



The Familiar Stranger (Sloane & Maddie, Peril Awaits #5)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: As semi-retired private detective Sloane Monroe unwinds at a luxurious spa retreat in North Carolina, a jarring phone call shatters her peaceful getaway ...

A friend has been found dead.

What seems like a random act of violence soon reveals a sinister pattern as more of Sloane's friends and acquaintances begin to be targeted.

As she races to uncover the truth, an unsettling fact emerges. Someone is using her life as a weapon, and everyone she cares about is in the crosshairs.

With her loved ones in danger, Sloane races against time to outsmart her enemy and protect those closest to her.

Will she uncover the truth before its too late?

The Familiar Stranger is the fifth book in the Sloane and Maddie: Peril Awaits series, written by New York Times bestselling author Cheryl Bradshaw and longtime editor Janet Fix.

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CHAPTER 1

Grady Clairmont adjusted his wig and puffed up his gel-filled brassiere. Taking one last look in the dressing-room mirror, he puckered his lips and blew himself a kiss. “Show time, sunshine.”

As he took a step back on his four-inch heels, he wobbled, almost falling into the armoire next to him, but he caught himself just in time. The mermaid fit of the dress was tight against his thighs—so tight it was difficult to move. He’d put on a few pounds since he’d last worn it, and even though he was in desperate need of a new drag wardrobe, money was tight.

In recent months, Grady had been laid off from his waiter position at the “ghostly” Marshall House, where he was often the center of attention. As he ooh ed and ahh ed with newlyweds, elderly couples, families, and children, the hotel guests often broke out into hysterics. Thinking back on those good times now, he realized how much he missed the laughter that had often reverberated through the atrium-style breakfast room. He’d always felt so good at the end of his workday. But those times were nothing more than distant memories now.

It had been two years since he lost his nephew, who had been an apparent victim of human trafficking. Though they could never prove a direct correlation in his nephew’s case. Grady had no doubt in his mind that trafficking was involved, and the wounds of his loss remained. If it wasn’t for the two women he’d met at the Marshall House who had previous careers in the crime-fighting industry, he wasn’t sure the ringleader would have ever been caught and imprisoned.

Grady closed his eyes and breathed, willing himself back to the present moment. He straightened the dress one last time, shifting it around his hips, and he waddled to the door. The drumroll had started, and the emcee would soon announce his drag-queen persona, Lady Grady. He tried to hype himself up to match the energy in the crowd, the music, the laughter. In truth, he just didn't have it in him anymore. The fans were always kind, but it was becoming a blur—night after night of the same thing, often the same faces even. It had all become pointless to him. Surely there was more to life than being a ... clown.

As he opened the door to step into the hallway, a white piece of paper fluttered to the floor. It seemed to have been stuck between the door and its frame.

A note from a fan, perhaps?

He'd had many in his time as a performer.

Maybe this one would cheer him up.

He unfolded the note and began to read.

Eyes wide, stay inside.

Fear, for terror is here.

The note was signed by Dr. Beetle, the root doctor down on River Street. Grady knew her, of course—she was an iconic figure in Savannah's Historic District. But he didn't know her that well. Not enough to exchange notes like this one, anyway. Many of the locals gossiped about the old gal, spreading rumors that she practiced hoodoo, Southern Folk magic—ideas that Grady didn't believe in.

The note she'd left was ... well, far from positive, and Grady wondered if it was a

prank. Had someone else written it, someone pretending to be her? If it had been left by the doctor herself, what did she want with him? Why leave such a note?

Assuming it was nothing more than an attempt to rile him up, he crumpled the note, tossing it over his shoulder into his dressing room.

He'd just taken a step into the hall when he felt the chilling sensation of hands wrapping around his throat, pulling him backward. Given his burly physique, he bucked his assailant away with ease and spun around, fists raised.

Furious, he stared into a pair of eyes, unsettling in their emptiness.

“Who the hell are you?” he asked.

The reply was swift and came in the form of a knife, the blade plunging into his heart, again and again.

Confused, Grady dropped to his knees, cupping his own blood in his hands. He reached out, desperate to fend off the vicious attack, but the blows kept coming. As the hallway began to swirl around him, the emcee shouted his name.

But Grady wouldn't be making it to the stage.

Not tonight, or any other night.

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CHAPTER 2

ONE WEEK PRIOR

“This place is sheer heaven,” Maddie said, admiring the snow-dusted trees and misty ridgeline visible through the glass corridor.

“So right,” I said. “It’s kind of surreal—seeing winter just on the other side of the glass while we’re warm and toasty in here. I hear rain is coming, though ...”

We were strolling along the enclosed walkway that led to Sanctuary Springs Spa, part of the Havencrest Inn and Spa at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains in North Carolina. The path curved gently with the mountainside, framed in glass on one side and local stone on the other, with soft lighting tucked into wooden beams overhead. Beneath our feet, the slate floor radiated warmth, making it easy to forget the snow piled up just beyond us in the January chill.

Tucked into the mountain itself, the spa already felt like a secret worth keeping—and we hadn’t even crossed the threshold.

Our latest girls’ getaway had landed us in this cozy mountain hideaway, the first time we’d seen each other—save for a wedding—in over a year. She’d flown in from out west, and I’d driven in from New Orleans. Today we were booked for a couple’s massage at the inn’s underground spa, and I couldn’t get there fast enough.

“We’ll be lucky to make it on time, thanks to someone who has to keep stopping to view the sights,” I said.

“In my defense, I am a tourist!”

We both laughed.

“I have to admit, I got a little sidetracked myself,” I said. “It’s like walking through our own personal snow globe.”

We stopped to admire a recessed garden alcove tucked into the stone interior wall beside us, filled with ferns, mosses, and local blooms like trillium and rhododendron. A faint mist hung in the warm air, scented with spruce and wild mint. We took a deep breath in and grinned at each other.

“I’m glad we were able to get away together again,” I said. “Thanks for changing your plans so we could do it sooner than later.”

She gave me a quick one-armed squeeze and we continued our trek toward the check-in desk.

“That’s why I retired,” Maddie said. “I make my own schedule now.”

Maddie had worked as a medical examiner for decades before retiring a few years earlier. But she kept busy—almost busier than she had been before with her full-time career. Now she did the teaching and conference circuits whenever called upon for assistance, which happened a lot.

As for me ... I was supposed to be easing into retirement, working part-time as a private investigator so I could travel more, but the last year had been a constant stream of cases everywhere I turned. One of them had happened at Maddie’s niece’s wedding, where there was a murder in her uncle’s mansion. The mental legwork had kept me on my toes, but I found myself longing for a break from it all. When my husband, Cade, insisted I was overdue for a breather, I called Maddie to suggest

another getaway.

And here we were.

We checked in and met our massage therapists, then snuggled under the covers of our respective cots, facedown, ready to be kneaded and smoothed. It wasn't long before I fell under the spell of the soothing music and pleasing aromas of oils and lotions.

Just as my masseuse, Harmony, started digging into my shoulders, my cell phone rang. I recognized the ringtone. It was Cade.

I groaned and pushed up to my elbows.

"You've got to be kidding me," Maddie said, speaking through the face cradle of her massage bed. "You didn't shut your phone off?"

I looked up at Harmony. "I'm sorry. It'll only take a minute."

She nodded and stepped away.

I rose to answer the call, but Maddie shot her hand out, stopping me. "Come on, Sloane. This is supposed to be girl time. Me time. You time."

Jay, her masseuse, stepped back, his eyes wide, unsure whether to continue.

I raised a finger. "One minute. I promise."

"Whatever he wants, it can wait for one hour," Maddie said. "Am I right or am I right?"

She had a point, and I conceded, walking back to the massage bed.

“Okay, okay,” I said. “I’m sure he’s just checking in.”

Cade was on his way to Wisconsin with his cousin and a few friends to go ice fishing, of all things.

I glanced at Harmony. “Would you mind turning my phone off, so I won’t be tempted to answer it? It’s in the front pocket of my bag.”

“Sure, I’m happy to help,” she said.

Harmony did as I’d asked and then returned to my side, saying, “Now, let’s get those knots out of your shoulders.”

And she did.

When the hour was up, I felt like a brainless noodle, and I was happy about it. We gathered our things and wandered down to the mineral soaking pools, where steam curled into the crisp mountain air. Then we eased beneath one of the stone-fed waterfalls tucked into a warm grotto carved from the mountainside. From there, we could see the snow-capped Blue Ridge Mountains. The view was majestic, but my mind kept going back to Cade’s phone call and the fact that my phone remained off—a total disconnect from my real life. It felt weird. A little bit nice, but also annoying, like an itch I couldn’t scratch.

“I need to see if Cade left a message,” I said. “I’ll just pop over to the locker, then come right back.”

Maddie’s eyes remained closed as she let the waterfall do its work on her neck and upper back.

“Maddie ... did you hear me?” I asked.

Her eyes shot open. “Can you not do this right now? You were the one who wanted to get away. I want you here with me, in the present moment. Is it too much to ask?”

I froze for a second, then sighed and plopped next to her under the mini waterfall. She smiled, and I forced myself to concentrate on the glorious setting, the calming sensations all around me, and the precious time away with my closest friend. Minutes passed, then more, and I felt like I was starting to get the hang of this “relaxing” stuff.

I draped an arm around Maddie and gave her a squeeze. “Thanks for reminding me about why we came here.”

With her eyes closed once again, she murmured, “Always and forever, my friend.”

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CHAPTER 3

We lounged for far too long and had to rush back to our room to change into nicer clothes for dinner at the Alta Vista, which overlooked the grounds of the inn and the mountains beyond. The reservation was for six o'clock, mere minutes away, but we laughed it off—the fact that the two of us always seemed to be running on the edge of time.

It wasn't until I grabbed my clutch that I was reminded of the call I'd missed from Cade. I picked up my phone, and Maddie plucked it from my fingers, plopping it into her bag.

“After dinner,” she said.

I moved my hands to my hips. “Now you're pushing it.”

I wasn't kidding, and she knew it.

Maddie crinkled her nose, studied me for a long second, and then gave the phone back to me.

“Okay, fine,” she said. “But if you need to make a call, will you at least do it on the way to the restaurant?”

I agreed and waited for the phone to reboot as we rode the elevator down to the main floor. When we stepped out, I found a signal.

Cade answered, getting straight to the point. “Where’ve you been?”

His tone wasn’t a teasing one, and I flushed, feeling a little defensive.

“I was relaxing at the spa, like I’m supposed to be doing,” I said.

When he didn’t respond, a sinking feeling came over me. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m still driving, and everything’s fine. Sorta. With me, at least. But I got a call from Henry—one I knew you’d want to know about.”

“I gather Henry didn’t have good news. What happened?”

“His girlfriend, Kim ... she died.”

“I can’t believe it. We just went to lunch a few weeks ago. What happened?”

He paused a moment then said, “She was murdered, Sloane.”

“Are you serious?”

“Died right on his doorstep.”

Given we lived on the same floor of a condominium in New Orleans, his doorstep just so happened to be across from ours.

“What did Henry say?” I asked. “Does he want me to investigate?”

“No, Sloane. He doesn’t. Not yet. The police are doing their thing, and he’s satisfied with how it’s going so far. I’ll bet they’ll be calling one or both of us for our input, since we live right across the hall. Maybe not, though, since neither of us were there

when it happened.”

I breathed a sigh of relief.

I didn’t have much more to give of myself right now.

“So he just wanted us to know, then,” I said. “How’s he doing? Is he okay? I mean, I’m sure he’s not, but ... you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, he’s dealing with it, but he’s shaken up. Her family and their friends from the Helping House have been by his side ever since it happened, chipping in as needed. He knew you were already in North Carolina, so he called me.”

“Mm-hm.” My mind started to roll with questions. I assumed a murder investigation would delay the funeral, and by then, I’d be back in NOLA. “What do you know about how she died?”

“Knife to the throat. Nasty stuff. Happened sometime during the day when he was at work. No exact time of death, but that narrows it down some. I can’t even imagine what went through his mind when he found her.”

All the renewal I’d been feeling during my massage began to leave my body. I shuddered to think of a murder happening right outside our part-time doorstep. In an instant, it felt like the walls were closing in.

“Look,” Cade said, sounding wearier, “I didn’t mean to put a damper on your vacation. But ... well, like I said, Henry wanted us to know before we heard it from someone else.”

“Should I call him?”

“He’s a wreck and busy with ... everything that comes with a murdered girlfriend. He’s insisted we not change our plans. We’ll be there for him when we get back, and maybe then he’ll be in a better place to talk about things.”

I paused a minute, thinking. “Did Henry happen to mention anything to you about what the motive might be?”

“He said the detectives were leaning toward a robbery gone wrong. They’re speculating Kim may have arrived home and caught the killer in the act of trying to break in. Henry has quite a few collectibles in the condo from his travels, and as you know, some are valuable. So, the robbery theory makes sense. Besides, Henry can’t think of a single reason someone would want to kill Kim.”

“I feel awful about the whole thing. Poor Henry.”

“Yeah, and listen, I’m sorry to break it to you while you’re on vacation, but I figured you’d want to know,” Cade said. “Now go on and get back to your relaxin’.”

Relaxing.

After the news I’d just been given, it was easier said than done.

CHAPTER 4

After the call ended, I took a moment to regain my bearings, and I realized I was in the main lobby of the inn, which featured a fieldstone fireplace built from local mountain rock, where a low, steady fire burned. A large antique mirror sat on the mantel of reclaimed wood. The entire lobby spoke to history, nature, and subtle luxury.

I did a slow three-sixty, looking for Maddie, and I found her walking toward me from a small bar area tucked into a corner of the space. In each hand was a martini—just what I needed. She handed one to me, and I downed it.

“You okay?” she asked.

“No, I’m not.”

“What’s going on?”

“Just feeling a little ... off, but I don’t want to dwell on it.” I placed my glass on a side table and dropped into a deep, cushiony chair nestled in one of the room’s little seating clusters. Before she could question me further, I asked, “Did we miss our reservation?”

“I’m not sure,” she said, eyeing me with concern. “I let them know we had an emergency of sorts. I had no idea how long you might be.”

The conversation with Cade had made me lose my appetite, but I didn’t want to ruin

our dinner plans.

“Let’s see if we can get a table,” I said. “And then I’ll tell you what Cade’s call was all about.”

We stepped up to the podium at the Alta Vista, which was right off the lobby, and I inquired about the status of our reservation ... or an acceptable alternative.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Monroe. We did try to call you,” the ma?tre’ d informed me. “Several times.”

Had they?

I looked at my phone, and sure enough, missed calls that hadn’t made it through because of my Do Not Disturb setting.

“Well, that’s a bummer,” Maddie said. “Guess I should have put my name on the call list too.”

“It’ll be okay,” I said, and then I turned back to the man. “Can we make a new reservation for later tonight?”

He glanced at the schedule in front of him.

“I’m sorry to say, it’s a busy night,” he said, a pained expression on his face.

“It was a family emergency ,” Maddie cut in, even though she had zero idea what my phone call was about.

“Mmmm,” was all he said as he went back to the schedule.

A voice behind me said, “How about you join us at our table?”

I turned to see a smiling Harmony, my masseuse from earlier, standing there, out of her scrubs and wearing a fitted, pale-pink dress with long, flowing sleeves. She was with a stunning woman she introduced as Almond, who was muscled to the maximum. It made sense when we learned she taught fitness training classes in her Asheville business, Hard Body Boot Camp. From the look of them, it was clear they were together together, with Almond’s protective arm around her shoulder as she fiddled with Harmony’s honey-brown hair.

Harmony and Almond. I wondered if these were family names, or if they were unique to these two women—one soft and one tough. At least on the outside.

Without hesitation, Maddie and I agreed to join them, and we were seated at a private table tucked into an alcove.

Almond swished a finger in the air and said, “Shots all around?”

The martini hadn’t made a dent, but I passed anyway, knowing it would be best for me to eat something first.

“I’m all in,” Maddie said, and the orders were made, along with a couple of bottles of wine for the meal.

While Maddie and Almond chatted about the fitness business, Harmony turned toward me and said, “Forgive me for saying, but you look a little down. I was hoping you’d be floating on air following your massage.”

“The massage was amazing,” I said. “It’s just ... I received some bad news on the phone a few minutes ago.”

Maddie's head flipped around. "What bad news?"

All three ladies leaned in, prompting me to share what I'd learned about Henry's girlfriend, Kim, as well as the fact that Maddie and I both had careers that involved sleuthing and deducing.

"So horrible," Harmony said when I'd finished. "Almond's always trying to get me to take self-defense classes. After what you just said about your friend's girlfriend, I'm thinking I should."

"Yes, you should," Almond said, accepting the shot from the waiter.

He placed the wine on the table and the other two shot glasses in front of Maddie and Harmony. "Appetizers, ladies?"

Harmony shook her head. "We're not ready yet. We're feeling chatty tonight."

She smiled, and he bowed and walked away, saying he'd return in a few minutes.

Feeling parched, I took a sip of my water, then said, "I recommend self-defense classes, though that doesn't guarantee you'll be safe from people who are out to do you harm. It does guarantee you have a fighting chance. Looks like Kim was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Sometimes even the savviest of us can't win, no matter how much experience we have."

