next Sunday, then?” Sibby’s eyes narrowed as she bore down on him with her famous death stare.

“I’d put money on those odds,” he said and smiled. “I have nothing but time until I get my badge back. I’ll figure out this puzzle way before next weekend.”

Kyle turned and went back into the dining room to gather more plates.

“Can I help with those?” Mia asked, looking up at him, her voice soft, her eyes searching his own.

All at once Kyle felt his stomach flip with a nervous energy he hadn't felt in a very long time. Maybe he shouldn't have been so sure of himself when he told Sibby that he had everything under control. He'd bet and lost a whole lot more many times before this woman literally crashed into his life. Suddenly he wasn't sure about those odds at all, and when betting against himself, things never seemed go his way.

CHAPTER 9

It was well past midnight when Kyle sat down behind the screen of his computer.

Mia and Sarah were sleeping, and he was careful to close the door to his office so that in case Mia woke up and went into the living room, she wouldn't be able to see what he was doing. As he waited for the system to boot, he thought about what Sibby had said as they cleaned up after dinner. He had been lonely after Meghan left, but he'd also been happy with his choice not to get involved with anyone else. He really had believed that it was working for him, this no strings attached sort of lifestyle. Then he thought about the auburn-haired beauty asleep in his bed. He knew better than to crawl in there after her, but that didn't lessen the desire he felt to do that very thing.

She appears to be a single mother without any idea of who she really is, asshole, he admonished himself, then stopped cold. Wait. What if she's not single? What if Sibby is right and she has a husband out there somewhere, worried sick about his wife and child? Even more reason to stay away, he cautioned himself, internally battling. Did she lose her wedding ring in the accident?

Realizing it was useless to guess, Kyle looked up at his screen and clicked on the Boston police department's database, hoping to find some answers to his questions. He typed in his badge number and prayed that he still had access, even though he was technically not supposed to be working. Magically, the program loaded, and he put in the case number for Mia's accident. He read over the police report and didn't see any detail that he didn't already know. Plus, there were notes from the hospital that outlined the diagnosis of a head trauma due to the crash, but the "next of kin" information was blank.

That makes sense, he told himself. If they asked her when she came to in the hospital about who they might call for her, she wouldn't have known. She has no memory of who she is.

Realizing that the basic information available to him was not helpful, he clicked on Google and put her name into the search bar. While there were many women named Mia Elizabeth Sawyer, none of their pictures matched the face of the woman in his bed. He opened a new screen and logged into Facebook. He couldn't find her there, either. Now, that was strange.

An hour later, he'd exhausted TikTok, Instagram, X and even Truth Social. Nothing.

No digital footprint? Odd for a woman of her age, even if she wasn't up to date with any new posts, she should be there. He should be able to find her.

Kyle leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes, and gave himself a moment to think. She had a NY State driver's license. Let's go with that.

He was able to access the NY State system with his ID information; police departments had a reciprocal arrangement with all traffic related incident reports. As the screen filled with a series of prompts, he realized that he'd need her driver ID number to move forward. Did he really want to rifle through her wallet, or could this wait until morning?

Kyle pushed back from the desk. It could wait. She'd been through enough, there was no real reason to do this now, it was late. He stood up and went to the window. He liked the quiet of this time of night, when the world seemed to take a breath and rest, if only for a few hours until the sun rose again. Even though he lived in the city, the street was empty, and the only light seemed to be from the lampposts; very few windows were illuminated. He realized that he should close his eyes and sleep, but he knew that his mind was still too active. He stood and quietly padded to into the living

room telling himself that once he found Mia's family and returned her safely to them, he could get back to living his own life, hopefully working as a detective once more.

The next morning Kyle immediately knew that he'd made a mistake pouring himself a few glasses of Macallan the night before. Drinking until pre-dawn always led nowhere and he'd pay the price for the next few hours, that was for certain. He shook his head, trying to clear a path for his thoughts when he smelled the mouth-watering scent of frying bacon. He walked out to find Mia in the kitchen behind the stove and Sarah sitting in the little bouncy seat they'd borrowed from Sibby on the counter, gently cooing as her mother kept up a one-sided conversation with the little girl. It was a jarring sight, first because it seemed so plainly domestic, but secondly because it was the antithesis of the life he'd established for himself. He watched them for a moment before clearing his throat to signal his presence.

"Good morning, Kyle," Mia said cheerfully when she looked up at him. "I hope you don't mind that I started breakfast. I'm most definitely on the mend and wanted to do something that felt familiar. Is that okay?"

"Of course. I'll never turn down the offer of breakfast," he said with a smile, hoping to appear reassuring. He had to admit to himself that he was somewhat shaken by the sight of her, still in an oversized tee shirt and a pair of sleep shorts standing in his kitchen.

"Oh, and I made coffee. I'm not sure if it's any good, though. I don't know if I remembered the proper ratio of grounds to water."

"It will be better than having no coffee at all, I'm sure," he replied.

"Don't say that until you taste it," she said, pouring him a mugful.

He walked over to the kitchen and reached across it to take the hot drink from her

hand. He took a long sip. “It’s perfect. Strong, just the way I need it this morning.”

“Great,” she said, turning back to the frying pan on the burner. “How would you like your eggs?”

“Any way you’re making them for yourself works for me.” He pulled out a stool from underneath the counter and sat down, watching her lithe movements as she cracked two eggs into the hot bacon fat.

Kyle knew he should ask her about her social media accounts but didn’t want to ruin this moment. She probably wouldn’t have any answers for him anyway, so he turned his attention to the baby.

“Hey pretty girl. Do you want to come out of that seat for a bit?” he asked Sarah.

The baby turned her attention to him, her deep blue eyes wide with wonder.

Kyle lifted the infant out of the seat, settling her warm, compact body against his own. She fit perfectly in the crook of his arm, and he had an overwhelming feeling that he wanted to protect her from some of the unsavory element he knew lurked in the dark corners of the world they lived in. But then again, it was even more important to stay on task, to help find the right people who could nurse Mia back to full-strength and send them on their way. Don’t get comfortable, fool. These ladies are not yours.

“Here are your eggs,” Mia said, interrupting his thoughts as she slid a plateful of food his way. “I can hold her while you eat.” She held her arms out and Kyle passed the baby to her.

“Thanks for breakfast,” he said, lifting the fork and knife she’d put on his plate, cutting into the soft yolk.

“It’s the least I could do,” she said, smiling. “If it’s alright with you, I think I’ll take a shower while you eat. This one can go back into her seat for a bit.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea, showering alone? What if you get dizzy in there?”

“If that happens, I’ll call for you. Don’t get your hopes up, though. I think I’m good to go.”

She winked at him, and Kyle felt the eggs lodge in his throat. He honestly didn’t know what he was rooting for, and he felt her teasing response directly in his groin. Now he knew he’d need to sit there for a bit to conceal his growing erection, which was currently straining against his sweatpants.

Mia returned from the shower, dressed in black leggings, a crisp white cotton button down shirt and a heather gray cashmere cardigan. Kyle didn’t know a lot about fashion, but he recognized that the material looked expensive. Then he started down a mental checklist of the other details he knew about her. She was driving a late model car when they met, the baby was in a pricey looking car seat, both had clothing that didn’t appear to come from Target. She had cash in her wallet, and he was pretty sure he’d seen a credit card there as well. He made a mental note to get a better look when he asked her for her driver’s license to run her number through the computer once more. As she walked past him to pick up her daughter, he breathed in her perfume; a fresh, lightly floral scent that reminded him of the lilacs outside of his childhood home.

“After I feed Sarah, I’ll need to figure out how to get another car and hopefully get back on the road.”

“I see. Did you suddenly remember where you were going while you were in the shower?”

“No, not exactly. But I am feeling better, and I was hoping that you might uncover something in the next day or so. I have an overwhelming sense that I’m supposed to be somewhere.”

He looked directly into her blue eyes, searching for any hint that she was keeping important information from him. He didn’t see anything other than the specks of gold surrounding her irises.

“I’m going to shower first. Then we’ll check the computer and see what turns up in the database.”

“Sounds good,” she said, lifting Sarah up.

That was his cue to leave them alone. He walked into his bedroom and shut the door. He saw her bag open on the floor, clothing neatly folded within. The bed was made, and the room was tidy; it was clear that a woman had been here. He stepped into the bathroom and found her toiletry bag hanging on the doorknob. Her scent was even stronger in here. Lifting a bottle of her shampoo, he inhaled and felt her essence surround him. He shook his head. No. No, no attachments. He turned around and reached into the shower, rotating the faucet to the hottest setting. He stripped off his sweatpants and tee shirt and submerged himself under the steamy spray. He had to wash away any thoughts of Mia. She wasn’t here to stay, and she wasn’t here for him. He had to keep his life as simple as possible. He already had enough of a tangle of complications with work. He couldn’t handle anything else.

A few minutes later after he rinsed his own shampoo out of his hair, he shut off the water and grabbed a clean towel from the rack, drying himself off before wrapping it around his midsection. He walked back into his room to grab some clean clothing from the chest of drawers that sat squarely between the room’s two windows. Glancing to the right, he saw a black sedan parked across the street with two burly looking men sitting in the front seat. From this angle he couldn’t see their faces, but

he was able to make out the license plate number of their car. He went over to his night table and grabbed a pad and pen from the basket he kept there for scribbling his late-night thoughts. Jotting the series of numbers and letters down, he grabbed a pair of sweatpants and threw them on commando, ripped off the top sheet of paper and stuffed it into a pocket. He knew that he'd have a better line of sight from his office window. That's where he was headed next.

CHAPTER 10

Mia told herself to calm down her racing heart.

Kyle had come out of the bedroom just as she was about to knock on the door and see if she could come in and grab a clean diaper to change the baby. She had heard the shower shut off a few minutes earlier and almost stumbled across the threshold when the bedroom door flew open. She felt her eyes widen at the sight of Kyle in low-slung sweatpants, shirtless. He had a distinctive tattoo under his right nipple that extended around his ribs to his back in some sort of swirled pattern; his hair released droplets of water as he walked past her, lifting his finger to his lips as if to signal that she was to remain quiet.

Despite recognizing that she was in quite the predicament herself, she couldn't stop her core from tightening at the sight of him. He moved with a panther-like grace, almost silently making his way into his office, leaving her holding the baby and wondering what it was that had him on what she recognized as some sort of heightened alert. She hadn't allowed herself to think about the way she felt about Kyle, but she couldn't deny the attraction. Don't fall for your rescuer. Don't succumb to Stockholm Syndrome. You don't even know why you're here in the first place. Try to remember. Try to remember...

She closed her eyes. She could see herself behind the wheel of a car, driving fast, trying to get away from something, from someone, but... what? Why did she crash her car into a tree? Was she scared that she was being followed? If so, why was that happening to her? Ever since spending the evening with Sibby and the rest of Kyle's family, she had a nagging sense that she had her own sibling out there somewhere.

She could feel the connection and then that sensation would evaporate, like fog on a late autumn morning, before the sun rises enough to burn it away. Was someone out there looking for her, someone who knew who she was and loved her? Would that person come for her and if they did, would she recognize them when she saw them again? She looked down at her daughter, now asleep in her arms, her soft weight reassuring, her tiny lips still moving as though she was dreaming of more breast milk. She only had small pieces of the puzzle. By not remembering more, was she putting them all in some kind of danger?

Just then, he re-entered the room and silently sat down next to her. She pulled the two sides of her shirt closer together, suddenly feeling exposed having just fed the baby. She looked at him and knew that there was a problem.

“Mia, listen carefully. There’s a car parked outside that looked suspicious to me, so I called in a favor and had the plates run through the DMV. It’s stolen. There are two men sitting inside of it and right now the police are on the way. I told them not to use their sirens; I don’t want to alert these thugs that they’ve been noticed. I need to get more information, and I don’t want to scare them off.”

“How could you possibly know that those men stole that car?”

“I’ve lived here long enough to recognize my neighbors’ vehicles and the comings and goings of their guests. It’s a friendly block and we all look out for one another. Besides, it’s my job. Or I hope it’s still my job.”

She nodded her head to indicate that she understood.

“But I have a bad feeling about those men. I think they’re here for you. Is there any reason that someone would be following you?”

She swallowed a gasp. “I have no idea, Kyle, I’m sorry. I just don’t remember.”

“Okay, okay,” he replied. “Maybe they’re private investigators. Maybe your family hired people to find you. It feels too fast, but since you have no idea of who you are, I guess anything is possible.”

He looked directly at her, and Mia was sure he was about to ask her something else, but he stopped himself.

“What, Kyle? What do you want to know?”

He released a breath and said, “Everything. But since you have no idea yourself, I guess we’ll have to wait until you regain your memory to find out. In the meantime, can I please have your driver’s license? I can at least run that through the system and see if anything turns up.”

“I’m sorry to be such a burden,” she said, glancing down at the baby’s face, then crossing over to where she’d left her handbag. She pulled out her wallet and handed him her license. Then she searched his eyes once more, feeling drawn into him despite her instincts warning her to stay away. “If it helps any, I don’t have a headache today. Maybe that’s a good sign. Maybe things will start reappearing in my mind again.”

“Yeah,” he said softly. “But for now, lay low. Stay away from the windows and give me a little time to sort this all out.” He reached for her hand and grabbed it, giving it a brief squeeze.

She felt like a million pins and needles shot up her arm at his touch. No. No. Stay detached. She shook her head to clear her mind, then said, “Okay. I guess this means that there’ll be no car shopping for me today.”

“No, not today. Or at least not until I can rule out that someone is out there watching you with a bad purpose. Once we clear that up, you can do whatever you’d like.” He

stood up. “The uniformed cops will finish their questioning of those two goons out there, then I’ll get the report, and we’ll take things from there. I’ll just be a minute.” In two strides he was gone, back inside his office.

She could feel her body begin to shake. The problem with that was that she was not clear on the reason. Either Kyle was worried about what he’d uncover about the men outside, or she was terrified at her body’s reaction to him. Either way, mere thought of the outcome made her shudder. She closed her eyes for a moment and tried to calm her emotions. She tried to think about what happened right before the car accident, but nothing came to mind. It was as if there was a big black hole in her thoughts, and anything that transpired in her life before the crash was just erased. It was both frustrating and frightening.

She gently stood to put Sarah into the Pack and Play, carefully maneuvering her own body so that she didn’t wake the baby. Sarah settled down and Mia silently made her way into Kyle’s office. The window shades were drawn down low and he was hunched over the computer screen giving her a clear view of his tattoo. The ink was carefully drawn to look like a maze of some sort, with concentric circles drawn with a bold stroke. For the briefest moment she wondered what it might be like to trace the pattern with her fingers, but then froze when he sharply turned around to face her. She drew in a breath.

“I didn’t mean to startle you,” she began. “I just wanted to see if you’ve found out anything more about those two men outside.”

“No, not yet. I have a buddy at the department waiting on the report.” He pushed back his chair and motioned for her to sit on the unmade mattress of the pull-out couch next to the desk. “I did run your license, though. I’m not sure what it all means, Mia, but you’re not who you claim to be.”

A cold shock ran up her spine. “What do you mean?” she asked, trying her best to

sound convincing.

“Mia Sawyer, or at least the Mia Sawyer at your last known address, died peacefully in her sleep at the age of eighty-seven late last year. She had no surviving family.”

“I don’t understand,” she said.

“Your identity was falsified. Do you have any idea why that would be?”

A fuzzy memory seemed to come forward to her mind. Someone who was telling her something about taking on a new name, but as soon as it appeared, it vanished. She couldn’t grab it before it left her thoughts again. “I wish I did know, Kyle. You’ve been so kind, and patient with me. And your family has been so welcoming. I truly don’t know who I am, but I think something about the address on that driver’s license is familiar. It’s like I have a vague feeling that I’ve been there, but I can’t pull up the details.”

“Well, that’s something. Hold on.” He turned back around and punched the address into the keyboard. An image of a brownstone on a Manhattan street filled the screen. “Take a good look. That’s the building. Do you live there?”

“Like I said. It’s familiar, but not clear. I mean, I don’t think I could describe the inside to you at all.”

He pushed back and turned to her, their knees inches apart. “Don’t worry about it for now. Let’s see what the police report turns up on those two men. We’ll figure it out from there.”

“But Kyle, what if I never remember?” Her voice was barely above a whisper.

She looked so scared and vulnerable that all he wanted to do was say something to

comfort her. “Well then, you’ll be stuck here with me, at least for the short term. But I have faith in you. I think you’ll eventually be able to pull up the missing information.”

He stood up. “I’m going to get a shirt. I can wait for the report, or I can step outside and talk to the uniformed officers before they go, and honestly, I’m feeling too impatient to wait.” He walked by her and gave her shoulder a quick squeeze before he left the room.

She watched him go and thought about what he’d just said. She’d be stuck here with him, for now. Would that be the worst thing that could happen to her? Maybe not. But she’d have to get her heart to stop racing at that thought, though.

He came back into the office, this time in jeans and a black tee shirt that pulled tightly against his chest, his tattoo covered once more. “I’m going out there. Sit tight. I’ll be right back.”

“Be careful,” she said.

“Don’t worry about me, Mia. I can take care of myself. And by the way, I think I’m going to keep calling you Mia for now, if that’s okay with you.”

She simply nodded.

He smiled and she felt her heart flutter. “Anyway, it suits you,” he said with a wink. In two strides he was out the door.

She lay back on the mattress of the pull-out couch. His woodsy scent was everywhere, and she felt surrounded by a strange sense of calm, despite the new information he’d just shared about her supposed identity. She really did believe that he’d not rest until he uncovered her truth and sent her back into whatever life it was

that she'd been living before the accident. She could only hope that she'd be happy to go back, because if she was being honest with herself, she was feeling happy here. She felt enveloped by the warmth his family had shown her and the immense kindness Kyle had showered on her. She didn't know why, but she felt as if this wasn't typical of her life "before," and she wasn't ready to leave the safe cocoon he'd provided for her and her daughter. Not yet at least. Especially since she had the increasing sense that whatever lay behind her was not as appealing as what stood before her now. She couldn't put her finger on it exactly, but she had an overwhelming dread that there was something sinister in her past, something that had made her run. And run she had. Right into Kyle's arms.

CHAPTER 11

As Kyle stepped onto the sidewalk, he watched the black sedan slowly pull away from the curb. The two uniformed officers, deep in conversation, had begun to walk back to their cruiser. He called out to them.

“Hey, guys. Hold on a minute.” He sprinted over to where they stood in the middle of the street. Once in front of them, he said, “I’m Detective Kyle Walsh. I called in the complaint.”

Kyle watched as the other men relaxed their posture when they realized they were talking to a fellow police officer. He continued, “Did you find out who those perps were?”

The red-headed man flipped through some pages on a small notepad he held in one hand. “Not sure if you can call them perps. It all seemed legit. They claimed to be waiting for a call from their boss. They said they pulled over just to take a break for a few minutes. It checked out, Detective. They had all the right paperwork; IDs were valid, and the car was legally registered to one of them.” He paused, then said, “I’m PO Tom Casey and my partner here is Brad Reilly,” he said by way of introduction. Casey outstretched his hand for Kyle to shake, which he did before doing the same with the other officer.

“I appreciate you both stopping by,” Kyle began. “When I didn’t recognize the car, I became concerned. This is a tight-knit neighborhood, we keep an eye out for one another’s property.” He didn’t want to tell these two anything else; he didn’t feel that they had a need to know about Mia and her predicament.

“Of course, Detective. Just doing our job. If there’s nothing else, we’ll be on our way,” Casey said.

“Sure,” Kyle said. “If I see that car again, I’ll be sure to call it in. Those men probably won’t be back. There are lots of other places for them to sit while on a break from work.”

“Absolutely, Detective. Have a good day.”

Both men tipped their hats in Kyle’s direction, and he watched them get back into their cruiser and drive off. He just stood still for a moment looking around his block. With that black sedan gone, nothing struck him as out of the ordinary. There were Halloween decorations on most of the houses; carved jack-o-lanterns sat on tidy porches and orange and black streamers adorned the lampposts along the quiet street. Autumn leaves were scattered across lawns, a carpet of gold, red, and bronze swirling with the gentle movement of the wind.

He hadn’t given a lot of thought to the approaching holiday, as it was always more of a nuisance than anything else, especially when he first walked a beat after graduating from the police academy. Kids out for some fun, others out for pranks or minor mischief. He could remember when he and his brothers would plan their candy-grabbing strategy to be sure to visit the houses that gave out full-sized chocolate bars and avoid the ones that handed out raisins in small red boxes, then once they were older, buying dozens of eggs to let loose on their unknowing victims. They found their fair-share of trouble in those days, egging houses and toilet papering trees, but they stuck together like glue. It was always “all for one and one for all.” Kyle consistently knew where to turn when he needed something. He knew just how lucky he was that his family was always there for him, especially now. As if it wasn’t enough that he was on leave from work, he had Mia to deal with.

Mia. It must be terrifying to not know who you were and if you had a family out there

somewhere looking high and low for you. Or worse, what if no one was looking for you at all. Or even more extreme, if the people who were looking for you drove an unmarked black sedan and seemed somewhat nefarious. Kyle shook his head. It was time to go back inside and try to figure out who the woman in his house was. For some reason, he felt like she was a ticking clock whose hands were approaching the midnight hour, the time when all hell was due to break loose.

Mia finished drying the last of the breakfast dishes when she heard Kyle's key in the door. She quickly folded the towel and dropped it on the counter, then waited for him to come inside.

"Well?" she asked. "Did you find out what those creepy men were doing?"

"They were just taking a moment out of their day," he said.

"Here, on your block? Does that seem likely to you?" she asked incredulously.

"Not really, but without more to go on, I have to believe it at face value for now. Besides, their identification didn't raise any red flags in the system. The officers who showed up ran their information. No hits."

She shook her head. "Okay, I guess you know what you're talking about. You're the detective." Mia remarked.

"Maybe. Or maybe we just need to get out of here for a bit. We could take a walk when Sarah wakes up. It's a beautiful day. A little chilly, but the sun is out. I could show you around the neighborhood."

"That sounds lovely," she said. "I'll pull out some warm things for the baby to wear. We could all use some air. And if there's a market nearby, we could pick up something to make for dinner. Perhaps if I see some groceries I'll be able to

remember how to make a dish or two.”

“You mastered breakfast, that’s for sure. And I can always make us pasta tonight. You don’t need to cook again.”

“Eggs and bacon seem like the kind of food you don’t need your memory to prepare. A simple pasta as well. But I’m thinking that if I’m presented with a variety of things, I might recall which go together to become something reasonable to eat. Or at least that’s the plan.”

“If you say so,” Kyle replied. “There’s a Trader Joe’s in walking distance of here. I’m sure there are some other things you might need as well. Do you have enough diapers and wipes for now?”

“Probably not, but I’ll check,” she said.

“Why don’t you do that while I go see if I can figure anything else out from the report on the men who parked outside. Once the baby wakes up, we can go out for a while.”

“Sounds good, I’ll just be a few minutes,” she said as she tiptoed into the bedroom.

Kyle watched her go and wondered just how long she’d be there with him, in his house, in his life. When he finally put the pieces to this puzzle together – and he knew that it would happen -- would he feel good about sending her back to whomever was waiting for her, wherever that was? Would they stay in touch? Would he ever see her again? He stood up straight. Holy shit. Cut it out. You’re just here to help this woman get back on her feet. You’re not friends. You barely know her. Stop being pathetic and get on with it.

He turned toward his office and with a determined air, put himself in front of his computer screen and saw that his own life had caught up to him. He had an email

letting him know that his range test was scheduled for the day before Halloween. The good news was that it must mean that he was inching closer to being released from administrative leave. The more concerning news was that he was going to have to shoot his gun, even if only at a target. He sighed. He could obsess over the final hurdle before he got his badge back, or he could shake it off and try to uncover Mia's identity. He put his head down and got to work.

An hour later they were in one of the aisles of Trader Joes. It wasn't too crowded, and Mia was pushing the stroller while he pushed a small cart growing crowded with groceries. She had put some potatoes and carrots as well as a whole chicken in their haul and was now looking for fresh thyme and rosemary. Apparently, roast chicken was another one of the meals she claimed one needed no memory to prepare. They rounded one end-cap filled with a variety of brightly packaged, Halloween themed chocolate bars.

"Look at all the sweets!" she exclaimed. "What day is it?"

Before he replied, it registered on him that she didn't say "candy," but instead said, "sweets." Then he thought again about the fact that she had an accent when they first met, but not after that. "It's October 28 th ," he said. "Halloween is a few days from now."

"Halloween," she repeated. "Costumes and ghost stories, right? I'm not so far gone as to not remember that!"

"True, but we call this candy. You just called it sweets."

"Candy, sweets, it's all the same, isn't it? It must be something I heard somewhere," she shrugged her shoulders, looking as confused as he felt.

"You didn't hear it here in the states. Or at least not here in the northeast."

“What are you thinking, Kyle? Do you think I’m from somewhere else? I mean, not from New York at the very least?”

“Well, you were heading north. Maybe you’re from Canada? Maybe that’s where you were going?”

He made a mental note to check the use of language in Canada, to see what exactly they called candy there. But if he was a betting man, and he went back again to the sound of her voice when he first found her at the crash, he was starting to think that she was from somewhere else. Somewhere across an ocean. Should I mention that she spoke with a British accent when I first found her? Would that confuse her even more?

“I wish I knew, Kyle. If I did, I would be out of your hair. I keep waiting for a thunderbolt, you know? A revelation of some sort that would jolt me back into my life.”

“Did you ever think that maybe whatever it was that caused the accident is the reason you truly don’t remember?”

“What do you mean?”

He looked at her across a large display of organic broccoli and thought better of having this conversation in the produce aisle of his local market.

“Never mind. I just think that the brain is a mysterious and complicated organ. There’s got to be an explanation for your amnesia.”

“You mean other than a really hard hit on the head? The emergency room physician didn’t seem that concerned. He didn’t even suggest a follow-up appointment. He just told me to give it time and my memory should come back.”

“Maybe it will. And don’t take me too seriously. I’m not a doctor. Hell, I barely made it out of high school chemistry. I truly know nothing where head injuries are concerned.”

“I thought you suffered concussions as a teenager. Didn’t you tell me that, or am I remembering the wrong information as well as forgetting my own past?”

“No, you’ve got that right. I played a lot of ice hockey and had my fair share of injuries.”

“You never lost your memory?”

“Not for this long,” he replied softly. “And I would mostly not remember getting hit. But don’t read anything into that. Everyone is different and even though I got checked into the boards more times than I can count, I was wearing a helmet. That helped. You weren’t.”

She looked at him for a long time and he watched as her eyes filled with tears.

“I hate that you had concussions. This recovery is not fun. I mean, the headaches have stopped, but my memory isn’t back. I wouldn’t wish this on anyone, but especially not someone as kind and caring as you’ve been with me and Sarah.”

In that moment Kyle almost broke. He wanted to take her into his arms and hold her until she felt better, until she was whole once more. But she wasn’t his to take and until he knew exactly who she truly was, he knew better than to let this go any further.

He cleared his throat. “Let’s go pay for these groceries,” he motioned to the cart. “It’s getting dark already. The temperature will drop before you know it. We should take the baby home.”

Home, he thought. Once she was gone, would it still feel that way?

CHAPTER 12

By the time the following Sunday rolled around, they had gotten into a routine, but no further on the hunt to find out Mia's true identity. They gave each other some space in his home, neither stepping out of the shower in a towel or getting too close while watching a movie on the couch, but they cooked their meals together, took long walks with the baby in either the stroller or strapped to one or the other of their chests with the cashmere wrap, and shared household tasks. Kyle had to admit that his kitchen and bathrooms were cleaner than ever before with her there. To anyone who didn't know them, they seemed very much a couple.

For Kyle, though, everywhere he turned was a dead end when it came to uncovering who Mia was. He had spent his week doing a more intensive Google search, a reverse image search, and a deep dive into marriage and birth records in the New York City database. All he had to go on was the address on her driver's license, but that was turning out to be a dead end as well. He went so far as to Google Sarah's name, but of course, nothing turned up. It was as if Mia had appeared, fully formed out of the ether, no past, no footprints, no trace of a life before he pulled her from her car. It was maddening. He was about to suggest a session with a hypnotherapist to try and unlock her memory. He knew that the department had a list of names, and he put it on his to-do-list to find out who the Chief thought might be best. Besides, that would give him an excuse to check in and see if he had a reinstatement date yet. He'd passed his range test the day before, surprising even himself with his accuracy and steady hand. While he still didn't want to carry his gun again, he knew he'd have to once he went back to work.

And for as annoyed as he was over his inability to figure out the puzzle she presented

-- bonus points, it was Halloween, and despite his reservations, they were dressed appropriately for their afternoon activity – walking around Sibby’s neighborhood with his brothers and nephews in tow, trick or treating. Kyle was in his typical family Halloween tradition “greaser” garb; a tight white tee shirt, a black leather jacket and form-fitting black jeans. Mia had found a wide poodle skirt in a secondhand shop and paired it with a baby-doll blouse in pink, a matching cardigan, and a pair of black flat loafers. Little Sarah was in a warm fleece with donkey ears on the hood and a small fabric tail on her rear end – on loan from one of Sibby’s boys. By the time they pulled onto Sibby’s driveway, the entire family was already outside, ready to go. The boys could hardly be contained, running circles on the lawn, their excitement bubbling over.

“What took you so long, brother?” Sibby asked, immediately pulling open the car door so that Mia could step out and reach the baby in the back seat. “And I still don’t think that this car is appropriate for traveling with an infant. It’s too small, even though the car seat fits inside.”

“Today was my fault,” Mia began, “I got dressed, finally wrangled the baby into her clothes and then she had a massive blow-out, and we needed to start all over again. I’m so sorry.”

Kyle’s eyes widened as his sister’s manner changed when addressing Mia. “Hush now, nothing for you to be sorry for. These things happen,” Sibby said, her manner kind and patient, lifting the baby from Mia’s arms. “Just so long as you let me hold this little one. I’m hoping that some girl vibes rub off on me. I want our last child to be female,” she teased. “Not that I’m sure I want to be doing this again. I’m just toying with the idea for now.”

Watching the chaos around him, his nephews brandishing toy swords to complete their pirate costumes, Kyle couldn’t stop the next words that spilled from his mouth.

“You’re willing to do this again ? Didn’t you tell the nurse at the hospital that you were done?” He pointed to his nephews, all in full battle mode, brandishing their toy swords.

“What’s it to you, mister?” his sister spat at him. “It’s not like you need to clothe and feed them. I’m only thinking about taking one more chance with this genetic merry-go-round. Truthfully, I’ll take whatever I get, a healthy baby, God willing. I’m just praying for one of the other variety this time. I will need someone to take care of me when I’m one foot out of the grave.”

“Wow,” Kyle began, about to remark on the difference in his sister’s attitude when speaking to him instead of to Mia, but Mia cut him off.

“I’ll say a prayer for you, too, Sibby. I hope you get lucky if you decide to try again.” She leaned around little Sarah and gave Sibby a hug.

Since coming to stay at Kyle’s, Mia had grown on Sibby, which Kyle still found hard to believe. His sister was tough, but somehow, Mia had found a way to endear herself with a few dates for coffee and the two were well on the way to becoming fast friends.

Sibby looked at Kyle and the sound of her voice brought him out of his thoughts. “You need to learn something from this lovely person while you can. She won’t be here forever, you know.”