"You're trained?" Almond asked.

"In martial arts," I said. "Comes in handy."

Almond shot Harmony a knowing look.

“There is nothing wrong with being trained in self-defense,” Harmony said. “But there is a lot to be said for mind and spirit training. Puts you in the right place at the right time, every time.”

“I love that,” Maddie said, raising her shot glass. “The right place, right time, every time. Salud !”

I raised my water glass, and the ladies downed their shots.

“Right place, right time ... except for Kim,” I said.

As soon as the words left my mouth, I wished I could take them back. Harmony had tried to lift my spirits, and here I was, pushing them down.

“I’m sorry about Kim,” Maddie said. “I can’t imagine how Henry must be feeling right now. It’s so screwed up.”

“The first thing that came to mind was whether I should stay or go, offer my support to Henry.”

“I’m surprised you’re still here, to be honest. Knowing you, I would have thought you’d left by now. I’m glad you didn’t. You need this break.”

She reached over and gave my hand a squeeze.

She was right.

I did need this break.

But the truth was, my mind wasn’t here in the present moment. It was somewhere else ... on a road headed straight back to New Orleans.

CHAPTER 5

In the middle of the night, I woke to the sound of sobbing. I jolted to a sitting position and turned.

“Maddie? What’s wrong?”

Her back was facing me as she sat at the edge of the bed, and she held her phone in her hand, her body quivering. She took in a deep breath. “You know Iggy, the guy in the band that I met at my niece’s wedding? We’ve dated a few times since then, whenever he’s nearby. We call and text and stuff. I-I like him a lot. And now ... ”

Her sobs resumed.

I pushed her hair over her shoulder and rubbed her back. “I remember him. What’s going on?”

“He was in a car accident last night. One of his bandmates just called, and ... well, they don’t know if?—”

She swiped at her cheeks, turning to face me as she threw her phone onto the comforter.

I presumed he wasn’t doing well.

“Oh, no,” I said. “I’m so sorry,”

“Crazy, you know? I just talked to Iggy right before we took off on our vacation.”

I checked the clock on the nightstand. It was just before seven in the morning. I couldn't believe it had taken me so long to realize Maddie had been on the phone in the first place—or that I hadn't woken during her call. Seemed the massage had done me a solid, giving me a good night's sleep.

I reached out, embracing her, and we fell back onto the pillows. She cried for a time and then succumbed to sleep. I folded her back under the covers and slid off the bed, slipping on a pair of leggings and a sweatshirt. Then I stepped into the hallway. I had some thinking to do.

I meandered through the halls until I got to the main lobby, where I sat on a rocker in front of one of the large fireplaces, embers burning hot. People were checking in and out all around me, the place abuzz, but my mind was focused on a harsh reality. Those in my inner circle always teased me about how murder had a way of finding me. Not just injury and death, but murder . It happened so often I found myself questioning Iggy's circumstances—whether Iggy's car wreck had been an accident or if it had been something more. The notion was far-fetched, even for me, and it wasn't long before I talked myself out of it.

“You're being ridiculous, Sloane,” I mumbled.

I rose to a standing position and made a beeline for the concierge desk, determined to shift the paradigm of our vacation. Neither Kim's death nor Iggy's accident had anything to do with me or Maddie. We were brushed by the unfortunate, but we were not the cause of it.

Right?

I waited in line for my turn, and when I stepped up to the shiny, smiley-faced young

man behind the desk, I said, “I’d like to make a reservation for two for ... I’m not even sure what. What are some good activities to do around here?”

He made a few suggestions, and I chose a tour of the Fox Hollow Vineyards.

As I turned to leave, I ran straight into Almond.

Ooph! I bounced backward, trying to regain my balance as I said, “I’m so sorry.”

“No, you’re fine.” Almond reached out for my arm to help steady me. “You okay?”

I felt the heat rising in my cheeks. “Yeah. I just wasn’t watching where I was going.”

She smiled, showing off her perfect teeth.

“What’s on your agenda for the day?” she asked.

“I just booked a trip to Fox Hollow Vineyards.” It was a family-owned, boutique winery, named after the foxes that darted through the vines at dusk, a tidbit that I knew Maddie would love.

“You’ll love it. I haven’t been in ages. In fact ... I was just finishing up a class here. Maybe Harmony would want to go.” She pulled out her phone and then seemed to catch herself, adding, “Oh, that is unless you’d rather not have company, which is fine?—”

I cut her off with the wave of my hand. “It would be great if you two joined us. Let me just double check with Maddie, in case she has other things in mind. She may not even feel like doing anything today.”

And that was the truth.

Given the news she'd received about Iggy, she may not have been up for going anywhere.

I dialed her cell phone, then our room phone, but she didn't pick up, and I wasn't making plans without talking to her first.

"She's not answering, but if you give me your number, I'll see what she wants to do today, then call you back," I said. "If not Fox Hollow, then maybe we can get together another time before we leave."

"Perfect," Almond said, handing me her business card. "And no pressure. Do what makes you guys happy. It's your vacation, after all."

When I returned to the room, I was surprised to find Maddie out of bed, showered, and ready for the day. She encouraged me to do the same, which I did. In my absence, I knew she'd been pontificating about life and death in general. I'd known her long enough to know it was one of the ways she dealt with bad news, getting it out, getting some fresh air, and talking about it.

Me?

Not so much.

I held things close to the vest until I was ready to snap, and then I booked little getaways such as these, to ease my mind.

Maddie was partway through a sentence where she muttered something about New Orleans, and I said, "What about New Orleans?"

"Oh, that's where Iggy is, at the hospital there. The band was there working a gig."

My stomach dropped, and my previous theory about his accident not being an accident came back to mind.

“Iggy’s still hanging on by a thread,” she continued. “I can’t stop thinking about ... well, wishing I’d been there for him, which I could have been if I’d been visiting you at the condo.” She hiccupped back a sob. “Who knows? Maybe if I’d been there, we would have been together, and the car accident Oh, Sloane. I could have changed the entire trajectory of ... of ...”

She flopped back on the bed and covered her eyes.

New Orleans. My home away from ... well, RV life. And now it was the source of two doses of bad news in just a few hours.

What were the odds?

CHAPTER 6

I pushed all thoughts of peril to the side, focusing instead on the rhythm of the tires as the Havencrest shuttle took us to Fox Hollow. Maddie had agreed that spending more time with Harmony and Almond would keep us from rehashing the what-ifs about the Iggy's unfortunate situation.

"Oh, Sloane ... look." Maddie pointed as Fox Hollow came into view. A manicured winter garden framed the front of the winery with neat boxwoods, red-stemmed dogwoods, and low stone borders. A single wrought-iron bench sat beneath a pergola, surrounded by rosemary and hellebores—winter roses—that offered small signs of life. It was the kind of garden that didn't need blooms to be beautiful.

As we debarked the shuttle, our friends slipped out of their SUV and headed our way.

"Hello, ladies!" Maddie hooted and spread her arms wide. "Isn't this gorgeous?"

There were hugs all around, and then we turned our attention to the quiet beauty of the winter garden. As expected, Maddie was fascinated with the fox-themed touches—sculptures, brass plaques, even a trimmed hedge shaped like a fox mid-leap. As we strolled through the space, my mind began drifting, no matter how hard I tried to stay on point. Then my cell phone rang, causing Maddie's head to whip around, halting the conversation she'd been having midsentence. Her eyes narrowed in on my phone, and she wagged a finger at me. "All right, you ... it's tour time. Hand it over."

I held it away from her. "No way."

“I’m serious, Sloane. Give it.”

Her words were blunt, but her eyes gleamed with mischief.

“Stay away,” I teased as I took a step back.

I shifted my attention from her to my phone just long enough to see the caller was Cade, and I answered.

“Hey, is everything okay?” I asked.

Maddie rolled her eyes, rejoining Harmony and Almond on their stroll through the garden.

I followed several steps behind.

“Sure, everything is great,” Cade replied. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

“I was just thinking about our call yesterday. What’s up?”

“Just wanted to let you know the reception’s awful up here. If you need me, you might not be able to reach me.”

“Oh, I doubt I’ll need you for anything urgent. It’s nice here,” I said a little louder than normal. Then I scooted around a tall plant and lowered my voice. “Oh, except Maddie just found out the rockstar guy she’s been dating was in a horrible car accident. The band was performing in New Orleans, and that’s where it happened.”

“Man, that’s terrible news.”

“I know.”

I wanted to say more about two major incidents happening to two people I knew—not well, but close enough—in New Orleans, but I didn’t.

“How’s Maddie holdin’ up?” he asked.

“She’s okay. We’re at a local vineyard with some friends we met at the inn. She seems to be having fun—for the time being, anyway.”

“Smart to keep her busy so she doesn’t stew on it. You’re a good friend.”

“Yeah, well ... I try. You be careful out there.”

I guessed he could hear the small tremor in my voice, because he said, “Sloane, Henry’s gonna be all right.”

It was like he could read my mind.

I wanted to believe it.

But I just felt ... off .

“I know,” I said. “You have a good time, and we’ll talk soon.”

We ended the call, and I stepped back into the walkway. The group awaited me up ahead. Maddie turned toward me, her arms crossed, a look of suspicion on her face.

I attempted to shift her attention, saying, “Oh, look at this cute little fox statue.”

Maddie cocked a brow. “Nice try.”

I offered her a smile and a shrug, and the four of us meandered for a few more

minutes until we'd had enough of the cold. Besides, a light sprinkling of rain had begun.

Harmony held open the massive wooden doors that would lead us inside the quaint building—a converted 1930s barn with cozy seating in the tasting room that overlooked the rows of vines and the forested hills beyond.

A couple of glasses of wine and a massive charcuterie board later, a calming ease flowed through me. Glancing around, it seemed to have the same effect on my friends. As the wine flowed, I watched as Harmony and Maddie got sillier and sillier. They were now in the gift shop, falling all over each other with laughter. I couldn't help but smile.

I turned to Almond, who was standing nearby at a T-shirt display. "Aren't they so—" I was about to say "cute," but I didn't finish the sentence, not when I saw the look on her face.

I swore there was tinge of jealousy gleaming in Almond's eyes, her gaze locked on Maddie and Harmony.

"They're having a great time," I said, trying to break the intensity of her stare. "And so am I. Makes me realize I should get away like this more often. It's a great stress reliever—the spa, the mountains ..."

"I hate the spa," she stated, monotone.

Her comment took me aback. "Oh."

"I mean, I've never liked massages. Don't like anyone touching me. Except Harmony, of course." She shot a quick glance my way. "And, outside of her job, I don't like her touching anyone else either."

I was at a loss as to how to respond to her touchy revelation, but I managed, “Ohh ... kay. Well, different strokes and all that.”

My massage joke was clearly lost on Almond, or if it wasn't, she didn't acknowledge it.

She switched her focus back to the two giggling goofballs, who were now holding up several bottles of wine in our direction.

“Which ones should we get?” Maddie shouted across the room. “They're all so good.”

Harmony laughed and said, “Let's get all of them!”

The change in Almond's demeanor left me feeling uncomfortable. Without another word, I joined the others to help make some decisions on their wine purchases, though my thoughts were still on Almond's abrupt mood change.

How could a personal trainer be so weird about human contact? Wasn't that a part of her job, to some degree? And why, with that attitude, would she choose to date someone who was a masseuse, of all things?

CHAPTER 7

Our first stop the next morning was the spa for a swim and a trip to the sauna. I couldn't imagine this kind of luxury ever getting old. Truth be told, I could spend all day here and not feel the slightest bit guilty about it. It was why we'd chosen to come in January, after all—the chill of the mountain air paired with steamy pools was nothing short of divine. I envisioned days upon days of Sloane pampering, reading books, enjoying healthy food and mocktails from the café ...

I was jolted out of my happy moment when I heard the words “Harmony,” “attack,” and “mysterious note.”

I grabbed Maddie's arm. “Did you hear that?”

I looked around and spotted a small group of staffers whispering off to the side.

Maddie nodded. “Someone said something about a mysterious note?”

“And something about Harmony being attacked, I think,” I said. “Wonder what that's all about?”

“Why don't we just ask?”

“Who are you going to ask?”

“I'm not going to ask,” she said. “You are. You're better at approaching people out of the blue and forcing them to reveal things. You're scary good at it sometimes.”

“Thanks for the compliment.”

It was true, but sometimes I wished it wasn't.

The whispering group of women began to disperse, and I wasted no time approaching one of the nail technician's, a girl I'd seen the day before. She'd seemed chattier than the others, and I hoped approaching her was the right choice.

Pulling her to the side, I asked, “Hey, are you and Harmony friends?”

The petite redhead shrugged. “Kinda. I mean, we work together is all.”

I got right to the point.

“Has something happened to Harmony?” I asked.

Her green eyes, ringed with massive false lashes, went wide. “Uhh, yeah.”

I pressed her for information, making sure to mention that I'd become friends with Harmony during my stay. She was more than happy to spill the tea. And the tea was this: Harmony hadn't made it in to work that morning. At present, she was lying in a hospital bed getting treated for a head injury.

Maddie, who'd been standing several feet back, sprung to my side and said, “What's this about an injury?”

She'd spoken loud enough for many in the spa to turn in our direction.

Maddie faced them, clenching her teeth and offering a weak smile, saying, “Uh, sorry. Sorry, everything's fine. Don't mind us.”

As everyone went back to their business, I urged the tech to keep talking, and talk she did. Harmony had found a “threatening” note near the back porch of their small home, and then she was attacked.

“Attacked how?” I asked.

She raised a finger. “I’m getting there. So, yeah ... it was raining, and she was huddled under the roof of her porch. She saw the piece of paper, I guess, somewhere out there in the yard, snapped it up, and read it.”

“What did it say?”

“No idea. Sounds to me like it wasn’t good, though. Maybe a threat of some sort. I’m still trying to find out. Whatever it was, Harmony thought the message was meant for both her and Almond at first. But it could have been meant just for Harmony, because she was the one got attacked.”

“Attacked how?” I repeated my earlier question.

“She was hit on the head.”

“Hit on the head with what?”

“I heard it was, like, a heavy object, whatever that means. Guess she blacked out, and Almond took her to the ER.”

The nail technician seemed to have a lot of details about the incident for someone who claimed she wasn’t close friends with Harmony.

“How in the world do you know all this already?” I asked. “It just happened last night.”

She shot me a sarcastic grin. “I know people.”

“What does that mean?” Maddie asked. “What people?”

She frowned. “I’m sayin’ I know people at the hospital , okay? Last I heard, Almond was at Harmony’s side. She’s sleeping there and everything.”

“I’m glad she’s all right.”

“I mean, it’s kinda spooky,” the girl said. “I’m glad she’s all right too, but still ... the entire situation is weird.”

Maddie turned toward me, saying, “We need to talk to Almond.”

She may have been right, but I had to remind myself—and my friend—that we were not on a girls’ getaway to solve mysteries. Law enforcement would be involved. For now, we were better off staying in our lane.

I shared my feelings with Maddie.

“As much as I hate not investigating something like this, I’m going to talk you off the ledge this time,” I said. “Let’s swim and go to the sauna like we planned, okay? That’s what we’re here to do, and the local cops will have it covered.”

“I’m surprised you aren’t scheming to find a way to get us into Harmony’s room.”

“Oh, I am, and I’m just as curious as everyone else is, but ... no. Not this time.”

It felt weird lying to myself, knowing my mind was weighing all the angles about what little I knew.

Maddie slung an arm around me. “You’re right. We need to continue our vacation and not let other people’s problems get in the way. Besides, after this week, we’ll never see any of these people again.”

CHAPTER 8

By the time we'd finished a late buffet breakfast at the Alta Vista, I had worked myself into a silent frenzy to know more about what had happened to Harmony. The first step would be to dig up some background information on the relationship between the masseuse and the gym rat. The fact that Almond had been so on edge the day before when watching Maddie and Harmony having fun together ... it lingered in my mind.

It seemed odd that, just hours later, Harmony was injured. A bit too much of a coincidence for my liking. And then there was the note. Was it threatening, like we'd heard, or was everyone just making a bigger deal about it than necessary? It was possible the nail technician could have exaggerated or misrepresented the information she gave us.

I decided to deal with the note later.

First things first.

Knowing Maddie wanted to take a nap, I told her I wanted to meander around the property until she woke up.

As soon as I said it, she plopped her hands on her hips. "You're not meandering anywhere. I know you better than to believe that. You're going to ask questions about Harmony, aren't you?"

Her eyes narrowed as she glared at me.

“It’s true, but here’s why.” I told her about Almond’s behavior yesterday at the winery and how odd I thought it was that Harmony was attacked the same night. “I just want to poke around, see what some of the staffers have to say.”

“I can’t believe Almond would think my friendship with Harmony was anything more than that. What a jealous jerk! Go on, find out everything you can. Maybe you’re right and there is something there. You sure you’re okay about me not coming with you? A nap is calling my name, hard .”

“Go on, get some rest.”

She gave me a slight nod and said, “Will do. See you in an hour or so.”

With that, she went her way, and I went mine.

I meandered for a time, looking for anyone at the inn who knew Almond and Harmony. When I found someone willing to talk, I kept my questions low-key and finagled the facts about my interest in whatever way I thought might get them to tell me more.

I was a private investigator.

I was Harmony and Almond’s friend.

Whatever it took to get information.

I’d always found it amazing how many people were willing to share what they knew when they thought something they said might help. From the random tidbits I gathered, I was able to create a reasonable picture of the ladies’ time together. It might not have been perfect, but it was enough to get my wheels rolling ...

Years ago, Harmony had struggled with opioid addiction, and Almond had been a key factor in turning Harmony's life around toward a healthier, more holistic existence. On the flip side, the cheery, vibrant Harmony was a balancing influence for Almond, who tended to work too hard, preferring to focus on her business instead of dealing with what sounded like a bit of social awkwardness. They were a solid team, a yin and yang.

That was one story.

And then another story came to light, thanks to Maddie, who'd decided not to sleep, after all.

We met at the lobby bar, where I found her chatting up the bartender.

"Yeah, so while you were talking to the porter, I decided to talk with Mikey here," Maddie said with a flip of her high ponytail, "about our friends, Almond and Harmony."

Bartender Mikey grinned and waved at me. "How you doin'?"

"Good, thanks," I said, then turned back to Maddie. "And ...?"

"Seems Almond and Harmony's relationship has been a rocky one from the start. They fight often, the crux of it being Almond's fanatical desire to protect her girlfriend from bad influences, which includes other interested parties, both male and female. In other words, she's a jealous lover, Sloane."

Just as I'd suspected.

The bartender punctuated Maddie's comments with one final tidbit. He said Harmony loved Almond—and only Almond. It was Almond's own insecurities that hurt the

relationship. Harmony was content, which pointed to Almond as the problem.

Was Almond's jealousy bad enough to hurt the woman she loved?

Had an argument between the two women devolved into a terrible vortex?

Had the note and the head injury been planned ... by Almond to look like the attack was by the hand of someone else?

It wouldn't be the first time a jealous rage had changed the course of people's lives.

In truth, all my theories were based on nothing more than what I'd seen and heard—and little was fact-oriented.

But after those curious revelations, everything sort of flickered out, nothing more than a wisp of an extinguished candle flame. We didn't see Harmony again, and we couldn't reach Almond, though we'd called her several times. Anything more than what we'd already done would have been out of line—farther out than I preferred to go, at least.

Two days passed with Maddie and me lounging, eating, and touring the Asheville area, all the while keeping our ears to the ground, hoping for a whisper of a clue as to what was going on with our two acquaintances.

But all was silent.

I hoped the lack of news was a good thing and that the whole sordid series of events had smoothed out with no need for input from us.

It was what it should be, I supposed.

Still, I had a looming feeling—a feeling I just couldn't shake.

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CHAPTER 9

We were back at the spa, what had all but become an addiction, floating in the mineral pool like two ... well, like a pair of dead bodies.

“Let’s go by the Hard Body Boot Camp,” I said, standing up from my floating position. “I saw on Instagram that Almond is back at work.”

Maddie snickered.

“What?” I asked. “Why are you laughing?”

“ You’re on Instagram?”

I moved a hand to my hip. “Social media is a method for investigation, you know.”

She stood up, flung her hair to one side, and squeezed the water out. “Go to see Almond, huh? And the purpose would be ...?”

“To offer our support, of course.”

“I doubt Almond wants to see me, first of all. I still don’t understand why she thought there was anything happening with Harmony. I’m as straight as it gets. You know, it’s kind of rude, to be honest. Rude to Harmony and to me.”

I understood what Maddie was saying. At the same time, it was the reason I was dead set on speaking to both women. If Harmony was involved in an abusive relationship,

I wouldn't feel right leaving the resort without offering my support while giving my two cents in the process.

We swam over to the side of the pool, and we leaned back on our elbows, gently kicking our legs in the water.

“Is support for Harmony all you're wanting to accomplish by stopping in for a visit, or is there something more, something you haven't said?” Maddie asked.

There was always more.

I just knew well enough not to make a big deal about things when I had more questions than answers.

“I wouldn't say it's the only reason,” I said. “But it would give me peace of mind ... and since I can't stop thinking about her, maybe a quick visit will ease my suspicions.”

“Hmm,” she said, tilting her head side to side as if weighing the options. “Okay, yeah, why not? Let's do it.”

CHAPTER 10

Before we left the inn for Hard Body, we decided to do some quick souvenir shopping. We didn't have much time left in the mountains, and souvenirs were in order.

First we went to the spa gift shop, where we each purchased lavender-scented slippers. They were filled with rice so they could be microwaved and a glorious foot experience had—from the comforts of home. We also splurged on two overpriced spa robes with the inn's logo on them.

Then we headed to the gift shop on the main level. It was fine—your typical collection of mugs, magnets, and branded fleece—but I'd been hoping for something with more substance, something that actually reflected the spirit of the mountains. So we made our way upstairs to the Loft, where small shops and studios featuring local artists and makers were tucked along a wide corridor with exposed beams and soft gallery lighting.

One shop in particular stood out, with a mix of handcrafted items and Asheville-themed clothing that felt a step above the usual tourist fare.

"Now we're talking," Maddie said.

She went one way, and I went the other. Then we met at the register, where one gentleman was ahead of us in line.

Maddie's arms were filled with all kinds of things, mostly gifts for friends. I, on the

other hand, was thinking of Cade when I chose a knife and a leather wallet, both handmade and top quality with intricate design work.

I was about to show her my finds when something caught my eye. I turned to get a better look at the man who'd just left the register and was leaving the shop ... emptyhanded, wondering why he'd changed his mind about making a purchase.

No big deal, I supposed, but the way he carried himself, his general vibe ... it reminded me of someone.

Was it the walk that seemed familiar?

The way he moved?

Who was he?

And why did it feel like I knew him?

I was so curious, part of me wanted to chase after him, think of an excuse to strike up a conversation.

My logical side retorted with, That would be a little much, Sloane. There's, what, maybe a .02 percent chance you would know someone here at the inn?

I talked myself out of the chase and shook it off, knowing sometimes the skills that made me a good investigator also made me a real weirdo if I wasn't careful.

I turned to say something to Maddie, but she'd vanished. A flicker of movement near the floor caught my eye—she was kneeling to pick something up.

She stood and held up a postcard, turning it toward me.

“Remember the Marshall House?” she asked.

“Sure do.” That was the place we’d stayed in Savannah, an old hotel in the Historic District. I took the card and examined it. “Someone must have dropped it. But it couldn’t have come from this place.”

“I agree. I think I’ll keep it.”

“Uh-huh,” I said, but I was no longer listening. My gaze had wandered back to the front entrance, and to my curiosity about the mysterious man.

CHAPTER 11

“Tell me about the note you found,” I said to Almond.

We were standing outside, under the eaves of the Hard Body building. I couldn’t help but think how she was back at work, acting like nothing had happened. But I wasn’t being fair. I had the tendency to dive into my job when times were chaotic as well.

Almond shrugged. “There’s not much to say.”

Maddie stepped forward, hands on hips. “Are you being serious right now?”

I gave her a gentle tap on the shoulder, hoping she’d relax.

Almond’s nonchalance wasn’t sitting well with me either, but I wanted to give her a chance to talk before I jumped to any conclusions.

“If I’m being honest, y’all are starting to creep me out,” Almond said, arms folded in front of her, muscles bulging. “What happened to Harmony, it isn’t your business. It’ll never be your business. Harmony’s resting at home, and things are settling down. We don’t even want to talk about what happened. Far as we’re concerned, it’s in the past.”

She made an explosion gesture, indicating the past was, poof, gone.

The weather of late had been wet, dreary, and cold, so I slung my scarf over one shoulder. “Look, it’s not in the past. It’s still an active investigation—I know that

much. I'm just trying to find out what the note said and see if I can help."

"I get it," Almond said. "It's like a car wreck. You can't help but crane your neck to see the disaster. Like I said, I don't want to talk about it anymore, okay? I've got work to do. If you need to talk to someone, talk to the cops."

She turned to head back inside, leaving me standing there, stewing over how rude she'd been. We hadn't done anything to deserve it.

Before she got the chance to walk through the door, I shouted, "Almond, stop."

I said it with full force.

She swung her head around, eyebrows raised.

Maybe a little too aggressive, Sloane.

I dialed back on the intensity.

"Look, we consider you both our friends," I said. "I have no pull here with the police. What's going on? Please. It's nothing about us wanting to know all the sordid details out of some twisted curiosity. Trust me when I say we have a lot of experience in this area. We're good at what we do."

Almond shot Maddie daggers for a few seconds, and I braced myself, thinking we were about to be kicked out the proverbial door.

Then she surprised me.

"Come on, then," she said. "We'll go to my office for some privacy. Follow me."

And we did.

Along the way we passed a myriad of machines and mats and ropes and trainers working their clients into a lather. A powerful beat emanated from unseen speakers, ratcheting up the energy. It was small but impressive, and I felt a pang of guilt that I hadn't been more committed to my own exercise routine.

Almond's office space was a stark contrast to the hard angles in the gym area. Low, plush seating in neutral tones, décor that focused on positivity of mindset and manifesting the power of self-care, and calming music—none of the rhythmic beat could be heard from the outside. It was like a happy cocoon. If I didn't know better, I'd say this was Harmony's office and not Almond's.

Maddie had been holding herself tight, and it showed in her face and shoulders. She was doing everything she could to refrain from further comment—at least for now, which was good. When we walked into the room, she appeared to relax a bit, some of the tension draining. Maybe because, in this space, Almond seemed more ... human? And not so robotic like she came off at times.

Almond slid onto a brown velvet loveseat and gestured for us to sit in the matching chairs opposite her. She lifted a teapot from a tray in the center of a low circular table. "Want some chamomile? Or anything else? I've got plenty of other options."

"Chamomile would be fantastic," I said, and Maddie agreed.

She filled a couple of mugs and handed them to us, the silence lingering for a moment as the tea cooled down enough for us to drink.

I was about to speak when she said, "Sorry ... you know, about everything."

"I'm sorry too," Maddie said.

“I can only imagine the tension you’re feeling right now, Almond,” I said. “We’re not trying to add to it. We mean it when we say we want to help.”

I wanted to keep the door open, to get her talking. If there was any indication that she might have written the note, that she might have been the perpetrator of injury and threats to Harmony, I needed to focus on her words and mannerisms. If she was guilty, maybe she’d slip up.

“Okay, first things first.” She massaged her temples and looked at Maddie. “To be honest, I have some—” she tilted her head this way and that “—some jealousy issues, maybe? I get aggravated when men and women come up to Harmony and flirt with her. Sometimes I get mad at her too, but it’s uncalled for, and she never starts it. She loves me, and I know it. But my nerves just fire off. I was feeling a little bit of that with you, Maddie, at the vineyard. And I mean it when I say I’m sorry.”

Maddie’s tenseness subsided, and she stood up, walked over to Almond, and gave her a big hug. The gesture seemed to surprise Almond, but she didn’t reject it.

“Harmony’s an amazing person,” Maddie said. “But even if she was single, that’s not my jam. We were just having fun, like friends do. And if you don’t mind me saying so, if that’s how you treat every person who tries to be friends with her ... well, I’ll be honest—you need to chill out.”

I held my breath.

After such a perfect moment, the reprimand was not something I was expecting.

Almond went silent, then she burst into a fit of laughter, saying, “Girl, you are so right.”

I breathed a long sign of relief.

“I know I’m right,” Maddie said. “You have your gym here, your life with Harmony. It’s so easy to live on edge, to distrust everyone, to exist in a chaotic vacuum. I’ve done it a few times myself, but ... yeah, it’s just not me anymore. And I’ll bet it’s not you either. As your many motivational messages in here point out, it’s no way to live.”

Maddie took a seat and reached for her tea. She pointed at a large print on the wall and read it aloud: “Release your worries, trust your path, and let the universe guide your every step.”

“Message received,” Almond said, folding her legs up underneath her as she got more comfortable. “Now, back to the note. I didn’t know about it at first. I just rushed her to the hospital to get her checked out after the assault. It was there that I found it in her coat pocket. Scared the hell out of me, someone leaving her a message like that.”

“Which was ...?” I prompted.

“See for yourself.” She took out her phone and showed us a photograph of the note. The message was smeared but readable:

Continue this path

Please to avoid,

Friends of PI.

What might have been a signature or a sketch of some sort at the bottom edge of the note had been torn away and was barely legible. It could have been a million different things. As for the paper itself, it appeared to have gotten wet, which made sense. Harmony picked it up off the lawn, according to the chatty nail tech, and it had been raining off and on since we got here. That night in the hotel room, in fact, I

remembered mentioning to Maddie how the constant stream of rain reminded me of being in the spa.

“Where did she find the note? On the lawn, in the bushes ...?”

“Just off the covered patio, sort of where the mulch meets the grass. She said it freaked her out so much, she dropped it, like it was on fire or something. But then she thought better of it, that I should see it, so she picked it back up and shoved it in her coat pocket. That’s when she was whacked in the head and went down. I heard her cry out, and I rushed out to check on her.”

I had so many questions. “And you were where when this happened?”

“In the kitchen, right next to the sliding glass door to the back. That’s why I heard her so well. If I’d been anywhere else in the house, I might not have.”

“Why did she go outside in the first place?”

I wondered if they’d argued, though I doubted she would tell me if they had.

“To commune with nature,” Almond said. “She calls it her time to ‘reflect and decompress’ after caring for others all day long. She does it every evening after work. You could set your watch by it.”

There was no hesitation in her response, and it made sense.

“What are her work hours at the spa?” I asked.

“Six days a week, five hours a day, except for Mondays.”

“That’s a long work week, given she’s constantly kneading muscles.”

“Yeah, I know. But it’s her passion, and I do my best to support it.”

“So her schedule is predictable,” I said, realizing this could have helped someone plan their attack if indeed they were aiming for Harmony.

Maddie cut in with, “I’m guessing you didn’t see or hear anyone running away?”

“To be honest, I didn’t even look. I was too concerned about Harmony. Although ... maybe I saw something. A shadow? Hmm, no, it was more like I sensed that someone was there or had been there. Geez, now I sound like Harmony. Anyway, it was not my top priority at the time, though now I wish that I had taken a moment to inspect the area.”

“That old 20/20 hindsight,” I commented.

“Right. To be honest, y’all, even though everything is getting sorted out and Harmony’s okay, I can’t help feeling ... well, terrified. I’m worried it will happen again. It’s hard enough to believe someone’s targeting her ... but what if, I mean, what if they’re targeting us ?”

It was in that moment I was certain she was innocent of any wrongdoing. Whether she and Harmony had relationship issues, whether Almond needed to address her temper and jealousy, no matter what others might say about them ... Almond’s partner had been targeted with an intention to harm, maybe even do more than harm.

It was a terrifying prospect.

Also terrifying was the fact that the note was referring to me, the PI.

It had to be.

But who wrote it, and why?

One thing was certain.

Vacation time was over.

Detective mode was now engaged.

CHAPTER 12

THE VILLAIN LAMENTS

If only I cared! If only!

I care about nothing anymore. Easier to never have loved than to love and lose—that's my motto. I have lost so much, and it's all thanks to ... her.

My lips curl into a sneer and my heart grows dark—darker than it already is—every time I think of ... her .

The moment she entered my life, I lost everything dear to me.

Every.

Single.

Thing.

Even things that weren't that dear to me, but a loss just the same. My family and friends, my job, my standing in the community.

And then my buddy, dead.

Again, thanks to her.

How is that even possible?

I'd loved my life, straddling the line between good and bad. And now ... well, it was gone, changed forever.

So be it.

I like the "bad" side of me better anyway. It's what I do best, after all. No sense denying it anymore.

I've spent so much time thinking about payback, plotting my revenge. And now, revenge has come at long last.

My time is now.

And she will pay.

Nothing will stop me ... and why would it? When you have nothing to lose, you are limitless. The feeling is unlike anything I've ever known. Better than all the things I've lost. The way I see it, I've only gained.

With all the time on my hands and no one to answer to anymore but myself, I'd tracked and researched and planned. Now, I find a great sense of satisfaction in carrying out my quest. I'm tempted to rush it all—the high is so intense—but no. I'll stick to the plan, drag it out, watch her squirm, question what's happening and why, until her strongholds unravel, and she starts to go crazy.

I will hurt her as she has hurt me, through her deepest connections, through the core of her fears, electrifying her terror. She will soon realize the truth: she cannot protect herself, much less anyone around her.

Because I'm coming.

In fact, I'm here.

Why should she be happy, thriving, when she's the source of my destruction? Well, the destruction of the former me. The new me? Far too clever.

Kill, maim, destroy.

My new mantra.

Let chaos reign.

CHAPTER 13

After thanking Almond for her time, Maddie and I left Hard Body in a rush, sweeping past weight machines and sweaty bodies like we were in training. The information we'd gleaned over tea and hugs was like gold in my hands. Almond changing her mind about talking to us was a huge point in her favor. She could have refused, and it would have been her right to do so. Instead, she invited us into her inner sanctuary, which was unexpected.

There was always the chance that I was wrong about her.

But I didn't think so.