Kyle felt his sister’s words twist deep in his gut. Lately he couldn’t think about Mia going anywhere. He was getting attached even though he knew he shouldn’t; she had a life out there somewhere, and eventually, she’d find it again. He shook his head and said, “Are we ready to go now, or what?”

“First things first,” Sibby said as she started organizing a group picture. “You know

that if I don't take this now, the kids will be all hopped up on sugar and we'll never get them to stand still. Now, come on everyone, get close together under the tree."

"I imagine they will calm down enough now to pose, hey Sibby?" he teased his sister, pointing to the boys rolling around on the grass in front of the house.

"Just lead by example, Kyle and wait under the tree."

Kyle's brothers, parents, and nephews knew better than to argue with his sister and they began to assemble in their usual places for their annual family photo. At Sibby's urging, they huddled together to fit into the frame, when suddenly, she turned. "Mia! You and Sarah too!! Get in there!"

"No, Sibby, you should be in the photo. I'll snap the shot. Go in the picture with your family."

"You're an official part of our family now, Mia, no matter what comes next. You have to be in the picture. Plus, it's what I use each year for our holiday card. That'll get the relatives in Galway talking now, won't it?" She laughed out loud at her own thought.

Mia held Sarah and stepped into the frame. Sibby set the timer on the camera and after making sure that everyone could be seen, jumped into the group just before the shutter snapped. "Thanks, one and all. We can set off now. Boys, mind your father and don't run into the street."

The large, unruly group began its trek around the neighborhood, stopping and nearly every house where Sibby would greet everyone she met. Kyle marveled at his sister. She knew all her neighbors and had a kind word to say wherever they went, asking after the health of the more elderly residents and making each person feel cared for and special.

Kyle hung back a bit and waited for his brothers to join him

“So, brother, tell the truth. How was the range?” Tim asked, falling into step next to Kyle.

“You passed, so it couldn’t have been that terrible,” Conor added.

“It wasn’t,” Kyle replied. “I can still shoot. I just don’t want to.”

“Yeah, you know how that goes. It does take a minute. But you’ll be reinstated fully, now, and your gun is standard issue. Don’t worry. It’s like riding a bicycle, right?”

“I really don’t think your analogy applies, Conor. I could have killed that kid.” He shrugged.

“That won’t happen again, Kyle. We all know you. It was a horrible accident. Time to put it behind you,” Tim said.

“Now it’s just the matter of getting the formal notice, brother. You’re headed back to work any day,” Conor chimed in, giving Kyle a playful punch on the arm.

“Devon seems to think so. And I’m going to call the Chief and speak to him as well. I hope so, though. It’s been rough. I’ve been losing my mind. At least working on Mia’s case has been something.”

“Is that why you brought Mia home? As a distraction?” Tim kidded.

“Not funny, man. She had nowhere else to go.”

“But she’s all recovered now, right, no more headaches? What gives? Do you plan on waiting until she remembers who she is?” Conor asked, more seriously. “Do you like

this chick or something?”

Kyle drew in a breath, not wanting to reveal the feelings he had for Mia that he'd yet admitted to himself. “The headaches have stopped, but she still has no memory of her life before the accident. I'm just trying to help her out.”

“Right man, but playing house ain't helping,” Tim said as they rounded a corner to the next street.

“Just as soon as she remembers, she'll be on her way. Don't you boys worry about it, or me for that matter. I can handle this.”

Tim cast a skeptical glance at Kyle. “If you say so, brother. It just seems to me that you're getting a little too comfortable with this arrangement. I'll assume you're still sleeping on the pull-out couch in your office?”

“Of course I am,” Kyle replied. “Don't you know me? Would I mess with a single mother like that?”

“That's assuming that she is a single mother,” Conor said under his breath. “You don't even know that for a fact.”

“Listen you two, I appreciate the concern, I do. But I have this situation under control. No need to discuss it further.”

Kyle hoped that was enough to close the uncomfortable discussion. The truth was that he did wish he wasn't sleeping on the couch, but rather in his own bed, with Mia. He'd never let that happen. He didn't know if she was unattached or if she had a husband out there searching for her, but he'd be lying if he didn't admit, at least to himself, that he found her incredibly attractive. There were nights when he had to relieve himself of some of the sexual tension between them with his own right hand.

Still, he'd never let this feeling he had for her go anywhere else despite wanting her warm body beneath his own.

Kyle turned his attention to his nephews, watching them dance up and down the block, each with a pillowcase growing fuller with each stop they made. Their excitement was infectious. Sibby pushed her youngest in a stroller as Mia pushed Sarah in hers, side by side, barely fitting within the confines of the sidewalk, heads tilted toward one another in deep conversation. Kyle knew that his sister longed for close female companionship like this, he only prayed that Sibby would be okay when Mia did finally leave. Thinking about it further, he hoped they'd both survive it.

His parents trailed behind the two women and his brother-in-law Geoff policed the street making sure that none of the children stepped into harm's way. The late autumn sun was shining, not a cloud in the brilliant blue sky, and the leaves that had fallen, covering the pavement, crunched under their feet. It was the suburban ideal, a perfect Halloween afternoon and for a rare moment in time, Kyle wished it was his to claim. Maybe I'll still have this one day. A wife. A child. A house near my family.

Just then the sound of Conor's voice pulled him out of his own thoughts. "When you go back do you think they'll give you a new assignment, or do they think you'll start out on desk duty first?"

Kyle was about to answer when he saw a familiar looking black sedan slowly turn the corner and pull toward the curb. He looked up at Mia, laughing at something Sibby had said, blissfully unaware of the threatening vehicle so close to her and the baby. The hair on the back of his neck stood up. There were two burly men sitting in the front seat. He hadn't seen them since the day they parked across the street from his house, the day he called for a patrol car to check the men out. This couldn't be a coincidence. These men were looking for Mia and this time he was going to find out exactly what they wanted for himself.

He quietly pulled his brothers a step or two back from the larger group. “Listen guys, I think we have a bit of a problem. That car, the black town car. I think those men are after Mia. They were parked outside of my condo when she first arrived, but a couple of uniforms scared them off.”

He watched as his brothers both squared their shoulders at the same time. “Here for Mia? What does that mean? Tim asked.

“At first, I thought they might be private investigators, looking for her, you know, hired by her family. But a PI wouldn’t have been so quick to disappear, especially if his fee depended on finding his target. I don’t know. I just have a bad feeling about them, like those men are not on the up and up. Something tells me that they are working for someone who has an ulterior motive.”

“What do you want to do about it, Kyle? We’re right here. Anything you need, just ask.”

“I think I want to question them myself. Just steer the family away from here and try to head back to Sibby’s. I don’t want Mia to be out on the street any longer than necessary.”

“We’ve got it covered, brother. Will do,” Tim replied.

Kyle knew that both his brothers had weapons strapped to their ankles. They never left home without them, and while he’d never done that himself, preferring to leave his police-issued gun at home under lock and key when he wasn’t working, they felt differently. He and his brothers owned licensed and registered Sig Sauer P365s, a compact pistol. They went to the shooting range and practiced safe gun handling. Even now, when Kyle questioned everything about the night he mistakenly shot the young man with the toy in his hand, he trusted his brothers and their judgement implicitly. They would not deploy a weapon unless it became absolutely necessary.

Kyle waited until his family was much further down the block before crossing the street and walking up to the idling sedan's driver side window. He knocked on the glass, which was rolled down in a smooth motion, a cloud of cigarette smoke drifting outward.

"Gentleman," he began. "Do you mind telling me what you're doing here?"

"Who are you and why would we need to tell you anything?" the driver said gruffly.

"Call me a concerned citizen," Kyle replied. "It's just that I've never seen you in this neighborhood, is all. I know everyone who lives around here, and I know that you two don't."

"We're just out for our coffee break. Taking in some air... is there a law against that?"

"No, but there is no Dunkin within a square mile of these residential blocks." His detective mind clicked on. "Why don't you tell me what you're really doing here." Kyle realized immediately that these two men were professional goons. "Or," he began, "tell me who your boss is, and I'll ask him a few questions myself."

"I told you buddy. We're just taking a break. Nothing more," one of the men said. "We're not here to make trouble. We're only taking in some fresh air." He took an exaggerated deep breath as if to make his point.

"Then let me suggest that you go find a more urban place to enjoy your time off. You've had enough fresh suburban air for one day."

The man in the passenger seat leaned forward and one side of his jacket fell away. Kyle clearly saw the shoulder strap for his gun and the revolver tucked at his waist. The driver put out a hand across his partner's chest and pushed him back in place.

“No problem. We were just leaving anyway,” the burly man said as he put the car in gear.

Kyle jumped back as the man pulled away from the curb and he watched the car disappear around the corner. Then he turned and quickly ran to go find his family. He had some decisions to make, and those were best done as a group. For as much as he didn't want to frighten Mia, it was time to get to the truth.

CHAPTER 13

When Kyle returned to Sibby's, Conor was the first to greet him.

"We've got the situation under control, Kyle. All doors and windows are locked. Tim and I checked the shed in the backyard and the basement. Nothing is out of place, no sign of anyone having been here when we were gone."

Kyle simply nodded. "Thanks, brother. Good to know."

"What's the deal? Were they PIs?"

"Hard to tell. They were goons, that's for sure. I don't know if they were out to snatch Mia or if they were just observing her for now. They were both armed. That I can confirm."

Conor joined the conversation, his arms crossed over his chest. "You want to call this in? Maybe you should get the department involved."

"I was going to call the Chief tomorrow, but I think I'll do it now instead. I got the plate. Maybe something will turn up when we run it."

"Yeah, but Kyle, you're probably right. I bet they're investigators. I wouldn't be surprised if Mia's family showed up here looking for her."

"If that was the case, why didn't they knock on the door of my condo? They tracked her to my address."

“Yeah,” Tim offered. “But they didn’t see Mia that day, did they? Today they got a visual. They’ll be back, or someone else will.”

“What’s the next move?” Conor asked.

“I think I should speak to Mia first. I don’t want to upset mom and dad, or Sibby for that matter. You know how she gets...”

“Yeah man, good luck with that,” Tim grimaced. “She’s gonna lose her mind if she knows that those guys were near the kids.”

“True,” Kyle nodded. “I need a minute. Let me get Mia alone and take her temperature on all of this. It’s her life we’re talking about here. I have to know what she wants to do.”

He walked into the family room to find his nephews surrounded by piles of candy, their father monitoring them to be sure they didn’t eat too much of it at once while rocking his youngest in his arms. Sibby wasn’t there, she and his mother must have been getting dinner ready. Mia wasn’t there either.

He made his way into the kitchen and saw his sister putting a lasagna into the oven while his mother was slicing carrots and cucumbers for a salad. He reached over to the cutting board to snag a carrot, and his mother admonished him with, “do that again and risk losing a finger.”

He smiled at her, not wanting to give away his inner turmoil. “Anyone see Mia?” he asked.

“She’s feeding Sarah. They’re in the baby’s room.”

“Oh, right,” he said, turning on his heel to leave.

“Give the woman her privacy, brother. Leave her be,” Sibby said. “Instead, you can bring those dishes to the table.” She pointed to a large stack of white plates.

“Of course, Sib,” he said, grabbing the dishes and walking back through the swinging doors to the dining room. He put them down quietly and made his way to the baby’s room. Despite his sister’s warning, he had to talk to Mia now. He quietly made his way up the stairs to the second level where the bedrooms were. The door to the nursery was partially open, the lighting was low. He could make out Mia’s form in the rocking chair, the baby at her breast. He didn’t want to scare her or interrupt Sarah, so he softly knocked on the door.

“Come in,” he heard her say.

He stepped inside the room. She had the baby’s head covered with a cloth diaper, concealing her chest from his view, but he could hear the smacking sound of the small child swallowing the milk.

“Mia. We need to talk.”

She looked up at him and teased in a whisper, “Are you breaking up with me? Because that line sounded familiar. Not that anything is truly familiar, that is,” she said with a lilting tone, clearly enjoying the chance to engage in some banter with him.

He smiled. “No. Not exactly.” He saw a shadow fall over her face as she recognized that something serious was happening.

“What is it then?”

“I think you’re being followed. No, let me rephrase that. I don’t think it, I know it. I just saw that black car again, but this time I spoke to the men inside myself. They

didn't give me much to go on, but I have a large suspicion that they were tracking your movements. I don't think you're safe here."

Her eyes widened and in a rushed flow of words she asked, "What? How could that be?"

"Since you can't remember, we can't know what it is. I'm just starting to believe that there's something going on with your past that's trying to catch up with you."

Her face fell. In a whisper, she asked, "Did I put your family in danger by being here? Oh my God Kyle, if anything happens to them because of me I don't know what I'll do."

"My brothers can handle it. You don't need to worry about the family. They'll be fine, I promise."

"I should go. I'll find a hotel. I'll lay low until my memory returns."

"I can't let you do that, Mia. I can't leave you alone to fend for yourself. Those men looked dangerous." He didn't want to tell her that they were armed. She looked frightened enough.

She took the now sleeping baby and stood, walked over to the crib, and put her down in it. As she remained turned away from him, she buttoned her shirt and folded the diaper she'd used for modesty, laying it on the changing table.

"Kyle, listen. You've done so much for me already. I can't let you do more. Sarah and I will be okay. Maybe those men know who I am. Maybe it's time that I speak to them myself."

He simply shook his head. "Not. Going. To. Happen."

“Kyle! It’s not like we’re a couple, or even involved. You can’t tell me what I can and cannot do.”

Something inside him woke up in that moment. After months of being suspended from work, of feeling unsure, unsettled, her words forced him into action. He didn’t hesitate. He took two steps closer to her, put his hand on her shoulder, looked directly into her eyes and said, “I’m invested in this now, Mia. I care about what happens next for you and Sarah.

“Kyle, I...”

He tightened his grip. “Don’t, Mia. Don’t argue. I just want to keep you safe until you remember more.”

“But you don’t know me. I don’t even know me. We don’t know who I am, where I’m from. I mean, what if I never remember? What then? Plus, what if Sarah’s father is in my life and looking for us? How will I explain living in your house, with you?” She shook her head and pulled away from him. Then she suddenly looked up, a thought clearly coming to mind.

“How do you explain the men in the car, then? They could have been hired by whomever is looking for me. It could be a husband, or the man I’m involved with at the very least.”

“Mia. Listen to me. We’re going to figure this out, and if you’re attached to someone else, terrific. You’ll go and live your life and that will be that. But for now, let me do this. Let me keep you safe. Let me keep Sarah safe.”

“How do you plan on doing that? Those men found me here, somehow. If we go somewhere else, they’ll find me again.”

“Not if we do this my way. I know exactly where we can go and be off the grid.”

“Off the grid? I don’t know that much about my past, Kyle, but judging from the contents of my suitcase I have a feeling that I wasn’t exactly a survivalist. Does ‘off the grid’ mean no running water?”

He laughed. “No. They’ll be running water and more where I’m planning to take us. Leave it to me.”

“What about your family? What about making sure they’re safe? How do you know that those men won’t come back here and ask where we went if we’re not at your place?”

“Have you met my sister? I pity them if they darken her door.” He leaned down and kissed her cheek. “First things first. Let’s go tell them what we have to do. Sibby’s made her famous lasagna and I know that she expects us to eat dinner.”

“Is Sarah safe up here alone?”

“Absolutely. No one is getting in here without going through me or my brothers. She’s fine. C’mon.”

He took her hand and led her back down the stairs, all the while trying to come up with the right words to say to let his family know what he had planned.

Mia could barely eat the lasagna on her plate. Kyle had been right. When confronted with the situation she was in, Kyle’s family rallied. Everyone had an opinion as to what she should do next. All she really wanted to do was run away and hide alone, but with Sarah to care for, that wasn’t an option. She would have to let Kyle handle the next steps.

She marveled at his patience. He listened to what everyone around the table was saying, each offering their ideas, their concerns. Finally, when the entire group had a chance to contribute, he cleared his throat and said, “I’m taking Mia and Sarah to the Cape.”

“The Cape house? Kyle, who’s to say they won’t follow you there?” Sibby asked.

“I’ll be sure of it. They must have tracked Mia somehow. I’m going to go through her luggage myself to be sure there’s no device hidden somewhere.”

“Device? What do you mean?” Mia asked.

“Somehow, someone might have put a tracker on you. Maybe on the plane. Maybe you were followed from London.”

“I wish I knew why I had been visiting London. I don’t even remember being there,” she said.

Kyle drew in a breath. Good thing I never mentioned her having an accent when we first met. That information would only make this worse for her. “It doesn’t matter now,” he said softly.

“But why would anyone want to follow me from anywhere?”

“That’s the question, isn’t it, dear?” Colleen added.

Mia put her head in her hands and closed her eyes. She couldn’t remember. She had to try, though. Somehow, she had to try.

It had been easy to stay with Kyle. He was wonderful to be around, so attentive, so helpful with Sarah. She couldn’t deny that she was attracted to him before that kiss,

but now, how could she stay alone with him in a place she'd never been, let alone heard of. It was a frightening thought, but what was her other option? With her eyes still closed, she tried to visualize herself on a plane with Sarah, but nothing came to mind. She didn't even remember traveling or arriving at an airport. It was as if she sprung to life in that hospital room after her car accident, her past erased.

She heard excited voices around the table and forced herself to concentrate on what they were saying.

"No one's been there since Labor Day. There'll be no food in the pantry. You'll need to turn the water and gas back on, oh, and the cable too, if you want internet and tv," Sibby said.

"I know it, don't worry. I'll take care of everything once I'm up there. I don't want to do anything from here. It might raise an alarm, besides, I'm not sure if my condo is compromised. What if it's bugged, or if they've tapped into my internet? No. We'll go tomorrow night, after dark."

"Should we come along?" Tim asked.

"No. I don't need a convoy of cars and besides, I can protect us myself."

"How about this? We all come up for Thanksgiving next month. By that time, you should have some idea of what you're looking for, and we can help if you need us. A holiday at the Cape might be perfect, after all," Sibby added in a tone that made what she said a done deal.

"That's a possibility, Sib. I'll let you know. I'm going to pick up a burner phone tomorrow morning. I'll send you an encrypted email with the number."

Sibby nodded her head.

Mia listened to them talking about this Cape house that they all seemed to love so much not saying a word. But when she heard the phrase “burner phone,” it gave her a jolt. She didn’t know why, but it sounded familiar. She repeated it to herself a few times. What is it about ‘burner phone’ that sounds like I should know it? ‘Burner pho...”

And then she knew, because she had one herself once. Who gave her a phone? Did she still have one? And if she did, where the hell was it?

CHAPTER 14

When they returned to his condo later that evening, Kyle waited for Sarah to fall asleep and went into his office to call the Chief. He had the older man's cell phone number and dialed it. Once it connected, he said, "Walsh here, sir. How are you?"

"I'm good. The question is how are you holding up since we last spoke?"

"I'm hoping you can tell me. Do I have a reinstatement date yet?"

"I was going to get in touch. The unofficial date is December first. I'm just waiting on..."

Kyle interrupted his boss. "The paperwork, right?"

"Yeah. You know how this goes. That email should arrive any minute. But don't worry about it. I have it on good authority that you're good to go. You passed the range test and the psych eval. You'll get your gun back and we'll all be happy to put this whole incident behind us."

Kyle felt as if the weight he'd been carrying around on his shoulders had been lifted. He was going back to work! "Thank you, sir. I appreciate having you in my corner."

"Of course, Walsh. You're one of my best detectives. We need you back."

"Speaking of detective work, I've been trying to uncover the identity of a Jane Doe who had a car crash near Fenway a couple of weeks ago."

“Yeah, Kelly and McCormick filled me in. She’s still with you?”

“Yes, sir. She has no recall as to who she is.”

“That’s awfully charitable of you, son. But knowing your family as well as I do, I’m sure you have extra hands around to help.”

“You know it, sir. But I do have a favor. There were a couple of guys in a car stalking her. They looked like pros. Investigators. And they were armed.”

“Plate number?”

Kyle smiled to himself. The chief knew him well. He repeated the numerals from memory, and he could hear his boss scratching his pen across the ever-present pad on his desk, noting them.

“I’ll see what we can find,” he said in the gruff tone of voice that Kyle knew meant business.

“Thank you, sir.”

“And Walsh. Nine am sharp on the first of December. Don’t be late.”

Kyle hung up the phone and let out the breath he’d been holding for months. He was finally going back to work. He couldn’t wait.

Kyle gave himself a few minutes to revel in the good news, then realized that they had a lot to accomplish before they could leave for the Cape the next night, so he did his best to put all his concentration into that project. Once he took Mia’s luggage out of the bedroom so that she could repack what she needed to bring, she went inside to feed the baby one more time and settle her into the pack and play, which he’d moved

in there days ago. He wanted to take a good look at her bags anyway. Maybe somehow, they'd been compromised and had a tracker somewhere within. Not wanting to violate her privacy, he waited for Mia to come back into the living room before getting started.

She was buttoning her blouse when she tiptoed out and joined him on the couch. "I'll empty these and repack them," she said, pointing to her luggage.

"Hang on. I want to check them over once they're empty. If someone slipped something in here without your knowledge, it would explain how those goons found you."

Wide-eyed, she nodded and leaned over to unzip the first bag. She had put most of her belongings into the dresser in the bedroom. He had cleared out two drawers for her when she first arrived. Aside from some warmer clothing for Sarah, there was nothing of note still inside the luggage. She grabbed the small pile and placed it on the couch. Then he lifted the bag, turned it upside down and inspected the seams, which were all intact and untampered, the pockets on the inside all empty.

"Nothing?" she asked.

He just shook his head. "Can I see the diaper bag and your purse, please?"

"Of course," she replied, standing, and then bringing both back to where he sat on the couch.

Kyle opened the diaper bag first. It held what one would think belonged inside, spare diapers, ointment, some toys, and board books. He dumped everything out on the coffee table and checked the lining. It was factory fresh. Then he pointed to her handbag. "Is there anything in there you don't want me to see? Anything personal? I know that Sibby guards her purse with her life. You could lose a hand if you open it

without permission.”

She smiled at him. “Not that I’m aware of. I mean, I don’t know who I am, so if there’s anything in there to give it away, I haven’t found it yet.”

“Okay. Here we go,” he said, dumping the contents on the table in front of him. He spread the items out, but there was nothing out of the ordinary. Her wallet, passport holder, some tissues. A small bag filled with lipstick, a tiny mirror, and a travel-sized mascara. A ring of rubber toy keys for the baby. Not a clue to her identity or why she was being followed. The fabric on the inside of the soft leather purse had not been tampered with, the seams were tightly sewn. He sat back with a sigh. Then he looked over at the stroller. “Hold on,” he said, walking over to it. He untangled the straps pulled out the liner, and there it was. A small, black tracking device. This was no Apple air tag. This was professional grade, placed by someone who knew what they were doing. He felt a shiver run up his spine. Whoever was after her meant business. Whoever was after her sent those armed goons to hunt her down.

“Here’s the culprit. It’s how they found you.”

He watched as Mia’s eyes widened. “But how did it get there?”

“Either the luggage handlers on your flight were in on this, or someone slipped it into the stroller while you weren’t looking.”

“I wish I could remember what happened, Kyle. I’m of no help at all, am I?”

He moved closer. “Listen, Mia. It doesn’t matter. When your memory returns, you’ll have more answers. For right now, we just have to keep you and the baby safe. Tomorrow, pack all your warm clothing. It will be colder at the Cape than it is here. We’ll go to the grocery store and stock up on what we need. Once it’s dark, we’ll hit the road. It’s not that long of a trip at this time of year, especially at night.” He turned

the tracker over in his hands. “And I have an idea of what to do with this.”

He walked into his office and returned with a padded envelope. He slipped the offensive black box inside and sealed it, writing an address on the front. “I have a good buddy in Nova Scotia. I go fishing up there every summer. I’m going to mail this to him and hopefully, send those goons on a wild goose chase. It should buy us some time.”

She just nodded. They sat silently for a moment and then she said, “I’m so sorry, Kyle. I feel like such a burden. I’m upending your life.”

“Listen to me, Mia. I’m in this with you now. Until the end. Whatever happens.”

He leaned in and gave her a quick hug, not wanting to go further for fear of not being able to stop. It was not the time to take this relationship to the next level, no matter how much he wanted to do just that. “Go to sleep. It’s been a long day and tomorrow will be even longer.”

She smiled. “Okay. And Kyle...thank you for everything. For sharing your family and for taking such good care of us. Please know how much it all means to me.” Then she stood and hurried into the bedroom, leaving him wondering if she had the same thought as him. This was not the time to take this relationship to the next level.

The next day, he drove to Sibby’s to drop Mia and Sarah off where he knew they’d be safe while he took his car over to Conor’s house. They had planned to switch vehicles with one another; his brother owned an SUV which would be better for use at the Cape. Plus, Conor was thrilled to have a small sports car to drive around for the next month.

“If we get a snowstorm,” Kyle began, “this car will be useless. Sorry about that.” He removed the baby seat from his car and moved it into his brother’s, securing it with

the belt.

“Let’s hope we don’t, then. I’ll be fine. If need be, I’ll take dad’s truck.”

“Oh, and sometimes the shifter sticks. Be gentle with her.”

“Kyle. It’s a car, not a woman. I know what to do...”

“Right,” Kyle said, reluctantly handing over the keys. “I appreciate the loaner,” he added.

“We’ll all be there at Thanksgiving. Just lay low. Don’t do anything crazy.”

“Is that a reference to my incident at work? Because...”

“No, brother, no. I meant don’t get involved with Mia. Or at least, don’t get involved in something you can’t get out of. You don’t need your heart broken again on top of everything else going on in your life. Still no official word on when you’re going back to work, I assume?”

“Not yet,” Kyle said. “But I guess that fits into my current plan. I’ll check in with the captain often, though. Plus, I’ll fill him in on what’s happening and update him with the number of the burner phone I’m going to pick up on the way home. He can reach me up there.”

“Sure, just as long as you connect to the Wi-Fi.”

Kyle let out a long sigh. “I know what to do, brother. Why is everyone so concerned?”

“Are you bringing your gun?”

Kyle realized that his family was still concerned for his emotional well-being. They knew that he'd locked his personal weapon away after the night he shot his service revolver unnecessarily, that he hadn't looked at it since.

He sighed. "Yes. I'm taking it out of the safe and I'll bring it with me. If I need to use it, I will."

Conor nodded. "Good. I feel better knowing that you're bringing protection." He paused. "At least one kind of protection. I don't need to ask you about where you plan on sleeping once you get there, right?"

"Leave it alone, Conor," Kyle said as he shot his brother a look that indicated he was in no mood for this line of questioning. "I'm going now." He got into the truck and drove off the driveway, leaving his brother standing there, shaking his head.

On the ride back to his house, Kyle couldn't help but wonder what he would do if the need arose to use his weapon. He hadn't looked at it after that fateful night and he didn't feel as confident around the thought of having to use it as he had presented himself to his brother. He used to go to the range with Conor and Tim all the time, but he hadn't been there in months now, apart from the range test. Was shooting a gun like riding a bicycle, like his brother had said? Would he react quickly if necessary? What if it all comes down to that? Then what? Would those goons show up in Wellfleet? It was a lot to consider.

Kyle knew that he shouldn't grapple with the "what-ifs" of this situation, it wouldn't help. He drove onto Commonwealth Avenue and parked near the Target. He went inside and used cash to buy a pre-paid cellphone, then went back to the truck and drove to Sibby's to pick up Mia and Sarah. The entire transaction took less than ten minutes, but the entire time in the massive store, he had his eyes open, scanning the other customers to be sure that they didn't look like they were paying any attention to him. He knew he was being paranoid, that no one was looking for him. Whoever was

searching for Mia should already be heading downtown where he dropped the tracker into a mailbox on Boylston Street. He smiled to himself. Have fun with that, boys, he thought. Then he continued back to Sibby's. He had so much nervous energy running through his veins and it he knew that it would be there until he pulled up to the house on the Cape. Once over the Bourne bridge, he hoped to be able to take a deep breath once more.

After picking up Mia and Sarah and humoring Sibby as she gave him all sorts of directions on opening the family's house on the Cape, he put them on the road toward the grocery store. After stocking up with more food than they needed, they headed back to the condo to rest before the trip that night.

"There seems to be a lot to know about your family's house on the Cape. Did you understand everything Sibby said?" Mia asked as he made his way through the building rush hour traffic.

"My family has owned that house since before I was born. I know exactly what to do. Sibby just feels better if she thinks she's in charge. We all let her have that, you know. But honestly, if I was heading off to war, I'd take my sister as my commander in chief anytime. She always has a plan."

"Is the Cape like Boston?" Mia asked, looking out the window at the bustling streets.

"No. It's the opposite. It's magical," he said. It's on the National Seashore, the beaches are federally protected. The sand is fine and white, and the ocean is the deepest blue you've ever seen. We spent our summers there as kids. It was so great. No rules other than be home for dinner. We would swim and surf and ride our bikes all over town. It was such a feeling of freedom, you know? Now we make it a point to take two weeks each summer and congregate there. Sibby takes the kids up for the entire summer, just like my mom did. Geoff comes up on weekends."

“The house must be big if you all stay there at once,” she remarked.

“It is, but it didn’t start out that way. My grandfather bought an old fishing shack after he got back from fighting in Vietnam. I think he was looking for some peace and quiet. Anyway, he put his kids to work with him. My dad and his brothers built additions onto the original one-bedroom structure. The place has evolved since my grandfather’s time though. We all chipped in for a major kitchen renovation last year. It’s top of the line now.”

“How many bedrooms does it have?”

“If you count the office, seven. Lots of rooms with bunk beds. We all seem to find a place to crash. It’s a lot of togetherness, but it’s a lot of fun, too.”

“Hmm,” she replied as she turned her head away from him.

“What? You don’t think my big, loud, messy family could be fun?”

“I didn’t say that.”

He watched her as she looked out the window and it dawned on him that she was probably wondering about her own family, if she had one, and if they were looking for her. Her next words made him wonder if she was able to read his thoughts.

“I don’t know why, but I just feel like there is someone out there, someone looking for me. Not a husband, not a boyfriend, but someone. A brother, maybe?”

“We’ll find them, Mia. We’ll find your people. I promise.”

CHAPTER 15

It was dark when Kyle turned the SUV off Route 6, down Long Pond Road until the dead end and then made a right onto Cahoon Hollow Road. He drove past “The Beachcomber,” infamous for its indie rock concerts and rowdy beach bar. It was the place where he’d had his first beer and lost his virginity, all in the same raucous night when he was seventeen years old, both events made even more exciting because he was underage. Back then he and his brothers would walk to “The ‘Comber” from the house, sneaking out after their parents fell asleep in front of the old console that housed a television set and a turntable. He loved those days and sometimes longed for them still; no responsibilities, no place to be, just pure fun fueled by ill-acquired alcohol.

Mia had fallen asleep about an hour before, somewhere along 495 South before the bridge, and he put his hand onto her leg to gently shake her awake. She sat upright and looked around, startled.

“Don’t worry, Mia, you’re okay. Sarah’s asleep in her car seat. We’re here.” He pulled down a long, gravel-filled driveway and stopped at the garage outside the house. He turned to her. “Stay in the car where it’s warm. I’ll go inside and turn on the heat. It might take a minute for the house to warm up. No one’s been here for a while.”