Before we left, we double checked that each of us had the other's cell number, and Almond had been kind enough to text me a photo of the note—something the police had told her to keep to herself. They'd wanted her to delete it, but she refused. Another big checkmark for Team Almond. I promised to treat the evidence with care and said we'd let her know of any updates. I hoped we would have something to share that would move the investigation in the right direction, finding the person behind Harmony's attack, whomever that might be. Almond could think of no one who wanted to harm either one of them, which made the search more difficult but not impossible.

Maddie and I stopped at a printing shop and made a copy of the note. Then we enlarged it several times to get an even better look.

We thought about dinner, but neither of us were interested in food—not yet.

What we were interested in was answers, and when we got back to the room, I couldn't swipe the keycard fast enough.

We threw our purses on the antique writing desk, changed into sweatpants and Ts, and flopped on the bed.

"The first thing we need to do is to make notes about everything we talked about with Almond," I said. "You write, I'll talk."

She rolled to the edge of the bed and pulled out a notebook from my laptop case. Then we covered it all. From the day we'd met Harmony and Almond at dinner to today's events, and everything in between. Discussions we'd had with the nail technician, coworkers and friends, and with Almond herself. Maddie then pulled out my laptop, and we made notes of key points from online articles about the crime and subsequent investigation, which wasn't much but we didn't want to leave anything out.

I reached out my hand, prompting her to hand over the pen and notebook.

"My turn," I said.

"Time to study the note?"

"Not yet. Time for dangling questions."

Maddie giggled. "You're so weird sometimes."

"True. I think we should brainstorm for a while, concentrate on some of our unanswered questions, barring the contents of the note."

"We should discuss the note, though, and what we think the 'friends of the PI' and

stuff is all about.”

“We’ll get to that, but not yet. The note could have been written to throw the police off the trail. There’s a chance it’s not even related to us.”

Did I believe that?

I did not.

Still, none of it made any sense.

I’d just met Harmony.

How could the note be related to me?

Maddie flipped onto her back and said, “Questions, gotcha. Thinking ...”

While I waited for hers, I wrote down a few of my own.

The big question: Why would someone hurt Harmony?

Expanding from that, I wondered if it was someone from her drug past?

Did she even have a drug past?

I’d wanted to ask Harmony, but because I’d gotten the information from the gossip chain, I was hesitant to bring it up. And Almond had not offered any such story—even when we talked about their relationship—nor had she brought up any sinister characters or situations associated with Harmony’s drug addiction. In her mind, that was a long time ago.

So, was the threat geared more toward Almond, who was known to be less than sunny when she was feeling threatened? During our conversation in her office, she'd admitted to being terrified—because of a threat—yet, she'd handled herself with grace and honesty once she'd loosened up.

How and why were they targeted?

Was it because they were a couple, two females, two races, living together, in love ...?

As I pondered that thought, Maddie shot straight up on the bed. “Where’s the weapon the attacker used?”

“Huh, good question. Given Almond didn’t mention it, I’m guessing there wasn’t a weapon found.”

“Or it was found, and the police aren’t saying anything about it.”

Maddie’s cell phone rang.

“Is it Iggy?” I asked.

She shook her head and answered the call. “Hey, Almond. You okay?”

I waved my hand to get her attention in the hopes she’d put the call on speaker, and she did.

“I’m okay,” Almond said. “I remembered two more things you should know about. Could be important or mean nothing at all. I don’t know.”

She had my attention.

From experience, I'd learned people often believed they didn't remember anything at all—yet once they started talking, even in a roundabout way, forgotten memories tended to surface. It looked like this was one of those moments.

“You're on speaker,” Maddie said. “I'm here with Sloane.”

“Hi, Almond,” I said. “What did you remember?”

“Okay, first off, the note smelled weird, like cologne.”

Maddie and I exchanged wide-eyed glances.

“Continue,” I said.

“It wasn't a fragrance either of us use. In fact, I don't use any at all, except deodorant. I'm kind of allergic. Harmony has all sorts of scents she uses at the spa, but she always washes up for my benefit, but even if she didn't, this wasn't one of those massage-y smells. It was more musky maybe?”

“Maybe it was leather?”

A moment of silence, then, “Maybe. It reminded me of like when you go into those New Age shops, and they have incense burning and stuff.”

“Patchouli!” Maddie said.

“Could be,” Almond said. “All I know was it was a strong smell. I mean, it had to be to stick to a note like that after getting wet. I figured it might be a clue?”

I wanted to high-five her over the phone. “It's a clue, all right. Good job.”

“Thanks. I can’t believe I hadn’t remembered it earlier.”

“It’s not unusual,” I said. “What’s the second thing?”

“I think someone was watching us the day of the attack. After we’d visited with you, we went to get something to eat, went shopping for groceries, the usual stuff. But I kept looking back at this guy. He just seemed to be everywhere we were. Long black coat, a fancy wooden cane, high collar.”

“Like a priest?” Maddie asked.

“Mmm, more like a black turtleneck. I even glared at him at one point, and he was unfazed. I didn’t think anything of it until just a few minutes ago. I feel so stupid!”

“You’re not.” I said. “It could be something or nothing, as you said, but it is information we didn’t have before, which is a good thing. We’ll see if anything comes of it. And hey, I have a question for you.”

“Shoot.”

“Did you find the weapon used to attack Harmony?”

“Nope. I even checked every object in the yard that could have been used to see if it had blood on it. Nothing did.”

Another dead end.

“Thank you for calling and trusting us with this information, Almond,” I said.

“Thank you for forcing me to trust you.”

We all laughed, promised to stay in touch, and the call ended.

Maddie dropped the phone on the bed, and our gazes locked.

“A scent and a man with a cane,” I said. “I do believe we’re getting somewhere.”

CHAPTER 14

“Can we talk about the note now?” Maddie asked, fluffing up the pillows and sitting up against them. “Because I’m worried?—”

“We can,” I cut in. “Just give me a second.”

The phone call from Almond had gotten my adrenaline rushing, and my head was all over the place. I added the two new clues—the scent and the cane—to our notes, then drew some hieroglyphics that meant nothing, just to buy myself a few more seconds of thought time.

Maddie interrupted anyway. “I know you’re thinking but ... do you think we should have reminded Almond to take the information she gave us to the police as well?”

I looked up. “Do you think we need to tell her that? Seems obvious to me.”

I hadn’t even considered the possibility that she might not share such important clues with the detectives working the case. Maybe Maddie had a point. Almond wasn’t the trusting, open sort.

“I’ll mention it to her the next time we talk,” Maddie said.

“Good idea.” I moved to the small table and chairs near the window, just for a different point of view. “Now, moving on to the note.”

Leaning forward in my chair, I offered her one of the photocopies. She held her hand

out and stretched, trying to reach it. She did a little groan, and I couldn't take it anymore. I stood, laid the copy on her lap, then went back to the chair.

She snickered. "Gotta keep you on your toes. What would you do without me?"

"I don't even want to consider such a thought," I replied.

She burst out laughing.

Though I had a photocopy of the note for myself, I also opened the image on my phone so I could zoom in and out. "I forgot to ask Almond about the size of the paper."

"I didn't think about that, either," Maddie said. "Let me ask her."

She texted Almond with the question.

"It may or may not be helpful," I said. "But I am curious."

I zoomed in and out twice, and then once more, taking my time.

The note was lying on a flat, pale background with no other items around it that we could use as a point of reference for sizing the note. I assumed it was a hospital tray. Almond had said she'd found the note in her coat after they'd arrived at the hospital. The note was a little darker than the tray, though it was hard to tell actual shades because of the lighting at the time the photo was taken. I could see a white bloom, maybe from the phone's flash or a lamp, toward the side of the note. All in all, it was a terrible picture, a little blurry, but I knew Almond had to have been distraught when she snapped it.

A text came through.

“It’s from Almond,” Maddie said. “The note was about four inches square.”

“Good to know.” The note appeared to have been folded into quarters, and all four edges had a subtle unevenness to them, like the paper had been torn to that size with the edge of a table or ruler.

I pointed that out to Maddie. “See? It’s not a clean cut like would happen with scissors or a paper cutter. Or if it had come from a 4x4 notepad.”

“Mm-hmm. Too bad this bottom part here is torn even more. That little thingie there is a tease.”

She pointed to the small smudge of something that might tell us who had written the note.

“Could be part of a signature, initials, or some sort of symbol even,” I said.

“An L? Part of an E?”

“A wild guess at this point,” I said.

“Uh-huh. And did you notice the subtle wrinkles there?” She pointed to the photocopied image. “That might not all be from wear and tear from rain and handling. It’s like those old-fashioned pages ... Ugh, what’s the word ...?”

“Parchment.”

She snapped her fingers and pointed at me. “Yes. Isn’t that unusual?”

CHAPTER 15

“So we’ve got a note that’s wet, torn, wrinkled, and stinky,” Maddie said, after verifying with Almond that the paper had indeed been parchment-like. “What’s next?”

“The actual words themselves.” I stretched my neck and shoulders, thinking. “I’ll be honest, I’ve had those words on my mind ever since I first read them.”

“So have I. The PI part freaks me out, Sloane.”

“Yeah, I hear you. I’ve thought a lot about that.”

“And?”

“How could it be related to me? We’ve known them for what, a handful of days? Besides, no one knows us here. We haven’t even been here before. Maybe the note is unrelated. Maybe it?—”

Maddie raised a hand, stopping me. “I’m not buying it. When it comes to you ... I mean, nothing is off the table. Strange things happen to you all the time. I can’t believe it’s a coincidence.”

“Okay, fine. But how in the world would I have become a threat to anyone in Asheville, people I don’t even know that well! Harmony, of all people.”

I dropped my head into my hands.

“Hear me out,” Maddie said, taking a cross-legged position in front of me on the floor.

I groaned.

I couldn’t help it.

This was the nightmare I was trying to avoid.

But we had to address it.

The big elephant.

“Someone’s trying to mess with you,” Maddie said. “Not Harmony. Not Almond. You .”

“In North Carolina? Come on, that’s just so ... far-fetched.” I paused. “Isn’t it?”

“Not far-fetched at all. You’ve ticked off a lot of people in your line of work over the years, Sloane. A LOT.”

“And you’ve helped, let’s not forget.”

Maddie’s life hadn’t been smooth-going, and many of those sketchy times were during one of my investigations. In fact, it happened in New Orleans a few years back. She had been kidnapped and almost killed. Thanks to me.

“Let’s focus on this creep and what his motives might be,” I said.

“On that note, I have a question. You seem convinced the bad guy is a ‘he.’ Why?”

“Did I say that?”

“You did.”

I chewed on my bottom lip while I thought about it. “Yeah, I suppose you’re right. I think it’s a man, though I hadn’t realized it until you pointed it out. I was shoving all that to the back of my mind, not wanting to think I’d put anyone in danger. In most of my murder investigations, the murderer was a man.”

Maddie shook her head. “Not true. What about Florida with my nephew? What about in New Orleans with that woman who ran the addiction house, before you bought it, and it became Helping Hands? What about in Tennessee ...”

I held up a hand. “I get it.”

“So ...?”

“I don’t know. It just feels like a man to me.”

“Okay, then,” she said with a clap of her hand. “Look, I’m about to pass out from lack of food. And I wouldn’t be opposed to a stiff drink or two. Besides, it is our last day here.”

With everything that was going on, I’d forgotten we’d be going our separate ways tomorrow. “Alta Vista again?”

“There’s another restaurant in here, Bennie’s Tavern. We haven’t been there yet, so let’s check it out. A change of scenery will refresh our minds too—if we don’t overdo the cocktails.”

I shot her a pointed look.

Maddie snickered. “No way you’re putting limits on me.”

“I’d be shocked if you allowed it.”

We slid on our jeans, sweaters, and boots, and left the room, preparing to hit the restaurant, where I was determined to do another deep dive into the mysterious letter.

CHAPTER 16

We found a private table—not many patrons in the after-dinner hour, which suited us just fine. We placed our drink order, choosing one of the North Carolina brewed ales for starters. Bennie’s was known for its creative drink menu—a mashup of clever cocktails made with local ingredients and regional spirits, or so the advertising claimed. We agreed to try a small-batch bourbon after we ate. When the beer arrived, we placed our dinner orders. Maddie lit up over the skillet cornbread, which came with smoked sea-salt butter and a drizzle of syrup. We both went with the poached pear and arugula salad as our main—topped with toasted pecans and a generous scoop of goat cheese from a nearby farm.

Maddie raised a glass, and we clinked mugs.

“Cheers to us,” she said.

Then she pulled out a copy of the threatening message from her pocket. “While we wait on the food, let’s break this sucker down.” She spread it out on the table so we could both see it, then read it out loud. “Continue this path and death is nigh. Please to avoid friends of PI.”

I had my eyes on not only the words, but also the way the message was punctuated and spaced.

Continue this path

Please to avoid,

Friends of PI.

“First of all, let’s drill down on the path ,” I said, pointing at the word. “Assuming this note was meant for Harmony, and I think we should just go with that assumption for now, what is she doing that her attacker wants her to stop doing?”

“My first guess would be hanging out with us. Or you.” Maddie winced. “Sorry.”

“As much as I wish it wasn’t the case, it’s plausible. But I don’t want to overlook the idea that the word PI was just thrown in there for effect. I’ll get to that in a minute. My point is, maybe she was on a path toward self-destruction. Smoked too much. Made poor decisions. Maybe she acted all sunshine-y but was battling past traumas or depression, and she wasn’t taking care of her mental health.”

“Who leaves a note like that and then whacks a person over the head?”

“The note and the attack could have been two separate situations.”

“Situations like ...”

“A burglar who was caught in the act.”

“Gotcha, gotcha,” Maddie said. “So she’s on a dangerous path of some sort that could lead to her death.”

“Well, that’s part two. Death is nigh. Is it her demise or someone else’s? Could be that something she was doing might harm someone else, and this was her warning to get a grip ... or else.”

“I see what you mean. Moving on, we have please to avoid , which is weird phrasing. Could it suggest an accent of some sort?”

“That was my first thought,” I said.

“Could also be someone trying to get all poetic on us.”

“That too.”

I tapped a finger to my chin, then sipped on my beer, as Maggie guzzled hers.

I smirked and shook my head. “There are other possibilities for that part of the message. Maybe they meant to write please avoid and accidentally stuck in the ‘to.’ Or maybe they meant they’d be pleased to avoid something. The comma at the end throws me a little bit. Maybe just a poetic punctuation. But it could be a sign-off of sorts. You know, ‘Signed, the friends of the PI.’”

Maddie smacked the table. “I like it. So that smudged thingie, the letter or whatever it is, at the bottom could mean something else. Maybe it’s not a signature at all.”

“Yeah.”

We stared at the note, going quiet. The waiter approached with our food, and Maddie swiped the note off the table.

Once the waiter left, I said, “I’ll say one more thing and then we can get down to enjoying the rest of the evening.”

“Sounds good. Where’s that brilliant mind of yours heading now?”

“In a nutshell, this all seems familiar, doesn’t it? I can’t place it just yet, but I will. And when I do, things won’t end well for our perfumed poet.”

CHAPTER 17

After two rockstar bourbons post-dinner and a restful night of sleep, we agreed to extend our vacation one more day before going our separate ways—me to New Orleans and Maddie to Jackson Hole, Wyoming, where she was scheduled to train a new staffer at the medical examiner’s office.

While Maddie was in the shower, I picked up the receiver on the hotel phone to punch up the front desk. Before I could, though, my cell rang with a call from Cade. Maddie was in the shower, so I knew I wouldn’t get any flak for taking the call. And besides, it felt like I hadn’t talked to him in ages. He knew nothing about what had been going on in North Carolina, and I decided I would share the highlights. Given Cade was a former chief of police in Wyoming, I was interested in his feedback on the note. I knew it would worry him, but there was no way to sugarcoat the threatening message.

“Catch any fish yet?” I asked.

“A bunch, and even though it’s been fun hanging out with the guys, I’ll be happy to get on home.”

“Mm, I’ll bet. There’s been a lot going on since we last?—”

“Sloane, you remember Andi Leland?”

I hadn’t expected her name to come up.

Andi Leland was a teenage girl who'd been kidnapped for human trafficking in Savannah, Georgia, over three years ago. My heart always jolted when I thought back to it. The details of the crimes were the stuff of nightmares. Maddie and I had been on vacation in the city while it was happening, so we did a little investigating on our own. And we solved it, stopping the killer right in his tracks. The killer mastermind, Hugh Barnes, was nothing short of psychotic. He ended up in prison where he belonged. He wasn't there long before he was shanked, bleeding out on the floor of his cell, naked as the day he was born. He'd gotten what he deserved in the end, and I had to admit, I was elated when I heard about his demise.

"Sure, I remember Andi," I said. "Such a brave young lady. Why are you asking about her?"

Cade's long, heavy sigh indicated I wasn't about to be given good news.

I braced myself, waited for him to continue.

"Andi called me?—"

"Why?"

"She was trying to get in touch with you but was dialing the wrong number. I told her you'd changed phone carriers back a year or so ago and your number too. Anyway, someone down there followed the breadcrumbs to me and gave her my number."

It was true. I had changed my number. I'd wanted to tidy up my contact list—and my availability to others from my past when I worked full time. It was an attempt to streamline my life, which never seemed to work. I'd shared my new number with just a few key people, but I'd updated my business information online. She could have found me if she'd looked.