She nodded and he stepped outside. It was much colder here than it had been in Boston. The wind off the ocean felt icy already and it was only the beginning of November. He could hear the surf pounding against the beach as he ran up to the front door and unlocked it, then turned off the house alarm and quickly went to the

thermostat on the wall near the kitchen and turned the temperature up. He heard the boiler kick on and felt relieved. The old machine was finicky and was never a sure thing, but luck was on his side tonight. He went into the kitchen and switched on the pendant lights that hung over the counter, then turned around to go back outside for his passengers and their luggage, grabbing a heavy knit blanket off the couch as he passed by. Once at the car, he opened the rear door and threw the cover over the baby. “I’ve got her, Mia. Let’s go inside.”

He waited for Mia to step out and then he unclipped the car seat from the base, hurrying them into the house. He put the sleeping baby, still in her seat on the couch and Mia sat down next to her daughter.

“You weren’t kidding. It’s freezing in here,” she said, not removing her sweatshirt.

“Hang on,” he said. Kyle walked over to the fireplace and opened the flue. Then he went back through the kitchen to the mudroom where he knew he’d find some firewood stacked outside the back door. Once he had enough to get a good blaze going, he relocked that door and went back to where Mia sat. “This will help,” he said as he quickly set the wood into the teepee shape his father had taught him as a boy, lit some kindling and watched it catch, small flames licking against the logs. “Sit tight,” he told Mia. I’m going to grab our stuff. I’ll be as fast as possible.”

She nodded at him, and he watched as she tucked the blanket in around her daughter, leaving only the child’s face visible. Then he went outside and began to ferry in their suitcases and the multiple bags of groceries. Finally finished, he locked the front door behind him and went to stand in front of the fire to warm himself up for a bit.

“I’m going to put the perishables in the refrigerator. The rest of the food can wait until tomorrow to be stored away. Then I’ll show you the bedrooms and you can pick one to sleep in. There’s a crib in one of the rooms already, so you don’t need to sleep with Sarah while we’re here. There’s a lot of room for us to spread out.”

“Kyle,” she began, walking over to where was. “I know I keep saying ‘thank you’ but I really mean it. You’ve done so much for me and for Sarah. I want you to know that we both appreciate everything. And again, I’m so sorry I crashed into your life like this. You have enough on your plate without my sad story.”

He could have just let her words go, he could have done as he’d originally planned, put the food away and then shown her to a bedroom where she could have gone to sleep. But he didn’t. He couldn’t. It might have been the way the light from the fireplace made her skin appear to almost glow; it may have been the chill in the air of the unused house or the familiar, safe feel of his family home. “Your story isn’t sad, Mia. It’s just different. Besides, the ending isn’t written yet.” He looked at her, into the warmth reflected in her eyes from the now blazing fire and despite knowing her shouldn’t do it, he reached for her. Then he tilted her head back and kissed her, slowly at first and then with a passion that surprised him. He wanted this woman. He wanted her naked, in his bed, calling out his name.

He ran his hands down her back underneath her sweatshirt, pressing her closer to him, knowing that she would feel exactly how much he wanted her, never breaking contact, continuing to explore her mouth with his tongue, feeling her match his movements with her own. He could have gone on like this forever; her in his arms, the heat of their bodies warming the room.

“What is it that you want, Mia?” he asked, searching her eyes for a clue before hearing her answer.

“I want this, Kyle. I want you,” she said, her voice smoky with desire.

That was all he needed to hear. It no longer mattered if she had someone out there looking for her, or if she had a past that she couldn’t remember. There had never been a time in his life when he felt this emotionally attracted to anyone. She was vulnerable and let him see that, making him fully invested in what happened to her

next. Christ! he thought to himself. I didn't even feel this way about Meghan, and I almost married her. What a mistake that would have been ! Knowing how he felt about Mia, knowing that she might not be his for long heated his blood even further.

For the first time since the incident with his service revolver, he wanted to feel something other than self-loathing. He wanted to lose himself in this woman who was more of a mystery than any case he'd investigated while working as a detective. Unsolved murders were less complicated than Mia, he thought. Then he realized that unsolved murders always had unintended victims. He didn't want Mia to feel victimized. He used every ounce of his self-restraint and pulled himself back out of her embrace.

"Kyle?" she questioned. "What's wrong?"

"Mia. I want nothing more than you in my arms, but is this something we really want to do now? I think we should wait until we know more and know who's looking for you."

He watched her reaction. It was as if he'd just poured an entire bucket of ice water over her. She shrank away from him.

"Right. That would be proper, now, would it not?" She sat back against the couch, a protective, invisible shield held together by the arms crossed over her chest, keeping him at bay.

If he had a quick thought that her use of language had changed to be stiff and formal, he chalked it up to his sudden rejection of her affection.

"We have nothing but time on our side, Mia. We're here with little else to do but try and figure out what happened on that night, why you drove off the road. I have faith that we'll get to the truth, and once that happens, if you still want me, I'll be here for

you.”

“Even if I’m supposed to be with someone else?”

“I don’t think that you are. I don’t know why, but you don’t seem like the type of woman who would kiss another man if you were attached to someone. Call it gut instinct.”

“And you always trust your instincts?” she asked, moving further away from him.

“It’s how I moved from beat cop to detective. I haven’t used it in a while, but I think I want to flex it again. I want to figure this out so that we can move forward together.”

“And if we can’t. Move forward together, I mean. What happens then?”

“I’m not going to think about that tonight, Mia. We both need some sleep. Let me show you where Sarah’s room is and then you can pick one for yourself.”

“Very well then,” was all she said in response.

This time it didn’t go unnoticed, that stiff and formal response. He felt as though her outer veneer was beginning to crack. And when it did, he’d get to the truth.

After a miserable night of tossing and turning, Kyle woke to the sound of an icy rain peppering the roof. He sat up in bed and looked out the floor to ceiling glass windows that framed one entire wall of the room. When his family had decided to expand the house, they had made it a point to want to bring the beauty of the outside in wherever possible. Each bedroom that faced the ocean on both levels of the house showcased the magnificent National Seashore. His grandfather had originally bought the large parcel of land before any restrictions were put in place by the government and so his family’s home was one of the very few allowed here, so close to the beach. That

original investment, small though it was, had grown beyond measure. While Kyle knew that his family would never sell the property, but rather pass it down through the generations to come, it was still remarkable to know that what they had was priceless.

The sky was slate grey, and the surf was rough, churning up both sand and seaweed with a powerful force. It must be miserable out there, Kyle thought. No surfers out to brave this weather. He smiled to himself. When they were young, he and his brothers loved a good rainstorm. A hurricane was even better. The more severe the wind, the higher the surf. Nothing could keep them out of the ocean.

He pushed the blankets back and climbed out of bed, pulling on his sweatpants, and heading into the ensuite bathroom. He brushed his teeth, splashed some cold water on his face, the day-old stubble rough against his fingers. Then he quietly made his way past Mia's room and down the stairs into the kitchen. The groceries were still out in the open, so he started putting them away in the walk-in pantry that flanked one side of the large space.

The kitchen had been carefully planned, with its extra-long cement countertop that had one of the two deep sinks that got constant use in the summertime. There were six stools tucked underneath and, on the wall, across from the pantry was a table that sat sixteen. Aside from Sibby's house outside of Boston, this was the place his family gathered most often. In his mind's eye, Kyle could hear the loud laughter and conversation that was the hallmark of any communal breakfast or dinner shared here. The stark contrast of it being just him, Mia, and the baby made the place feel almost empty. At least the boiler had finally kicked in and was churning out heat; he made a note to call the oil company to be sure that they continued to receive deliveries for as long as they were there.

On his last trip into the pantry from the kitchen, he heard Mia softly talking to Sarah. They must have just come downstairs. He wasn't sorry about what happened between

them the previous night, but he hoped she didn't feel awkward about it, either. They were stuck up here together for now and they had to set some boundaries.

"Good morning, ladies," he said with a smile as he stepped back into the kitchen. "How did you both sleep?"

"Sarah did great," Mia replied.

From the tell-tale dark circles beneath her eyes, Kyle knew that the same didn't apply to Mia.

"That's good," he said. "I was just going to make some coffee. What would you like for breakfast?"

"Coffee would be good for now," she said, pulling a stool away from the counter and sitting on it. "It looks treacherous out there," she said, glancing out at the ocean.

"Yeah. I think it's a good day to be inside. I'm going to move the car into the garage. I'll probably be scraping ice off the windshield for a bit. It's nasty weather, but once the sun returns, we can go out onto the beach. I know you're going to love it."

"This house is beautiful. I can see why you're drawn to it."

He smiled and went to find the grinder for the coffee beans. In a few short moments he had everything ready and was just waiting for the brew to drip through the filter so that he could fill their mugs. He could tell she felt as uncomfortable as he did after last night's kiss and realized that it would be impossible to ignore it, no matter how much he wanted to do just that.

"About last night, Mia, listen..."

She let out a long breath. “No, Kyle, you don’t need to say anything. Let’s just acknowledge that we both felt the same and leave it at that, alright?”

“Of course,” he replied, wishing it was different, wanting nothing other than to pull her into his arms and comfort her.

“I know what we’re here to do,” she said. “I need to sort out the mess that I am and appreciate any help you can offer. Is the internet working?”

“It should be,” he said. “I set it up before we left Boston. Let me check.” He lifted his burner phone out of the pocket of his sweatpants and scrolled through various screens. “It is. I’ll fire up the desktop in the office. You’re free to use anything you find in there. Oh, and the shelves are filled with books if you’re looking for something to read. Lots of thrillers and romance novels. Sibby and my mom are obsessed with one author in particular. Her name is Lucy Score. Or I think that’s her name. Last summer that’s all they talked about.

“I’ll take a look,” she said warmly, giving him a wide smile.

Once the coffee was done brewing, he reached for two large mugs from the cabinet and filled them. He opened the refrigerator and pulled out the half and half for her, placed it on the counter and said, “Also, feel free to look around the kitchen. There’s lots of equipment for any type of cooking and plates, silverware, and glasses behind those doors and drawers. He pointed toward the polished cherrywood cabinets against the opposite wall. “I’m sure you can find anything you need while I’m in the garage.”

She lifted her mug and nodded. After a sip she said, “I’m good with this. I’ll be here when you get back. I have no plans to do anything other than drink this coffee.”

He smiled. “Well, maybe I can convince you to take a walk later.”

“Maybe,” she said. “Or perhaps we’ll just stay indoors where hell isn’t freezing over.” She winked at him.

He felt that small eye movement deep in his belly. He turned to leave before he couldn’t.

CHAPTER 16

Mia watched as Kyle left the house for the garage and once she heard the door close behind him, she slumped forward on the stool and put her head down on the cool countertop. Contrary to what she'd just told him, she wasn't good. She was so far from good that she didn't have the words to express the truth of how she was feeling.

Nothing felt familiar to her. She had tried to fit in with Kyle and his family, but she still had this nagging awareness that these were not her people, no matter how kind and welcoming they'd been since she had met them. It was maddening. It was almost as if she was standing next to her true self, but she couldn't reach that person, no matter how hard she tried. The truth of who she was remained elusive, as if it was sitting right at the edge of her consciousness but she couldn't reach in and grab it. And while that was frustrating, it paled in comparison to how she was feeling about Kyle.

Mia could not deny her growing attraction to this man. Her initial wariness of why he was trying to help her, a total stranger, disappeared long ago. For as strong and commanding he was, she'd seen his other side; he was flawed and vulnerable himself. Whatever had happened that night when he shot that young boy by mistake had forever changed him, that was clear. Maybe he stopped to help her after her accident out of a need for redemption, or maybe, now knowing him better, he'd stopped because that's just who he is, she couldn't know for sure. The only certainty she currently had about anything was the way she felt about him. Her life had been turned upside down with that car crash, but it had brought him to her. Was that so terrible?

She lifted her head and looked at her daughter, happily kicking her feet in the little

seat that must have once been used by Sibby's children. This house was certainly equipped for family life. "Sarah," she asked the little girl. "What have I done? What are we going to do, you and I?"

The baby just looked at her, blue eyes wide, her hand fisted as she tried to put it into her mouth.

"And we're stuck inside today, the weather is terrible. We're in the middle of nowhere. It's almost gothically romantic. I'll need to watch myself. I can't fall for this man; do you hear me?" It was as though saying the words out loud would have a greater impact on her. They didn't.

The baby just cooed back to her mother, kicking her feet harder as if to say that she was excited to spend the day with Kyle as well. Mia looked out one of the enormous windows at the ocean, waves high and roiling, the slate gray sky reminding her of Kyle's gaze. She shook her head. It was going to be a long day.

By the time Kyle returned from the garage, Mia had managed to make a large pot of oatmeal. She wasn't sure why, but the warm cereal felt both reminiscent of something she couldn't place yet comforting, totally appropriate for a cold morning. She was in the pantry looking for brown sugar when she heard him come through the mud room. When she stepped into the kitchen, he was there, filling the space, his cheeks red from the cold.

"It is freezing outside," he said, pouring more hot coffee into the mug he'd left on the counter. "That's unusual for this time of year. I moved the car into the garage. If we get more of that icy rain, at least I won't need to scrape it off again."

"Would you like some hot oatmeal?" she asked him.

Yeah, that would be great."

She spooned some into a bowl for him and passed over the small ramekin of brown sugar she'd found in the pantry.

"Thanks," he said. "This looks great. Do you think this is something you ate as a kid?"

"I don't know. I didn't think about it, but now that you ask, it was just something I knew how to make. I don't know why that is, but..."

They both ate in silence for a few minutes, then he asked, "Are we okay after last night?"

She felt a mix of sadness and relief. It would be good to clear the air. "Of course," was all she managed to say.

"Good," he replied, although she didn't think he sounded convincing. He abruptly changed the topic as if moving on from it would make the sexual tension between them disappear. "There are some basic things I can show you about the house, and I also thought it might be best if we discussed what would happen if those men somehow showed up here."

Her eyes widened. "I thought we came all this way here to avoid that," she replied.

"We did, but we should be prepared for anything. I think we're safe here. We know that there were no tracking devices on anything we brought with us -- we got rid of the one we found. I just believe in preparation for any possible eventuality, that's all."

She suddenly had trouble swallowing her oatmeal and pushed to bowl to one side. "You don't plan on leaving me alone here, do you? Because it's a big house and I'm..."

“No, Mia, of course not. I’m just concerned that there might be a chance that we need to defend ourselves. If that happens, I think we should both know what to do.”

She felt a shiver of fear run up her spine. It was bad enough that she could not remember who she was or have a clue as to why those men were after her. It was worse to think that they might come back again. She needed a moment to think. “Let me get dressed in something warmer. I’ll just be a minute.”

Mia turned to lift the baby out of the seat when she heard him say, “You can leave her there. She looks happy enough. I’ve got her.”

“Okay,” she replied. “I’ll be right back.” She ran up the stairs and into her room. She certainly could have done whatever Kyle had planned for them wearing her flannel pajama pants and oversized sweatshirt, but she felt the need to insulate herself from him, especially if they were going to be working together, potentially sitting near one another on the couch. She felt that familiar rumbling in the base of her stomach, the desire that she could not turn off no matter how many times she told herself that any further involvement with him was a bad idea. She would end up heartbroken at the end of this and she couldn’t afford to wallow for weeks in self-pity when she had a baby to take care of.

She stripped off her nightwear and grabbed a pair of wool slacks, a blue pin-striped button-down blouse, and a heavy navy cardigan from her luggage. Then she found a thick pair of socks for her feet. She brushed her teeth and her hair, swiping on a coat of mascara before squaring her shoulders in attempt to bolster her own confidence. She went back downstairs with what she told herself was a determined attitude. I’ll let him help me figure out who I am and be on my way. I’ve inconvenienced Kyle and his entire family for way too long now.

At the bottom of the steps, she could hear him talking to her daughter, but they weren’t in the kitchen. She continued past the large dining room to follow the sound

of his voice and found them behind a large computer monitor at the desk in the office. Looking around, she saw that three of the four walls had built-in bookshelves; the other wall was all glass. Behind it was a tall sand dune now covered in ice. It looked like it housed a million shimmering diamonds on its surface as the wind shifted the sand around and around.

She cleared her throat to let him know that she was standing there. “Hmm,” she said. “You weren’t kidding about the books. There are a lot of them.”

“Yeah,” he smiled. “It’s been a lifetime of collecting. My mom’s quite the reader and most of these are hers. She’s gone through them all.”

“That’s wonderful. I might take you up on your suggestion and grab one to read later.”

“Great,” he replied. Then he gestured for her to come around to see the tab he had open on the computer screen. “I was able to trace your credit card. It checks out that the billing address is the one in Manhattan, the same one that’s on your license. Apparently, it’s paid electronically. I think that I’d need the IP address of the actual recipient of the bill to track who’s been paying it each month, but I’m hopeful that one of the guys in the consumer fraud department downtown will be able to help with that. I’m going to send him an email now. You have a Gmail account as well – did you know that?”

“No,” she said.

“Well, you do. It’s on the billing information. Would you have any idea what the password might be?”

She looked at him with a blank expression. She couldn’t even believe he was asking her that question. “No, sorry. If I don’t know my name, how would I have any idea

what the password to that account might be?”

“Sometimes odd things remain in your mind, is all. Once when I had a concussion, I could remember what I ate right before the game but not the hit that sent my head into the boards. I was thinking that maybe you have bits and pieces coming back to you and maybe they don’t make sense. A password might be a phrase you commonly used prior to the accident, something that just seems like it would work. I tried Sarah’s birthday, but no luck.”

She stared back at him, not knowing what to say, or how to explain that there was nothing in her mind that could help. He looked so earnest, so concerned, that her annoyance with his question quickly faded. Despite her earlier resolve to finally be well enough to be on her way and escape from this nightmare, now all she wanted in this moment was to find herself in his arms once more. She couldn’t make believe any longer. She had fallen for this stranger. There was no way out of it now and that thought scared her as much as the one about the men finding them here. She may be safe hiding here, keeping out of sight and out of the reach of the men on her trail, but by doing that, had she made herself more vulnerable to something riskier? Kyle had made it all too easy for her to lose her heart to him and that, she realized, was more dangerous than any outside threat could ever be.

During Sarah’s morning nap, Kyle walked Mia through the kitchen and showed her the door to the basement. They went down the creaky stairs together. It was freezing. Cold air radiated off the cement walls and floor.

“It’s unfinished down here, but I realize that if you had to hide somewhere, there’s a large cedar closet, and it locks. It won’t keep a professional out, but it will buy us some time. If there’s any sort of intruder, grab the baby and come down here. Let me show you where it is,” he said, grabbing her hand and leading her to the very back of the large space.

Mia shivered, but not from the arctic conditions in the basement. Is this where my life has led me? Hiding from some unknown shadow from my past? If I could only remember something – anything – maybe that would help me understand why I feel like I'm running from danger. UGH! Why can't I remember? She followed closely behind him as he showed her where the closet was located. He opened the door and flipped on the light. A pleasant, sharp woodsy odor met her nose. They stepped inside and she was surrounded by colorful ski clothing, down jackets and extra heavy blankets neatly stacked on shelves. Ice skates hung by their laces on hooks against one of the walls. There was a rack of snow boots in a variety of sizes as well.

“Wow. Your family is prepared for winter, that's for sure.”

“This house is not far from some great ski mountains. We would often stop here and gear up before heading further north.” He reached out and touched one of the jackets, pulling out the paper ticket attached to its zipper and smiled.

Hmm. It must be nice to have memories of family trips. Hell, what she wouldn't give for a glimmer of what her life was like before she crashed that car.

“Mia are you with me?” he asked with a grin, shaking her out of her reverie.

She turned and took in the entire closet. There were no windows, but there was a bench in one corner. She imagined that this is where the kids would sit while having their boots laced. The tone of his voice changed just then, from lighthearted to serious, and she knew his detective training was kicking in.

“Mia. If you have to come in here, lock yourself in. I have the key and will come for you once any danger has passed.” He turned to show her the deadbolt lock and how to secure the door. “Don't open the door unless I say, ‘Wellfleet.’ We'll use that as our password to know that you and Sarah are safe.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,” she said.

“It probably won’t, but I feel better knowing that I can keep you and Sarah safe. Let’s go back upstairs. It’s freezing down here.”

He grabbed her hand again and they hurried back into the warmth of the first floor of the house. “Did you have a chance to look around upstairs?”

“Aside from my room and Sarah’s, no.”

“It’s pretty basic. Lots of beds.” He smiled. “I do have a large family.”

“You’re lucky if you ask me. You have your people, and they’d do anything for you.”

He looked at her then and she felt the sincerity in his gaze all the way down to her toes. “Mia. If it’s the last thing I do, I’m going to find your family. And under the unlikely circumstance that I don’t, you’ll always have me.”

For a moment she stood frozen, hearing his words, and processing their meaning. The next thing she knew, she vaulted herself into his arms, and felt his welcoming embrace. After that, it was only a matter of which bedroom they would choose.

CHAPTER 17

Kyle lifted Mia off her feet and carried her into his bedroom, carefully setting her down on the mattress before climbing in after her. For as much as he knew this might be the mistake of his lifetime, there was no way he could stop himself now. He'd been fighting his attraction to this mystery woman for the last few weeks, but once she gave him the green light out in the hallway, he knew that there was no turning back. He wanted her, he craved her touch, and he was willing to risk the consequences of their actions. He leaned over her body and kissed her on the lips, softly at first but more fervently as she responded to his tongue as it swept through her warm mouth. He could have stayed in this moment forever, but his body was starting to need more. The zipper on his jeans was feeling extremely uncomfortable, the available space between him and the fabric of his pants disappearing completely.

There was no need for words between them; their hands expressed everything they were trying to tell one another. He swept his fingers lightly over her shirt and felt her tremble beneath it. He grazed one nipple against the soft fabric and watched in awe as a wet spot began to spread outward, soaking through both her bra and blouse. He had no idea that her body would react this way and he was momentarily stunned by his own ignorance, but suddenly had the overwhelming desire to taste the milk that was leaking through her clothing.

"Kyle," she huskily whispered his name, and he felt a fire ignite deep in his belly.

He almost didn't know what to do first, undress her or himself, but in the end, it didn't matter. As he reached for the top button of her shirt, they both heard Sarah cry out from the room down the hall. She had woken up from her nap and her sharp wail

snapped them both out of the sensory overload that they'd been experiencing, a tangle of limbs and tongues. Kyle looked down at her face, her eyes wide. Then, unexpectedly, she started to giggle, which quickly turned into a fit of laughter.

"Oh my God, Kyle," she said, wiping away tears, still laughing. "Talk about timing." She shimmied away from underneath him and stood up, almost running out of the room to comfort her daughter.

A moment later he could hear her talking to the baby. Then he heard the door to Sarah's bedroom click shut. Whatever was going to happen between them faded away and he was left feeling more frustrated than he could remember. What the hell? he thought to himself. And what now? Damn it! Keep your hands to yourself, asshole! You can't do this. She's compromised and you're just supposed to be trying to help her find her way back to herself. Don't let that happen again, no matter what. If you're going to help her, stealing her heart and then sending her on her way is not the way to do it!

But then again, he had no idea of how to get this particular genie back in its bottle...

Mia realized that she would need a shower after that episode with Kyle. She recognized the nervous laughter that she couldn't control as she fled from his room. Now, she was hot, bothered, and soaked with breast milk. Luckily, she produced more than enough of the stuff, so the baby didn't miss her meal. What had just happened between them, though, she realized, was too close a call.

Mia knew that she was attracted to Kyle. She just hadn't been sure if he felt anywhere near the same about her. Now she no longer had to wonder. In the brief time she'd been in his bed she'd felt more comfortable than she had in a very long time. She still couldn't remember much about what her life was like before the accident, but she was sure that the unsettled feeling she walked around with most of the time wasn't new. Laying under him, his weight pressing on her felt like a warm blanket made her

feel safe. She didn't want to take advantage of his kindness or his generosity, but she did want him to know that she was starting to have feelings for him. More than anything else, she wanted to crawl back into his bed, but this time, she wanted to be naked when she did.

She wished she knew who she really was, where she was from, and if there was someone out there looking for her. There was the nagging sense that she was in trouble somehow, that she was running from something, but none of her memories had resurfaced. She was beginning to think they never would. Could she honestly get involved with this man if she had no recall of her past? Was it fair to enter a relationship with someone not truly knowing if there was another man out there who had already claimed her as his own? And who was Sarah's father? Even if that man wasn't looking for her, wouldn't he be searching for his precious baby daughter? None of this made any sense to her.

Mia closed her eyes. She did her best to conjure up an image of where she was right before that car accident. Try as she might, all she could see was Kyle. She saw him helping her out of her vehicle. She saw him in his apartment in Boston, those low-slung sweatpants sitting right below his hips in an oh-so sexy way. Cooking together in his small kitchen, him holding her baby with ease. It would be so much easier if she could just stay here with him forever, but she knew that wasn't going to be an option. She had to reclaim her life before the accident, whatever it was, so that she could start over somewhere else -- with someone else. She felt like she was caught in a vise and all the air was being squeezed from her lungs.

Mia looked down at her daughter drinking at her breast. What should I do, Sarah? Should I tell him how I feel?

The little girl looked up at her with such trust in her eyes that it almost made Mia cry. But then again, if she shed a tear, would it be for her daughter, or for the simple fact that the man in the other room wasn't hers? She had no real claim on him, and until

she could remember the truth of who she was, she could not climb into his bed again, no matter what else happened. Then she looked up at the ceiling as if to bargain with the heavens . Give me strength. I'm going to need it...

Dinner that night was strained. The baby was asleep for the night, giving them no outside distraction to focus on. They gave one another a wider berth in the kitchen than they previously did; it was almost as if they were each afraid to graze against the other and chance igniting the fire that still simmered for them both underneath their polite exteriors. They ate in relative silence as well, only requesting that one pass along a bowl or a saltshaker when necessary.

When they'd each finished the spaghetti Bolognese that he'd effortlessly pulled together, she offered to clean up. "You cooked," she said to Kyle. "My turn to do the dishes."

"Okay, thanks," he said. "I'm going to try and do some research for a bit, see what I come up with."

She nodded, feeling the loss as soon as he left the room. As she was in the pantry, putting away the half-used, open box of pasta they'd cooked for their meal, Mia felt herself drawn to the shelves that held the bakeware. There were muffin tins, cake and pie pans, a stand mixer as well as measuring cups of all sizes. She ran a finger along a silicone baking sheet, reveling in its smooth texture. For the first time since the accident, she felt like this was something familiar, something she knew a little bit about. And while she could barely remember how to tie her own shoes, somehow this equipment seemed like an extension of herself. She felt comfortable around it and for some strange reason, it was now calling her name. It was almost like when she saw the chicken in the freezer case of the grocery store and knew that she could successfully roast it for dinner, or when she found the oatmeal and innately knew how to make a bowl of it for breakfast. Something in the back of her mind told her that she knew how to bake a cake, and the next thing she knew, Mia was testing that

theory.

She grabbed the mixer and three round cake pans and brought them out to the counter. Then she went over to one of the wall ovens and turned it on. The default setting was 350 degrees. She wasn't sure if that was right or not, because the number felt unfamiliar, but if it wasn't, she figured, she'd know soon enough. She went back into the pantry and found the sugars, both white and brown, a bottle of vanilla, both baking soda and baking powder, and a large bag of flour. Scouring the shelves, pushing aside the almond extract and raisins, she found cocoa powder and a sack of multi-colored sprinkles. Once she had everything out and ready to go, she reached into the refrigerator and pulled out two eggs and a stick of butter. Then she stepped back for a moment and looked over what she had out on the counter, thinking about these components for a long while. When she had a plan outlined in her mind, she got to work.

Kyle was in the large office in the front of the house staring at the computer screen. He was waiting for a contact of his in the department to come up with the IP address of the computer that was paying Mia's credit card bill each month. His point person – Shelby -- had traced the card back to the bank where it had been issued. The paperless bill was sent to an email address attached to Mia's name, even though she had no recollection it or its password and login information. The bill had been promptly paid just two days ago. Kyle knew that Mia hadn't paid it. She didn't remember having a credit card until they searched her wallet together back in Boston and found it tucked neatly into one of the leather slits designed to hold it. Then she had used it at the Trader Joe's the day they'd shopped together and made no other purchases since. The only other charge was for coffee in the Heathrow airport on the day she had traveled to New York City. Kyle felt that if they could trace back to the IP address, they'd find a link to someone who knew Mia. Hopefully, that person would be looking for her.

He heard the ding that alerted him to a text message and glanced at the screen. No

answer as to where the bill had been sent, but Shelby was promising a deeper dive in the morning. If anyone could crack this open, it was her; Kyle had worked with her before and knew what crazy computer skills she had. Her knowledge of the dark web was legendary in the department. He was sure she'd come up with something soon.

Kyle turned to look out the window. It was dark, but there were what looked like millions of stars shining over the ocean. The rain had stopped at some point and the sky had cleared, giving Kyle hope that tomorrow would be a bright and sunny day. He shut down the computer and was about to go upstairs when he smelled something sweet coming from the kitchen. Once he stepped inside, he saw Mia, flour covering her shirt, pulling the first of three cake pans out of the oven. He was stunned.

"Did you find my mother's cookbooks somewhere?" he asked as she slid the hot pan onto a cooling rack.

"Not exactly," she said, continuing with her task until all three pans were out and she shut down the oven.

"So did you improvise?"

"Something like that. I don't know. And I don't know if this will taste good or not, but I suddenly felt compelled to bake. Don't ask me how I know what to do, I just do. It's so weird."

He nodded slowly, not sure of how to respond to her statement. "Did you remember a recipe?"

"It wasn't like that. It was more like I recognized the equipment and immediately knew how to put it to good use."

"Okay..." he began. "Maybe this is a clue to your past. I guess we can try

investigating bakers in the New York City area. Maybe somehow that's the link we've been missing."

"I think we're going to have to taste this before we decide if I'm a baker or not. And maybe it's a hobby and not a career choice. All I remembered was the ratio of butter to eggs to flour. The rest I improvised."

"If it was at all foreign to you, there would not be any improvising. You'd have no idea what to do."

"Maybe," she nodded, stepping over to the refrigerator and pulling out two more sticks of butter.

"What are you doing with those?" he asked.

"Leaving them out overnight to soften. This cake needs frosting. Or at least I think it does."

"And you know how to make frosting as well?"

She smiled. "I guess we'll find that out tomorrow, won't we?"

He couldn't stop the next thought that came into his head. He could think of a much worthier use for that frosting than to spread it on the cake. He imagined that it would taste even better slathered all over her naked body...

CHAPTER 18

The next morning dawned bright and clear. Kyle could sense that it was cold but couldn't wait to get outside and walk on the beach. At least the frigid temperature would help him control his body's reaction to Mia. He'd spent the night tossing and turning alone in his bed, fantasizing about how it would feel to have her there with him. It was almost four in the morning before he fell into a fitful sleep, dreaming of what he'd do if she allowed him to have his way with her. He pushed back the blankets and head into the bathroom to brush his teeth and shower. Then he'd go down and make them breakfast. It was very early. The house felt still, and he wasn't sure if she wasn't up yet.

Once out of the shower, he toweled himself dry and dressed in layers. He knew that it would be windy on the beach, and he needed to insulate himself as best as he could. He'd have to tell Mia to do the same for herself and for Sarah. He pulled on thick socks and made his way downstairs. As he rounded the corner to the kitchen, he caught a glimpse of her at the counter, a bowl of frosting and a sack of sprinkles resting at one elbow. She was clearly concentrating on her task, and he stopped himself before he could startle her. He wanted to watch her for a moment before she knew he was there.

She was wearing a cardigan sweater over a thin camisole, a pair of loose sweatpants and a flour covered apron. She moved with a steady hand as she spooned the thick, dark chocolate frosting onto the cake. She smoothed it with a knife and took a handful of sprinkles and dusted them across the top, then added another layer of cake and repeated the movement again. She put the last round on top and scooped out some more frosting, spreading it evenly down the sides of the cake and across the

surface. He watched in fascination as she picked up a Ziploc bag from the counter, trimmed off one corner with a knife and loaded the remaining frosting in it, twisting the plastic until she could control the stuff as it slowly dispensed, swirling the chocolate into a decorative pattern. She took handfuls of sprinkles and pressed them all along the sides of the cake and then stepped back to look at her sweet creation.

He cleared his throat to let her know that he was there. "Mia?" he questioned. "What are you doing?"

"What's it look like I'm doing? I'm frosting this cake, that's what." Her tone sounded somewhat frantic to his ears.

"I see that, but why are you frosting the cake now? It's not even seven o'clock yet. Unless, of course, you're planning to serve it for breakfast."

She sighed. "No. I can imagine how crazy this looks, but I couldn't sleep at all last night. I was trying to figure out why baking this cake felt so familiar to me."

"And?" he asked, wanting to confess that he'd been up for most of the night as well, just for a completely different reason.

"Nothing. Just the knowledge that I could do it. And muffins. I know how to make muffins. And scones, and cookies. I know all those recipes, they're in my head."

She looked up at him and he wanted to grab her and hold her in his arms. He took a step closer. "That's great, Mia. Pieces of your memory are coming back."

"Useless pieces. I mean, what good is knowing how to frost a cake when you can't remember who you are, or where you're from?"

"Stop being so hard on yourself. If you remembered this," he said, pointing to the

cake, “the rest can’t be so far behind.”

“What if the rest isn’t good?” she whispered.

“Did you remember something or are you making an assumption?” he asked.

She hung her head and sighed. He reached out and lifted her chin up. “I have an idea that will do us all some good. When Sarah wakes up, let’s go outside and take a walk on the beach before breakfast. The cold air might help clear your mind some more.”

“Do you think that’s safe? Us walking exposed on the beach?”

“It’s fine. No one else is up here. Season is over and we have the place to ourselves until the family comes up for Thanksgiving. Let’s enjoy the quiet while we can.”

What he wanted to say, but didn’t, was let’s enjoy each other while we’re alone , because who knows how long we have before the truth was revealed , until they uncovered her identity. Now that she remembered the slightest bit of her past life, Kyle knew that they were on borrowed time.

They spent the day in quiet companionship, neither one wanting to admit to the other that they had feelings that had started to go beyond simple friendship. They had walked far down the beach, gloved hand in hand, bundled against the cold, with Sarah wrapped warmly in the cashmere carrier that Kyle had worn tightly against his chest. A thin layer of ice coating the sand gave way under the weight of their boots, crackling as they walked. The sunshine felt good against her skin and the sound of the ocean was like a meditation, calming and more serene now that the storm had passed. A large part of her wished that this was her life, with this man, in this peaceful place. She wanted to shut out the world on the other side of the Bourne Bridge and never return to it, to find comfort in his arms and in his bed. Kyle made her feel this way, safe and cared for. They were starting to finish each other’s sentences, to know what

one or the other wanted before either asked for something ordinary, like milk for her coffee or another waffle for him at breakfast. Yet always lurking in the corner of her thoughts was what was to happen when she remembered her past? Would they ever see each other again after that?

She looked out at the ocean, its deep expanse almost calling to her, beckoning her far away from here. It was all so confusing that she pushed the thoughts out of her mind, looked over at the tall, gorgeous man carrying her baby on the beach and willed herself to live in the moment while she still could, because when her memory returned and she once again knew exactly who she was, there was no telling if he'd still want to help her.

Mia was finishing loading the dishwasher after dinner, and now that her daughter was asleep, she was thinking about having a little more wine. She cut two slices of the cake she'd made the night before and frosted this morning. She put a piece of the deeply chocolate dessert on plates, grabbed forks from the silverware drawer and balanced it all in one hand while she carried her refilled wine glass in the other. She brought everything into the living room where Kyle was adding two more logs to the fire, making it blaze, orange and red flames shooting high into the chimney. Placing everything down on the coffee table, she said, "It's do or die time, I suppose. Let's taste this cake and see if I have any skill as a baker, or if this was all just a bad idea."

"If it tastes as good as it looks than you might be on to something," he said smiling, pulling the decorative grate across the opening of the fireplace, and sitting down on the couch. He reached for his plate, cut off a corner of his dessert with a fork and put the bite into his mouth.

Mia watched as he closed his eyes, clearly savoring the cake he was eating. His tongue swept against his upper lip to catch a stray crumb, and she thought she might faint. To cover her reaction to his simple motion she asked, "Is it edible?"

“May I?” he reached for her wine glass.

“That bad?” she inquired.

“No. That good. I love dark chocolate and red wine, don’t you?”

“So, it’s good?”

“Mia, this cake tastes like it comes from a French patisserie. It has a remarkable depth of flavor. It’s delicious.”

“It’s the strong coffee I added to the batter. Don’t ask me why I added it, I just had a feeling that it belonged.” She stood up.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“To get the wine bottle and your glass. I’ll be right back.”

She walked into the kitchen and took a moment to rest both hands on the countertop. There was something so sensual about the way his tongue had found that crumb. She could feel her insides quiver with the thought of his tongue in her own mouth. She wanted him, there was no denying that. Taking in a deep settling breath, she grabbed his glass and the bottle of Cabernet she’d come in here for and went back to sit next to him on the couch.

“Please tell me there’s more of this cake,” he said. “It’s addicting.”

Mia smiled. “Yes, lots more. I have a few more ideas of things I’d like to try and bake as well. It’s like a small dam burst inside my mind and it’s filled with recipes.”

“Not a bad way to start to come back to yourself,” he teased.

“I suppose. I feel like I’m walking on a frozen river that’s beginning to melt in places. I wish it was more familiar and less scary, though.”

He moved closer to her, his leg pressing against her own. “Mia, I’m right here with you. I know you’re frightened, but you don’t need to be. We’re getting closer to the truth; I can feel it.”

She lifted her wine glass and took a deep sip. “Maybe,” she replied in barely a whisper. “But perhaps when we find out who I really am you won’t want to know me anymore.”

He looked directly into her eyes, and she could see the sincerity in his own. “Listen to me, Mia. No matter what we discover, you and I are friends now. I’m not letting go of that.”

Friends, she thought wistfully. If I lean in and kiss him now, will he still see us as just friends? Will that be the signal that I want something more? He was the one who kissed me first, after all, yesterday in his bedroom. Was that a one-time thing?

In the end, it didn’t matter. Kyle drained the rest of the wine from his glass and stood up. “I’m going to bed before I eat more of that cake tonight, Mia. Thanks. It’s beyond delicious. Are you coming upstairs too?”

She heard his words and realized that it wasn’t an invitation to join him, but rather an admission that he’d be going to his room alone.

“No. I’m going to enjoy this fire a little bit more. I’ll be up in a bit.”

“Okay. See you in the morning.” He turned and walked into the kitchen. She could hear him put his dirty plate in the dishwasher and head up the long staircase. Once the house was quiet, she lifted her own piece of cake and put a small forkful in her

mouth. The frosting was velvety smooth and the sprinkles along the edge added a nice crunch. Oooh, this is good, she thought to herself after one bite. She leaned her head back and allowed the sweet, rich chocolate to coat her tastebuds. It triggered a far-off memory of a cute bake shop on a smart street in a busy city. Was it a place she shopped in or was it... wait. It was her bake shop. She owned it. But where was it, and why couldn't she remember more?

CHAPTER 19

Mia tossed and turned in bed, finally falling into a restless sleep. She had strange images cluttering her mind until she started to dream about two men in dark suits chasing her. She couldn't find Sarah and felt her heart begin to race, a cold sweat forming between her shoulder blades. In the dream she felt as if she was running in quicksand, not able to put enough space between her and the ominous men behind her. She turned but could not see their faces, just the image of their bulky bodies, arms outstretched, trying to capture her. A hotel lobby appeared out of nowhere in her dream and she was in it, running, running, doing her best to elude their grasp. The next thing she knew, she was in a hotel room holding Sarah, looking to escape from the evil men who were now outside her door. She looked down at the baby in her arms and suddenly she knew one thing for certain. The little girl's name wasn't Sarah.

It was Daisy.

She woke up with a start and heard screaming. It took her a minute to realize that the sound she heard was coming from deep down in her throat. A minute later, the door to her room was flung open and Kyle stood there, gun in his right hand, eyes wide with apprehension.

"Mia." He craned his neck, searching for unseen assailants. "Mia, are you alright?"

She watched him search the room with his eyes, looking for intruders. His shoulders lost some of their tension when he realized that the windows were all closed and that she was the only one there. He crossed from the doorway to the bathroom and

stepped inside. She imagined he went in there to check and make sure that they were alone.

“It was a dream, Kyle. A bad dream.” Tears stained her face.

She pushed the blanket off the bed and stood up quickly, intent on going to check on her baby, to make sure that her screams hadn’t woken the child. Kyle stopped her.

“I already checked. She’s fine, fast asleep.”

“You’re sure?” Mia asked.

“Positive.” He pointed to the baby monitor on her night table. “See for yourself.”

She looked at the screen. The baby was sleeping, her small rump in the air. Then she glanced back at him only to find his eyes roaming her face. “Do you want to tell me what happened?” he asked softly.

Mia looked at him and suddenly realized that he was shirtless, his sweatpants slung low, and barefoot. If her heart wasn’t already beating out of her chest from the nightmare, she’d be dizzy from the sight of him. Then she realized that she was barely dressed herself, wearing a sheer camisole and a pair of lace panties. She quickly climbed back into the bed and drew the blanket up to her chest, covering herself as best as she could.

“There were two men, and they were chasing me.”

“Were they the men I told you about? The thugs that were outside my apartment and then again on Sibby’s block on Halloween. Maybe they were stuck in the back of your mind until now.”

“I don’t know. Maybe. In my dream I was in a hotel, and they were there too. They were trying to catch me, and I couldn’t find Sarah.”

He sighed and sat down on the edge of the bed, gingerly resting the gun on the night table. “It was just a dream, Mia. There’s no one here but us. You’re safe.”

“Kyle. That’s the thing. It didn’t feel like a dream. It felt so real, like they were going to catch me. It was truly scary,” she said as she felt another round of tears well up in her eyes. She tucked her legs underneath her and leaned her head into her hands. She could not stop the torrent as she began to cry with a sudden intensity that surprised her.

“Don’t cry.” He crawled up on the mattress to where she sat and pulled her into his arms. “I’m not going to let anything happen to you or to the baby. I promise.”

“But what if they find us here? We’re all alone and...”

“And nothing. If in the very unlikely occurrence that those goons find their way up to the Cape, it’s their funeral. I won’t hesitate to shoot a trespasser. This is private property.”

“That sounds equally as frightening. If anything were to happen to you because you were protecting me or the baby, I don’t know what I’d do. I feel my life spiraling out of control. I’m so sorry I brought you into this.”

He held her tightly as she cried, all the while rubbing small circles on her back, telling her that he was there and not to worry. It was so easy to lean against his strength, to feel the warm of his bare skin seep into her own chilled body. She wiped away the tears and looked up at him. “Kyle, I –”

“Shhh,” he said. “Try to get some rest.” He gently placed her back against the pillows

and went to stand. She grabbed his hand.

“Can you stay? Until I fall asleep? Would that be okay?”

“Of course,” he replied, positioning himself next to her, leaning his head back on the pillow next to hers.

Mia turned her body to face his, resting one hand against his chest, feeling the hard muscle there beneath his warm skin. Then slowly with the tips of her fingers, she began to tangle with the patch of hair between his nipples, ever so lightly expanding her exploration until she caressed one bud and then the other. She heard his breath hitch; she felt a familiar strumming between her own legs. She didn’t know what came over her, she just knew that she couldn’t ignore the desire that pooled in the pit of her stomach. She wanted him, and not because he had come to her rescue, but because he had proven himself to be a caring and kind man who clearly felt an attraction to her as well.

“Mia,” he said her name so slowly it sounded like a moan. Maybe it was, she wasn’t sure. “If you don’t want to end up naked beneath me tonight, please, stop now.”

Instead of answering him with words, she dipped her fingers down lower, caressing his belly button before slipping under the waistband of his sweatpants.

“I’m not kidding. Last chance to change your mind about this,” he whispered in her ear.

“I’m not kidding either. Please Kyle, believe me.”

The next thing she knew, his mouth was on her camisole, teasing one nipple and then the other through the thin fabric. She could feel a small stream of milk escape from one, but he pulled down the lacy garment and licked it before it could soak the

mattress. Then he pulled the straps off her shoulders and shimmed it over her hips, grabbing her panties with his thumbs and removing them as well. She could feel his erection underneath his sweats, and she didn't hesitate to kick the blanket away so that she could pull them off him. If she was going to be naked, then he would be too, and once uncovered she could see his body fully. A fine sheen of sweat had broken out across his chest, and she slowly tasted its salty flavor before reaching up and kissing his mouth. His tongue swept against her own, shooting sparks of electricity throughout her body. She had no recollection of ever feeling this way about anyone else; something deep within her soul told her that she never had.

Mia rolled on top of him so that he was right outside the entrance to her body. Then she slowly lowered herself, allowing him to fill her with an ever-expanding wave of pleasure. He wrapped his arms and legs around her and let her set the tempo for a bit, then he spun her around on to her back and took control. Mia could have sworn that he went further and deeper into her body than she could tolerate, but instead, their fit was perfect, and they tipped over the edge together in a spiral of sensation that she'd not soon forget. As each wave passed through her body, she had only one thought—something had sent her away from a different sort of life and into this man's arms. And now, she had no idea if she could ever leave him.

Kyle took nothing for granted. Not his misstep the night he shot that perp, not his family and their devotion to one another, and certainly not what he'd just experienced with Mia in her bed. He knew that he was attracted to her, but he didn't expect the depth of his feelings to result in the most incredible sexual experience he'd ever had. And now, he wasn't sure what to do next.

She had fallen asleep in his arms, her chest rising and falling peacefully, her hand still resting between his legs. He needed to be careful not to move; he didn't want to her to shift and wake up; he liked the feeling of her warmth against the most sensitive part of him. He wondered about her nightmare, though. It was probably just a by-product of all the stress she'd been under, coming up to the Cape with him under

duress. But maybe it was something more. And the sudden baking, that was odd as well. Maybe pieces of her memory were returning, and she just had no other way to process them, he wasn't sure. The only thing Kyle did know was that he was starting to wish that she'd never remember her past. That way, maybe he could convince her to stay here with him. There was something about this woman that was so attractive that it made him wish that he could hold on to her and call her his own. After what they just did, he thought, how the hell was he going to be able to ever let her go.

And then there was the matter of his gun. When he first heard her screaming, he was sure that someone had broken into the house and was in her room. The fear that struck him in that moment was heart-stopping, but he didn't hesitate as he once thought he might. He reached for his gun in the night table next to him, grabbed a handful of bullets out of the box that sat next to it and ran as fast as he could to check on the baby and then go find Mia. But there was no one else in the house. As a matter of fact, he remembered now that the alarm panel was set to "arm" – had someone broken in, there would have been a siren blaring, not just a woman screaming. None of it made any sense. The only explanation was that she must have remembered something, even if it was just the feeling of being threatened. He'd have to ask her some very pointed questions in the morning.

For now, however, they were safe and warm in this bed. He could hear the ocean as it pounded against the beach outside the window. The rhythm was familiar and comforting, and he did his best to fall into the sound of it, allowing it to lull him to sleep as well. As his eyes grew heavy, he had one final thought: whatever it took to make the woman next to him feel safe, that was the mission. He could not let her down.

CHAPTER 20

Mia woke in the early morning pale light disoriented, with two pressing needs -- to pee and to breastfeed. Both her bladder and her boobs felt full to the point of bursting; she hoped that Daisy was going to be awake soon. Then she realized that she wasn't alone. Her mind raced for a minute, remembering the events of the previous night. She turned her head and saw Kyle still sleeping on the other side of the bed.

It was not like she could have forgotten what happened between them, even with her compromised memory. It was body and soul shattering sex, after all. It was just that she was starting to remember bits and pieces of her past life and she still hadn't determined if she was free to fall for him. While she didn't wear a wedding ring, she did have a baby. Daisy's father had to be out there somewhere, didn't he?

If the two men who had found her in Boston were hired by whomever it was that was looking for her, then they must know her identity. Maybe she was going about this the wrong way. Maybe those men held the key to her future and if they did show up here, perhaps she could get them to tell her the truth.

Or maybe they just want to snatch Daisy and kill you, she warned herself. Plus, she could no longer ignore the overwhelming sense that she was in real trouble, the kind of danger that Kyle would not be able to protect her against.

She looked over at Kyle again. This man had done so much to help her already. She could not let him continue to put his own life on the line for her. She had to figure this all out and do it quickly before the rest of his family arrived for Thanksgiving

and she put them all in peril as well.

That was the other odd piece. Thanksgiving. She wasn't sure what that holiday entailed. She heard Sibby talk about it in the kitchen with Colleen before they left, planning for what they'd need to bring to the Cape to make the traditional meal, but none of that felt familiar. Shouldn't she have a core memory of celebrating with her own family as a child? Why couldn't she even remember that? If she did have a bake shop somewhere, wouldn't she have made specialty cakes for the occasion? She had heard Sibby mention pumpkin pie. I have no idea how to make one of those, she thought.

She sat up and shook her head, trying to pry some odd fact loose in her brain. It didn't work and she knew that she had only a few minutes before her bladder would betray her as well. She carefully maneuvered herself out of the bed, doing her best to keep Kyle asleep. Once she made it to the bathroom and relieved herself, she felt better. Now it was just a matter of putting some clothing on before he woke up and found her naked yet again.

Mia quietly made her way back into the bedroom, thinking that she was in the clear as she rummaged through the top drawer of the dresser where she had stored her bras and panties. Suddenly, she felt a shift in the air; it was as if the energy had become supercharged.

"Good morning," he said. "Where did you go?"

She quickly grabbed a lacy thong and stepped into it, turning around with her arm covering her leaking breasts.

"I had to pee. And I have to feed...the baby."

"Is she up yet?"

“I’m not sure. I’m going to check.”

“Don’t you think you would have heard her?” He pointed to the monitor screen on the night table. “I think she’s still asleep.”

She followed his glance and saw that indeed her daughter was in her crib and not yet awake.

“Come back to bed, Mia.”

It sounded more like a command than a request.

“Kyle, I think we should talk about this...”

“Mia. There’s nothing to talk about. I think we both know that we crossed a line last night. What’s the harm in crossing it one more time?”

“Just one?” she asked, knowing the answer.

“Just one for now,” he replied with a smile. “We can see what happens after that.”

And for all that she recognized that this might not be the best idea she ever had, Mia couldn’t help it. She wanted to lose herself in him, to forget that she couldn’t remember who she really was and be reborn in his embrace, to be a part of his life, his family. She slowly moved her arms away from her breasts and hooked two fingers in the thin lace of her panties, pulling them down and kicking them aside. Then she took a deep breath and sunk back down into the bed with him, reveling in the warmth of his body and his heady scent.

Just once more. Then you have to tell him what you remember.

At breakfast that morning, Mia was determined to keep her wits about her. It wasn't just the mind-blowing sex that had her rattled; it was the distinct memory of Daisy's true name. She had pushed the pancakes around on her plate long enough for him to notice that she wasn't eating.

"Aren't you famished?" he asked. "Or is it that you just don't like what I made? It's okay, I won't be insulted if you want to make yourself some eggs."

"It's not that, Kyle, these are actually delicious," she said, taking a bite to make a point. The forkful of maple-soaked goodness tasted like cotton in her mouth. She looked over at her daughter, kicking happily in one of the multiple baby seats she'd found in the house, fed and content. She pushed the plate aside. "There's something I have to tell you, something I remembered."

He looked up, his eyes boring into her own. "You remembered something? That's great. What is it?"

"That nightmare, I don't think it was just a random bad dream. I think it really happened. I think the men I saw in the dream are the men who you saw on the street. And I don't think they're here for me. I think they're here for Daisy."

"Daisy? Who's Daisy?"

She turned her head slightly to look at her daughter. "You've been calling her Sarah, but her real name is Daisy."

He pushed himself back from the counter, stood up and began pacing around the kitchen.

"That can't be. You have papers that prove otherwise."

“We know they’re fake, Kyle, so they’re useless. I can’t remember anything else, but I know what I know. My daughter’s name is Daisy.”

“Those are damn good fakes, Mia.”

“I wish I knew how I got them, but for now, all I am sure of is that those two men have been on my trail for a while. I don’t know where that hotel was, the one in the dream, but it felt awfully real to me. Could they have something to do with my accident?”

She watched as he ran his hand through his hair, clearly thinking about what she’d just told him. Then he looked at her again.

“We already know you’re not Mia Sawyer. I guess it stands to reason that your daughter’s name has been changed as well.”

“Why can I remember Daisy’s name but not my own?”

“I wish I could answer that for you, Mia. But for now, you’ve given us something to go on. If you’ve remembered correctly, maybe I can find a clue about a baby with that name on the police database. It’s not so common a name, there can’t be that many missing children named Daisy. Something might turn up.”

Mia nodded her head and then wrapped her arms around her body, suddenly feeling chilled to the bone. “I don’t know what I’m hoping for here, Kyle. That you find her or that you don’t.”

He came over to where she sat and lifted her off the stool to her feet and put his arms around her.

“Listen to me, Mia. We’re going to figure out who you are and why you’re here. I

promise.”

“But when we do, what will happen to us?” She felt a familiar panic begin to rise into her chest.

“Nothing, if I have anything to say about it. I think we both know that we’re in deep now. I’m not letting you go without a fight.”

She felt herself begin to spiral out of control with fear. “Kyle, it’s not that easy. Daisy has a father. He’s out there somewhere. What if…”

He lifted a finger to her lips and then replaced it with a soft kiss. “I don’t know who Daisy’s father is, or if he’s even out there, but this I do know. If you were mine, I’d never have lost sight of you in the first place. I have to believe that whoever he is, he’s not in the picture at all.”

“I wish I felt as confident about that as you,” she replied, now standing on her tiptoes to kiss him back, feeling stronger with the contact, the warm, woodsy scent of him reassuring. She drew in a deep breath. “I appreciate it, though. I really do. You have a sneaky way of making me feel better.”

“Mia. It’s you who’s sneaky. I never expected this,” he motioned to the tight space between them. “That morning of the accident, I just acted on instinct. I didn’t think that I’d bring the victim into my home, my family. I didn’t know that I’d find you.”

“I’m the lucky one, Kyle. I could have been trapped in my car for God knows how long if you hadn’t been there. And what would I have done after the hospital released me? I had no idea just how shaky I would be that first week. If it hadn’t been for you, I don’t know what might have happened to me, or to Daisy.”

“I think the universe had a plan for us, Mia. We were supposed to meet.”

“Maybe. Or maybe I’m just the luckiest woman on earth. I’m here with you in this little cocoon you’ve created for us. I just wish I had more answers.”

She could feel his strength in the embrace they shared. It would have to be enough for now.

“I’m going to put the baby down for a nap. I’ll catch up with you in a bit,” she said, stepping back and immediately feeling the loss of his arms wrapped tightly around her.

“After I load the dishwasher, I’ll be in the office. I’m going to see if I can find anything about a missing baby named Daisy.”

“Okay,” she said, lifting the child up and balancing her on one hip. As she made her way up the staircase, Mia was left with one very unsettling thought. Whatever he finds, I hope that he doesn’t think less of me for taking my daughter away from her father. I must have had a good reason. Right?

CHAPTER 21

Kyle had just finished reading an email from Shelby, the police department's IT wizard. She had no luck tracing that IP address, the only link to whomever had paid Mia's credit card bill. Apparently, that person was good at hiding themselves within the deep web. Shelby further cautioned him against changing the password to Mia's Gmail account because that might lead someone back to his IP address, which was identifiable and easily traced. He threw the phone down on the desk and looked up the computer screen and saw the new email notification. It was his official reinstatement letter from the department. Just as the Chief had predicted, his restart date was December first. He felt the tension rise in his chest; he was running out of time to solve this mystery and uncover Mia's identity.

Then he had a random thought. If none of his own government sources could help, maybe a foreign one might offer some information. He took a stab in the dark and typed in a long-shot. What appeared next was truly shocking. While there was no American child who fit the description of the little girl sleeping upstairs in his family's home, there was a British baby named Daisy Byrne on the Interpol website. When I first met Mia she had a British accent, I'm sure of it... he thought to himself, his stomach churning. Kyle continued to read:

BULLETIN

Missing child, Daisy Byrne, approximately five months, blue eyes, blonde hair. Thought to have been abducted by the maternal parent, Maeve Byrne. Whereabouts unknown. All pertinent information can be reported to the Manchester office...

Kyle felt as if he'd been punched in the gut. There it was, in black and white. He'd uncovered her identity. She wasn't Mia Sawyer. She was Maeve. Maeve Byrne.

He stood up and walked around the office in circles, his hand raking through his hair as he tried to wrap himself around this new information. The briefest of paragraphs, yet so life changing. Think, Kyle, think! Sitting back down in the desk chair, he tried to examine the evidence he had in front of him. A baby had been taken by her mother and the authorities were looking for clues to her whereabouts. That wasn't the surprising piece. As he thought about what he knew of Interpol, the fact that they had a simple alert on the web and that there was no other reporting on this had to mean something.

It was odd for Interpol to be involved in a missing person's case, unless, of course, that person was someone of significance. They generally looked out for children involved in human trafficking or forced labor, not one lost to a domestic disturbance case, if that was what this was. He couldn't be sure. Maybe, the father was someone of great influence, the kind of man who lived at a level where he could keep this kind of news out of the public eye and the overly intrusive British tabloids.

But why? Why not let the press run the story and try to gather intel that way? Was the father a high government official? Could he be the Prime Minister? he silently questioned, a chill running up his spine. He shook it off. No. The Prime Minister's last name wasn't Byrne, so all that would have meant was that they weren't married... but -- did she have an affair with someone of influence that resulted in a baby? Maybe she was just hiding the fact that she wasn't married to Daisy's father for some reason. But Interpol wouldn't care about regular, law-abiding citizens. None of this made any sense.

Kyle leaned his head back and tried to stay calm and think. He couldn't be sure. He realized that Mia truly didn't remember more yet, but he had to wonder. Who the hell was she, really? Someone was out there looking for her and he knew that this

wouldn't necessarily end well for either of them.

He continued to scroll, hoping to find out more about Daisy Byrne and her mother. The Google search was short; there was still nothing there, other than the Interpol bulletin. After a few minutes, he shut down the computer all together. After his leave from the department and the Internal Affairs investigation into his misfiring of his service weapon, he didn't need more trouble. He realized immediately that as a law enforcement officer he had a responsibility to call in the information he had – a woman and baby matching the description in the bulletin were currently residing in his home.

But he couldn't. His heart wouldn't let him. He had fallen for Mia, fallen hard. He knew that he couldn't turn her in because with her memory gone, she had no idea of what she'd done; it was a radical move to abduct a child, and he knew that she must have had a reason. He needed to figure out what her motive was and determine how best to help her. Alerting the international authorities just didn't feel like the right thing to do. No. When she remembered enough to clue him into why she was on the run, they could make an informed decision together. Until then, he'd keep this revelation under wraps.

But Kyle was faced with an even bigger dilemma – what to tell Mia now. He didn't feel right keeping this information to himself, but what good was sharing it with someone who had no recall of her life before they met one another. Would this news terrify her, or if he revealed her true name, might it jog a memory that would unlock the rest of the details stuck somewhere in her mind? Still wrestling with these questions, Kyle almost didn't hear Mia when she stepped into the office. He sensed her presence, though, and when he turned around, there she stood, and his decision was made. He wouldn't reveal what he knew... for now.

"Find anything?" she asked, her voice a bit shaky.

“Nothing important. Is Daisy asleep?”

“Yes,” she whispered, her eyes wide.

“What? What is it?” he asked, reading her face and realizing that she had something on her mind.

“I think I remembered something else. A woman. She offered to help me when I was in the taxi line at JFK. She got close to me. I think that maybe she planted the tracker into the stroller.”

“Would you recognize her if you saw her again?” he asked.

“I don’t know. She was just a woman, a nice grandmotherly type. She let me go ahead of her on the line. Do you think that she’s involved in this?”

He nodded his head. “I do think that’s possible. But if it is, then someone knew you were on that plane, landing in New York. Why did they let you get away? Just to follow you later? It doesn’t make sense.”

“Maybe they wanted to track me to my destination. Maybe there’s something important there that they want, and I was going to lead them to it.” She drew in a ragged breath and then added, “I’m scared, Kyle, about that and...”

She hesitated and he reached out and pulled her onto his lap and knew that he was right not to share what he found online. It would destroy her. “You’re letting your mind run away with you, Mia. Until we can figure out where you were going, it doesn’t matter. You’re here now. No one knows where you are but me and my family, and they’re not telling anyone. You’re safe. Daisy is safe.” He pulled her in closer and felt that electric connection to her that was undeniable; they were meant to be together.

“I know that, but what I don’t know is how you’ll end up feeling about me if I’ve taken Daisy away from her father.”

“I would think that you must have felt threatened by him, or worse. You don’t need to worry about what I think. Aren’t we past that, anyway?”

Kyle searched her eyes and held her gaze. He hoped that was enough to reassure her that he wouldn’t judge her for running. But what he didn’t say was that he now knew that they were on borrowed time. If those two men were Interpol agents, they’d figure out where she was. Mailing that tracker to a different location bought them some measure of safety, but not enough. Besides, she remembered the woman at the airport. That had to mean something. Maybe pieces of her memory were coming back, and she’d soon know who she really was and what she did. And once she remembered that she’d be able to tell him exactly why she ran.

She rested her head on his shoulder, and he drew her in closer, his mind beginning to spin out a bit. If she was a fugitive, what did that make him? An accomplice to this crime? He closed his eyes. Reel yourself in, Kyle, he thought to himself. Besides, it really didn’t matter. There was no way he was going to turn her in to the authorities. If need be, they’d disappear together into the night, and he’d make sure that no one would find them.

As the days passed, they fell into a quiet routine. Long afternoon walks on the beach, bundled up against the cold November wind, the baby strapped to Kyle’s chest, happy to watch the birds skitter along the shoreline. At nap time, Mia would bake all sorts of delicious breads, cakes, and muffins. With each new day she would remember how to make a different treat and the spare freezer in the basement grew fuller in anticipation of the rest of the family joining them soon for Thanksgiving. After dinner, when Daisy would be safely tucked in for the night they would drink wine in front of the fire, often making love there before heading up to his bed at night where they’d sleep tangled in each other’s arms. Kyle could not remember a time that

he'd been more content. If it wasn't for the looming threat of Mia's past eventually catching up with her, he'd be blissfully happy. He was ever watchful on the rare occasions that they went to Provincetown to walk around and window shop or to Orleans to pick up supplies at the Stop and Shop. He would scan the faces of the people they'd pass and try to find distinguishing features in case he ever needed to pull someone out of a line-up. But as the days went on and no one showed up at their door, he began to relax a bit without letting his guard down completely. He desperately wanted to pretend that they were just another normal couple enjoying their time in a vacant resort town.