Given Cade's doleful tone, it was obvious something was wrong, and my stomach did a few flips.

"What's happened, Cade?" I asked.

There was a long pause on the line, followed by four horrible words that broke my heart. "Grady's been murdered, Sloane."

No ... it couldn't be.

After my first trip with Maddie to Savannah, the same trip where I'd learned Andi had been kidnapped, I'd become good friends with Grady. We'd kept in touch ever since, and a few weeks ago, I'd flown back to see his show.

The puzzle pieces in my mind, no matter how much I'd resisted admitting they fit together in any logical way, were coming together, and I couldn't deny it.

My lunch with Kim a couple of weeks before.

My weekend visit with Grady.

And now ... Harmony.

An eerie whimper escaped my lips, and I collapsed into the chair, slapping a hand over my mouth. Maddie came out of the bathroom, donning a robe. She took one look at me and fell to the floor at my knees.

"Sloane, what is it? What's happened?"

Tears filled my eyes, and I fought them back. But I couldn't speak. My entire body trembled as repercussions and theories and likelihoods took me deeper and deeper

into a dark, unimaginable place.

In the gentlest of ways, she pried the phone from my fingers.

“Here, let me. It’s okay. I’ve got it.” Directing her attention to the phone screen, she held it to her ear and said, “Cade?”

“Maddie, is she okay?”

Maddie placed the call on speaker. “What’s going on, Cade? Tell me everything.”

And he did—at least, what little he knew.

Over a week ago, Grady had been murdered just before one of his stage performances, a knife to the heart—several times. Andi was afraid something might happen to her dad next—he was also a drag performer at the same nightclub. She wanted us to come down to Savannah, find out who murdered Grady and why before anyone else fell victim to the same fate.

Maddie spoke to Cade for a time, then she assured him I would be okay, that I just needed time to process what I’d just learned.

“Call me before you make a single move, ya hear me?” Cade said.

“Will do.”

The call ended, and she turned, staring at me for a few seconds, her hands on hips, concern in her eyes.

“I can’t believe it, Maddie,” I said. “Why? Why Grady? I don’t understand.”

She leaned over and took my hand in hers. “I don’t know, but all of this, it’s hitting too close to home. It’s time we get some answers.”

CHAPTER 18

Having shed the tears and fears, I confirmed the fastest route to Savannah was all highway—I-26 across North Carolina, then onto I-95, a straight shot to the coastal city. But according to Google Maps, there was a huge pileup on I-26 and, therefore, major delays.

After Maddie finished cursing like a sailor, I said, “We’ll go down through Georgia, then. There are a couple of routes ... another hour, but it’s the best alternative. More scenic too, for what it’s worth. We’ll be fine.”

It seemed it was my turn to do the reassuring now. She’d morphed into an emotional wreck. It was understandable. She’d been with me in Savannah and felt like I did about Andi: a brave, likeable young lady who’d been through too much pain in the short span of her life, and now another blow to her sense of safety.

We threw our belongings into our suitcases, and I mean threw . Even I abandoned my usual desire for “a place for everything and everything in its place.”

While we checked out and headed to my Audi, the first thing I did was to turn off my Do Not Disturb and allow all calls to come through. Vacation time was over. Next, I called Andi, letting her know we’d received her message and that we were heading to Savannah. She wanted to talk about the current events, but I suggested we save it until we were all in person. Though reluctant, she agreed. I asked to speak to her father, Mike Leland, and she put him on the line. I told him the same information, and we agreed to meet at their house.

I also called Almond, who didn't pick up. I left her a voicemail, apologizing about our need to make an abrupt departure. I explained we had a pressing case but added we'd be in touch if we figured anything out before she or the cops did. I also added: "If you haven't already, please be sure to tell the detectives everything you shared with us. They're the leads on this, and they need to know. Give them a chance to do right by you."

Maddie took the wheel for the first leg of the trip, a long six and a half hours, if we didn't stop for breaks. And we wouldn't be stopping anywhere for long—not in my playbook, anyway.

We drove in silence for a while, which was unusual. Maddie had always been the first one to turn on the radio and crank it up on our road trips. The hum of the car's engine lulled me, and I leaned against the headrest and closed my eyes ...

When my phone rang, I shot straight up and fumbled around for my phone, which had dropped to the floor while I dozed. I reached for it, peered at the screen, and saw the name Katerina Smart, a detective in Chattanooga whom we'd befriended over the years. I glanced over at Maddie, who was eyeballing me.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"Kat Smart."

"Well, are you going to answer it?" she asked, looking at me with a curious expression.

"Yes, of course."

The truth was, I almost didn't want to answer. Or hear any voicemails. Or see any text messages. Because most of the time, when she and I had talked over the years, it

always involved a murder case. And we spoke often, which was, I guess, sad in the scheme of things, but our reality, nonetheless.

I put the call on speaker. “Hey, Kat. I’m here with Maddie. We’re on our way to Savannah, for ... uh—” I didn’t want to get into all the details, so I stayed vague “—another case we’re working on. How are things going with you?”

“What’s the case about? Care to share?”

I paused to consider the question. “Mmm, maybe not yet.”

“Same ol’ Sloane. Keeping it close to the vest.”

Maddie laughed. “Hi, Kat. So, what’s new?”

“Shoot, girl, it’s never good when I call, is it? I’m glad you’re together right now—saves me making an extra phone call. Since we’re all in the crime business, and because we’re friends, of course ... well, I just wanted to let you guys know about a big decision I’ve made.”

There was silence for a time. I let it play out for as long as I could stand, which was mere seconds, and said, “And that decision is ...?”

“Well, to be clear, I’m still mulling things over, but ... I think I’m out.”

“Out of what?”

“The business. I don’t want to be a detective anymore.”

Maddie and I shared a wide-eyed glance, and I sucked in a deep breath before asking, “What happened?”

I suggested we pull over so we could put all our focus on the conversation. We did, stepping out of the car and standing in a scenic overlook with views of Tallulah Gorge. I'd heard of the massive canyon with its picturesque waterfalls, sheer rock faces, and lush forests, but my imagination could never capture what lay before me to the fullest. The juxtaposition of this natural beauty to the everyday ugliness I faced in my career gave me pause.

The wind whipped around us, prompting us to duck back inside the car.

"Go on, Kat," I said. "Tell us what is going on."

And she let it all out, sobbing as she got deeper into the story. There had been a gut-wrenching case in recent months, involving a child. Out of habit, I asked her for details, but she said she didn't want to get into those. Still couldn't talk about it without having a "total breakdown," she said. She did tell us she'd cornered the perpetrator, who then proceeded to take shots at her, one bullet lodging in her thigh—and not a major artery—and the others, near misses. She'd fired her weapon in return, center mass. Instant death. She was healing now, but the case had shaken her. Even over the phone, I could feel how deep her mental wounds were. She was working with two therapists, one department ordered and the other one of her own choosing.

"Even with all the support I'm getting," she said, "I've realized I just don't want to do this anymore. It's sucking the life out of me."

No truer words ...

We talked for almost an hour, kneading through the pain. As much as I wanted to tell her things would be okay, I knew they wouldn't be. Kat was tough, but she'd be forever changed in a way that could affect her approach to her job. She worried about it—that she'd become weak and afraid.

Losing Kat as a detective was a tragedy for everyone. She was one of the finest investigators I'd ever met. As much as I wanted to offer words of comfort, I struggled to know what to say.

Maddie, on the other hand, wasted no time with her response. "This could be an amazing opportunity for growth, Kat. You never know where your new path might lead."

We ended the call with promises to keep in touch, and I was determined to do just that. Trauma like she was experiencing now could make a person want to crawl into a cocoon and never come out. Maintaining connections with not just family but trusted friends was a cornerstone to healing.

Still, what a mess.

And it made me question my own journey.

As the tires chewed up the miles and the natural splendor of North Georgia swept past my window, I allowed a cold reality to set in.

The list of recent victims who were known to me: Grady, Kim, Iggy, Harmony, and who knew who else? Were their tragedies all related somehow—because of me? Some but not others? I might even add Kat to the mix, except in her situation, she hadn't been the intended target.

The trajectory of the attacks: Savannah, New Orleans, the North Carolina mountains ... and now a plea that I return to Savannah. Was someone leading me their way, littering the path with death and injury so I'd follow?

Because ... of course I would.

My history as a private investigator looped around and hit me square in the face. I now saw myself as the ultimate target, and everyone who knew me, even remotely, could be in danger.

CHAPTER 19

THE VILLAIN TIGHTENS THE NET

I just knew Sloane couldn't resist the lure of seeking me out. She'll do anything to solve a case, no matter who she hurts in the process. What a clueless bore! Doesn't she realize the tentacles of wrongdoing spread wide and deep? She can't win them all, no matter how clever she pretends to be.

Perhaps she's starting to understand just how connected she is to all this tragedy. I wove the perfect trap ... or so I'd thought.

Neither Sloane nor her little sidekick were able to figure out the Savannah connection. I'd needed some help there, and I found the perfect stooge in little Andi Leland.

I find myself wanting to stew again to revisit the moment when the flame of hatred first ignited.

When they put my old friend, Hugh Barnes, behind bars down in South Georgia a couple of years ago ... well, that was the straw that broke everything. Hadn't Sloane already done enough damage to my life?

Then Hugh got stabbed while in the slammer, killed by inmates who didn't take kindly to his penchant for trafficking teenagers.

I just about went delirious with madness when it all went down.

I liked the guy, you know?

Hugh and I had done some business together over the years—most of it illegal, and yes, sometimes related to the selling of little humans.

His death ... it felt too close to home.

When he was alive, I'd done the occasional "wet work" for him and a few others across the country. The money I'd earned from those small jobs provided me with an impressive nest egg—known only to myself, of course—allowing me to engage in this little vengeance plan of mine.

Still, I wasn't pleased when those jobs dwindled to nothing after Hugh's death. I guess I was too "hot" for comfort. I didn't blame them; even I worried there might be some fallout coming my way, but it never happened. Other than losing everything that was important to me, of course. Although ... those things are not so important now, are they?

What a joy it's been to take charge of my life at long last instead of wallowing in pity. After months of following her around, searching for patterns, weaknesses, and most of all, formulating the best way to inflict pain. To give it to her good. Just like she did me.

Revenge is like sugar, indeed, especially when it includes stringing someone along, one horrific bump after another, straight to their own demise.

I waited for the perfect storm of events. For the girls' getaway, for Cade's getaway—for the universe to flip the switch. I said goodbye to Jackson Hole and jumped straight into Sloane's personal hell loop.

With glee.

But things—like the notes I’ve written—haven’t unfolded like I thought they would.
So far, no slow, agonizing burn.

Not the cryptic messages.

Not the risky near-misses while they visited that fancy mountain resort.

Not the dropped postcard.

Not even the obvious fact that Sloane’s associates were going down like dominos.

For a private investigator, she was a disappointment.

Well, nothing to do about all that except to juke.

And juke I did ... with young Andi’s help. Such a pretty thing, that Andi Leland, even though she must be about eighteen years old now. Too old to be the valuable toy she once was years ago.

But I digress ...

Turns out, Andi was the biggest help of all in luring Sloane to my web.

Andi called Sloane, like I knew she would—thanks to my urging while we both just happened to be in line at her favorite coffeeshop. I made sure the newspaper headlines recounting that drag queen’s death was front and center in my hand. We got to talking—two total strangers—as people often did in the South.

Indeed, Little Miss Andi had heard about Grady’s death and was “deeply saddened.”

Boo-hoo.

I did a great job of acting, like, Oh my, you're the girl who helped bring down that human trafficking ring.

"Hmm. I wonder if those two women are still around," I'd said, tapping my chin. "I remember their hard work had made all the difference in catching that awful Hugh Barnes. Well, with your help too ... Andi."

The Leland girl got a faraway look in her eyes and said, "You know, that's a good idea."

Then it was her turn at the counter, and I skittered out the door.

Mission accomplished.

Sloane and Maddie are here.

And now it's time to tighten the net.

CHAPTER 20

Our GPS led us straight to the Lelands' door, where Mike and Andi awaited us with sandwiches and cold drinks. Andi's mom was visiting her mother in Florida and wouldn't be back for another week.

My mind was all over the place, the rock in my stomach reminding me that in the blink of an eye, another person in my life could die.

We sat in the living room filled with colorful décor and soft lighting, including candles. There was a poster advertising an evening at the popular nightclub with Racy Lacy—that was Mike's name when he performed—posing alongside of Lady Grady. Their costumes outlandish, their eyelashes even more so, but their hearts ...

I knew them well—at least as well as I'd known anyone during my casework. They were good people. And now one of them was dead.

Mike saw me looking at the poster. "A good place to start, huh? Grady was our honcho, you know? A friend to all. Encouraged us to go out there and have fun. That's why we did it. For the artistic expression, to do something outside the box for a change."

"I remember, yes," I said, Maddie nodding alongside me on the couch.

Mike was an accountant—not the most creative of professions, unless finding loopholes could be considered a way to express oneself. But it was a good, solid profession.

I clasped my hands on my lap, biting my lip.

While Grady's fourteen-year-old nephew had disappeared, only to be found dead by apparent suicide, we never could connect him to the human trafficking ring that was focused on others his age in the Savannah area.

But Andi Leland had been one of those teens—and had fought her way out, her bravery leading us to Hugh Barnes.

Hugh Barnes, the ringleader, had a long history of evil, almost as if he were born into it. This included a quirk with the number 5. That quirk had led us to him and his system for collecting his “product”—focusing on fourteen-year-olds: $1 + 4 = 5$. We had Maddie to thank for connecting those crazy dots.

Barnes was long dead, but Grady's murder was fresh. Part of the same circle, but not completely, and I was desperate to find out what was going on.

Maddie broke the ice, as she was known to do, and grabbed a sandwich and a beer. We all followed suit, except Andi and I each chose a probiotic-infused soda.

“The funeral was a big deal,” Mike said. “The number of people who showed ... crazy good stuff.”

“It was so beautiful,” Andi said.

“I wish someone would have called me to let me know what was going on,” I said.

“We all assumed you knew,” Mike said. “I'm sorry. I should have found a way to track you down earlier, let you know what happened.”

“It's the reason I did,” Andi said. “I just wondered ... well, you helped the police

before. Can you help them now? We're coming up on two weeks since his death, and I'm afraid the police are not doing all they can. You know what I'm saying?"

I did.

She'd implied that maybe a black drag queen wasn't worth their time.

"I don't think that's it at all. He was an icon, well-loved in this community," I said.

"And we don't know all the details yet. We should wait a bit before we?—"

"It makes sense!" she insisted.

"Andi ..." Mike warned.

"No, it's okay," I said, holding up a hand. "It's a conclusion that is neither far-fetched nor unlikely. But there's something you don't know ..."

Where to begin telling them about the connection with everyone who'd been injured or killed ... and me?

"We think someone's out to get Sloane," Maddie blurted out as she took a huge bite of her turkey-and-provolone.

Mike jerked his head back. "Oh my."

"Hold up," Andi said. "I haven't finished saying all I need to say. It's true, I agree. Sloane is a big part of this whole thing. She has to be."

"You sound so sure," he said, his expression one of confusion. Then he dropped his head to the side as his shoulder slumped. "What haven't you told me?"

“It wasn’t intentional, Dad. I realized it just a few minutes ago.”

She pulled out a piece of paper from her sweatshirt’s pocket.

Parchment.

Small square.

Maddie gasped.

I put my hands in together in front of my lips, prayer formation.

It can’t be ... yet another note ... no.

CHAPTER 21

Always the brave one.

I knew you'd assist.

Bring them to me

For one final twist.

There it was, another note, and the first one I'd been able to see in person, hold in my hands. It was not as cryptic as Harmony's message. In fact, it was downright clear as day. And now we could see the full image of what we'd thought was an L or an E on Harmony's note. It was a simple cross. The vertical bar was made up of dashes, while the horizontal bar was a solid line. The note also held a strong musky scent, just like Almond had described.

Without knowing, Andi had led us closer to the man—or woman, I had to admit—who had it out for me.

A person who would do harm to anyone close to me, just to make me squirm.

The spiraling thoughts from the car ride leered at me, front and center. I am the target, and everyone who knows me, even remotely, is in danger.

Even more chilling was the fact that in recent weeks, I must have been followed, my friends, old and new, targeted—all part of some twisted, sadistic game.

And now the psycho had duped Andi into calling us here. The whole thing had been planned, and the plan had worked.

Someone had it out for me, and they wouldn't stop, not until I was dead.

In this moment, however, my safety was secondary to Andi's.

I had to exercise caution with my decisions, ensure Andi stayed safe until we worked through the puzzle.

I cleared my throat. "Mike, we need to speak with you—" I glanced at Andi "—in private for a moment."

Andi shook her head. "No, no way. I'm adult enough to hear whatever you have to say."

I looked at Mike. "Please. Just us, then you can decide if you want to call her back in."

"Does what you intend to say involve her in some way?" he asked, his eyes darting from me, to Andi, to Maddie, then back to me.

I paused. I had to be honest here, even though the last thing I wanted to do was tell this young lady who'd been kidnapped and abused at the hands of a human trafficker just a few years ago, that she might be in danger again. "Well, it could, yes."