Knowing that his entire family was about to descend on them in the next few days was an unwelcome reality; they'd need to discuss just how much they wanted to reveal about their relationship.

"Don't you think it would be easier to tell the truth? I want you in my bed at night, Mia," he said one morning at breakfast. She'd been writing out a list of ingredients for a coffee cake she wanted to bake for the family's arrival.

"I'm afraid that they'll judge me. Or think that I trapped you with my pitiful story and the amnesia card. It's all so cliched and predictable."

"Nothing about you is predictable, Mia," he said, reaching across the counter and grabbing her hand. She still didn't know what he'd found online. He checked every day, but there were no updates or additional information posted. He would call some of his contacts at the department and ask to speak to their connections, and maybe somehow, he'd get lucky and hit on some new detail he'd missed. Kyle knew it was only a matter of time before her past caught up to her and found its way to their front door. Until then, he'd keep moving forward and pretend that this would all work out just fine. That was the way to protect the woman he'd realized now he had fallen in love with. He'd take a bullet for her, if necessary.

The added stress of the family's impending arrival made it impossible for him to tell her what he knew. The bubble they'd created would certainly burst once the house was filled with others. Plus, how could she face them once she realized that they found out that she'd abducted her daughter from London? That was a real crime, one that could have her both extradited and jailed. His siblings would not take this news lightly; he knew them. They would all feel an obligation to turn her in to the authorities. He couldn't let that happen, either. It would be enough to confess that he and Mia had grown serious feelings for one another and that they'd be sharing a bed. He could see his sister's face now. She had expressed her worry about him and his involvement with Mia from the outset. It was going to be a long and loud discussion; of that he was certain, but it had to be done. The sooner the better.

CHAPTER 22

Mia was dressing Daisy when she heard car doors slamming on the driveway. She closed her eyes, trying to keep her nerves from overtaking her entirely. She had been both looking forward to and dreading this moment; she couldn't wait to see Sibby again, but she was pretty sure that she was going to face some intense questions. She knew how protective Kyle's siblings were of one another. She didn't want them to think less of her because she had fallen in love with their brother while compromised.

Plus, she wasn't sure how they would feel about the relationship that had blossomed between her and Kyle. It wasn't something she'd expected to happen, but now she could not imagine her life without him in it. He was so good with Daisy and the baby was comfortable in his arms. What else could she ever ask for? She pulled the warm, burgundy corduroy overalls up on the little girl and buttoned the two straps at her shoulders. She reached for white cotton socks from the dresser draw under the changing table and slipped them onto Daisy's kicking feet. After she brushed the fine, blonde curls on her daughter's head, she said, "Well, sweetheart, we've stalled long enough. Time to go say hello to everyone."

Mia gave herself one glance in the full-length mirror on the back of the bedroom door and satisfied that she looked pretty put-together in an outfit that had no baby puke stain on either shoulder, she left the bedroom and went downstairs. She could feel the cold air rushing in through the open front door as suitcases and bags of groceries were shuttled in from outside. Just as she reached the landing, Sibby appeared.

"Mia! You look great. And look at Sarah. She's grown in the last month! I can't wait to catch up with you," Sibby said, coming in for a brief hug. Then she turned her

attention back to the bevy of activity around her. “Conor! What are you doing? Bring the cooler directly into the kitchen. That stuff needs to go into the freezer right now!”

Mia stepped back and watched the frenzy around her. She looked for Kyle but didn’t see him. “Can I help, Sibby?” she asked tentatively.

“Come into the kitchen. I’m sure we can find something for you to do!” Sibby replied as she pulled off her heavy down coat and hung it in the entry hall closet. “There is a ton of stuff to put away. I hope the fridge isn’t too full.”

“Well, actually...”

Sibby interrupted her. “Hang on a sec, Mia. Geoff,” she yelled, turning to her harried husband. “Where are the boys? Don’t leave them outside alone. The ocean is right behind the house, you know.”

“They need to learn about that at some time,” Geoff teased her.

“I’m not in the mood for your games, dear. Just make sure that they stay out front or come inside.”

Mia watched as the other woman directed the traffic around her like a seasoned pro. She had clearly taken on the role of commander-in-chief of the family and everyone else carried out her orders without complaint. Just then Sibby turned back to face Mia.

“C’mon. I want to hear all about what you think of the Cape and how you and Kyle kept yourselves busy out here off season. Not much to do, is there? None of the local shops are open, are they?” She put her hand on the small of Mia’s back and led her down the hallway into the kitchen. Once there, they found Colleen trying to organize the mess. There were bags on every available surface. Mia put Daisy in her seat and

began to empty out the large shopping bag closest to her, keeping busy. The last thing she wanted to do was fill Sibby and her mom in on just how she and Kyle spent their free time; she knew that Kyle planned on telling his family about them, she just didn't want to be the one to do it.

Mia started to pay attention to the groceries in front of her. There were bags marked "stuffing mix," which seemed odd to her. It looked like a sack of salad croutons packaged as something else. It didn't feel familiar. There were glass containers filled with marshmallows, fresh chestnuts, and ruby red cranberries. Those three things didn't seem to belong in the same meal, and she had no idea what Sibby or her mother intended to do with them. There was a huge turkey wrapped in brown butcher paper and the first thing Sibby did when they entered the kitchen was wrestle the bird into the refrigerator, rearranging everything inside to make enough room for the star of the meal. Mia realized that she would just have to watch and learn, because this Thanksgiving Day dinner was way out of her league.

"Tell me, Mia. What do you think of the Cape?" Sibby asked as she organized what needed to go in the pantry versus the increasingly crowded refrigerator.

"It's beautiful here," Mia replied. "I love being on the ocean. Sarah does too." She was careful to use the name for her daughter that Sibby would recognize. She didn't know just how much Kyle would share with his family, but she didn't want to give anything away.

"Have you felt safe enough up here, away from the world?" Colleen asked.

Mia smiled. "Yes. Kyle has made sure to isolate us. We've been in our own little bubble."

Sibby looked up at her and in that moment, Mia knew that she could see the truth.

“You like my brother, don’t you?”

Mia could feel the blush spread from her toes northward toward her face. She simply nodded.

“Well, he could do worse, Mia. I know that you’re still confused about your past, but I’m thinking that you’ve left no one behind. Your heart would tell you if you did. You’re a woman of good character. I pick up on these things, I’m never wrong.”

“She’s right, Mia,” Colleen replied with a nod. “Sibby’s always been a good judge of character.”

“I appreciate that. All I can say is that I’m relieved. I was worried that you both might think less of me because I fell in love with Kyle. I mean, my situation isn’t exactly normal.” The words spilled from her mouth before she could stop them.

“Love? Not just attraction?” Sibby questioned, pulling out two large bunches of celery from a bag and put them on the counter. “That’s a whole different level of involvement.” Mia thought that Sibby was trying to think of the right thing to say next.

Sibby stopped unpacking the groceries for a minute and looked directly into Mia’s eyes. “You know, Kyle’s been through a lot himself. I’m sure he told you all about what happened at work.”

“He did. He told me that he’s been forever changed by that night. I think he has nightmares about it. Sometimes I hear him shouting out in his sleep.” When she realized what she just said, Mia put her hands up over her mouth.

“It’s okay, Mia. You’re an adult and so is my brother. None of us thought that you’d live like monks here together. We just figured it might not have happened yet, you

know, this thing between you two,” she said with a smug smile.

“I think Kyle was worried about your reaction as well as what your parents might say.” She glanced over at Colleen who was busying herself at the sink, then continued, “but it’s not like he took advantage of me. I was...I am, a willing participant in our relationship.”

“My brother is not the ‘taking advantage of a woman’ type,” Sibby replied. “As a matter of fact, the one and only time he had his own heart broken was when his fiancé walked out on him, and we needed to pick him up off the floor.”

“Sibby!” Colleen said sharply.

“Oh...well, that’s a piece of his life he hasn’t told me about,” Mia admitted.

“Then I’ll say no more. It’s not my story to tell.” Sibby squared her shoulders as if to shake off the tense bit of conversation. With a smile she said, “For now, help me bring some of this downstairs to the second freezer. We’ve run out of room here.”

“Oh. About that. I’ve sort of filled it.”

“Filled it? With what? Was there a sale on something at the market that you couldn’t leave behind?”

“Not exactly. I’ve been baking. It seems that I still don’t recall who I am, but I do remember how to bake. I hope that’s okay.”

“If you made anything with chocolate in it, it’s more than okay. Let’s go see what goodies you’ve stored away.”

Mia lifted the baby out of her seat and followed Sibby down the steep basement steps,

feeling relieved about one thing – neither of these women seemed at all upset at the thought of Kyle being involved with a mysterious woman who could not remember her own past. She liked both now even more than before.

As they moved the last of the cars into the oversized garage, Kyle asked his brothers and his dad to join him for a quick walk on the beach. Geoff was already down at the shoreline with the boys, the baby in a carrier strapped to his chest, running them around to relieve the excess energy they'd accumulated on the ride from Boston. Once they were gathered, Kyle began the conversation he'd reviewed in his head. He had to tell them what he knew about Mia. He had no real choice. He needed their help.

"I'll make this quick," he began. The sun was struggling to peek through the clouds, and it was both windy and cold on the beach. "I know the truth about Mia's identity. I just haven't told her yet."

"Why not, brother? She deserves to have the truth, especially if you have it." Conor said.

"It's complicated. I found Sarah's identity first. And the child's name isn't really Sarah, by the way. It's Daisy."

"Sarah's identity? What do you mean?" his father asked.

"I found an Interpol bulletin about a missing child. It seems that she was abducted from London by her 'maternal parent,' which is what they called Mia. Except that they used her real name – Maeve Byrne."

"Interpol?" Tim asked, his eyes widening. "Kyle, man, you've got to call this in."

"Not so fast, Tim. I have an odd feeling about this. I've gotten to know Mia and I

think that she must have had a good reason for taking her daughter out of Europe. I keep hoping that she'll remember on her own. Her memory has started to come back. It's strange, but she can recall how to bake a whole lot of different things. We think that maybe she was a baker in her former life."

"Great, Kyle. Maybe she's the King's crumpet maker. You still have an obligation as a law enforcement officer to notify the proper authorities."

Kyle felt the wind whip around them. It was freezing cold, which intensified his feeling of dread. "Listen. I didn't have to tell you all what I know. I think that Mia is very close to having her memory return. Let's give it the weekend and reconvene. There's no reason to ruin the holiday."

"No reason to ruin the holiday? Brother, do you hear yourself? You're almost clear of one investigation that almost cost you your job. Do you really need more trouble?" Tim asked.

Kyle pulled himself up to his full height and said, "Full disclosure. I'm in love with her."

Kyle watched the faces of the men he held closest to his heart fall.

"What did I tell you about getting involved with the single mother, Kyle?" Conor asked. "You've dug yourself quite a hole, haven't you?"

"Conor!" their father replied. "Hold your tongue!"

The assembled group all turned to hear what their oldest member had to say. "No one of us is qualified to judge what Kyle's done here. He says he loves this woman, then respect it. The heart wants what the heart wants, plain and simple." Then he turned to Kyle and put a gloved hand on his shoulder. "Listen to me son. I know I can't tell you

what to do, but you know what's right. We're all in it with you, whatever you need. But you get this weekend, and this weekend only. Come Monday morning, if nothing's changed, we'll have a very different kind of discussion."

Kyle nodded his head. He knew his father was right. As the group made their way up the dune toward the house, he turned back to them and said, "And just so you know, Mia's sleeping in my room with me. Please, let's just leave it there. No additional comments are necessary."

They silently walked back to the house, and Kyle felt like there was a giant clock ticking over his head. Monday would be here soon enough. He just prayed that was all the time Mia needed to remember everything.

CHAPTER 23

It had been a long and draining day and it wasn't over yet. Mia watched as Sibby sat at the kitchen counter with a glass of merlot and a legal pad and pen; Mia's own glass sat at her elbow. Sibby was making yet another list of things to be done before Thursday's big meal. Dinner had been loud and raucous, but now the house was quiet, the dishwasher was humming and the sky outside the picture window was full of stars. Sibby's parents and all the children were already sleeping, Kyle and his brothers were in the living room drinking Conor's pumpkin home brew, deep in some sort of hushed discussion.

"I didn't realize that Thanksgiving required this much work," Mia said to Sibby. She watched the other woman rip off part of a page. She'd made a shopping list of a few rogue items still missing but necessary for the big day.

"It's a finely orchestrated meal, like Christmas or Easter, except without all the religion thrown in," Sibby kidded. "I guess you don't recall what your family did to celebrate."

Mia shook her head. She truly had no idea what happened on this holiday, but if she was being honest, she couldn't bring up an image of a Christmas or Easter celebration either.

"The thing is," Sibby began, emptying the remains of the bottle of wine into their glasses, "there are certain family traditions. Expectations, if you will. When the meal is the same year after year, you can't deviate from what people love to have on their plate. For example, I hate serving sweet potatoes covered in marshmallows, because

that's all the kids will want to eat. But then again, when I was my children's age, that's what I wanted as well. As my mom always says, 'it's payback time.'"

"What is your favorite dish to eat on this holiday?" Mia asked, not trying to make idle conversation, but rather to use as a roadmap for herself.

"Honestly, by the time I'm finished cooking – which will take two days at the least – I'm over it. None of the food looks appealing. All I see is how many potatoes need to be peeled or how much corn I will have to shuck for the pudding. But I do love the part where we go around the table before dad carves the turkey. We tell each other what we're thankful for, and that makes it all worthwhile."

"You don't eat at all?"

"Generally, not during dinner. I tend to sneak back into the kitchen much later, when I'm finally hungry, and make a Dagwood sandwich."

"What's that?"

"Wow. You really remember nothing, huh? It's a sandwich piled high with all the leftovers. Turkey, stuffing, cranberry sauce, potatoes — all smothered in gravy. It's freaking delicious."

Mia lifted her wineglass and took a sip. "I'd love to learn. I can help you with the preparations. You direct me and I'll follow orders."

"Great, Mia. I'm going to take you up on it. My mom loves to help, but sometimes it's a 'too many cooks' situation and we end up arguing on how to do the simplest tasks. She's slowing down but unable to accept that she can't do everything she used to be able to do."

“That must be hard for you both,” Mia said.

“It’s inevitable,” Sibby said as she turned her head to look out the window. Mia wondered if Sibby was tearing up and didn’t want her to see any sign of weakness. Not that she would have judged Sibby for it, quite the opposite. She admired Kyle’s sister and truly felt as if she’d made a friend.

“Look at those stars,” Sibby exclaimed, taking her wine to the double-paned slider that led outside. “I want a closer look.” She unlocked the door and stepped onto the deck. Mia felt the cold rush of air fill the kitchen and followed Sibby, carefully balancing her glass as she wrapped her arms around her chest.

The sound of the ocean crashing against the beach was rhythmic and soothing. In the past month Mia had become so comfortable here with Kyle, and now with the rest of his family here she couldn’t help but wonder if she had her own people out there somewhere. As they stood silently at the railing of the deck, looking up at the sky, Mia’s mind raced with the thoughts of what was to happen when she reclaimed her memory and left this place. Would she be on the run, or would she be able to maintain the relationships she made with Kyle’s family and now treasured? Would she see them again, or would her presence put them in too much danger for her to keep in contact?

She took a large swig of her wine, hoping to dull the painful thought that Kyle and his family were only temporary acquaintances. Aside from feeling like a part of something larger than herself within the warm circle of these generous people, she was in love with Kyle. The painful thoughts about leaving him behind threatened, crowding her mind, blocking out the present moment almost entirely. She looked up at the inky sky studded with stars. The constellations were shimmering, bragging with their beauty. She took in a deep breath of the salty air and willed herself to be calm, to enjoy the here and now and not focus on tomorrow. It would be here soon enough; no need to summon trouble to her door.

Kyle added another log to the fire and then sat back down on the couch with his brothers and brother-in-law. He drained the remains of the malty brew in his glass and said, "So here's my plan."

The other men leaned in attentively.

"If Mia doesn't remember who she is by Christmas, I'm going to take her and the baby away from here. I'm not sure if I'll even stay in the country. I've got to keep them safe until she truly knows who she is and why she ran."

"That's not reasonable, Kyle," Conor said. "Didn't you say that you're being reinstated on December first? You can't just give up your life for someone you met a month ago."

"I can do what I want, Conor," Kyle replied softly.

"True, brother, but what about the rest of us? You'll just go and then what? Hide for the rest of your life? What happens if she never remembers?" Tim asked.

Kyle paused. He hadn't thought about that. What happens if she never remembers? His brother's words bounced around in his brain. What if what she did is so abhorrent to her that she blocks it out forever? Could that be a possibility?

"What would you have me do, Tim? I'm in love with the woman."

"Listen, fellows. It's late. We're not going to solve this dilemma tonight. I vote we sleep on it and reconvene tomorrow," said Geoff, standing up and gathering the empty glasses.

"Leave those," Kyle said, motioning for his brother-in-law to leave the mess behind. "I've got it. I'll wash them so that Sibby doesn't yell at us in the morning."

Geoff nodded and said, “Night.” He left to upstairs to the room he shared with their sister.

Tim and Conor stood as well. “He’s right. We’re not fixing this problem so easily and I’m beat,” Conor said. “See you in the morning.”

“Me too. I’m sure we’ll see things clearer with a full night’s rest.” Both men hugged Kyle and then went to their room, arguing over who got the top bunk.

Kyle balanced all four glasses with the tips of his fingers and carried them into the kitchen. The sliding door was open, and the room was freezing cold. At first, his senses stood at full alert; had someone left the door open or did an intruder break in? But then he heard the quiet tone of female voices and realized that Mia and Sibby were outside on the deck. He put the glasses in the sink and stepped over to the door.

“Ladies, you’re bringing the house temperature down. Are you coming in soon?”

“Right now, brother,” Sibby said as she stepped back into the kitchen with Mia trailing behind her.

He shut the door and locked it, then put the safety bar down, preventing anyone from jimmying it back open from the outside.

“I’m heading up to bed. Don’t stay up all night, there’s work to be done in the morning.”

“We’re right behind you, Sibby. I’ll wash these glasses and we’ll be up as well.”

“Thanks, brother. See you both tomorrow.” Sibby turned and disappeared down the hallway.

Once she was out of sight, Kyle pulled Mia into his arms. “How long were you out there? You’re freezing!”

“I’m not sure,” Mia replied as she rubbed her hands together. “It was mesmerizing. So many stars...”

“Well, if you give me a minute to take care of these glasses, I’m sure I can think of a way to warm you up from the inside...”

She smiled at him then and he felt his entire body come alive. He quickly let her go, turned to the sink, squirted some soap onto a sponge and rinsed away the remainder of the foamy beer from their glasses and washed the dirty wine glasses as well, balancing them on the drain tray next to the deep stainless-steel basin. He squeezed the excess water from the sponge, placed it on the dish set there for this purpose and grabbed a towel to dry his hands. He then reached for Mia who had been standing off to one side, watching him.

“Ready to go up to bed?”

“Always,” she replied.

Her words made his blood hum and race through his body. He reached for her hand and led her through the hallway and up the stairs to his room. Once there, he closed the door behind them and pulled her into his arms, kissing her deeply, releasing all the tension he’d felt throughout the day, knowing that he’d soon have her naked in his bed. For whatever time together they had, Kyle knew one thing. He’d make her feel like the cherished beauty that she was. He would worship her, body and soul with every ounce of his being for as long as he could.

Kyle wasn’t sure how long he’d been asleep when he heard Mia crying. He turned to look at her and realized that she wasn’t awake. She must be having another

nightmare, he thought. Not wanting to scare her but wanting to stop whatever this bad dream was from consuming her this way, he put his hand on her chest and slowly began to apply some pressure, hoping to reassure her that she was safe here with him. She grabbed onto him and slowly opened her tear-filled eyes.

“Kyle,” she gasped. “Kyle...”

“Shh, Mia, you’re okay. You’re safe. You’re here with me, remember?”

She pushed herself up to a sitting position and leaned back against the headboard. He could tell that she was pretty shaken from the effects of the dream.

“No, Kyle, no. I may be safe, but Daisy is the one who’s in danger. They’re coming to get her. I know they are.”

CHAPTER 24

“Who, Mia? Who’s coming for her?” Kyle asked in a whisper.

“Those men. I took her away to keep her safe, but it’s not enough. They’re going to find us. I know it.”

He was sitting on the edge of her side of the bed now and she felt his hand reach for her shoulder. She knew that he was trying to reassure her, but there was nothing he could do to calm her down. She felt herself shaking and gasping for air, trying to regulate her breathing. Her heart was pounding, and she felt sweat form on the back of her neck. That dream wasn’t a figment of her imagination, she was sure of it. It was a large piece of memory that had been unlocked, the true reason that she was on the run, and she felt the terror of it deep in her bones. Her daughter was the one in danger! But why...

“Tell me everything about that nightmare, Mia,” Kyle said. “Every detail you can remember.”

She struggled to keep her voice steady. “I was in a hotel room, Daisy was asleep. I saw two men through the peephole in the door and I knew they were there for her. They wanted to take her away from me.”

“Was one of them her father?”

“No. No, they were looking for Daisy.”

“And how did you get away from them?”

“I created a diversion. I lit a fire and the hotel’s sprinkler system came on. The alarms started to sound. When I knew that lots of people would be in the hallway, I took Daisy and ran to the car. I got in and started to drive away, but then they were on the road behind me. I took the exit too fast, and... well, you know the rest.”

He nodded his head.

“Mia,” he began, taking her hands in his. “Please believe me when I tell you that there is no way those men can get to you or Daisy now. You’re safe here with me. My brothers are here, my dad and Geoff. No one will hurt you.”

“You don’t understand, Kyle. They’ll stop at nothing. I remember that much.”

“Do you remember who Daisy’s father is?”

She shook her head no and let him move closer to her. “That part still feels shadowy to me. I’m not sure. He’s wealthy and powerful, or at least I think he must be for him to have those scary men hunting us.” She watched a shadow cross his face.

“Mia,” Kyle began, tightening his hold on her hands and looking directly into her eyes.

She heard the tentative tone of his voice, and it pushed her further to what she was pretty sure was the edge of what she could endure.

He squeezed her fingers and continued, “There are other small things that I might have ignored, things that might be clues. I mean, I don’t know a lot about women’s clothing, but yours have always seemed expensive. You had a good deal of cash on you. I think you might be wealthy, or at least have access to wealth. And, when I first

met you at the scene of the accident, you had a British accent. Does any of this ring a bell?”

“Me? A British accent? No way. I mean, I’m American, right?” she said nodding her head as if that made her last statement true. “I have a state issued driver’s license, for God’s sake!” She pushed the blanket off and jumped out of the bed and began to pace back and forth.

“Anyone with residency can get one if they pass a road test,” he said. “We’ve already determined that your papers are fake. I mean, the woman who lived at the New York City address, the real Mia Sawyer – we know that she passed away.”

Mia could sense that there was something else that he wasn’t telling her. She turned to face him. “Kyle, why is it that I feel as if you know more than you’ve let on? How would I have forged identification? Do you know more, something you haven’t told me?”

He looked away then, and when he recaptured her gaze, she prepared herself for the worst.

“Okay, Mia, here it is. I was afraid to tell you, afraid that if I did, that you wouldn’t be ready to hear it. I just don’t want you to be more scared than you already are.”

She looked back at him and saw nothing but true concern and care in his eyes. She drew in a breath and prepared herself for whatever was to come next.

“Just tell me, Kyle. I have to know. I have the right to know.” She gathered her strength, stood up and turned to face him. “I’ll be okay.”

She could see the internal struggle he was having, whether to share what he knew or not. “Really, Kyle. If you know more, you have to tell me, you have to tell me right

now!”

He drew in a deep breath and shook his head, as if he wasn't sure if telling her was the right thing for him to do. But she knew that he lived by a strict moral code. He wasn't going to continue to lie to her, even if it had been a lie of omission. In a rush, he said, “I know your name, your real name. It's Maeve Byrne. I found it on an Interpol alert about Daisy. The British government is looking for you and your daughter. I'm going to continue to assume she is your daughter, right?”

At that moment the room started to spin, and the next thing she knew, he was kneeling next to her, and she was sprawled out on the floor.

When Mia came to, there was a cold washcloth on her forehead. Kyle was holding her hand and whispering her name.

“Mia. Mia. Come back to me. It's going to be okay. We're going to figure this out.”

Her eyelids fluttered open, tears spilling out immediately. She tried to sit up, but he gently pushed her shoulders back down.

“Just stay where you are for a minute. You fainted and scared the hell out of me. I was afraid you might have hit your head again, but I think I caught you in time.”

She turned away from him, but he reached for her and said, “Mia. Look at me.”

When she did, Mia could see the concern on his face. She raised herself by her elbows and said, “Kyle. Daisy is my daughter. I swear it. Please, help me get up.”

He put a one strong hand under the small of her back and the other behind her knees, then he slowly lifted her off the floor, placing her carefully onto the bed. Once she was situated back against the pillows, she said, “Thank you. But tell me that you

believe me. Daisy is mine, I promise you. I'm telling you the truth."

"I'm sure she is, Mia. I know you wouldn't lie about something so serious."

She watched him rake his hand through his sleep-riddled hair. Then she had a thought. "How could I be breast-feeding her if she wasn't mine?"

"I don't know for sure, but I think that's possible. I mean, didn't Victorian women have wet nurses for their children? I don't think you need to be a biological mother to breastfeed."

"Well, if that's not enough information for you, Daisy and I can each take a blood test. If our types match, will that convince you?" She looked down at her fingers; they were intertwined tightly, rapidly turning white. "No, now that I'm thinking about this, we can do a DNA swab. It's easier and Daisy won't even know it happened. We can go to a lab tomorrow and do it."

"Don't be ridiculous. I believe you," he said. "There's no need..."

"Yes, yes there is. You and your family have done so much for me. I don't want there to be the slightest doubt about what I know to be true. Please, Kyle, let me do this."

"We can discuss it in the morning. Let's try and get some sleep tonight. It's late and we're both exhausted." He pulled the blanket back and got into the bed next to her, wrapping his arms around her, pulling her tightly against his chest.

She felt the tears spring free once more and roll down her cheeks. "All I have to give you is my word, Kyle," she whispered. "The truth that I know deep down within every inch of my soul. You must let me do this. Please."

He sighed. "Mia, I need you to know that I believe you, but if it will make you feel

better to have scientific proof, so be it. We'll figure it out together. Now go to sleep."

But try as she might, Mia could not close her eyes. She reached for her phone and started to google DNA testing. She was amazed to find that there were at home tests sold at the local pharmacy in Orleans, right near the Stop and Shop market that she knew Sibby had every intention of sending one of her brothers to with a list of stray items she still needed later today. She would volunteer to go with Kyle. That way, she could get a test kit and real answers, because that way she'd have concrete proof, and she needed it. Despite what she told Kyle, she wasn't sure of anything anymore, and now, more than anything else, she needed the indisputable truth.

Mia was up with the sunrise. She had been living on the Cape long enough now to know that it was cold outside; the color of the sky gave it away. She associated that deep pink hue with the first hours of a frigid morning and it was now peeking in from the small space around the window shades. She sunk down deeper into the warmth of the bed and the heat that Kyle's body provided. Even in sleep he responded to her, his growing erection poking at her from behind. It took a few moments for him to fully wake up, but when he did, he snaked one hand between her legs as his other hand found its way to caress her nipple.

She turned around to face him. "Good morning," she said. "I've done a lot of thinking and not a lot of sleeping."

"Sorry to hear that," he replied, his hands now on her rear end. "But what I have in mind right now won't require any thought at all..."

Mia knew that she should stop him, that they needed a plan for today so that she could have a definitive answer to the question that was now front and center in her brain. She still didn't have enough of her memory back to know who she was before the accident, but something deep down told her that she'd never take another woman's baby. Plus, how could she so readily breastfeed Daisy if she didn't give

birth to her? Unless she gave birth to a different baby and had a milk supply... but then, where was that baby and...

It was becoming increasingly difficult to concentrate based on what Kyle was now doing to her body with his fingers, making it come alive with sensation, erasing her need for anything more than him and the perfect fit that they'd become.

It's too early to drive to Orleans. Let him show you how he feels about you, she told herself. She wordlessly guided him inside her body and found a rhythm that matched his, delaying the inevitable start to their day, if only for a short while. Mia knew that she'd have to do the impossible later and test herself and Daisy. Even worse, she'd have to live with the results, whatever they might be. But for this moment, she was going to allow herself this pleasure and the chance to feel connected to this man who she now so deeply loved. She wanted to block out everything other than the building climax that she desperately sought, the affirmation that she was bound to him as he was to her, that he would stay by her side no matter what.

More than anything, she realized that her need for him went so far beyond the physical act they were sharing; she needed him to believe her. It was her only way out of the mess that was now her life.

CHAPTER 25

During the long and tense family meeting at breakfast, Mia's mind kept wandering back to being in bed with Kyle just a short time before. She would have given anything to have the chance to rewind the clock and replace this pressure-cooker of a meal with the pleasure she shared with him earlier this morning. She was unable to eat the toast he'd put in front of her and the small sip of coffee she had swallowed burned as it traveled down her throat.

They'd started the conversation by telling everyone that the child they all knew as Sarah was actually named Daisy. That caused quite a discussion, and everyone had an opinion about that piece of information. She wished they didn't need to tell the family all the rest of the details, but Kyle felt that it was important to keep everyone up to date with what she remembered. The unspoken and underlying message was clear; she'd put them all in danger just by her presence in their home and now they each had a right to speak their mind.

"Let me understand this," Sibby said turning to Mia as she brought yet another full pot of coffee to the table. "You had a nightmare, or you remembered what happened right before your accident. Which is it?"

"Both," Mia said meekly. "I did have a nightmare, but it was my mind's way of bringing back the events of what happened that night. I remember it clearly now. Those two men were there for Daisy. I'm sure of it."

"We think that the baby's father might be someone with money, or maybe someone with influence," Kyle interjected. "Why else would that alert have been sent by

Interpol?”

“Don’t jump the gun, brother,” Conor said. “Maybe Mia’s involved in some sort of human trafficking ring. Maybe she’s just a courier.”

“I’m not,” Mia said sitting up straight in her chair. “That’s my daughter you’re talking about, not a stolen child. I’m her mother.”

“Mia, I don’t want to upset you further,” Tim began, “but we don’t know that for sure. Plus, Daisy has a father with paternal rights, and those rights have been violated. Without consent, you’ve kidnapped her from another country and entered the US with forged documents. That’s a whole lot of trouble right there.”

Tears sprang to her eyes. “What about me, my rights? I’m not a criminal and I would have never taken Daisy away if I didn’t feel that we were both being threatened. I might not remember much, but something deep down tells me that I’m a rule follower, not a rule breaker.

“There’s a first time for everything,” Conor said under his breath.

“That’s enough!” Kyle said as he pounded a fist against the table almost upending his coffee mug. “If Mia says she was in danger, I believe her. I don’t want to hear another word from any of you that doesn’t include a solution to the problem we find ourselves in right now.”

“Oh, a solution where we’re not all accessories to this international crime?” Conor asked. Despite the kidding tone to his voice, his words chilled her to the bone.

Mia tried to ignore the rapid beating of her heart and said, “Excuse me. I have one solution.” All eyes turned her way. “I told Kyle that I want to take a DNA test. I know that I can get a mail away kit at the Walgreens in Orleans and that once the lab

receives it, they email the results within two days. I can overnight it from the post office there. I can at least prove undeniably that Daisy is my daughter, and we can know the truth by Saturday.”

“Don’t be so sure. Thanksgiving is a holiday. We might not get that email until later next week,” Sibby said.

“It’s the best I can offer. Otherwise, I can pack up Daisy and my bags and go. I would understand if that’s what you all want me to do.”

“Absolutely not,” Kyle said as he stood up. He rested his hands on the worn surface of the wooden table, the one that had been carved by his grandfather for family meals such as this one. “You’re not going anywhere until we figure this all out, Mia. I mean it.” Then he turned his attention to his family. “Since when have we worried more about ourselves than those we’ve sworn to protect and serve, huh? This might be a strange circumstance, but Mia and Daisy are here, under our roof. We’re going to see this thing out and look after them both. Do I make myself clear?”

“Of course, brother,” Sibby said, reaching out to grab one of Mia’s hands. “We would never let you leave, Mia. There are men with bad motives out there somewhere looking for you. We’re not going to let them find you.” She looked at her two younger brothers and said, “I won’t hear another word about international laws being broken. Mia is a woman alone, and she felt threatened, end of story. I believe her.” Then she turned to Mia and added, “And for what it’s worth, I believe that Daisy is your flesh and blood.” Her tone left no misunderstanding or confusion. Sibby had ended the discussion and Mia could feel her body begin to relax.

“As soon as Daisy wakes up from her nap, I’ll go to Walgreens and get the test. Sibby, I can pick up anything you need from the Stop and Shop at the same time.”

“I’m going with you,” Kyle said.

“Me too,” said Conor.

“Me as well,” said Tim.

She tried to clear the tears from her eyes. She had expected this news about Daisy to cause a commotion. The last thing she wanted was to put Kyle at odds with his family, but now it seemed that they were all rallying behind her once more.

“Thank you. For everything,” she said. The next thing she knew, Kyle reached over and helped her out of her seat and pulled her into his arms.

“We’re here for you...I’m here for you,” he whispered in her ear. “Everything will work out, you’ll see.”

For as much as she wanted to believe him and never leave the warm circle of his home, his family, or his strong, reassuring arms, she feared that if the results of the test proved otherwise, that if she wasn’t Daisy’s mother, she’d lose this man forever. That was the kind of heartache that she could not imagine.

An hour later they’d made it to Orleans and Kyle pulled the car into the pharmacy parking lot. He’d convinced his brothers to stay at home, not wanting to make this any more difficult for Mia. As he shut the engine, he turned to her and said, “Whatever happens, I’m here to help you, Mia.”

“What if it turns out that I did do something terrible, Kyle. What then?”

“I can’t imagine that’s true. I have a good sense of people, and you don’t strike me as a hardened criminal,” he said with a smile.

“I know that you’re trying to make me feel better, and I do appreciate that, but I’m questioning everything.”

“There’s a simple solution. I’ll go get that test, you’ll do the swab, and we’ll expedite it. We’ll know soon enough. Wait here.”

He got out of the car and hurried into the pharmacy. Mia sat back in her seat and closed her eyes, willing herself to remember the truth. My name is Maeve. My name is Maeve. Think!” But nothing came to her. She drew in a deep breath, took off her seat belt, opened her car door and stepped into the cold air so that she could check on the baby. At least her little girl didn’t seem bothered by the chaos of their lives; she was sound asleep. The grey, overcast sky mirrored her mood; it looked like a storm was brewing. Too nervous to sit, she waited, leaning against Kyle’s truck until she saw him return, holding a small brown paper bag.

“Mission accomplished,” he said, handing his purchase over to her.

She reached into the bag and pulled out the blue box, turning it over in one gloved hand. “Let’s hope this works,” she said.

“Let’s do it in the car. It’s freezing out here,” he offered.

They both climbed into their seats, and she removed her gloves and ripped open the cardboard flap, the instructions, swabs and vials inside spilling out onto her lap. She read over what she was supposed to do. It was simple enough. She dipped a tester into her mouth and rubbed it against her cheek. Then she placed it in the container provided for that purpose.

“I hate to wake the baby, but I don’t see as I have a choice if we’re going to mail this off now.”

“Maybe she’ll sleep through it. You don’t have to get it much past her lips to swab her cheek.”

“Right,” Mia replied, hopping out of the car one more time and opening the rear passenger door. She took the swab meant for Daisy and slowly replaced the baby’s pacifier with it, rubbing it as best as she could to obtain the sample cells. Then she put the pacifier back in place, happy to see that while the little girl stirred, she didn’t wake up crying. She quickly put the swab in the appropriate container and got back into the front seat where she filled out the provided form that was to go with the test.

“Okay. Let’s go to the post office,” she said. “I’m going to expedite this somehow.”

“I’m sure that won’t be a problem,” Kyle responded.

He drove to the post office and Mia could feel the adrenaline running through her veins. This was it. She would get the answer to at least one of her issues by the beginning of next week. If she had concrete proof that Daisy was her daughter, that would be one big battle less for her to fight. Once he pulled up in front, she said, “This won’t be long. Then we can go to Stop and Shop and get whatever is on Sibby’s list.”

“Right,” was all he said.

She quickly made her way into the small building and was immediately struck by the quaint charm of the interior. It almost looked like she’d stepped back in time; the wooden counter was worn down with wear and there were colorful Thanksgiving decorations hanging over the service area. There was no one else inside except for her and a lone employee who gave her a huge smile when he realized he had a customer.

“What can I do you for, young lady?” the uniformed worker asked. He had grey hair and a bushy mustache.

“I need to mail this, and it needs to be dispatched overnight,” she stammered.

“Well, I can certainly help you with that,” he said, pulling out a blank label and both a large and a small envelope with red trim. He held both up. “What’s your pleasure?”

“The smaller one will do,” she said, suddenly realizing that this man would now be in on her secret. He would see the contents of her package and the name of the company where it was to be mailed. She reached for the pen that was attached to a string at the side of the window where she stood and began to fill out the label. She finished copying the address from the test instruction insert she’d brought with her, stuffed the vials inside the envelope with the completed form and sealed the envelope. Then she handed it all back to the postal worker, who immediately put it on the scale.

“That will be \$10.80,” he said.

Grateful that he didn’t make a comment about the package itself, Mia pulled out a ten and a one-dollar bill. She slid it across the counter and asked, “And it will arrive tomorrow, even though it’s a holiday?”

“Yes, ma’am. Express mail is delivered every day of the year. Guaranteed or your money back.”

“Thanks.”

She waited as he filled out his part of the label and passed her back one copy.

“Have a nice holiday,” she said, turning to leave.

“Don’t worry about a thing. The United States Postal Service will take good care of your package. Have a lovely afternoon,” he replied.

She nodded and went back outside. Don’t worry, she thought to herself. Impossible!

CHAPTER 26

Once back inside the warm cabin of the SUV, Mia felt the gravity of the situation fall over her like a dark cloud. She had just sent off a test that would prove to everyone what she was sure she knew -- that Daisy was her biological child. There couldn't be any other outcome, or at least not if she was to keep her sanity intact.

"All good?" Kyle asked as she settled into her seat.

"That seems like a loaded question. I mean, what's the best possible result? That I prove to everyone that Daisy is my daughter? I know what I know, Kyle. She's mine."

"I know that too. I just meant did you have any trouble mailing the test away?"

"Oh... no. The man inside was very helpful." She looked down at her mittened hands. "I'm sorry if I sounded angry. I'm not. I'm just frustrated that I can't seem to remember enough to clear this whole thing up. Plus, I feel terrible dragging you and your family into my drama. You've all been wonderful. It doesn't seem fair."

"Don't worry about us. Focusing on you gives the family a chance to take a break from harassing one another." She watched as he grinned at her, and she began to relax.

"It's just insane that I seem to be a fugitive and you're all willing to keep my location under wraps. I truly do feel as though I'm asking too much of all of you."

He sighed. "I don't know what else to do to convince you that this is something we want to do... I want to do." Kyle turned in his seat to face her. Then he grabbed both of her hands and pulled off the mittens, linking his fingers with hers. "In case you haven't noticed, I'm in love with you, Mia."

She felt her heart race inside her chest. She knew that she should say something, but she couldn't get her mouth to form any words. Instead, she leaned over the center console of the truck and kissed him. His lips were warm, and she parted them with her tongue, wanting to taste him, to consume him, to shut the world out and run away with him to a place where no one could find them. She slipped her hand inside the zipper of his coat and could feel the strength of his chest that lay just underneath his flannel shirt. She wanted him with an immediate intensity; she just wished that they were still alone at the house and could do as they pleased with one another. Reality shook her out of that delusion as soon as Daisy started to cry from her car seat. It was time to feed her. They had to go back.

She pulled away slowly, reluctant to lose the physical connection she had to him. "Kyle, we'd better..."

"I know. Daisy's hungry." He paused then said, "Mia, just to be clear, I'm not going to let you go, I'm going to hang on and see this thing through. And when it's settled, when we know the truth, no matter what it is, I'm still going to be here, you'll see. You make me feel things I didn't think I was capable of anymore." He squeezed her hand.

She looked into his eyes and saw that he was sharing a deep part of himself with her, and she wanted to reciprocate. "Oh my God, Kyle. I love you too. I'm just so scared that this will all disappear once I remember who I am. Please, please don't let that happen."

"I won't, Mia. There's got to be an explanation for all this trouble, and we'll find it."

For now, let's just enjoy the holiday and try to put the test and everything else out of our minds. The results will be here soon enough and maybe by then we'll have discovered some other clue to your identity."

She felt the car shift into gear, as he slowly steered them back onto Route 6 toward the house. For as much as she wanted to head straight to his bedroom once they reached his family's home, she knew that was out of the question. She had to feed Daisy, and the house was full of people. Any chance of intimacy would have to wait until much later. She only hoped that she could hold herself together until they could be alone together again.

The first thing Mia noticed when they arrived at the house was an old red Honda civic on the driveway. It had a dented fender and looked like it had logged many a mile. She glanced over at Kyle and asked, "Who could that be?"

He smiled. "Millie, my sister. She's the only member of the family you haven't met yet. She must have just arrived from Boston."

She nodded and jumped out of the truck, opening the rear passenger door to lift Daisy out of her car seat. She walked up the path with Kyle, who was holding the bag of groceries that Sibby had tasked them with bringing home under penalty of death if the entire list wasn't fulfilled. She had gotten used to Sibby's manner and knew that her outside persona didn't truly match the warm and caring woman she was on the inside. She only hoped that Millie was as kind and understanding as the rest of her family. Of course, she realized, it would be impossible for her to be anything other than caring and welcoming; the rest of the clan had proven that already.

They stepped into the warmth of the house and hung up their coats and were instantly greeted by the smell of cinnamon and apples simmering on the stove. She could hear laughter and conversation coming from the kitchen but opted to run upstairs and feed Daisy first before meeting Kyle's youngest sibling. Plus, she felt the need to organize

her thoughts before seeing the family together again. Dropping that test off took more out of her than Mia cared to admit. She stepped into the room Daisy had been using, grateful that it was quiet. She sat down in the rocking chair and settled the baby at her breast, willing herself to be calm for the sake of her daughter. So much had happened since she'd arrived in Boston, but that fate had brought her to Kyle was so overwhelming that she almost didn't believe it. If she didn't know that he was real, that he was just downstairs kidding around with his siblings, she would have thought that she was dreaming. But it is real, she told herself. Now if you could only remember the rest of who you really are. She tossed the name Maeve around in her head, knowing that Kyle had traced her identity through the internet, knowing that despite the facts, it still all seemed foreign to her. No, not foreign, she thought. Distant. Cloudy. Hazy. Surreal.

She looked down at the sweet face of her baby. She has my bone structure, doesn't she? I know that I'm her mother. I'm sure of it...

But the truth was that Mia wasn't sure anymore. Doubt filled every corner of her mind. What if she stole someone else's child? Was she capable of something like that? And if the worst is true, and this baby isn't hers, what will Kyle do then? He certainly couldn't protect her from the law, could he, no matter how he felt about her. He had sworn an oath to serve and protect, after all. She would lose him...

She let out a breath. Daisy had fallen asleep, her lips still moving, her eyelids fluttering as she dreamed. She slowly stood, careful not to wake the little girl, walking to the crib and placing her down gently for a nap. She backed away and quietly turned to leave the room. When she opened the door, was startled to find Kyle on the other side in the hallway. She silently latched it shut and whispered, "What are you doing here? I thought you were downstairs catching up with Millie."

"I was, but I thought that maybe I could sneak out before anyone noticed. We have unfinished business, don't we?"

She looked into his eyes, smoldering with heat and realized what he meant.

“Are you serious? Won’t they come looking for us?”

“We can be quick, and we’ll need to be quiet...”

“Where?”

“Follow me.”

He grabbed her hand and pulled her down the hallway into his bedroom. He locked the door. Then he led her into the ensuite bathroom and repeated that precaution. Mia didn’t hesitate. She put her arms around him and stood on her tiptoes to kiss him. He unzipped her jeans, and she shimmied out of them. Then he lifted her onto the cold marble countertop, pulled her panties to one side, unzipped his fly and maneuvered himself inside of her with one fluid motion.

Mia gasped. The feeling was so intense, so full. Silently, they took from each other what they needed, climaxing together with a simultaneous shudder. She felt sated, even if only temporarily until he stepped back, breaking their connection.

“You are incredible, Mia. I want you all the time, any way I can have you. I can never have enough.” He ran the water in the sink and stuck a glass underneath, offering her a drink, which she accepted before passing it back to him.

“Same,” was all she said before jumping down on shaky legs. “I guess we have to go downstairs now, huh?”

“We do, but wow,” he replied, looking at the counter where she had just been sitting. “Are you okay to go deal with everyone, or do you need a minute? I can run interference, you know.”

“No. I’d rather go downstairs with you now. Just give me a chance to splash some water on my face.”

She ran the tap, made sure the water was cold and used a few handfuls to cool herself down. Kyle handed her a fluffy towel, she dried off, looked in the mirror and hoped that everyone would think the flush in her cheeks was a result of breastfeeding Daisy – or maybe they wouldn’t notice it at all. Ugh.

Once done, she passed the towel back to Kyle and said, “Ready as I’ll ever be, let’s go.” She reached for his hand, and they headed downstairs.

Thirty minutes later, Mia wondered why she had been worried. She instantly loved Millie who was a younger version of Colleen – a bundle of energy and warmth. Sibby was sitting at the counter with her lists, organizing the feast for the next day, shouting out orders to the rest of her family.

“You know, Sibby, I can make dinner rolls and a dessert. I’ve remembered a few recipes and have some sweet treats stored in the downstairs freezer. I’m sure we have all the ingredients I need to make some yeast based rolls.”

“Well, that would be lovely, Mia. The kitchen should be all yours after tonight’s meal of...” She consulted one of the multiple sheets of paper in front of her. “...beef chili.”

“Um, sounds good. I’ll get to work when dinner is over.” In her mind she questioned what “chili” was but decided it would be better not to ask.

“I’d be happy to help you, Mia,” Kyle offered.

“Great!” she replied. “Just be ready to roll up your sleeves. There will be kneading involved.”

He gave her a knowing look as if to say whatever it was, he was elbow-deep in it with her.

CHAPTER 27

Mia searched through the bathroom cabinet for some sort of cure for indigestion. The few bites she had at dinner of Sibby's spicy chili almost did her in. It wasn't something she'd ever eaten before, and she was grateful for the plain rice and cornbread that had been served alongside it. She moved the Advil to one side and found a bottle of pink antacids. She opened it and chewed two of them slowly, hoping they would do the trick. Then she went back down the kitchen to work on preparing the dough for dinner rolls; she'd bake them off tomorrow before the big meal.

She was in the pantry, pulling out the ingredients she needed when she heard Kyle talking to his sister Millie. She froze in place.

"I really like her, Kyle," Millie said. "But you and I know that when the pieces of a story don't add up, either someone is lying or..."

"Millie, I hear you. But I know that Mia doesn't remember anything. I've been living with her for a while now and..."

"Kyle. You're just about to get your life back. I'm worried for you, brother. Do you really need more trouble? Sibby told me that you're you're being handed back your badge and gun on the first."

"It's too late, Millie. I don't care about my badge and gun as much as I care about what happens to Mia. She ran from something, from somewhere, and it must have been bad. I have a gut feeling about her and I'm going with my instincts on this. Once we get the DNA test back it will at least put the biggest question to rest. Daisy is

Mia's daughter. She's not lying about that. I believe that she's telling the truth about not remembering anything of her past."

"Okay. If you do, I'm with you. I just don't want to see you get hurt."

"And I love you for that," he said.

"I'm going up. It's been a long day, and you know that Sibby will put us all to work tomorrow," Millie said.

"I'm sure of it. See you in the morning," Kyle replied.

When Mia heard Millie's footsteps retreating, she stepped out of the pantry still holding a bag of flour. She saw Kyle's eyes widen when he saw her there.

"I'm sorry to have overheard your conversation," she said softly. "I didn't know what to do."

He reached for her and took the flour out of her hands. "I can only hope that you now understand that I'm a man of my word. Tell me. What else do you need to make these rolls? The sooner we're done, the faster we can go upstairs and get into bed."

Mia could feel the heat rise from her toes to her face. "Right. Well, this might take a minute. I'm not baking them tonight, but I thought I'd prepare the dough and leave everything in the downstairs refrigerator. That way, we only need to pull out the trays and bake them off tomorrow right before dinner." She began to pull bowls out of the cabinet. "Can you please take out the food processor?" she asked him.

"Sure," he replied, walking back into the pantry. From inside he asked, "which blade?"

“Not the shredder. Just the normal one.”

He came back into the kitchen with the equipment, put it on the counter and plugged it in to the outlet. “Thanks,” she said.

“What’s next?” he asked.

She was already busy mixing three tablespoons of the flour in a bowl with a packet of instant yeast and a pinch of sugar. She mixed it together with some lukewarm water from the tap and then covered it all with a kitchen towel. “That needs to rise for twenty minutes.” She set the timer on the microwave and said, “The instant yeast saves a lot of time.”

“If you say so,” he said.

She stepped over to the food processor and measured in some more flour, salt and sugar. Then she took the butter out of the refrigerator and cut it into small pieces. She dumped that into the processor as well. Finally, she hit the “on” switch and watched the mixture swirl around in the bowl until it was all combined. Once the timer went off, she lifted the towel and combined the now risen flour and yeast with the mixture in the food processor, adding eggs and some cream until the dough came together. Shutting off the machine, she expertly portioned the buttery concoction into rounded balls, placing each one on a baking tray lined with parchment paper. Then she grabbed two more clean kitchen towels from a drawer and covered the trays and their contents.

“These need to rise for three hours.” She picked up his phone and set yet another timer. “I’ll come back down later and put them in the fridge.”

“I can do that,” he said.

“We can fight over that when the phone chimes. For now, let me clean this up.”

Kyle walked the dirty utensils and bowls over to the sink and as she washed, he dried everything they’d used and put it all away. Mia looked around one last time and satisfied that they’d tidied up enough so that Sibby would be appeased, she said, “Okay. Let’s go upstairs.”

“You don’t need to ask me twice,” he smirked, grabbing her hand and pulling her along to the staircase.

The house was mostly quiet; as they walked along the upstairs hallway, Mia could see light spilling out from under Millie’s door and heard the soft laugh track of a sitcom coming from someone else’s television. But the children were all asleep and she was pretty sure that Kyle’s parents were as well. It had been a long and emotional day. While she knew that she’d have to get up to put those rolls away, she did want to get the chance to close her eyes for a little bit first.

It was as though Kyle had read her mind. Once inside his bedroom, he let her use the bathroom first and again offered to get up when the timer went off. “You get some rest,” he said. “I really don’t mind helping out.”

“We’ll see,” she said. “How about whoever hears the alarm first wins?”

“Okay. I’m going to wash up. You get into bed. I’ll be there soon.”

She nodded her head and watched him disappear behind the bathroom door. She pulled off her clothing, grabbed a thin sweatshirt and a pair of sleep shorts and crawled under the blanket. I’ll just close my eyes for a minute, she thought. Then when Kyle comes back, we’ll have a proper cuddle before sleep.

A proper cuddle? she repeated in her mind. That phrase sounds familiar and foreign

all at the same time. How odd. In that moment exhaustion overtook her, and she fell into a deep sleep.

Mia woke with a start and immediately glanced over to make sure that Kyle was in bed with her. He was there, softly breathing, looking as peaceful as Daisy looked at night. She felt tremendous relief. The clock read 1:59am and she realized that she had exactly one minute before his phone timer went off. She quickly got out of bed and walked around the mattress to his side to turn it off. No need for them both to be awake. She reached for the pair of thick, wooly socks that she'd left on the dresser, put them on and very carefully opened the bedroom door so that he stayed asleep. Knowing that she was the only one awake, she didn't put on her robe; she'd be quick and back in bed soon enough. Once in the hallway, she made her way to the stairs and stealthily climbed down to the kitchen. There was no need to put on a light; the moon was not quite full but still shone brightly in the sky casting the room with a golden glow. A peek out the window proved that the stars were too numerous to count. With a sigh, Mia pulled the towels off the rolls and was pleased to see that they had risen to be fluffy, buttery pillows. Each would bake nicely before dinner and the basket would be overflowing with yeasty goodness.

She concentrated instead on not dropping anything on her way to store the prepared rolls and very carefully navigated her way into the bowels of the house. The boiler kicked on as she reached the landing and she jumped at the sound and almost dropped the trays, but luckily, she remained calm enough to accomplish her task. She pried the refrigerator door open with her foot and slipped the trays inside. The light from the appliance glowed and she thought for a moment that she saw a shadowy movement across a corner window of the basement.

She was disoriented to where she stood in relation to what was outside that window and suddenly her heart thudded rapidly in her chest, and she almost forgot to remove the bags of cinnamon breakfast buns she'd made the week before from the freezer before she turned to go back upstairs. With the refrigerator door closed, the basement

was plunged into darkness and while her eyes adjusted rapidly, she still had the odd sense that something wasn't right. She didn't want to think about it; she ran up the wooden steps and shut the door behind her. She dropped the cinnamon rolls on the counter knowing that they'd defrost in time for breakfast and could only think about being back in the safety of Kyle's bed when she saw them.

Headlights. There was a car on the driveway.

Mia very quietly crept along the walls of the kitchen, staying out of sight of prying eyes and pressed herself against the cool plaster, hoping to remain invisible. Fear shot up her spine, freezing her in place. She could see out through the panels of glass that sat on either side of the front door. There was a man sitting in the car, but he didn't step outside. It appeared as if he was on his phone, angrily discussing something with whomever was on the other side of that call. His hand gestures were animated, and he kept shaking his head in disagreement with what he was hearing. She couldn't make out the details of his features; they were hidden in the recesses of the hooded sweatshirt he wore. Something about his broad shoulders seemed familiar, but she shook away that thought, knowing that there was no chance she knew this person. She watched as he ended the call by throwing his phone onto the empty seat next to him before putting the car in reverse and backing out into the street. Then the car slowly drove away. She tried her best to see the license plate, but it was too dark outside to make out the numbers.

Once she was sure that he was gone, Mia felt her knees give way and crumble beneath the weight of her body. She didn't know what to do next. Part of her wanted to grab Daisy out of her crib, dress her in her warmest clothing and take the keys to Kyle's truck and drive away. She was putting these good people in danger and that was unfair. They didn't deserve to potentially get hurt because of her and her problems. A bigger part of her wanted to wake Kyle up and tell him what she saw, but she knew he'd then rouse his brothers and go looking for this mysterious car and she didn't want that to happen, either. In the end, once her body stopped shaking, she

crawled over to the staircase and slowly pulled herself up the steps, only standing when she was a safe distance down the upstairs hallway at a point when she knew she wouldn't fall again. Then she walked on shaky feet to Kyle's room and got back into the bed.

She was cold, so cold. It was tempting to press her body against his warm one, but she didn't want to startle him. Instead, she wrapped the blanket tightly around herself, lay back against the pillows and waited for the sun to rise. An intruder would give Conor and Tim yet another reason to question her presence in their home. She had the feeling that she hadn't fully gained their trust and had no real idea of how to do that considering she still couldn't remember much about her life before this moment. She felt so scared, even though she knew that she wasn't alone, that Kyle's warmth and strength was lying right there beside her, but she almost wished she were. That way, the collateral damage would be much more limited to a party of one. Just her.

CHAPTER 28

The horizon began to lighten with pale pinks and lavender streaks out where the ocean met the sky. Slowly the stars faded, the sun made its way to the very edge of the earth and continued to climb, bringing with it a new day. Mia had hoped that the dawn would make her feel better; instead, it filled her with dread. She'd have to tell Kyle about what happened in the very early hours of the morning, and she knew he'd be angry with her for not waking him up then.

She heard someone moving around downstairs. She could only assume it was Sibby, who had prepped the turkey the night before and had planned to put it up to roast early in the day. While this kitchen had two wall ovens, Sibby's plan of attack for the meal included using both. Mia knew that it would be a busy morning and that if she wanted to bake off those cinnamon rolls, she'd better get down there soon. She glanced over at Kyle. He was still asleep. She quietly pushed the blanket off her body and was about to put on her fuzzy socks once more when she heard him stir.

"Mia?" he questioned. "Where are you going? It's early."

"I was going to help Sibby. I think I heard her put the turkey in the oven."

"Right. But she usually goes back to bed after she does that. No one else is up yet. Even Daisy is still asleep. Come back and lay down with me. This is the best time of the day."

Last night's event sat heavily on Mia's chest. She knew she had to tell Kyle about the mysterious man on the driveway, but she recognized that once she did, all hell would

break loose. What difference will it make if I tell him later? That man is gone. Maybe he was just lost, trying to figure out how to get wherever he was supposed to be. Maybe he wasn't looking for me. Why ruin the holiday that the entire family was looking so forward to?

She was building a defense in her mind for keeping this news secret just a little bit longer when he reached out his hand, beckoning her back to his warmth and the safety of their bed. "Just for a little while. I have cinnamon rolls to bake," she told him as she sat back down on the mattress. He pulled her to his side.

"Oh, right. I was supposed to get up and put the dinner rolls in the downstairs refrigerator for you. I guess I didn't hear my alarm."

"No worries," she said as she fit herself against him, her head on his shoulder, his arm snaked around her waist. "I was up, so I did it."

"You went down to the dark basement yourself?" he teased. "See any ghosts?"

It was her opening to tell him the truth, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. "No ghosts. Just that creepy boiler clicking on as I hit the last step. I almost had a heart attack."

He chuckled. "Yeah. When we were kids, we'd dare each other to go down there at night. Sibby was the bravest of all of us. She never got scared."

"Why am I not surprised?" Mia asked. "Your sister can do anything she sets her mind to. She's got that oldest daughter vibe. I'm so impressed by her resolve in all things."

"It's a family trait, I hope," he said. "I like to think that we all have a bit of that." He began to trace a light pattern against her hip with the tip of his fingers. "When I was first put on leave, that's what got me through it. Without my family reinforcing my

hope that I would make it out to the other side of that entire mess, I don't know what would have happened to me. It was bad enough as it was, I mean, you saw the condition of my condo that first day you got there. I was a mess, and my home reflected my state of mind. Without my family believing in me, telling me repeatedly that I'd be cleared of the charges, I don't know if I would have made it through. Then you showed up and I felt that old resolve returning. You gave me a reason to want to be better, to do my job better, to absolutely be the man I always knew I was – I am."

"Kyle. You shouldn't doubt yourself. You might be the best man I've ever known. I don't want to think about what might have happened if it wasn't you at the scene of my accident."

"Just to be clear, Mia, it's not like you remember the other men in your life. I don't currently have much competition," he teased.

She felt a chill run up her spine and she shivered. That man from last night. Was he familiar to her or was she imagining that she knew him somehow?

"Are you cold?" he asked. "I know what we can do to warm you up." He brushed his lips against her cheek with a feather-light kiss.

Just then they both heard Daisy cry out.

"Give her a minute," Mia said. "Maybe she'll fall back asleep."

When the cry became a wail, he said, "Let me get her and bring her in here. You're cold, I'm not. I'll be right back."

He got out of bed and Mia rolled over onto the warm spot he left behind. She pulled the blanket up under her chin. She was filled with dread. She had to tell him. She had to tell him now.

Kyle returned to their room with a happy Daisy. He'd changed her diaper and removed her sleep sack; she was kicking her feet and cooing at him simultaneously.

"Here you go," he said handing Mia the baby. "I'm just going to brush my teeth. I'll be right back."

She sat up, took her daughter into her arms, and unzipped the sweatshirt she still had on from last night's adventure. She brought the baby to her breast and willed herself to be calm. Daisy latched on immediately and Mia closed her eyes. She saw the lights on the driveway, the man in the hoodie on his phone, the car backing away. It was as if this nightmare was on a loop, repeating in her mind endlessly. She felt the mattress dip and realized that Kyle was back. She was about to tell him when he reached over and kissed the top of Daisy's head before running his fingers along the trail of milk leaking from the nipple of her other breast. He locked eyes with her as he put his wet fingers in his mouth and sucked. It was a simple gesture, but it sent shock waves to the center of her being. If I tell him, will I lose him? If I tell him, will he forgive me?

In the end, it didn't matter. As Daisy happily drank her breakfast, Kyle pushed himself out of bed.

"I think it's best if I shower. If I stay here now, Daisy might see some things she should never see."

"Okay," Mia said, feeling the same electric current between them that he felt. "Maybe I'll shower after she's done? Will you be able to watch her for a bit?"

"Of course. But take your time. Daisy and I are old friends now. She'll be fine."

"I know. Thanks," she said, but in her mind, she grappled with the dilemma at hand. The opportunity to tell him had passed. She would need to find a time and a way to divulge the truth.

Organized chaos. That was the only way Mia could think to describe the scene in the kitchen. The smell of rosemary, thyme, and citrus scented the air as the overly large turkey roasted in the oven; there were both sweet potatoes and yellow potatoes peeled and boiling away on the stovetop and Sibby and Colleen were both wielding large knives as they chopped celery and carrots, onions, and garlic to mix into a large bowl of dried cubes of bread for something they called “stuffing.”

“I made a large pot of coffee, but breakfast is on you, today, Mia. Do you think you can handle scrambling some eggs and frying the bacon in the fridge?”

“Of course. Let me throw these cinnamon buns on a baking sheet and get them going. I think you’ll like them.”

“You don’t have to ask me twice,” Sibby said. “I love a warm cinnamon bun.”

Mia quickly arranged the raw dough on the parchment paper that covered the baking sheets. She felt good to be included and she knew she could handle eggs and bacon, so she pulled the refrigerator door open to retrieve what she needed from inside. It was all the other food prep that was going on this morning that confused her. Plus, she was truly baffled as to why none of it was familiar. This was clearly a time-honored, national holiday. Why don’t I remember this? she asked herself. Maybe my family doesn’t celebrate Thanksgiving... but if that was the case, there must be a reason. Do I even have a family? Or wait...she wasn’t from here at all... And then it hit her so hard that she had to stop herself from falling over. I’m not American! I’m British! It was fuzzy, but she had the distinct memory of Kyle asking her about that when they first met.