"Then I need to know about it," Andi cut in before her father could respond. "No way I'm leaving this room."

Mike stared at the ceiling, as if searching for answers. Then he said, "I'm okay with her staying."

Andi pumped her fist above her head. “Yyyes!”

“It’s not a game, young lady,” he said. “It’s just ... you’ve been through a lot. And while those experiences have made you wise beyond your years, shall we say, it also doesn’t mean that you know everything. We’re going to listen to what these two ladies have to say, and then we will talk about things, and I will make a decision.”

She sat and clasped her hands together on her lap. “Sorry, Dad.”

“All right, then,” he said. “Let’s hear it.”

But I couldn’t say the words.

All the words that still didn’t make sense.

All the words that filled my heart with dread.

Maddie and I exchanged a long look. I could see the same trepidation in her eyes that I felt in my bones. Then she reached out and squeezed my hand. “It’s okay. I’ll be here to add commentary as needed—like always.”

She smiled, and I felt all the support in the world from this person who had been with me through thick and thin for a long, long time.

I took in a shuddering breath, and I hoped they didn’t notice. Then I began. “Here’s what’s been going on ...”

I started with the attack on Harmony and the note that was left behind. That note had all the same characteristics as the one Andi had received. I explained that just before our vacation, someone close to me in New Orleans had been murdered—right outside our door. And that Maddie’s boyfriend was in a bad way after a terrible car accident,

also in New Orleans. Not to mention my fellow detective's near-miss with a bullet not so long ago. All related? Maybe not. But I was a common thread in all these tragedies, and I presented the whole sordid mix without holding back a single detail.

After who knew how long, I sat back and glanced at Maddie. "What have I missed in terms of facts?"

"Nothing, as usual," she said, then directed her next comment to Andi. "Where did you find that note?"

Andi lifted it up for us to see. "It was just like this, folded, at the coffeeshop counter, next to my hand. Not knowing who it might belong to, I picked it up and read it. I assume it was meant for me."

"In such a public place?" Maddie asked, then raised an eyebrow in my direction. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

I was.

"Did anyone approach you there?" I asked. "At the counter? Standing in line ... or?"

She mulled the questions over, and then, "Oh, man! Yes! I was talking to this nice guy, well ... I thought he was nice. He had one of those mountain canes—you know, all carved up and fancy—and a newspaper, and he was about ... mmm, yay high," she paused her rambling and stood, lifting her hand above her head to indicate a specific height. "You know, he was tall. But not overly tall."

"What else can you tell us about him?"

"He was holding a newspaper. There was a headline about Grady, and we talked about how sad it was that he'd been murdered. Then the guy remembered my name. I

didn't even have to tell him. He remembered it from all those years ago when I was abducted. Is that weird? Maybe not. It was a big deal, I get it. Everyone in the city knows who I am. Anyway, the whole chat put me in a real funk, but then he said something about wishing you two were around to help again, and that's when?—"

I cut in with, "That's when you decided to call us and tell us about Grady and get us to come down here."

Maddie added, "And he knew you would, Sloane."

He sure did.

If he thought his little ruse gave him a leg up, he had another think coming.

Game on.

CHAPTER 22

Mike shook his head, his face blanketed with concern.

I was sick about the fact I could be putting his daughter in harm's way, but I didn't look away from him. Chin lifted and gaze steady, I wanted him to know I had this under control, even though I didn't.

My poker face was getting better with age.

I hoped.

My recommendation to Andi and Mike was to sit tight. They both looked at me, baffled by my comment. We were looking at multiple jurisdictions, a lot of assumptions, and an undertow of concern that something just wasn't right. I wouldn't call it outright panic, but the feeling was at a low boiling point. Now more than ever, facts were what I needed. Not emotions. But my head was spinning as to where to begin.

"First, we need to find out if there have been any threatening notes left anywhere else," Maddie said, focusing on the facts when I could not. "Kim, Iggy, Kat ... we hadn't known how important it was to ask them about it until now. So, we will. In fact, Sloane, let's ask Kat to do a search in the FBI database for other crimes that involved a note like this one."

I felt the investigator in me de-icing from the shock as I regained some degree of intention.

“Good idea, Maddie,” I said. “What else ... Andi, let me have a look at that note again.”

She handed it to me. “Sure thing.”

“You’ll have to take this to the police, if not today, tomorrow,” I said.

“Okay-doke.”

Maddie leaned closer to me, and we read the note out loud. Then we examined the cross at the bottom a second time.

Maddie traced it with her finger. “What’s the meaning of this cross, I wonder? Some religious symbol?”

“Or roads, maybe a map?” Mike threw in.

I stared at it for a moment, and then I gripped Maddie’s arm so tight she squealed. “I’ve seen this before ... just like this with the dashes and everything.”

Andi’s raised arm, straight up, as if asking to be called on. “Oh, I have too!”

“You have?” her dad asked.

I’d seen the symbol on Dr. Beetle’s business cards. Long after we’d left Savannah, I had googled it, out of curiosity. The image was a hoodoo symbol for crossroads, where the spiritual and physical realms meet. Put that together with the scent, which reminded me of her little shop on River Street, and I felt certain ...

Andi jumped up and grabbed her father’s shoulders. “Dad, it has to be Dr. Beetle!”

“But why would she write a note like that?” Maddie asked. “How did she get to the mountainside of North Carolina to leave the note for Harmony? How?—”

“I have no idea,” I said, heading toward the door. “But we have to make some calls.”

“You can’t just leave us hanging,” Andi whined.

“We won’t,” Maddie assured her. “We just need some time to think,” then to Mike, she added, “Can you keep this under wraps for another couple of hours at least?”

He nodded. “Yeah, sure.”

“Andi, you stay right here with your dad,” I said. “No arguments. If you’re where we can’t reach you, it’ll cause worry for all of us. I promise we’re not going to leave you out.”

I was surprised when she ran over and threw her arms around the two of us. “Y’all helped me and my friends when there seemed to be no hope. I’ll do whatever you say.”

We hustled to my car. “To the Marshall House,” I said. “We figured out one mystery while staying there. Time for another.”

Maddie slid behind the wheel. “On it.”

We were there in no time, at the same hotel we’d stayed during our first visit to Savannah, when Andi had been kidnapped. We even got our old room when we checked in, which was unexpected. Talk about serendipity. To be back at the place it had all started.

As we lugged our bags through the door, Maddie shot me a wink. “That’s the

universe working for you.”

She’d read my mind.

Now I needed the universe to lead me to the person wreaking havoc on my mind, body, and soul.

CHAPTER 23

I got bored tossing and turning that night, watching the clock until it was time for the atrium to open for breakfast. I nudged Maddie awake, and we plodded downstairs for coffee, juice, and a hearty meal. I knew it would be a busy day, and I wasn't sure when we'd have time to eat again.

The first thing I did when we stepped back into the room was to call Henry.

When he answered, I said, "Henry, how are you?"

My old New Orleans buddy and I took a handful of seconds for greetings before I asked him about the status of his girlfriend's case.

"It's the craziest thing, Sloane, I tell ya. They would still be focusing on a robbery gone wrong, except for ... uh, hang on."

And then he put me on hold.

I tried not to dwell on the knife to the throat Kim had received, a horrible personal assault, similar to what had happened with Grady, only he'd been repeatedly stabbed in the chest.

But then we had Harmony, alive and well, other than suffering a heavy blow to the head—nothing to sneeze at, to be sure. She'd experienced a concussion from the attack, along with some minor cuts and bruises ... and no doubt some mental battles to work through as well.

While I waited for Henry to come back on the line, I signaled to Maddie, who was rummaging through her suitcase.

“What’s up?” she asked.

I covered my phone with my hand. “Hey, we should give Almond a call to check on her and Harmony. I want to make sure they haven’t had any other problems or found out anything new about Harmony’s attack. If they ask about any new developments on our end, I say we don’t mention anything. For now.”

Maddie gave me a thumbs-up. “I gotcha covered.”

She swooped her phone off the bed, where it lay next to her purse, and walked toward the other side of the room.

Henry came back on the line. “Cripes, sorry. That was funeral home. Seems there’s another delay of some sort. I’ll have to go over there. Sloane, I sure do wish you were here.”

“I do too, my friend. I do too. Won’t be long, but we’re in Savannah right now.”

“Savannah? Weren’t you going to the mountains?”

“And we did, yes. But—” I debated about how much I wanted to say. “There’s been a bit of a family emergency, and we were waylaid.”

“Hmm-hm. Everything going to be okay?”

He was testing me.

Good ol’ Henry.

Fighting a smile, I called him out on it. “You’re pushing me to come clean, aren’t you?”

“I know you well enough to know when you’re working a case, Sloane. Is it related to Kim? Something else? I remember you had an old case over there in Savannah ...”

“I’d rather not get into it right now,” I said, “not with all you’re going through at the moment.”

He cleared his throat, then said, “Just be careful, and hurry on back to New Orleans. I need you.”

Guilt consumed me; I wished I could be in two places at once. I should have gone to him before coming to Savannah, but I couldn’t ignore what was happening or the fact I was starting to feel like a mouse being led around by a piece of cheese.

Which was the truth.

That bastard was leading, and I was following. I needed to take a more proactive approach, and that started with my next question.

“I’ll be there as soon as I can,” I said. “But, hey, before you go, I do have a question about the investigation down there. They haven’t happened to find any, say, messages or notes, have they?”

There was a long pause.

“How did you know?” he asked.

I swung around to find Maddie, who was just coming out of the bathroom. I waved her over, putting the call on speaker.

“Henry, it’s Maddie. You’re on speaker now. What’s going on?”

“You referring to the note they found on Kim’s body? How did y’all know about that? They swore me to secrecy.”

“Who’s they ?” I asked.

“The law, who else? I’d planned to tell you anyway, once you got back from vacation, but then you called just now. I was about to tell you about the note they’d found, but I got interrupted by a call from the funeral home. So, yeah, there was a note. A creepy one too.”

“Do you have a copy?” Maddie asked.

“Can’t say as I do. But I have it ingrained in my brain. I’ll never forget it.”

He told us what the note said.

When he was done, one thought circled through my mind: And three makes a serial killer. Almost.

Grabbing a notepad from the desk, I asked Henry to repeat the words, but to include punctuation, capitalization, and where new lines began. I wrote as he spoke, asking questions to clarify, and in the end, I had this:

Number two, who are you?

A friend to Danger

- once was a stranger.

Don't choke up!

And ending with the crossroads symbol.

"That's a lot more complicated than the other—" Maddie stopped when she caught herself.

But Henry had already clued in. "Hold on now, are you saying there was another note?"

"It's complicated, Henry," I said. "I can't go into it right now, but later, I will. I promise. I called to check in and see how you were doing, that's all. Find out what was going on with the case. Knowing I'm not there for you, I just ... I feel awful about it."

"Don't worry," he said. "I know when you get back here, we'll have plenty to catch up on. Everyone's always talking about getting justice and all, but it won't bring Kim back, and I just want it all done."

"She will have justice, Henry," I said. "It's what she deserves."

"Guess you're right."

"Okay, we gotta run, but listen, until Kim's killer is caught, be careful, okay? Keep yourself safe."

"I'll do my best. Take care of things in Savannah, and I'll see you soon."

Maddie and I said our goodbyes, and I ended the call.

"You ready to analyze this case?" Maddie asked.

“More than ever,” I said. “Let’s talk about this note. Like you were about to say, it’s got a bit more juice to it than the other ones.”

“Dr. Beetle again, though?”

She looked doubtful, and I understood her point. The likelihood the elderly root doctor had made the rounds through the Southeast was ... well, it was almost zero. And even if she had, to what end? She had no beef with me. Or Maddie. If anything, she’d helped us during our Savannah case.

“My conclusion? Even if it is Dr. Beetle’s symbol, it doesn’t mean she’s behind these notes,” I said. “I think someone else is writing them, and for whatever reason, they’re doing it in her style, her tone.”

“Yup. But—” She collected her hair into a high ponytail and secured it with the hairband on her wrist. “I think we still should go see Dr. Beetle. You never know what kind of input she’d have for us, maybe something useful. She knows Grady and Andi too, which all ties in with what’s happening right now.”

I screwed up my face. “Are you serious? I mean, I like her, but she’s intense. Don’t you think? All that hoodoo voodoo.”

She wagged her finger. “I know you believe in it just a little bit.”

I shrugged.

“I still think she put some sort of nasty juju on Hugh Barnes,” she continued. “She was there for us in her own root-doctor way. She also knows all the key players, like Andi, her dad, and sweet Grady. And she knows this town, all the inner workings. We’re going.”

“The same could apply to the police around here,” I said. “They did a great job, including keeping in touch after the case was solved. But there’s not much for us to take to them at this point. Andi will call them about her note, just to be sure, but I doubt they can do anything with that. We’re the only ones who know all the troubling chain of events. Well, besides the psycho who’s messing with me, of course. He seems to know everything.”

“And so will we, soon enough,” Maddie said as she threw her arms around me. “I just hope this doesn’t progress into some awful showdown.”

I flexed my arm muscle and winked. “Whatever we need to do to take this guy out for good.”

She turned her attention to the note. “Let’s look at the first line. I think ‘Number two, who are you?’ serves a dual purpose. It’s a clue that reveals Kim was the second person to get a note—and the second to die by the blade. Grady was the first.”

“Morbid but true.”

“I’m just giving it to you straight,” Maddie said. “The next part seems to answer the who are you part. Like, you are a friend to Danger. You think Kim was into something sinister maybe?”

“Danger is me, Maddie.”

Maddie’s face was a mix of emotions, indicating a hint of doubt.

“It makes sense,” I said. “She’s friends with me, and going to the third line ... It’s an explanation about me, Danger. Because we weren’t always friends. We’d just gotten to know each other, so ‘once was a stranger,’ would make that doubly accurate.”

“Huh, I wasn’t moving in that direction,” Maddie said, “but I can kinda see where you’re going with it. But what’s with that ending line? It doesn’t even rhyme. It’s different than the other notes.”

“From what I’ve seen, even the rhymes all have varying tempos and number of words. They’re all over the place.”

“So this is just a warning.”

I gave her a flat look. “Maddie, think. It’s more than a warning.”

Using the pen, I pointed at the line— Don’t get choked up!

“He doesn’t want us crying over it?” she guessed. “Oh, wait ... He doesn’t want Kim crying that she’s dead. Or Henry?”

“He slit her throat, Maddie.”

“Ohhh. He’s throwing it in our face, making a joke about the way she was murdered.”

I snapped my fingers. “Yep, and that line was directed at me, it helps me form an opinion about his personality. Maybe it will help me discover his identity. I mean, he’s gotta be someone from my past, right?”

“Has to be.”

Maddie put a hand to her heart and closed her eyes.

I continued, “And when I say he/him/his , I do realize this could be a woman from my past. I’ve had run-ins with both men and women alike. Still ...”

“I’m starting to think he’s a man too,” Maddie said. “Feels like you’re rubbing off on me.”

“Yeah ... well, I’m still trying to keep an open mind.”

“You were starting to say something else. Still...” she prompted me.

I nodded. “I saw a man at the inn, while we were shopping. Sounds crazy, I know, but everything about him ... the way he moved, his height. I had the distinct feeling I knew him somehow. I’m certain he’d dropped that postcard for us to find. It’s just too random. Too coincidental.” I held up the pad of paper and shook it. “And the ending to this note. Talk about flippant!”

“He’s trying to get at you, in your head, tear you apart.”

I used my fingers to enumerate other traits I was picking up. “I think this guy is someone with a dark sense of humor. He’s narcissistic, believes he’s untouchable. Yet, he wants me to remember him. He’s provoking me so I’ll use all my skills to figure out the puzzle. Letting me know that, if I don’t, more people I care about will be hurt, or even worse, they could die.”

“He knows you go hammer and tongs after a case,” Maddie said.

I raised a brow. “Interesting way to put it, but yeah, hammer and tongs—I give everything I have in me to all my cases. My job is a huge part of who I am.”

Maddie was pacing now. “Right. Let’s assume the two of you have met. Maybe you haven’t interacted with him in a direct way, but an indirect way.”

“Hadn’t thought of that. It widens the circle. I’m going to start making a list.”

Maddie stopped. “It sounds to me like this dude’s playing a game.”

“A game for him.”

“It isn’t a game if he means to hurt you.”

Oh, yes it is a game , I thought. The killing game.

And I had no intention of letting him win.

CHAPTER 24

Our next stop was to Dr. Beetle's shop on River Street. Although I preferred to start making a list of potential criminals who'd want to hurt me, Maddie convinced me it was more important to talk to Dr. Beetle first.

The air was crisp and fresh today, the sky a solid blue. I tipped my head back and breathed it in, feeling the sun's rays on my face as they sent a rush of energy through me.

When we arrived, the door to Beetle's shop was locked. I checked the schedule hanging in the window. From Monday through Sunday, it was the same: If I be hera, we be open."

And she didn't seem to be "hera." I knew how appearances could be deceiving when it came to our favorite hoodoo woman. As could expectations. So, we pounded on the windows and door and called her name.

"Shop been closed for a while now. Oh, say maybe a week or so."