Besides, things weren’t adding up. Did all professional bakers use metric measurements as she did, instead of imperial ones? Kyle seemed confused when she asked him to measure out one hundred milliliters of milk and fifty grams of butter for the rolls they made last night. It took a minute for her to figure out the conversion

back to ounces and tablespoons. Something was most definitely off. Could she be from London? And if so, why did she not have a more distinct accent when speaking?

“Mia?” Sibby’s voice broke into her inner monologue. “Are you okay over there? You’ve had that refrigerator door open for quite a while.”

“Have I?” Mia looked around and realized that Sibby was right. She had been lost in her own thoughts and still hadn’t pulled out the bacon, eggs, and butter. “Oh. Right. Sorry.” She quickly took the items and placed them on the counter, then closed the door. “I’ll get breakfast going now.”

“I know you will,” Sibby teased. “Once you get your mind off my brother, that is.”

Mia blushed but was happy to let Sibby think that she was daydreaming about Kyle instead of questioning everything about her own very existence. The vortex of uncertainty that constantly swirled around her head these last weeks seemed to pick up speed for a moment. She tried to shake the feeling away, but it continued to build until she lifted the tray of uncooked cinnamon rolls and turned to put them in the second oven underneath the one that held the turkey. As she opened the door, a wave of warmth bathed her face and she had a clear vision of that happening before, with a much larger oven in a commercial kitchen. It felt like *déjà vu*.

Just like that, she remembered.

It was familiar because she owned a bakery. Not just any bakery, either, and she was no ordinary baker. She had created one of the most iconic wedding cakes of all time, for two of the most famous people in the world. Panic overwhelmed her as she remembered, and her hands began to shake. These weren’t run of the mill people, not just another bride and groom. They happened to be high ranking members of the royal family. With a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach, she knew that somehow, this was the reason she was on the run. As if a door unlocked, her

memories flooded back to her, washing over her and nearly knocking her off her feet.

I am British! She felt the shockwaves deep in her soul. I don't recognize Thanksgiving because I've never celebrated it before. I have a brother, Finn. Somehow, he helped me get to the States. I was supposed to meet him at a safe house in Port Hope. Shit! My name isn't Mia. It's Maeve.

She composed herself enough to finish her task and begin making breakfast for the family by finally removing the last of the ingredients from the large kitchen refrigerator. She didn't want to let on that her memory had returned, plus, she now had the beginnings of a headache that pounded along her forehead with an increasing intensity. Let me make it through breakfast. Then I'll figure out my next steps.

Maeve didn't know much in that moment, she only was sure of one thing: she had to take her daughter and leave here, and she had to do it fast. It was the only way to protect Kyle and his family. She was sure of it.

CHAPTER 29

Her next thought was that she had to confess to Kyle. She had an obligation to tell him all that she'd remembered. As soon as breakfast was over, and his brothers volunteered to clean up, she turned to him and said, "I need some help bringing some of the desserts up from the basement freezer."

He took one last swig from his mug and said, "Of course."

"Meet me back here in a minute. I'll ask Millie to keep an eye on Daisy for me."

He nodded and she turned to lift her daughter from the bouncy seat, then went into the living room where she found Kyle's younger sister trying to get her nephews settled in to watch an episode of Bluey on the big screen.

"Can you hang on to this little one as well?" she asked. "I just need to organize the downstairs freezer. Won't take long."

"Of course," Millie said, taking the baby from Maeve. "At least she doesn't talk back yet! That's a blessed relief."

Maeve smiled. "True. I can feel that coming, though. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Once she knew that Daisy was properly cared for, Maeve turned and went to the basement door where she found Kyle waiting for her. The activity in the kitchen had ramped up even more, and she was grateful for the chance to speak to him privately in a quieter space. "Let's go," was all she said, and he followed her down the wooden

steps without protest. When they reached the refrigerator, she said, “I have to tell you something. I’ve remembered more of my past.”

“You did?” he asked, reaching out for her arm.

“I did. I can bake because I owned a bake shop, a successful one at that.”

“Do you remember where? Was it in the US?”

She shook her head. “I wasn’t visiting London. I live in London. It all adds up. This holiday and all that goes along with it is unfamiliar for a reason. I’ve never celebrated it before today.”

“And...” he prodded.

“I baked the wedding cake for the King’s younger brother and his wife. It was quite elaborate and...”

“Wait. What?”

“I baked the cake for –”

He interrupted her. “I heard you. That revelation is a lot to take in, don’t you think?”

She watched him mull over what she’d told him and waited for his reaction. Then she saw acceptance dawn on his face.

“It would put the Interpol piece in better perspective, but it doesn’t answer the question of why you left Europe. So, you baked a cake for famous people. What does that have to do with why you ran?”

“You don’t know how it works, Kyle. Unfortunately, I’m involved with these people, and that’s real trouble. The bride wasn’t easy to work with on that cake. I had to make multiple samples for her to taste before I got the okay to move forward. I supplied hundreds of sketches of the design for her approval. Maybe she’s had time to think about the final product and is unhappy. Who knows? That family is everything to England. They wield a ton of power.”

He shook his head. “Yes, but Interpol is looking for Daisy. That’s the key factor here.” His eyes then widened with awareness. “It’s Daisy that the royal family is looking for, isn’t it?”

Maeve heard what Kyle had asked, the words he spoke, but everything around her seemed to spin out of control. Memories flashed in her mind like the reel of an old, silent film, choppy and in short bursts of random images. An angry bride. A late night as she was closing the bakery alone. An unexpected visit from an apologetic groom holding an expensive bottle of wine that he insisted they share to make up for his fiancé’s rude behavior. Kind words. A handsome, famous man. A quick and drunken encounter in the back shadows of her shop. A positive pregnancy test. Finn helping her plot an escape, promising to wipe away all digital traces of her so that she’d be a ghost.

Finn! It was him on the driveway last night.

Blessed relief at that thought, then bone-chilling fear as reality settled around her. She had to leave now and find Finn before he showed up again. If he was here, then he must have risked his own life to find her. She was a fugitive; that was apparent. She’d kidnapped her own daughter and illegally transported her across an ocean.

“Kyle. As difficult as it is to believe what I’ve just told you, I know I’m right. I need to take Daisy and run. If I don’t, The Firm will come here and find me.”

“The Firm?”

“That’s how the royal family refers to themselves. Everyone in England knows that. They’ll have to leave no trace of me, of Daisy, or anyone I’ve met along the way. I’m disposable. They will protect the reputation of crown at all costs. That’s why I ran in the first place. I knew that Daisy was a stain on the monarchy that had to be destroyed. Please, please, just let me go. I can’t let them find me here. I pose a threat that must be put down before the public knows about me or worse, my daughter.” She was shaking and becoming almost hysterical.

“Calm down, Mia. Let’s talk about this rationally.”

She could feel herself free-falling into panic. “When does it ever help to say ‘calm down’ to a person who is having a breakdown, huh? I can’t calm down. And by the way, I remember my real name. It’s Maeve.”

“I know,” he sighed, clearly reluctant to tell her the rest. “I turned that bit of information up when I was on the Interpol site. I was afraid if I told you, I might push you over the edge. As it is, you’re not thinking clearly. You can’t just go, and besides, you’re a danger to yourself and to Daisy in this state of mind. And if you think I’m letting you go anywhere alone, you have no idea who I am. We’ll figure out a plan. I’m going to help you. Please, just let me help you.”

Maeve saw the strength of his conviction in the way he looked at her. If she could, she’d fall into his arms and let him make this situation better, but there was no way that could happen. He had no idea the level of power and influence they were dealing with here.

In a measured tone, she said, “Kyle. I can never repay you for the kindness you’ve shown me, shown Daisy. I cannot in good conscious place you and your wonderful family in harm’s way any longer. I can sneak out of here right after dinner, when

everyone is busy cleaning up. I'll come up with a story. A headache. A stomachache. I'll be quiet and just run."

He pulled her into his arms. "I told you this before, but I'll say it again. I love you. We're in this together until the end. If you go, I go."

She shook her head against his chest. "No, Kyle, I can't let you –"

"We're done discussing it, Maeve. If you have to run, then I'm coming with you. We'll make it work."

Maeve knew that there was no way she was going to win this argument. Now it was up to her to figure out how she was going to leave him behind. She didn't want to do it, but she loved him too much to let him come with her and risk his own life. He had a family and a career here that he was just getting back to.

No.

This was her problem, and once again, she was on her own. Her mind spinning, she stalled the inevitable by saying, "Okay, Kyle. Let's not ruin the holiday for your family. I guess there's no harm in waiting until we have the DNA test results, anyway. Once I prove to everyone without a shadow of a doubt that Daisy is my daughter, I'll feel better. I don't want your parents to think that I'm a child abductor. I have made some poor life choices, but Daisy isn't one of them."

Maeve watched as relief washed over him and she wished that she didn't have to lie. She was firm in her resolve to leave – just not with him in tow. Let him think that I've calmed down and agreed to his plan. It's the only way that I'll be able to get out of here without him.

She reached into the freezer for the tray of brownies and the apple crumb pie she'd

baked the week before when she was still blissfully unaware of the truth. She balanced them together and then passed everything over to Kyle to carry back up the stairs.

“Got it?” she asked.

“Yes,” he replied, turning to return to the warmth of his family. He took two steps away from her and paused. “Are you coming up?”

She smiled to make it seem like their difficult conversation was now behind them, closed and agreed upon. “Of course. Let’s go.”

She followed his solid form into the bright light of the busy kitchen. She directed him to an empty space on the counter and he put down the desserts.

“Mia,” Sibby said, “can you help us with the potatoes? They should be ready for mashing.”

“Yes. I’ll just check that Millie doesn’t need help with Daisy…”

“I can do that,” Kyle interjected. “Don’t worry about the baby. I can take over inside.”

Maeve locked eyes with him and knew that he was on to her. She understood that he was smart enough to know that if left alone with her daughter, there was a good chance she’d try to make a run for it, despite what she’d just said about waiting for the DNA results. But the truth wasn’t all she saw in his steely gaze. There was possessiveness, desire, and love there as well. It made her knees weak and her heart race faster.

Maybe I should let him help me get away and find Finn. Besides, I love Kyle, that’s

real and true. I don't want to leave him.

She blinked first, nodded her agreement, and took the ricer out of the drawer which she knew housed the larger utensils. This kitchen was familiar now, this family one she wished she could call her own. After all they had done for her, the least she could do was whip up a large batch of mashed potatoes. That was one side dish she did not need her memory to know how to prepare.

By three o'clock that afternoon, the dining room table was set with the Walsh's best china, crystal wine glasses, and silverware. Candles were lit and placed down the center of the table, alternating with pretty seashells from the beach outside the windows, giving the room a warm glow. Sibby had brought along some of the boys' Thanksgiving crafts from school and they were used as cheerful decorations, scattered on the sideboard and hung from the curtain rods -- colorful turkeys, an overflowing cornucopia, and a variety of somber looking Pilgrims helped mark the day.

The true centerpiece was the enormous cooked turkey, deeply browned and resting on a heavy ceramic platter, brought out to be carved by Kyle's dad right after they all offered at least one thing that they were thankful for this year. When it was Kyle's turn, he simply said, "I'm grateful for the accident that brought Mia to me." She took note that he still called her by the name that would be familiar to his family and could feel her eyes well up with tears, which threatened to spill out onto the tablecloth. She mouthed, "thank you," and when it was her time to speak, she stammered out, "all of you," before succumbing to the emotion that she felt deep inside.

Kyle, who was sitting next to her, grabbed her hand underneath the table and squeezed it hard, as if to let her know that he was not going to ever let her go. Maeve wished that she could accept what he was offering. She wanted to stay here with him, with his family, forever and always. If only she could.

By the time they'd completed the turn around the table, the boys were clamoring for the toasted marshmallows that sat on top of the sweet potato casserole.

"Turkey and green beans first, then you can have two marshmallows each."

Squirming in their seats, the boys waited patiently to be served, then made fast work of their dinner so that they could have the coveted treat.

"Slow down! It took me three days to cook this meal. I'll be damned if you're going to choke on it," Sibby said. She turned to her husband. "Geoff, please, a little help here."

Maeve smiled as she watched Geoff work some magic and devise a quick game to distract his sons. For as unfamiliar as she was with today's holiday and its traditions, she felt a warm rush of recognition that Finn was somewhere nearby, and that she would soon see him again.

She just never could have guessed that it would be so much sooner than she could have expected.

CHAPTER 30

Sitting on the living room couch in the glow of the blazing fireplace, Maeve began to make a list in her mind of everything she could pack into her smallest duffle bag. She'd need warm clothing for both her and Daisy, but that was bulky. Maybe she could take the bare minimum and buy more once she reached her destination. But how would that work, she argued with herself. Daisy went through multiple outfits a day. Something was always getting wet or stained. No, she'd have to pack Daisy's things and leave her own behind. That could work...

"A penny for your thoughts," Kyle whispered in her ear.

She had allowed herself one last moment of comfort in the strength of his arms. They were cuddled close together in one corner of the couch; the house was finally growing quiet after a long day full of way too much food. She knew that when they went to bed in a short while, she would wait just until she knew he was deeply asleep before sneaking out to grab Daisy and make their way to this mysterious Port Hope where she was to meet Finn. She only hoped that her brother had gone on ahead of her. If it had truly been him on the driveway the other night, there was always a chance that he was somewhere much closer than the safe house location.

"I'm not really thinking of much," she lied. "I was just considering going into the kitchen to get another piece of pumpkin pie. I've never had it before but now I only want to figure out how to make it. It's delicious."

"It is good. I'm pretty sure my mother would be delighted to share all the steps. She loves it when someone asks for an old family recipe. That one comes from several

generations ago. I remember my grandmother making it. But I guess you can trace your family tree back further than me, huh?"

"No, not really. My family was originally from a small village in Ireland. I only visited there once, when I was a little girl. Finn's been back a few times but once my parents moved us to London, they didn't look back. I don't think they have fond memories of 'the troubles' and all that went with it."

"I hate to admit that I'm not so familiar with modern Irish history. I just know that it was a terrible time to be living there."

"That it was. But I was raised almost entirely in London. I was only five years old when we arrived there."

"Right. It's interesting. This country is only about two hundred and fifty years old, so I think of anything European as ancient in comparison."

"Don't get me wrong. There's great beauty in the old architecture and the winding cobblestoned streets near where I had my shop. But there's no greater destination than the USA. I mean, this is where everyone I knew aspired to live someday."

Maeve settled back against him once more and thought about how he might feel in the morning when she was gone. She could imagine him waking up to her side of the bed empty, him going into the room where Daisy had been staying and realizing that she had cleaned out most of her daughter's things. It made her sad and more than ever she wished that she had another option.

"Are you ready for bed?" he asked her, the implication clear between them.

"Yes," she whispered, shifting her body around to look in his eyes. "With you, always."

“Let’s go,” he replied, and she stood first, turned and reached out her hand to help him up off the soft cushions.

Just then both Conor and Tim came back down the staircase. Each had a gun in their hand.

She felt a shiver run up her spine.

“What’s going on?” Kyle asked, his voice laced with concern.

“Someone’s in the backyard. We’re going to see who it is and handle it.”

“Not without me, you’re not.” Kyle turned to his brothers and said, “Wait for me. I’m going to get my gun.”

Then he grabbed Maeve’s hand, and she could feel the intensity in his grip. “Go get my mom and Sibby and tell them to take the kids to the cedar closet. Send my dad to me and take Daisy to the safe room. Remember what I told you to do?”

“Lock the door and be very quiet?”

“Exactly. Do it now. Go and hide. I’ll come get you when we know more.”

She nodded her head. “Wait. What about Millie?”

Just then Kyle’s youngest sister appeared, gun in hand, Geoff trailing behind her. “Let’s do this, boys,” was all she said.

As he was about to let her go, Maeve pulled Kyle close and said, “Please be careful.” Then, in a whisper she hoped only he could hear she said, “I love you. Come back for me.”

He looked at her and she instantly knew one thing for sure. She was never going to be able to go and leave him behind. She had never loved anyone the way she loved him and that had to count for something.

Maeve hurried up the stairs and found the door to Sibby's room open. She was not there, but Maeve realized that she must have gone to get her children and rouse her parents. Moving further down the hallway, she found them huddled together in the boys' room.

"We're heading to the basement. I'll go get Daisy. Take a warm sweatshirt. It's cold down there."

Sibby just nodded her head in agreement as she tried to wrangle her sons together, all three of them sleepy and confused. As she held her youngest child, Maeve noticed a crack in Sibby's armor. Her hands were shaking.

"It's going to be okay, Sib. Kyle won't let anyone harm us. I know it." Maeve reached out and placed her hands over Sibby's, squeezing lightly.

Sibby's eyes widened for a second, but then she drew in a deep breath and composed herself once more. "Let's go boys. Time for an adventure," she said quietly in a falsely upbeat tone.

Maeve gave her a quick wink and ran down the hallway for Daisy. The baby was sleeping soundly, blissfully unaware of what was going on around her. She lifted the warm child up into her arms, hoping that she wouldn't wake. Then she grabbed a blanket, threw it over Daisy and rushed back to the staircase just as Sibby, her mother and the boys started to make their way downstairs. Kyle's father had already grabbed his own gun and was formulating a plan with his sons.

It was dark. Just the faint glow from the dying embers in the fireplace offered the

dimmiest light in the corners of the room, but the house was now familiar to her, and Maeve knew the way. Kyle was waiting for them at the basement door. He had one finger over his lips to indicate to his nephews that he didn't want them to say a word. He silently ushered them all down the wooden steps and when Maeve, who was bringing up the rear, reached him, he whispered in her ear. "We talked about this eventuality. You know what to do."

"Be careful, Kyle. Please."

"Don't come out until I give you the 'all clear' signal, understand?"

"Yes," she whispered as she took one final step into the cedar closet. She turned to him. "Just promise me that you'll come back."

"I won't be able to stay away," was the last thing he said before he shut the door, leaving her with his family and the overwhelming guilt that she'd brought this plague into this house. She turned the lock and looked at Sibby and Colleen. "I'm so sorry," was all she could say.

"Don't be," Sibby said. "You're family now, and that means you have our protection. We stand up for one another. Always."

The tears threatened again, and Maeve willed them away. She had to be strong; that's what Kyle would want of her.

Colleen was pulling some of the ski jackets off the rack and creating makeshift sleeping bags for the children. "Come gather around, you hooligans," she said to her grandsons. "I'll tell you a story." Her lilting tone was calming, and the boys settled down quickly.

Sibby and Maeve both sank to the floor, each holding a sleeping baby, backs to the

now locked and secured door.

“Do you think it’s those two men again?” Sibby asked. “You know, the ones who were trailing us at Halloween?”

Maeve blinked. “You know about that? Kyle didn’t want to scare you and tell you about them. He thought he’d succeeded.”

“Right,” Sibby said. “I may not have gone into law enforcement like most of my siblings, but I’ve been around long enough to know the drill. Plus, I’m a mom. As you know, that makes us the queens of observation. No one comes within two feet of my children without me knowing about it.”

“That makes sense,” Maeve said, glancing at a sleeping Daisy. “Did you ever see them again after that day?”

“No, but let me tell you that if I had, they would have been sorry. You might not have noticed, but I can be very scary myself if necessary.”

It was the moment of levity that they both so badly needed, and both did their best to disguise the nervous laughter that bubbled up between them.

“Do you think that’s who showed up here tonight?” Sibby asked.

“I have no idea, but I can’t imagine who else it might be. Kyle sent them off the trail by mailing that tracker to someplace in Canada, but I’m sure they have resources to put them back onto where I am now.” Maeve hesitated. She didn’t want to tell Sibby the truth as she now understood it, that she was being hunted down by representatives of Britain’s royal family. The way it all sounded, the perception of who royalty was to Americans was so different than it was for the citizens of England. Here, as Maeve had come to appreciate, royalty was equated to a Disney creation. Princes and

princesses, elaborate ball gowns and diamond encrusted tiaras. In England it was both a business and a burden; half the population thought they were useless, expensive saps and the other half would lay down their lives for the monarchy. Maeve wasn't one of the latter.

But for as much as she didn't want to tell Sibby the truth, she knew that she should. Sibby and the rest of her family had taken Mia and Daisy in, had treated them like one of their own. It no longer felt right that the rest of the adults in the group didn't know the real reason that Maeve was on the run. She could only hope that when she told Sibby the story, the other woman would believe her. She took a deep breath and began to speak.

CHAPTER 31

Sibby listened to Maeve's story.

She took in the details about the quaint bakeshop, the wedding cake, the late-night visit from a prince bearing an expensive bottle of wine and the indiscretion that followed. Maeve wasn't proud of herself; she was more embarrassed and ashamed than anything else. She wasn't sorry that she had her precious daughter, however. She was just mortified that she'd gotten so drunk on wine and the closeness to royalty that had allowed herself to be seduced by this near mythical figure. He was just a man, after all. And not a particularly good lover, either, although that detail, she kept to herself.

"You're telling me that your real name is Maeve Byrne. Plus, the man who is sixth in line to the throne is Daisy's father. Do I have that right?"

"Yes. After his older brother and that man's four sons, Daisy's father is sixth in line to the crown."

"Let me get that right. This little girl in your arms is seventh in line to the throne... she could be the Queen of England someday? C'mon. It sounds like something I'd read in a supermarket tabloid. I mean, this kind of thing just doesn't happen." She paused and then said, "Wait. Is she a princess?"

Maeve pointed her chin at a sleeping Daisy. "Yes, I suppose so, but she'll never claim the title. The Firm – that's how they refer to the royals where I come from – will want Daisy eliminated. There can be no trace of royal blood left on the outside of the

family. That's why I ran."

"It's pretty unbelievable," Sibby said softly.

"It's part of the reason that I'm glad I did the DNA test. It's like an insurance policy. Aside from proving to you and the rest of the family once and for all that I am Daisy's mother, not some child abductor, it is undeniable evidence. If I can't get away from them at least I can try and get the test to someone who matters, someone who will protect Daisy from them."

"Who would that be?"

"The very people who if they had this information would make it public. The British press."

"Now I know you're crazy. Even I know that the British press is ruthless. They'll destroy you and your daughter. You'll never have a private moment again."

"It's a small sacrifice if I know that it will keep Daisy alive."

Sibby sat up straighter then. "What if you just run? Change your identity, go somewhere they can't find you?"

"Didn't I do that already? Where did it get me? I pulled you and everyone you hold dearest in grave danger. No. There's no more running away. It just won't work."

"That's because you were on your own in a foreign country. Now you have us. If we all put our heads together, I'm sure..."

"No, Sibby, no. I can't let your family do that. I've taken advantage of you for too long already."

Maeve felt Sibby's stare and felt pinned in place. She knew what was coming next.

"Tell me that you haven't fallen in love with my brother. How are you going to turn your back on him now?"

"I have to, Sibby!" Maeve said, this time not able to stop the tears from forming. "And my love for him is the reason that I have to go."

"Oh, please! Stop being such a martyr and lose the self-pity. You need us, you need Kyle's help. Plus, the two of you belong together. I see it in his face every time he looks at you. He's madly in love with you."

Maeve felt her heart skip a beat at Sibby's words. She knew how he felt about her. She felt the same way about him. She just hadn't realized that the rest of his family had seen it too.

"I don't want him to get hurt, or..." Maeve whispered, unable to finish her thought. It was unspeakable.

"He can handle it. He's a big boy and he's been through much worse. Plus, I can't imagine he's going to sit back and let you walk out the door alone. I mean, do you truly know him at all? No way that's going to happen."

Deep down, Maeve knew that Sibby was right. She felt relief and then felt terrible for feeling that way – she didn't deserve Kyle, his protection, or his love. "All I can say, Sibby, is that I will love him for the rest of my days, whether we are together or apart. And that's the truth."

Sibby reached out then with her free hand and laced Maeve's fingers with her own. "I'm proud to know you, Maeve. Proud to call you my sister."

“It’s mutual, Sibby.”

Their conversation was interrupted by a knock on the door. They both heard Kyle’s voice at the same time.

“Wellfleet, Mia. Wellfleet. Open up. It’s okay, just a false alarm.”

“Why is he telling us the name of this town? Has he lost his mind?” Sibby remarked.

“No. It’s our password to let me know that it’s okay to unlock the door.” She quickly stood and turned the deadbolt. Nothing could have surprised her more than seeing Kyle standing there with another man.

It was her brother, Finn.

If she hadn’t been holding the still sleeping Daisy, Maeve knew she would have fainted. The sight of her beloved brother was so shocking that at first, she thought he was an illusion, an effect of that long-healed concussion she’d gotten from the car accident that led her into Kyle’s arms.

“Finn?” she said in a voice barely above a whisper. “How did you find me?”

“It wasn’t easy, dearie. And these chaps almost shot me as I was trying to see if I’d located your hideaway.”

“It wasn’t that close, I promise,” Kyle said. “We did have our guns drawn but Finn was trespassing on private property, after all.”

“Nearly had a heart attack, I did. But you look good, Maeve. I can tell these people have taken good care of you and the babe.”

“Maeve?” Colleen questioned as stepped closer and listened to the conversation between this stranger and Mia.

“C’mon, Mom. Let’s leave them alone for a minute. We’ll go upstairs and I’ll explain everything to you. Or at least everything I know.” Sibby led her mother and the boys out of the safe room.

Maeve turned to her brother. “I had an accident, Finn. I couldn’t remember who I was or where I was going,” she said quietly.

“I know. Kyle here filled me in. But Maeve. We must go. The Firm is on to ya. They aren’t too far behind me now. They’ll be cresting that hill by sunrise, I’m sure of it. Say your goodbyes and let’s be off.”

Kyle stepped between them. “Not so fast. There’s no guarantee that whomever these goons are, they won’t find you. They’ve tracked Maeve down before.”

Finn let out a slow breath. “I hear you and I can appreciate your concern. But I’ve got this now. I’m going to take my sister and my niece and get them to the safe house in Port Hope, right over the border into Canada. That’s where Maeve was headed when she had the accident. I have a network of people who can provide her with a new identity and a place to regroup and start over again.”

“Right. Just like you provided her with the name Mia Sawyer. One click, and I was able to find out that the real Mia Sawyer was already dead. Not a great system you’ve got going there, Finn.”

Her brother took a step closer to Kyle. “Listen. She’s my blood. I’ll take care of her and the baby from here on out.”

“No. No, Finn, you won’t.” Maeve wasn’t sure where her courage came from, but she

was determined not to let either man make this decision for her. “And Kyle, while you know how much I appreciate all that you and your family has already done for me, I can’t allow you to continue to put them in the line of fire. I have a different plan in mind.”

“You can’t just leave, Maeve,” Kyle implored. “Those men will be on you in a minute.”

“I don’t plan on going anywhere, at least not right yet. I have an idea, but it will require time on the phone informing some of the people who need to be brought up to speed on everything that’s happened to me since that night the prince showed up at my shop after closing. Once I’m done, I’ll get out of your hair, Kyle. You need to go back to the life you had before me. You deserve to get your badge back and return to doing what you love. And I need to move forward as well, if not for me, then for my daughter. I’ll clear our names and be done with it, once and for all.”

He didn’t get a chance to respond before she turned back to Finn and said, “Give me some time. I’m going to fix this, I promise.”

Four hours later, as the sun was beginning to rise over the beach outside the office windows, Maeve sat, surrounded by notes she’d taken during her phone conversations, grateful for the time difference between Massachusetts and London. Even though the day was just beginning here, it was already in full swing across the pond, and she was dizzy from all that she had learned in a short while. She had made her way up through the hierarchy of the British press, reaching out first to a reviewer who had said some kind words about her bakery years before and publishing her thoughts in “The Daily Mail.” From there, and with the promise of a twelve-hour lead time for her to file her own exclusive story, that reporter gave her the numbers of editors at both “The Sun” and “The Daily Telegraph.” Finally, she was able to make contact with someone who could put her in touch with “The Guardian.” Maeve felt confident that her story would be told with accuracy once she could provide these

sources with the DNA test results. After that, the world would know the truth and she'd be in the clear.

Now all she wanted was a cup of tea before Daisy woke up; Maeve knew that there was no chance of getting any sleep now, not that she'd be able to close her eyes anyway. Too much had been left unsaid between Kyle and herself; she knew that she'd need to have a conversation with him as soon as they could grab a minute alone. Maybe there was a chance for them when this was over, after the story broke.

Or maybe he'd no longer want to be exposed and in the middle of the media circus that was about to be her life...

CHAPTER 32

Maeve should not have been surprised to find Finn seamlessly blending into Kyle's family dynamic. He could easily keep up with Tim and Conor's stories, entertaining the group with some of his own. Plus, everyone wanted to know about how he planned Maeve's escape from England. As Maeve got ready to go upstairs with Daisy to feed her without distractions, she saw them sitting around the kitchen table. Sibby was with them, drinking coffee as they waited for the mailman to arrive with the DNA results.

"Good morning," Maeve said to the gathered group. "So sorry for all of this..."

"Maeve!" Sibby said, walking to the table to stand behind her brother. "You have a British accent!"

Maeve hadn't paid attention to the sound of her own voice but at Sibby's words, she realized that her transformation was complete. She had returned to her true self. Mia Sawyer was dead again, this time gone forever. Feeling in that moment like herself once more, she said, "I guess it's time to call me by my real name. I'm Maeve Byrne, and I'm glad to know each one of you." But she had no time to ruminate on this change. She had work to do and not a lot of time to get it all done.

"Maeve..." Tim began. "The name suits you, now that you mention it. More than Mia did, somehow."

"Where'd you get those falsified documents?" Conor asked Finn, seemingly nonplussed by Maeve's admission. He stayed on topic. "The driver's license looks

authentic, so does this passport.” Maeve’s papers had been left out on the table for all to see.

“I have a network of friends who work behind the scenes at various municipal authorities. Plus, those documents look real because they are real. I’m not about fakes. I know people who can get into any system and produce paperwork when necessary. And in Maeve’s case, it was an emergency. We knew that word had gotten out and The Firm was made aware of Daisy’s existence. We had no time to waste. I had those papers in less than twenty-four hours. Then we wiped the internet clean of any trace of her. Birth records, newspaper stories about the bakery, address, mobile number – all of it.”

“What is it that you do for business again, Finn?” Tim asked pointedly.

“I don’t think I mentioned it before, but it really doesn’t matter. Let’s just say I’m a dealmaker and leave it there.”

“A dealmaker for who?” Tim asked, pressing Finn harder for information.

“Oh, for the love of God,” Sibby said as she brought out a large tray of pastries baked by Maeve and left in the downstairs freezer. “Let it go, boys. No one needs a pissing contest now. What matters is that Maeve and Daisy are safe here. I’m confident that no one will be able to get past the likes of you.” She turned and left the room, allowing the men to speak freely once she was gone.

“Tell me again when we can expect the post to arrive?” Finn asked reaching for a palmier.

“Generally, around one in the afternoon. I don’t know if today’s mail will be here on the normal schedule. I think express mail is delivered separately,” Conor said as he grabbed an almond biscotti and quickly dunked one end into his coffee mug before

taking a bite. “I’m going to miss Maeve’s baking when she goes. She’s got skills!”