We turned to see a short, elderly man looking up at us, his skin like buffalo leather, dark and wrinkly.

"Oh," I said. "Hello. Is that typical of Miss Beetle?"

"Dr. Beetle," he corrected. "No, no, not typical at all. She always here, 'cept for now."

I glanced at the sign, then at Maddie, who said, “Thanks for letting us know. Is she sick or just taking a vacation maybe?”

“Oh, no, no, never takes the vacation. She sick, yes.”

“We’re old friends,” I said. “Do you know where we can find her?”

“The darkness made her sick. And it’s still here, you see. It ain’t leaved.” He was looking past us now, one of those faraway looks in his rheumy eyes. Then he snapped to and pointed a crooked finger at me. “D’ya feel it?”

I didn’t know how to respond.

Something in my eyes must have given me away because he wagged his finger, adding, “Ya do.”

“What are you taking about?”

He turned to Maddie. “Take yo friend and go before the darkness get you too.”

Before we could say another word, he wobbled away, leaving me with a series of unanswered questions.

“Should we go after him?” I asked Maddie.

“No way. I mean, the man was spooked. Are you okay?”

I jerked back my chin. “I’m fine.”

She inspected me. “No darkness or whatever he was talking about?”

“The only darkness around here is that we’re getting nowhere. Someone in this place must know something.”

I began to walk—with purpose—back the way we’d come.

Maddie shuffled up next to me. “What’s the plan?”

“I don’t know yet ... I’m looking.”

We passed all the usual shops and restaurants along River Street until I reached what used to be the Happy Beatnik, a place that was key to our Savannah case years ago. It was now called Shaggy Shack—basically another version of the same thing. A place to hang out, drink kombucha and the like, eat healthy snacks, and relax. I didn’t see anything about poetry readings, which was a big draw for the Happy Beatnik back in the day.

“Maybe someone in here knows something or even remembers us,” I said, opening the door.

The bell at the top of the door chimed, and though it was a soft, delicate sound, it was enough to announce our entrance to patrons and staffers. All eyes turned in our direction.

I acted like I didn’t notice and instead looked at Maddie, who was smiling and waving to no one in particular.

“Hi, y’all,” she said.

I was surprised at the number of people who smiled and waved back. Maddie had that “thing.” It was charming, to be sure, and had helped move my investigations along in the past.

I let my gaze flow around the shop, focusing on décor as much as the people. The shop had changed, not just in name, but also in style. It now was all neutrals and pastels, and the cloud-like seating matched the vibe. All floofy and poofy with mounds of those squishy stuffies scattered everywhere.

“I don’t recognize a soul,” I whispered.

“Me either,” she agreed. “But come on. Someone has to know something about a fellow River Street shop owner.”

She led the way toward a young woman about to step out from behind the counter. She wore an apron and had a tray of drinks in her hand.

The woman blew a stray hair out of her eyes and looked our way. “Can I help you?”

“Yes. Well, maybe,” Maddie began.

I cut in with, “Do you know anything about Dr. Beetle down the street? We heard her shop has been closed for a week or so, and there’s no information as to what’s going on.”

She narrowed her eyes. “You friends of hers?”

“We sure are,” Maddie replied.

“Well, I don’t know much, but I’ll tell you what little I know. Yes, she closed her shop, and I’m not sure she’ll open it again. I see her often—I’m always working, she’s always working—and then the last time I saw her, she was frazzled out. It was just after that nice drag-queen man got ...” She made a stabbing motion toward her heart a few times. “I’m guessing it’s related to him.”

“How do you know?” Maddie asked. “Were they good friends?”

“I’m not sure. I feel like they were at least acquaintances, because after his murder, she kept saying, “I done tried to warn him, dat Grady.” She imitated Dr. Beetle’s walk and accent to a tee. “That’s why I’m sure the two things are related. Him dying and her closing the shop.”

“She said she tried to warn him ?” I asked, wanting to clarify.

“Hey, that’s all I know. It could be nothing. I gotta get back to work.”

She glanced over her shoulder to find what I presumed was her boss glaring our way.

“Didn’t mean to get you in trouble,” I said in a low voice. “We appreciate your help.”

Without another word, she hurried to a table at the back.

“Thanks for explaining the ingredients to that ... sandwich! No peanuts for me! Toodles!” Maddie shouted at the server’s back. Her comment, though false, let the bossman know our conversation had been Shaggy Shack-related, even though it hadn’t been.

The girl didn’t turn around, but she did shake her head.

“Come on, let’s get out of here,” I said, pulling Maddie along.

We exited the shop and bumped right into the old man we’d met before, and I got the impression he’d been waiting for us. He handed me a business card with a handwritten address on one side.

“Whose address?” I asked.

“I don’t got time to feed you all da answers.”

He shook his head and walked away, chuckling to himself.

Maddie plucked the card from my fingers. “I’d bet my Louboutins this is where we can find Dr. Beetle.”

If she was right, the information he’d just given us was huge. I pulled out my phone and started poking at the screen. “Let’s see ... GPS says it’s not that far from here.” I looked up. “What do you think? Too intrusive to just go up to her house when she’s not feeling well?”

Nudging me in the shoulder, she said, “Who are you and what have you done with Sloane? Let’s go.”

CHAPTER 25

We found the house, a small, fenced-in cottage. It had been there a long, long time, as evidence by the state of the dwelling. Falling shutters, blackened, curling roofing shingles, and a front porch that tilted to the left all reminded me that home was where the heart was—and not necessarily what it looked like.

As with her little shop, tidiness was not one of Dr. Beetle's strong suits. Trinkets and potted plants, both dead and alive, and even an old bicycle, were strewn across the weed-filled property.

I opened the wrought-iron gate, which groaned in protest.

"Well, well, well," came from inside, and the screen door whapped open. "I knew youse be comin'."

She waved us in.

I entered the cottage with my mouth agape. A quick glance at Maddie told me she was feeling it too—the strange energy hanging in the air, the way the house seemed to breathe with something old and unseen. It was like we'd stepped into another world.

The home was made up of just three rooms—the main room with a kitchenette tucked into the corner, and what I presumed were doors to a bedroom and a bathroom. The walls were covered head to toe with antiques: tapestries, paintings, sconces with candles, and masks of all kinds. A few animal bones and skulls were scattered across

tables ... and more candles everywhere. Lamps of all sizes with low wattage bulbs added to the mysterious ambience.

Scattered about was a familiar sight: the crossroads symbol. Embroidered in pillows, drawn in sand laid out on a plate, hanging from the walls. Not a cross. But a crossroads.

The symbolism wasn't lost on me.

The furniture looked hand-carved and was worn from wear, lots of reds and blacks and yellows in the seat cushions and pillows. Smoke curled out of incense burners, leaving the room with a powerful mixture of scents.

As freaky as it seemed, though, it was also cozy.

Dr. Beetle to a tee.

"Sit, sit," the old gal said, shuffling around the room, clearing off the couch and a couple of chairs. I took the sofa, sinking in so deep I wondered if I would ever get back out again. Maddie slid into a wooden chair. Dr. Beetle stood, swaying on her feet.

On the table in front of us was a familiar sight: mojo bags and all kinds of goodies to go inside, depending on the result one wished to evoke. I'd kept the one she'd given me years ago, and thinking about those times made me smile. We'd made a difference that day. We'd hunted down evil and snuffed it out.

But it never stayed out for long.

"Looks like you've been working," I said, gesturing at the table.

“Always workin’,” she said, chuckling. But then her face turned grim. “Not sure bout it all anyhow. You hear what all happen to our Grady mon, yes? I could no stop it. I could no. My powers, dey fail me.”

“What do you know, Dr. Beetle?” Maddie asked. “I’m guessing you’re aware we’ve been led down here by some weirdo?—”

“I know why yo hera,” she said, then began to cough.

I tried to get up from the couch, but kept falling back down, the springs jabbing my butt cheeks. “Water, Maddie. Get her some water.”

And then the coughing stopped.

“Don’ need no watah. Whatchu wanna know?”

“You don’t already know?” I said, and thought maybe I’d let my sarcasm get the best of me.

“We heard you sensed something was going to happen to Grady, and you tried to warn him,” Maddie said. “But you couldn’t stop it, and now you think you’ve lost your mojo. And you’re hiding out here, because you can’t face the thought that everything you’ve believed in and lived for may now be gone.”

The blank expression on Dr. Beetle’s face was frightening. Like she couldn’t believe what she’d just heard, and she wasn’t happy about it. Some long, uncomfortable seconds passed, and then she waddled over to Maddie and patted her shoulder, offering her a small smile.

“No, girl. This bad mon, as you say ... he comin to hurt her .” And the old woman swung around, pointing a chubby finger straight at me. “Through the Grady mon, he

hurt her .”

Another jab in my direction.

Maddie and I froze, our eyes wide and locked on each other. Beetle had just verified my worst fears. My career flashed before my eyes, one criminal after another, one victim after another, and all the people on the periphery. So many people.

I now understood what Maddie was getting at. The woman’s attempt to save someone had failed. All her skills were of zero consequence in the face of this particular evil. Was the same true for me?

“He be hera now, in da city, and dat’s why you came. He done made you come hera.”

The doctor placed her head in her hands and groaned. Maybe it was a chant. It lasted for a long time, and she swayed as she wailed.

I felt dizzy, like the house itself was shaking, and I grabbed the old couch cushions, my spine as straight as the furniture would allow. Then I launched myself off the couch, brushing myself off. “Dr. Beetle, how did you try to help Grady?”

A hush fell over the space. Dr. Beetle peered through her fingers at me.

“Tell me everything you know, everything you ... you feel,” I said. “I can stop this man, but only with your help now. We can do it. We can do it again .”

Beetle pressed her lips together and nodded. She leaned against a large table, which was smackdab in the middle of the room, for support. “We can do dis, yes.”

“What happened?”

“I feel the shadows comin, you know how I do. And for whatever da reason, you came to my mind, and dat’s when I felt da connection tween him and you. But you weren’t in da city, not close ’t all, so I tryna tink about all the reasons he wanna come hera when you not hera. That case, o’ course. That was it, I knew. And I tink of Miss Andi and all da kids and ... and Mister Grady. I kept tinkin about Mister Grady.”

“Okay ...” I said.

Although it shocked me, I found myself believing every word that was coming out of her mouth. People had instincts, people had gifts ... I had them too. How could I deny this woman’s experience was real? Further, how could I deny how her instincts so closely represented my reality? I was the target, but this jerk wanted to punish me—for what, I didn’t know. And he was doing it through those I cared about.

“Please, go on,” I said.

“I think bout the one dat got put away fo his crimes, the human traffic man who done got kilt in prison. Hugh Barnes. And dat’s when I know.” She tapped the side of her head. “Dis one who come fo you now, he’s angry at you, girl. For what happened to his life. For what happened to his friend, dat Barnes.”

My eyes shot wide open. “He’s friends with Hugh Barnes?”

“Are you saying this guy is a human trafficker too?” Maddie blurted out.

The old woman bobbed her head left to right. “Mmm, not so sure. Maybe not all da way. Maybe back in da day. Not sure bout dat. But he is a killah!”

The force of her words unsettled me, and I pushed back the urge to shudder. “So, this man was going to hurt me through Grady. And you sensed it. How did you try to warn Grady?”

Her crooked finger found me once more as she said, “I left a note.”

CHAPTER 26

I left the doctor's house on shaky legs, all the pieces flying together in a whirlwind of revelations and maybe even some regrets.

"I'd like to catch a cab back to the hotel instead of walking," I told Maddie. "Can you ...?"

I pointed at her phone.

"I'll call for a driver, sure. And I feel ya. I just want to crawl in a hole and bring you with me."

I'd had my doubts about going to see Dr. Beetle, but now I was glad Maddie had pressed the issue. We learned more about this case—I guessed that's what it was now—than I'd ever expected to learn from our woo-woo connection.

Dr. Beetle's note had been written with care, well thought out, she'd assured us. Of course, in my world, I would have been far more direct and told him to call me as soon as he got the message. But not in Beetle's world, and I had to respect that. I remembered how, back at her house, I'd even thought we were similar in a couple of ways. Protectors for good and fighters against the shadows of evil. And we both trusted our instincts.

Her note to Grady had said:

Eyes wide, stay inside.

Fear, for terror is here.

Dr. Beetle

And the crazy thing was, she'd signed it straight-up as Dr. Beetle. Full name, clear as day. And I knew it was clear as day because she rewrote the whole thing for us. When I'd asked her if it was written exactly like the original note, she shot me one of those blank looks that said, O' course it's exact. You take me fo da fool? And she'd even rewritten it on the same paper as the original—a torn square of parchment paper, a pile of which she had in an old writing desk, which reeked of oldness and incense and candles.

As Maddie called it, “the Dr. Beetle Smell.”

I still clutched the mock note in my fist, and I opened my hand. Brought the parchment paper up to my nose and took a long sniff. The scent seemed to be ingrained in the paper itself. It smelled just like Andi's note. And there was a good chance it was the same smell Almond had said was on Harmony's note.

The man had been in Dr. Beetle's home, and not just for the paper. While there, he'd stolen her hand-carved walking cane with a massive tiger's eye stone on the handle. She'd had to get a substitute because she needed it more and more these days to get around town. The cane wasn't just some old walking stick, either. It meant a lot to her—that much, she'd made clear.

The old woman's handwriting was neat, which came as a surprise, and I couldn't be sure until I'd done some comparing, but it didn't look like the handwriting on either Harmony's or Andi's notes. I'd bet that was the case for Kim's note as well.

There had been no mention of a note found near Grady, so I had to assume the police had chosen not to reveal it to the public yet ... or the killer had seen it and snatched it

up, taking it with him.

And then it clicked.

If the killer had seen the note, whether he'd taken it or not, it had to have been the kickstart to his idea to leave similar notes for others, notes intended for me to find.

Creative.

Clever.

It also suggested he was better at stealing ideas from others than coming up with them on his own, which further confirmed my profile of this man. He thought he was untouchable and brilliant. He enjoyed toying with people—it made him feel worthy and daring and wise—and he cared little about those he hurt along the way. All he cared about was that his games could continue and that he got what he wanted in the end.

Deep down, as Dr. Beetle had alluded to, this man was angry. In his mind, he'd lost some important things that mattered to him because of me, things that defined him or kept him steady, at least. And other than Hugh Barnes, I wasn't sure who or what that might be—a child, a parent, a job ...

Dr. Beetle didn't have an answer for that, either.

But she'd told me enough.

Another thing I'd deduced during our conversation was that this man—and it was a man—had come to Savannah. So, he didn't live in the city on a regular basis. I'd solved cases in only a few states in this country. If he were on the periphery of a crime, somehow hurt as a result of the arrest or whatever damage might have been

done along the way, he could be anywhere. But my gut told me he was from one of those locations where I'd done business. At least that would be my first line of attack.

Our ride pulled up to the curb, and the driver rolled down the passenger window and said, "Hurry up and hop in. I gotta make a living, but truth be told, I hate coming around this place."

CHAPTER 27

Back at the hotel, we ordered two bottles of wine and some sandwiches, then took turns in the shower, sliding into the luxurious robes we'd purchased from the spa in North Carolina. The wine-and-dine arrived, and Maddie poured each of us a full glass of pinot grigio before settling cross-legged on the bed, same as me. While she'd been taking her shower, I'd opened my laptop and begun to type all the data points from everything we'd learned today.

But now, I set the laptop aside and took the glass of wine. We clinked glasses but said no toast or any words at all. We just sat there soaking in the quiet of the space, me trying to clear the noise in my mind.

Deep breaths, Sloane ...

As always was the case when I was trying to enjoy a moment of peace, my cell phone rang. It was Andi.

"Did you go see Dr. Beetle?" she asked.

"Hang on just a second, okay?"

I shot a glance at Maddie, covered the phone, and whispered, "I'm not sure how much to say to Andi yet. We haven't had two minutes to breathe."

With a flick of her fingers, Maddie whispered back, "Just tell her that."

I nodded, then said into the phone, “Yes, we did see her?—”

“And ...?”

“We learned a lot, but to be honest, it’s been a long day, and I’m resting for the evening—” which was a lie “—but we’ll be back at it in the morning.”

“You promised to keep me in the loop, remember?”

“I do. Why don’t you go get some rest too, and we’ll talk to you and your dad again tomorrow?”

Given Andi had always been a bulldog for information, I wanted to make it clear that her father would be included in all discussions.

She huffed an irritated, “Okayyy, fine. Y’all take care, then. Talk to ya tomorrow.”

I hung up, sipped my wine, and wiggled the glass in Maddie’s direction.

“I’m on it,” she said and reached behind her to the nightstand, where she’d placed the bottles of wine and the food. She grabbed the open one and refilled both glasses.

As she handed mine to me, she said, “Did you mean what you said about resting for the night?”

“Of course not. We’re so close to finding this guy. It’s all I can think about.”

She reached for our sandwiches, two fried green tomato BLTs, not the healthiest choice, but they looked delicious.

She handed me my sandwich, and I took it, unwrapped it, and dove in.

“Not bad at all,” I said, then took another big bite. “Cade would be all over these big slabs of bacon.”

As I said his name, I felt a stab of guilt about not calling him yet.

I needed to check in sooner than later.