“You should have seen her shop in Chelsea,” Finn said. “The line would snake around the block, everyone eager to meet the woman who baked the cake for the Prince and Princess. It must have taken her close to a month, day and night, to finish that masterpiece. Orange blossom frosting, raspberry filling in a buttery rum cake. Pictures were all over the internet.”

Both brothers pulled out their phones at the same time, clearly checking the internet for photos.

Conor whistled. “That’s some cake!” he said. “But you’re right. No mention of the baker.”

“Yeah, but no good deed, eh? Look at the trouble that beautiful confection brought to our door,” Finn replied. “I don’t think it was worth making that cake, no matter what they were willing to pay.”

“Agreed,” Tim said, “except for one thing. It brought Maeve and Kyle together. I think it was meant to be.”

Conor reached over and punched Tim in the arm. “Don’t get all mushy on us, brother. They’re not in the clear yet. Where the hell is the mailman?”

Maeve quietly backed out of Daisy’s room; the little girl was both fed and asleep. With one step, she bumped into an immovable object in the hallway: Kyle. He put his finger to his mouth to indicate that she should remain quiet. Then he grabbed her hand and led her down the hallway to his bedroom. Once inside, he pulled her into his embrace.

“I’ve been wanting to do this for hours,” he said as he ran his hands through her hair.

“I would love to lose myself in you right now, Kyle, but we need to talk,” she said, pulling away from him.

“There’s nothing more I want to say to you, Maeve. I don’t care what brought us together, what the circumstances were. I’m in love with you and I’m not letting you go. Where you go, I go.”

“No, Kyle. It’s not that easy. You have a job to go back to and my story is going to be big news. I don’t want to drag you into that media frenzy. It will be ugly. Things will be said about me that are untrue. It will be upsetting, and my plan is to hide until it all blows over or the next big scandal replaces it altogether. I can’t ask you to wait for as long as that takes. That’s unfair.”

“You don’t get to decide that for me, Maeve. If this is going to be bad for you, I want to be there to soften the blow. Let me protect you and Daisy through this storm. Once it all blows over, we can figure out our next steps.”

“But your job. You’ve waited all this time to go back to work. I can’t take that from you. You’ll end up resenting me for it.”

“You know what I’ve come to understand during this administrative leave of mine? It’s just a job. I can always get another one somewhere else.”

“No, Kyle. You live in Boston and so does your wonderful family. I don’t know where I’ll end up.”

“I’ve always wanted to see London,” he said softly.

“That’s the one place I’ll never go back to,” she replied. “I think I’d rather stay here, state-side. I’ll figure out how to do that after this story breaks, or rather, after it goes away.”

“We can figure it out together,” he said, but then he stopped speaking for a moment. “Unless you don’t want me around. I guess I may have jumped to an inappropriate conclusion.”

Maeve took his hands in hers and dragged him over to the bed, motioning for him to sit down next to her. She looked deeply into his eyes. “Kyle. Listen carefully. There is nothing I want more than to spend the rest of my days with you. I just don’t feel that it’s fair to put you through what I know will happen next. So, how about a compromise?”

“What do you have in mind?” he asked.

“You let me go, for now. Finn and I will take Daisy and disappear – he’s good at that and has the connections to make it happen. Whenever this story goes away and I feel that Daisy is safe from harm’s way, I’ll come find you.”

“I don’t know...”

“Kyle. Once I tell the world who Daisy’s father is, and I have the DNA proof of that fact, The Firm will have to deal with me. I’m not going to be able to keep them from being in her life, if that’s what she wants when she is old enough to understand. But she won’t be hurt by them. I won’t let it happen.”

“I want to provide you both with a safe place to fall, Maeve. I want to raise Daisy with you, as my own. I want to marry you, Maeve.”

She stared at him, now speechless herself. She felt her heart race and her palms grow sweaty. “Marry me? That only complicates my life, Kyle. I’m not in the right state of mind for marriage.”

“I’ll wait until you are, Maeve. For as long as it takes. I love you and I’ll ask you

again. Hell, I'll ask you over and over until you finally say yes."

She threw her arms around him, got close and whispered into his ear, "I love you, too. I promise not to take too long." She leaned in to kiss him and when their lips touched, she felt that familiar shock wave of electricity spark between them. In that moment, she would have granted him anything – her heart, her soul, eternity. Before she realized it, they were pulling on each other's clothing, trying to get closer, to be skin to skin, almost succumbing to the passion they both knew they shared before and wanted to experience again. But it was not to be. Just as he pulled the warm sweater over her head, they heard what sounded like an explosion downstairs. There was shouting and the sound of furniture being overturned. They had unexpected guests and all either of them could think was that Daisy was alone in her crib. At the same time, they ran toward her room to protect her from whatever was happening on the floor below them.

CHAPTER 33

By the time Kyle had secured Maeve in Daisy's room, instructing her to wedge a chair under the door handle and not come out under any circumstances unless she heard him tell her their password, there was all-out shouting and sounds of a scuffle coming from the living room. He stopped back in his bedroom to get his gun; he knew his brothers would not have theirs on them, not having suspected intruders to show up at their front door. Aside from Finn, they didn't think anyone else had found them. They thought they were in the clear.

He quietly and carefully made his way, grateful for the carpet that muffled the sound of his feet on the stairs. He realized that these intruders might be armed, and he didn't want to startle them, causing one or the other to shoot one of his family members. As he got closer, he could see his brothers, hands in the air being threatened by two burly men, each with a gun. All he could hope was that the rest of his family was downstairs in the cedar closet, locked in and safe. Then he realized that Finn was not there. Was he hiding out somewhere else, planning an ambush? That could lead to errant shots fired and one of his brothers getting hit. Or was he working with these two somehow? If that was the case, Maeve would be devastated.

Aside from the night that Maeve had the nightmare that brought him running to her bedroom, this was the only other time since the incident when he shot the young man by accident that put him on administrative leave that he held his gun. The time he went to find Maeve alone in her bed, he had grabbed the gun without thinking about it. He knew that he'd shoot anyone who might have posed a threat to her, but he'd been thankful that there was no one there. Now, with his brothers threatened by two actual intruders, he realized that the risk of firing his weapon was greater. If one of

those two men primed their gun, he'd have no choice but to take them out. He hoped that in the moment he'd make the right choice.

Kyle steadied his breathing; that was step one in a crisis. Stay calm, he told himself. Stay in the shadows; listen and go slow. He focused on the conversation that was now taking place between these two men and Conor and Tim. He knew that they'd both gone through hostage negotiation training in their roles as a police officer and a firefighter. They would keep these two men talking for as long as possible to avoid a negative outcome. He strained to hear what was being said.

"We want those DNA results. Where are they?" one of the men said.

"They haven't arrived yet," Tim replied.

"Bullshit. We watched the mailman ring your doorbell thirty minutes ago. I saw him hand you an envelope."

"That was nothing, just the regular junk mail that gets delivered to this address."

"Cut the crap. We want that test result. We want it now. And then we'll take the little girl and go. No one needs to get hurt."

"If you think that you're taking anything out of this house..." Tim began.

One of the men brandished a gun, pointing it directly at Tim's chest. "We don't want to make a mess here, buddy, but we will if need be."

"You won't shoot us," Tim said. "The cops will be all over you. I'm a police officer, my brother here is a firefighter. The penalty for shooting one of us is greater than it is for an average citizen, if you know what I mean. You won't make it to trial. Our fellowship runs deep, if you get my drift."

“I’m sure you can appreciate that we have a job to do,” the other intruder said, as if he could broker a deal. “Let us take what we need, and we’ll never darken your door again. Your family will be safe.”

“C’mon, man! What do you take us for? We all know that you can’t leave a trail behind. If we give you what you want, you’ll kill all of us.”

“If you don’t give us what we came for, you’re dead anyway. Let’s make this less painful all around,” the first man said.

Kyle could feel the pounding of his blood as it traveled through his body. These guys were serious, and time was growing short. He had to make his move. He lifted his foot to place it quietly on the next step when he saw a shadow cross the room, then a body. It was Finn and he was holding a large kitchen knife!

The next piece unfolded in slow motion. Finn lifted the knife in both hands overhead and ran into the man closest to him, wedging the blade in the man’s back, landing it between the intruder’s shoulder blades, causing him to fumble his gun. The second intruder whirled around and fired his weapon, hitting Finn in the thigh. Finn dropped to the ground. Conor reached for the fallen gun and the second intruder then raised his own pistol and took aim at him. That’s when Kyle made his move.

Without a sound, he rushed down the staircase and took a shot. He hit the second intruder in the shoulder, the man falling to his knees, his weapon skittering across the floor, out of his reach. With three men bleeding on the floor in front of him, Kyle’s first thought was that Sibby was going to be pissed. But he calmly said, “Tim, secure those weapons. Conor, call 911. Tell them we need medical and police details here right now.”

His brothers leapt into action. The guns were laid out on the coffee table, Tim putting his body between the injured intruders and their weapons. Conor called it in and then

turned to his brothers and said, “They’re on their way. Four minutes out.”

Kyle nodded, put his own gun in the waistband of his jeans and knelt next to Finn. His wound was bleeding quite a bit, but the bullet had just grazed him. Thankfully, it hadn’t hit any major artery. He’d be okay once the paramedics arrived and bandaged the wound.

“What were you thinking, man? A kitchen knife?” Kyle asked him.

“I thought I’d create the diversion you needed to move from the fucking staircase, that’s what.”

“How did you know I was there?”

“I didn’t, really. I counted on the fact that you’re in love with my sister and would never let anyone harm her or Daisy.”

“You’re right. I’d take a bullet for either one of them any day.”

“Clearly, so would I. Keep that in mind.”

Kyle smiled. “I’m on the case, you can relax.”

Finn closed his eyes. “I think I will, then.”

Kyle could hear the sirens in the distance. He knew that this incident would probably delay him returning to work. There would be an inquiry, but he didn’t care. He knew the law. While this wasn’t Kansas or Florida, where there was a “stand your ground” mandate, Massachusetts did have open carry laws. His weapon was licensed and registered with the proper authorities, and he had felt as if his life and home were endangered. What happened here today fell into the common law principle of “castle

doctrine.” He was allowed to use reasonable force if an intruder threatened him or his home, and that’s exactly what he did. Plus, no one died, and the men’s injuries were minor.

What mattered now was that Maeve and Daisy were safe. And when this entire ordeal was over, he could hope that they could start planning for the future. Together. Because one thing was certain – now that he’d found her, he was never going to let her go.

Just then, the mailman showed up at the open front door. “Excuse me gentleman. Can one of you sign for this envelope, please?”

Maeve sat on the floor Daisy’s room, her back against the wall, her baby wrapped tightly in her arms. She hated not knowing what was happening downstairs. The guilt of bringing trouble to Kyle’s family door was overwhelming her and she began to question everything about her decision making. First you get drunk with the prince and get pregnant. Fool! Then you crash a car and basically lose your mind. What’s next? How can you humiliate yourself further?

She knew what was to come next, though. Anyone who lived in London knew that the British tabloid press was ruthless. They’d come at her with telephoto lenses, hoping to catch a grainy picture of Daisy. She’d brought the world to her daughter’s door before the child could speak for herself. Shameful.

And that wasn’t all. The press would dog Kyle and his family, too. They’d all be under the same microscope, hopefully not for as long as she would be, but still. They deserved better. All they did was help a young mother in need.

Hot tears burned her eyes and fear sat at the base of her belly. How would she live with herself if anyone got hurt because of her? How could she go on? Oh no... what if Kyle got shot?

She had to stop herself before this spiral of bad thoughts spun out of control. She had to be strong for Daisy and herself. She sat up straighter, as if that was the only way to regain control and began to think about the future.

She'd go somewhere else, find a bakery and apply for a job. She'd live a quiet life in a place where she could raise Daisy and give her a happy childhood, away from the scandal and character assassination that was sure to follow in the wake of this explosive news finding its way into the world. She'd allowed her daughter's early life to be earmarked by ugliness; she'd spend the rest of her life trying to make it up to her. As for the matter of her father, she was sure that he'd deny everything, even a valid DNA test. She could only imagine that The Firm would not respond to her accusations; they never answered a public cry of wrongdoing. It would be in their best interest to now ignore her and Daisy. If need be, she'd relinquish all future claims to any part of the monarchy's vast supply of cash for support of this child. She didn't want their money or their involvement in Daisy's life. At some point, if Daisy wanted to meet her biological father, she'd have to arrange for it on her own. In her heart of hearts, Maeve knew that wouldn't happen, though. She planned on more than making up for her indiscretion as time went on. What she did know, though, was that when Daisy was old enough, she'd tell her the truth. She had the right to know and decide her own path when the time was right.

As far as her own future, well, that was truly unknown. The only thing she knew for certain was that after today, she couldn't allow herself to count on Kyle anymore. She could not let the tabloids destroy his life as well as her own. He had exceeded every promise he'd made her, sharing his home with her and his family, too. She could not ask for anything more.

Just as she was beginning to feel that she had a plan in place, she heard gunshots, and every rational thought she'd had flew out the window. Please, she sent a prayer up toward the ceiling of the room. Please let Kyle be safe. Please don't let those shots be aimed at him!

CHAPTER 34

As soon as the Wellfleet police finished asking their questions, Kyle had sent Conor along with Finn to the hospital to be checked out, knowing Maeve would want her brother to receive the best care possible. Conor would bring Finn back to the house after the doctors there cleared him. Once the two assailants were carted off in the back of two ambulances, both handcuffed and arrested, he and Tim had quickly cleaned up the mess left behind. As much as it pained him to wait a minute longer to go to Maeve, Kyle knew better than to let Sibby and the rest of the family out of the safe room until they cleaned up the bloody mess on the floor, knowing that if she found it, they'd all have to hide out in that safe room for the rest of their lives. Plus, there was no real need for his nephews to see the aftermath of the shooting. They were young and impressionable, and he didn't want them to be afraid to be in their family's beach home because of what had happened here today. Finally, when there was not a drop of blood left on the floor, Kyle raced back up the stairs to Maeve.

Once he got to the bedroom, he took a long, deep breath and then knocked, saying the password out loud repeatedly. "Wellfleet, Wellfleet, Wellfleet." Then there she was, on the other side of the now open door, still holding Daisy, eyes welling over with tears.

"Kyle. I heard the shots. What happened? Are you hurt?"

He watched as her eyes scanned his body.

"I'm fine. Don't worry about me. Are you okay?"

“Me?” she asked, eyes wide. “Aside from almost having a heart attack at the thought that those men had come for Daisy, I am. I heard sirens. Are they gone?”

“Yes,” he said, bringing her over to the rocking chair in the room and sitting her down. Then he took the baby from her and was rewarded with a gummy smile from the little girl. That one innocent gesture from the baby made the trauma of the day fade just a bit.

“Finn was the real hero, Maeve. He jumped one of the guys with a kitchen knife and that gave me an opening to disarm them.”

“What? Did he stab someone? Is he in trouble?”

She tried to stand but he could see how shaky she was with this news. “No, he’s not in trouble,” he said attempting to reassure her. “But he did get injured. He’ll be fine, Conor’s with him at the hospital. They should be home soon.”

“Hospital?” she asked softly.

“The second perp fired his weapon, and a bullet grazed your brother’s thigh. It could have been much, much worse. As it is, I had to fire my gun as well.”

“Kyle...” she whispered. “I’m so sorry. Are you sure you’re alright? That must have been difficult after everything...”

“I would have thought that, too. But when your life and Daisy’s were on the line, there was never any doubt that I would take out anyone who threatened either of you. Instinct kicked in, I guess. I’m happy it did. Now I know that I’ll be fine if I go back to work.”

“What do you mean ‘if’?”

“Let’s not talk about that now, Maeve. In view of what just happened, let’s just take a break for a bit. Besides,” he reached into the back pocket of his jeans with his free hand and pulled out the slim, white envelope that had been delivered during all the chaos. “I think this is the news you’ve been waiting for.”

She looked up at him and then back down at the mail in his outstretched hand. She shook her head. “I know what it’s going to tell us. You open it.”

“Are you sure?”

Maeve nodded.

He handed Daisy back to her mother and slowly peeled back the flap. Then he lifted out the paper and reviewed the information. With a smile, he said, “The truth was never in doubt. You are most certainly Daisy’s mother. As far as paternity goes, here’s the proof to her lineage. She’s 99.9% linked to Anglican bloodlines reaching far back in time, with ties with the royal family. Here it is, printed as plain as day. You have your proof.”

“And my insurance policy. I can scan a copy of this to my contact at ‘The Daily Mail.’”

He watched as her face quickly went from relief to resignation. She sighed and said, “I don’t think you can truly comprehend the blow-back on me once this news gets out, Kyle. That’s why I need to take Daisy and leave. I’ve been enough of an intrusion on you, on your family. Finn and I will be fine. We’ll find a place to lay low for a bit.”

“Maeve, I still don’t think you understand that where you go, so do I. I’m confident that whatever the tabloids say, it won’t matter. I know you, the real you. That’s all that matters.’

She stood up and let him take her and Daisy into his arms. The little girl cooed with glee as she was fully enveloped in their embrace. “If only it were that easy, Kyle. I love you too. That’s why I must leave.” She stepped back and walked over to the dresser, opening the top drawer and pulling out the contents with one hand, making neat, colorful stacks of the clothing she planned to take with her.

“Will you at least agree to hold off on the packing until Finn comes back? Give me a chance. We can discuss this with the entire family first. Maybe if they tell you how they feel, you’ll reconsider.” He took a pile of onesies out of her hand and put them on the dresser’s smooth surface. “Please, Maeve? How about it?”

She stilled then, and he could feel her indecision. Finally, she lifted her eyes to his and said, “You drive a hard bargain, detective.”

All he felt was relief. He’d bought himself some more time.

By late afternoon’s sunset, they were seated at the kitchen table. Both a bottle of whiskey and a bottle of tequila, along with several shot glasses were laid out down the center of the smooth surface. The adults were discussing the events of the day, and the children had been allowed to go outside and play in the swirling snowstorm that had blown in off the ocean while no one had been paying attention to the weather. Warned from straying from the deck outside the kitchen, the boys were content to throw snowballs at one another before coming together to build a fort from the rapidly falling white stuff. It was piling up quickly, and for Kyle, it was a literal sign from the heavens that he was right – Maeve should not leave. Looking out at the ocean, almost invisible against the whiteness of the sudden storm, she had agreed.

“Before the likes of you get too drunk to know better, I’m going to pull out yesterday’s leftovers for tonight’s dinner. We could all use a meal right about now. I don’t think anyone’s eaten since breakfast,” Sibby declared.

For Maeve, it was hard to believe that Thanksgiving had been just one day before. It felt like a lifetime had passed between last night's holiday dinner and all that had happened since. She knew that at any moment, her news would hit the airwaves and the peace and quiet of the Cape Cod setting would forever be changed for her.

"Let me help you, Sibby," she said, standing up a little too quickly and feeling the effects of the shot of tequila she'd downed.

"Are you alright?" Kyle asked.

"Yes. I'm fine," she replied with a smile. "I guess it was the tequila. Looks like Daisy's drinking formula tonight."

He reached for her hand and squeezed it. "Good."

The look he gave her then told Maeve everything she needed to know about his plans for her later and her stomach flipped. Despite her resolve to go, she was grateful for the storm and the opportunity to spend another night in his bed. Selfishly, it was the only place she truly wanted to be, and she'd soak in every minute while she could.

She, Colleen, and Sibby were arranging the leftovers, putting everything in bowls and on platters when Conor and Finn returned from the hospital, quickly opening and then closing the front door against the intensifying snowfall.

"If it wasn't a stressful enough day," Conor began as he helped Finn into the kitchen. "That ride home from Hyannis almost put me over the edge. The roads are nearly impassable."

"I missed it," Finn admitted. "The pain pills they gave me are brilliant. I slept the entire time."

“Yeah. And I white-knuckled it,” Conor added. Seeing the open bottles on the table, quickly settled Finn into a chair and reached for a shot glass. “I’m going to need a few of these,” he said as he downed his first drink.

“Go slow, brother,” Sibby said. “Dinner will be up in a minute. You can drink all you want after you put some food in your stomach.”

Maeve finished putting the remaining dinner rolls on a tray and slid them into the oven to warm before turning to Finn. She walked over to where he sat and kneeled in front of him. “Thank you,” she whispered. “I know you did this for me,” she said, lightly touching his leg, not wanting to disturb the bandage she could see under the outline of the fabric of his pants.

“Pish posh,” he said, mimicking the words she’d recognize as something their mother used to say to them when they were children. “Tis nothing.”

“It’s something, alright,” she replied.

“Maeve, you know I’ve got your back. Always.”

She kissed the top of his head. “And I’ve got yours.”

Sibby interrupted the moment between them with a simple statement. “Come and get it, people. Dinner is ready.”

Maeve stepped back and made a plate for her brother and placed it in front of him. Then she went into the pantry to find the powdered formula she’d brought along from Boston for a situation exactly like this one. When she came back into the kitchen, she could feel Kyle’s eyes on her. She looked up to find him across the room, holding two plates – one for him and one for her. Suddenly, she realized just how hungry she was, but not for food. She was hungry for his touch, his kisses, the strength of his

body as he covered her own. And with one glance, she could tell that he felt the same.

CHAPTER 35

It was as if after the day's events, the family did not want to be apart from one another. Tim and Millie were sitting on the floor in front of the coffee table playing Scrabble. Geoff, Sibby, Conor, and their parents were engaged in a rousing game of Monopoly. Finn was sleeping on the couch after refusing to go to bed before the party ended.

Maeve and Kyle were curled up together in the loveseat, quietly watching the fire burn low, both silently wishing that they could retreat to his bedroom and the privacy it afforded them but knowing that they should stay for propriety's sake. Finally, when the Monopoly game ended with Sibby once again the big winner, everyone started to stand and disperse. Kyle and his brothers had to wake Finn and help him up the stairs to the room that Maeve had once stayed in; it was pretty much unused these days. No one questioned that development.

She had gotten to his room first and went into the ensuite bathroom to wash her face. She didn't hear him come in and when she lifted her head from the sink, she saw him in the mirror, standing behind her.

"You startled me," she said.

"Were you expecting someone else?" he teased.

"I'd be disappointed if it wasn't you," she replied, turning and easily fitting into his embrace.

She reached up with one hand and caressed his cheek. “Have I told you how much I love you? You were truly my knight in shining armor today.”

“I guess I’ll take that over being your Prince Charming,” he said with a wry smile.

“Very funny,” she said, reaching down now to acknowledge his reaction to her closeness as he strained against his jeans.

“Maeve,” he whispered in her ear. “I will always be in your corner.”

She stepped back and looked up at him once more. “I know. And when this scandal has passed, we can be together. But for now, let me go. It’s time to let me go.”

The wind rattled the window, and both turned their attention to the increasing intensity of the storm outside. “I don’t think it matters tonight, or even tomorrow. We’re going to be snowed in here for a bit, so for right now, let’s go to bed. I have big plans for us.”

Knowing that the time for conversation was ended, she simply replied, “Do you? Lead the way.”

It continued to snow throughout the night, a surprise storm that blanketed the Cape with over two feet of snow. Maeve had to admit that the blizzard might not have been a shock to the weather forecasters, but it was to Kyle’s family since they had been so focused on the holiday and then on the swirling scandal involving Daisy’s biological father that they’d missed the bulletins that had apparently scrolled along the bottom of television sets the day before. It didn’t matter. The discussion at the breakfast table surrounded the fact that no one was going anywhere until the roads were cleared, and that could take a day or two.

“And this is why everyone needs a second refrigerator in the basement,” Sibby said to

Maeve. “We have plenty of food to feed this crowd until the roads are drivable. We can finish off the leftover turkey with a pot pie tonight. After that, we’ll raid the freezer and go from there.”

“How did you get to be this organized, Sibby?” Maeve asked. “I owned a bakery and often had to call in an emergency order for flour or sugar to one of my suppliers because I unexpectedly ran out.”

“My mother trained me well,” Sibby said, smiling at Colleen who was sitting at the table, sipping at her coffee.

“When you start with nothing, you learn to adapt. We had a lot of mouths to feed on a policeman’s salary when the kids were young. I made do with less and we all survived, right?” Colleen responded.

“Yes, ma’am!” Sibby replied. “And had a lot of fun along the way. I never realized how much scrimping and saving you had to do until I was married with kids of my own. It was a targeted and well-thought-out effort to keep us all clothed and fed and we all appreciate what you and dad did for us.”

“That’s what family does, Sib. You know that.”

Maeve knew that Colleen’s statement was truly meant for her. “You’re lucky to have each other. Finn and I lost our parents when we were young. Getting to know all of you over the past two months has been eye-opening for me. I can only hope to aspire to the same thing for me and Daisy as time moves on.”

“Something tells me that will happen,” Colleen replied.

“Did someone say something about bacon and eggs?” Conor asked as he entered the kitchen.

“I didn’t hear that, but if you’d like to get breakfast started, feel free, brother,” Sibby said, pouring herself a cup of coffee.

“I can do that,” he said. “Not much else going on. Can’t even start shoveling yet. It’s still snowing.” He reached under the counter for the large skillet that was stored there.

“Did anyone check the forecast?” Maeve asked.

“No. And does it matter?” Sibby asked. “We’re stuck here until further notice.”

Well, Maeve thought to herself, at least the weather will keep the paparazzi away for just a little bit longer. Silver lining.

By nightfall, the snow finally tapered off to flurries and after dinner Maeve volunteered to load the dishwasher and wipe down the countertops and table. She saw stars peeking out in between the breaks in the clouds in the dark sky and knew that although this storm had passed, a larger one was about to descend at their front door at some point tomorrow.

The children had been exhausted from a day playing in the snow and went to bed without a whimper. Even Daisy had experienced her first taste and feel of the cold stuff; Kyle had bundled her up and taken her outside with the boys for a bit that afternoon, and they all came back inside with rosy cheeks, clamoring for hot chocolate. Maeve grabbed the open bottle of red wine, knowing that everyone had taken their glasses into the living room already. Satisfied that the kitchen was now left clean enough to pass Sibby’s inspection, she went inside to join the others.

What she saw as she turned the corner took her breath away. Kyle was there alone. He had a bottle of champagne on the coffee table and two beautiful, tapered flutes sat alongside it. The fire was warming the room. When he saw her, he smiled.

“Maeve,” he began. “Join me, please.”

She looked around for the others, but they were nowhere to be found. “Where did everyone go?” she asked.

“Forget them for a minute. Come here, please.”

She walked over to where he stood by the fireplace. As she got to him, he dropped down on one knee.

“I don’t know if you’re ready for the question I’m about to ask you, but I’m going to ask anyway. Maeve Byrne. Will you marry me?”

While she shouldn’t have been surprised, she had to admit that his question took her breath away. “I love you, Kyle. I just –”

“Answer me, Maeve,” he said. “I want to make you happy for the rest of our lives. Just say yes.”

And in that moment, despite her fear that the tabloids were about to expose her ugly truth to the world, Maeve knew that if she followed her heart, it would not betray her.

“Yes, Kyle. Yes. I’ll marry you.”

He stood up and swiftly took her into his arms, kissing her deeply. In the next moment, Kyle’s family and her brother Finn entered the room, offering their love and congratulations. Kyle popped the cork out of the champagne bottle, and they heard toast after toast, celebrating their engagement.

An hour later, after the others had left the room and given the happy couple some space, Kyle turned to Maeve and said, “I’m sorry that I don’t have a ring to give you.

We can go shopping for one once we get back to Boston.”

“I don’t need a ring, Kyle. But this doesn’t change my situation.”

“It does though, and yes, you do need a ring. What’s changed is that now we’re officially a team.”

“I still think it would be wrong to drag you into this scandal. It’s not fair.”

“Let me worry about that, Maeve. Together we’ll protect Daisy from the worst of it. I have a plan.”

“A plan?”

“Yes. Remember when I sent the tracker that had been placed in your bag to my buddy in Nova Scotia?”

“Of course.”

“We can go there. It’s a small place, but the people are friendly, and I am sure they don’t want a media storm. They will shut it down before it can be whipped into the frenzy you’re so concerned about. And this storm bought us time. My dad has an old army buddy who happens to be the Wellfleet town clerk. We can have a marriage license by tomorrow, once we dig ourselves out. Then we can have a ceremony here at the house. We’ll be on the road before the paparazzi finds you.”

“Who can marry us here?”

“Millie. She just became a Universal Life Minister with an online application. It’s legal and once she pronounces us married, it’s binding. What do you say?”

“I say you’re crazy. But that’s just one of the things I love about you,” she smiled and nodded her head. “Let’s do it.”

“I was hoping you’d say that,” he said, leaning in to kiss her. “There’s no backing out now.”

“I was about to say the same thing to you,” she replied.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:33 pm

One Year Later

“Daisy,” Maeve called out. “Mind your papa. Stay away from the dock.”

“Mommy,” the little girl responded. “Ducks.”

“I know, darling. The ducks are fine where they are. They don’t need your help.”

“Don’t worry, Maeve. I’ve got her,” Kyle shouted back toward where she stood on the patio.

Maeve stepped back inside to admire the shiny new commercial ovens she’d just purchased for her bake shop.

She’d found the small retail space for rent on Dock Street in the Province of Shelburne, the place that she and Kyle had made their home.

It was small, but it had a pretty area out back where she’d installed café tables and chairs, sun umbrellas and big, overflowing planters with beautiful flowers ready to bloom.

In the aftermath of the snowstorm last Thanksgiving, they’d quickly packed up and drove north, over the border into Canada, then on to Nova Scotia.

As it turned out, Shelburne had been looking to expand their police force, and Kyle’s friend Tony made a quick connection for him with the captain.

He was hired on the spot.

They found a big, old Victorian with plenty of room for family visits, and although it took longer for Maeve to acclimate to both the harsh winter weather and the small town itself, she finally felt at home.

It was so very different from life in London, and there was a large learning curve.

It seemed to her at first that everyone here knew or was related to everyone else, but as it turned out, Daisy was the only passport she needed to become a true member of the community; the whole town had fallen in love with her little girl.

She was warmly welcomed and when her new neighbors learned that she had once owned a bakery, they begged her to open one here.

They pledged their support, and since her grand opening was less than a week away, she had a lot on the line.

She'd be baking long and late the next few nights.

At least she knew that her daughter would be well taken care of – Daisy and Kyle were nearly inseparable.

She loved her papa, and he loved her as well.

If it wasn't enough to have the pressure of starting this new business venture, Sibby and the family was planning a trip to Shelburne for the grand opening.

She still had to get the house in shape for the onslaught, but she was excited to see them once again.

It had been too long.

When the paparazzi finally did find her, it was too late.

The story had broken months before and most people had moved on to the newer scandals hitting the 24/7 news cycle.

After all, there was always a fresh or salacious story for public consumption.

She was yesterday's news, and happy to be just that.

Whenever a stray reporter showed up in Shelburne now, her neighbors and friends circled her in an embrace of protection and a warmth she'd never experienced anywhere other than with Kyle's family.

For that, she was incredibly grateful.

And true to form, the royals had not acknowledged the story, or Daisy's existence.

So much to be thankful for...

But then again, she had so many blessings, not the least of which was her marriage to Kyle.

She could have never imagined a love like this, a life like this.

Sometimes an accident is the wake-up call you don't know you need.

In a flash, everything can change, and if you open your heart, the most unlikely of fairy tales can come true.

Including finding your very own true Prince Charming when you least expect it...