“It’s divine,” Maddie said, wiping her mouth with a napkin.

I set the remnants of my sandwich aside and pulled my laptop back out. “Let’s start at the top.”

And we did.

We bounced facts back and forth, things we knew for sure. Our review of What We Know didn’t take a lot of time, but the list was lengthy and twisty. I entitled another document the What We Need to Know list—things we needed to further explore.

The high priority point of What We Need to Know involved going back through all my cases and seeing if something jumped out. But we decided to tackle the easier-to-attain second and third items: whether a note had been found on or near Iggy and whether there were any other crimes in the FBI database with similar threatening messages.

Maddie called Iggy, which she’d been wanting to do anyway, and I called Kat.

“I didn’t expect to hear from you so soon,” Kat said after just one ring. “Always a pleasure. Listen, I know something’s going on. As vague as you were during our last conversation, I could sense something’s brewing. Talk to me.”

I blew out a loud sigh, inhaled, and let loose. “I feel bad even calling, with everything

that has happened to you, but if you're up to it, I could use your help. It won't take long, promise."

"Don't even think twice. What can I do?"

Even in her state of flux, she was here for us. And she knew we'd do the same for her. We'd been through two major cases together, me as a private investigator, Maddie as medical examiner, and Kat as detective. Once in Tarpon Springs, Florida, where we solved the murder of Maddie's sister. And the other just outside of Chattanooga, where we'd really established our connection as sister investigators, putting a murderous hair stylist behind bars.

"Right, so ... I need you to check your databases for other crimes out there that might involve threatening notes with these specifics—" I shared the details of our notes, size, smell, words "—I don't want to come off as taking advantage of our relationship, your contacts. I hope you know how much I respect?—"

"Stop, Sloane. I'm glad you called. Tell me everything."

Before I knew it, I'd shared the entire list of What We Know and other tidbits of our latest escapade.

Trying to stop a whack-job from killing people I cared about ... and me.

"That's big, Sloane. Why didn't you tell me when I called while you were on the road to Savannah? Now I feel bad for monopolizing the entire conversation with my situation."

"You needed to talk, and I needed to listen. In a way, we're on a similar path right now, though they're not the same."

Still on the phone with Iggy, Maddie cocked an eyebrow in my direction.

There was a moment of silence, then Kat spoke up. “It gets to you, this business.”

“It sure does. Makes me think twice about sticking with it sometimes.”

“Your situation is open ended,” she said. “You have to work this through before you can make any major decisions about hanging up your days as a private eye.”

I hadn’t gone all the way down the retirement road yet, but I could admit, this series of tragedies—as a result of my investigative work—gave me the willies. I’d heard of cases coming back on detectives, but it was not something I’d ever worried about. Isn’t gonna happen to me syndrome. And now, I wasn’t even sure it was something I could deal with, but Kat had picked up on it.

I diverted, saying, “Are you okay to check the databases?”

“I will, and I’ll get right back to you.”

I thanked her, threw my phone on the bed, and rubbed my temples. When I looked up, Maddie was eyeballing me.

“Did Iggy have a note?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “But I’m sooo glad to hear you’re taking this serious enough to consider total retirement. It’s the life, trust me.”

“I’m not considering it right now,” I said, then added, “Kat will get back with me about any other similar crimes. How’s Iggy doing?”

“He’ll be out in another day or two, he thinks, then back to California. He sounds

great, and I freaking miss him! Maybe I'll hitch a ride with you to New Orleans, depending on how long it takes us to solve the crime spree at hand."

"I'd love that," I said, and I meant it. It was one of the few times I'd seen Maddie's heart open up and stay that way—on one man. Besides that, I knew seeing Henry again was going to be a soul-ripper, and Maddie had a way of revealing the light, even in the darkest of times. It sounded selfish, but sometimes it was nice to lean on someone. Cade, Maddie ... my people. I wasn't that good at leaning, but I was working on it.

Maddie went on and on about Iggy, his wounds, his band, his upcoming gigs, and I set my investigator's brain on pause so I could give her my full attention.

And I did.

Until my phone buzzed with a text.

It was Kat: Nothing popped up. Not even a little bit similar. Maybe other parameters you could provide?

I responded with: We're good. Thanks for checking.

Stay in touch , she replied . I'll keep thinking on everything you told me. Takes my mind off everything else.

Focus on you , I typed. We've got this.

I glanced at Maddie. "Kat found nothing similar. Could be a good thing, or he could have just changed his MO. I feel like calling every person in my universe in the last twenty years to see if they're okay."

Maddie laughed. “We can’t do that, but we could run through your caseload, say in the last five years or so.”

“But I’ve been doing this, what ... twenty plus years now?”

“I say we start with a smaller circle. If nothing gives, we’ll expand it.”

And so we worked on this number-one item in our What We Need to Know list—if any of my cases reflected on the current state of affairs.

But nothing jumped out.

And that covered a lot of cases.

Discouraged, I said, “We gotta go back a few more years, I guess.”

“Right,” Maddie said, gulping down her second glass and pouring herself another. I was still working on my second glass, but she refilled me anyway. “So, we’ll go all the way back ... to the beginning.”

What a trip that would be.

The process was easy for me. I never forgot a case. Year after year after year. Maybe not every detail, but every investigation.

I’d discussed my past cases for a while, and then Maddie lifted a finger, stopping at a case Cade, she, and I had worked on together. It was back in Jackson Hole, and it was where Cade and I had first met.

“Human trafficking,” I murmured.

“Yes. Do you think ...?”

“I don’t know. It was a long, long time ago.” I shook my head, clearing the cobwebs from my memories. “There were two girls. Olivia and Savannah. Both kidnapped.”

“So crazy that one of the girls is named Savannah, and we’re in Savannah. It’s almost like she’s calling to us now.”

I ignored Maddie’s tendency to delve into the spiritual side of things.

“But we caught the guy, rescued the girls. They’re safe. Everyone’s moved on.”

“Do you know that for sure, though?” she asked.

She had a point.

I didn’t know for sure.

I hadn’t checked on them, but that wasn’t unusual. I didn’t typically follow up on the aftermath of a closed investigation. A new case always came up, and I focused on the present, putting the past behind me.

This one, though ... it meant something more. In part because of the heightened aspect of the kidnapped girls.

“I have all the contact info on all my cases on a spreadsheet.”

“Perfect.”

I entered their information into the search bar and found the file of contacts, narrowing it down to the people I needed to call, then turned toward Maddie. “What

do you think? Should I call?"

"You should," Maddie said. "Right now."

CHAPTER 28

I decided to start with Savannah's father, Noah, just to get a feel. Years before, when he'd hired me to find his missing daughter, the case took a dark turn when his wife, full of grief, overdosed on pills and died. If only she'd had the will to carry on a little longer, she would have been reunited with her daughter.

My call with Noah was short, with him confirming all was going well. I called Olivia's mother, Kris, next, but the number was no longer in service. I called the landline, and it, too, had been disconnected, indicating there had to have been some big change in their lives. I texted Kat, asking her to see if she could track down the new cell phone number.

Then I placed my phone on my lap and waited.

Kat's text came through fast, as I'd hoped it would: Different names, new location, new number. I think she doesn't want to be found.

She gave me the new phone number for Kris ... and her new name, Mary. It seemed the FBI itself had worked it out for her, thanks to an agent friend—not witness protection, but enough that she could start a new life.

But why?

Perhaps it had been because of all the press around the kidnapping at the time. Everyone in the country was talking about it back then. It was a lot—overwhelming for the families.

I called Mary, using her current name, and she answered, much to my surprise, thinking it was possible the years may have made her less wary. I reintroduced myself, and there was an uncomfortable silence before she responded with, “How did you get my number?”

I wasn’t about to admit the truth.

“I’m a detective, after all,” I said.

“Oh ... kay.”

“I know it’s been quite a few years since we last spoke. I’m just calling to check in on your family.”

“Why? Is something wrong?”

“Oh, no ... no. Everything’s fine.”

“Just seems weird to me, to hear from you out of the blue, after all this time.”

My attempt to make it seem like I was just checking in wasn’t working. I shifted gears, blaming it on nostalgia in my old age, and she’d chuckled at that.

“Those are times I’d rather forget,” she said, “but I can only imagine, as a detective, how you might want to check in and make sure everything is fine on our end.”

“That’s the reason for my call,” I said, holding my crossed fingers behind me back.

“Well, good to hear from you, but yeah, everything’s great.”

We got caught up on the last ten-plus years. Her daughter, Olivia, now Jennifer, was

thriving, but not in Jackson Hole. They'd moved to the East Coast—somewhere in North Georgia. Kris/Mary had chosen a common girl name for each of them, and their last name was Jones. They'd changed many details about themselves, including their dates of birth. All the better to meld into the background.

“And your husband—Terrence? I take it you're not together anymore.”

“Not in the least bit. He didn't take it well that I ended things. He refused to grant me a divorce, so I did what I had to do. I pulled some favors. He has no idea where we are, and I aim to keep it that way.”

They'd changed names, moved, and started a new life, a life away from her husband—not that I blamed them. When I worked the case, I'd met the guy. To say he was difficult to deal with was a gross understatement.

“Did he hurt you or Olivia, or both?” I asked.

“In more ways than one, but not in a physical way. In fact, it's worse than that, because ... oh, Sloane. How could I have not seen it from the get-go? The reason it didn't work out was because I couldn't get over the fact that he didn't love my daughter.”

“That's ... so awful,” I said.

Our conversation went on for thirty minutes, her describing the man's outright disdain for her daughter, his stepdaughter, Olivia. How she would never tolerate a man who didn't accept her daughter as part of the marriage package. How she'd found out about some of his illegal hobbies involving gambling and shady business deals.

“This only came up ... when?”

“Several years after you got Olivia back for us. I swear, it got to the point where sometimes I thought he’d kidnapped Olivia himself back then, just to get rid of her.”

But I knew that hadn’t been the case.

Didn’t I?

I’d caught the man who’d kidnapped Savannah and Olivia, almost killing him in the process. He was serving time for what he’d done.

Still, the tentacles of human trafficking were monstrous and vast. But there had been no indication her husband had been involved in any of it. I would have picked up on that. And yet, I was questioning myself.

We ended the call, and I was left wondering if I was trying to fit a square peg into a round hole.

Maddie plopped down beside me. “I heard bits and pieces. You think there could be a connection between what’s happening and this Terrence guy?”

“There’s a slight connection, I’ll admit. Still, it seems like a stretch.”

“Let’s keep looking. Even if this guy is bitter about the divorce, it had nothing to do with you.”

“Right. But what if he knew Hugh Barnes?”

I wished I could ask him.

Then I realized that I could.

His number was right there.

CHAPTER 29

“Hello?”

“Is this Terrence Slade?” I asked.

“Yes ma’am. How can I help you?”

“You may not remember me. I’m Sloane Monroe, the detective?—”

“I remember you.”

His response was sharp and flat, but if what his ex-wife had said was true, it was understandable.

“I was reminiscing about some of my cases, and I decided to follow up to see how all the families were doing,” I said.

“Ours, not so good. Kris divorced me.”

“I’m sorry to hear it. Other than the divorce, everything’s going okay, I hope?”

“I’m fine, yeah. As far as how they’re doing, I wouldn’t know. I don’t talk to them much anymore. Have you spoken to Kris yet?”

“I haven’t. I was going to try her if I couldn’t get in touch with you.”

It was a lie, of course ... but given Kris had gone to great lengths not to be found, it was warranted.

“Good luck finding her,” he said. “Once we split, Kris and Olivia disappeared from my life. It’s my own fault, I suppose.”

“Are you still in Jackson Hole?”

“Sure am. Just trying to put my life back together. I try to stay positive. I’m going to anger management classes, got a new job, trying to stay productive, keep busy.”

“Keeping busy is a good idea. When I’m trying to take my mind off things, I find traveling to someplace new is a great way to refresh my attitude. Do you travel much?”

“Oh, gosh, no. Don’t have the money, first of all. Second, I’m more of a homebody these days.”

“So, you’re in Jackson Hole right now?”

“Yup. Same place, different me.”

He sure sounded convincing.

“Sounds like you’re doing all the right things,” I said. “I wish you all the best. Thanks for taking my call.”

“No problem. Hey, if you talk to Kris, will you tell her I’m doing better, maybe see if she’ll call me?”

“Sure will. Take care now.”

We hung up, and I sat there for a minute, assessing how I felt. The fact was, if he was in Jackson Hole, there was no way he was here now. Given Cade had once been the chief of police in Jackson Hole, I called one of his old coworkers, a mutual friend. I explained I was working a case and needed to verify if Terrence still lived in the area. He agreed to do a drive-by, and a short time later, he called me back, confirming he saw Terrence through the window of his house, sitting on the couch, watching television.

And we were back to square one.

I got up from the bed, tossed my food wrappers into the garbage can, and set my wineglass on the desk.

I stretched.

I paced.

Maddie chewed on her lip, leaning against the bathroom's door frame, watching my every move.

I lay back down on the bed and placed the pillow over the top of my head, covering my eyes. "I just need a minute."

"We'll find him, Sloane. We're so close."

I wanted to catch this killer with an intensity that I'd never felt before. I wanted to crush this person who was taunting me, killing my friends, bringing my past back into play, making me question my entire career ...

Then a realization struck.

Even though patience was not my strong suit, it was the only way I'd win this twisted game. A man like my nemesis would be anything but patient. He'd keep pushing and pushing until he'd pushed himself right into a corner.

And that's where I'd get him.

CHAPTER 30

My cell phone rang, and I cursed it, refusing to move from my position of rumination—and plotting.

It rang again and again, and I shot my hand out, searching for the phone in the expanse of the comforter. “Where is the dang thing ...” I growled as I whipped the pillow off my face.

“Looking for your phone?” Maddie asked.

I glanced at her and saw my phone dangling from her fingers.

She handed it over, and I looked at the screen.

Cade was calling.

With a guilty wince, I answered. “Hey, honey. We’re in Savannah.”

I thought it best to just get it out there.

I figured he wouldn’t be too happy that I hadn’t checked in sooner, and I was right.

“You don’t have to tell me you’re in Savannah because I knew that’s just where you’d be. You and that sidekick of yours.”

Maddie snickered and leaned in, saying, “Hey, now. I can hear you and your big

voice. Sidekick, huh?”

Given she'd gotten involved in our call, I put it on speaker.

“Uh, hey, there, Maddie,” Cade said. “Sorry about that. You're not a sidekick, and you know it. But I worry ... It drives me nuts sometimes, these murders you two are always stumblin' on, even when you're not supposed to be working. It's just ... well, it's unbelievable.”

Maddie went to respond, and I raised a finger, stopping her.

“You're right,” I said. “I should have let you know what was going on. You know I can handle myself, and I'm not alone, so stop worrying, please?”

“Sloane, when it comes to you darlin,' I'll always worry.”

“We're safe and sound at the Marshall House. I'm sorry I didn't call before. You know how investigations make you lose track of time sometimes.”

“Yeah, I do,” he said with a sigh. I could hear the crunch of gravel underfoot. “I'm comin' on down there. Three heads are better than two— Oh, what the heck is going on ... oh, hell no!”

“Cade?” I said his name twice more, then looked at the phone. Still connected. “Cade, are you okay? Talk to me.”

Maddie and I exchanged concerned glances, waiting for him to respond.

“My tires are slashed,” he said with a heavy breath. “I ain't goin' anywhere for a while, looks like. Hang on.”

The thought of his tires being slashed in a quiet ice-fishing community ... well, it seemed unusual.

“Did you drive over a nail maybe?” I asked.

No response.

Maddie tried next.

“Is the rest of your truck okay?”

No response.

A feeling of dread rush through me. “Are you okay?”

In the background, I could hear Cade cursing, then some other men’s voices. It sounded like they were walking around, inspecting the damage.

I heard a man say, “Hold tight. I’ll call you a tow, buddy.”

Cade thanked the man, then came back to us. “I heard your questions. No, it wasn’t a nail. The front and back tires on the driver’s side were cut with a sharp object. Big cuts, not little notches or nicks. Yes, the rest of the truck is okay. Yes, I’m okay, except for the fact I’m pissed off by the whole thing. By the time I get down there, you?—”

“Will already have the situation resolved,” I said, sounding more assured than I felt. Truth was, I was relieved he wasn’t here. I loved the man through and through, but he could be too protective at times. Him being here would put a rock in my shoe, and I had no desire to be hobbled right now.

“How did it go with Andi?” he asked.

“She’s much calmer now.” My comment had a smidge of truth, if at all. But a smidge counted in times like these.

I finished with, “Take care of your truck and get on back to New Orleans. I might even beat you there.”

“Yep, will do. In the meantime, don’t do anything crazy, all right?”

Nothing I did was crazy, per se.

Crazy was in the eye of the beholder.

I thought back to what he’d said about always worrying when it came to me.

“We won’t do anything crazy,” I said.

Maddie shot me an exaggerated wide-eyed look and mouthed, We won’t?

I nudged her arm, and she shook her head at me, covering her mouth with her hand to stop herself from laughing.

Cade mumbled a few words under his breath, then said, “All right, then. I’ll meet you back at the condo. Just keep in touch with me a lot more than you’re doin’ now and let me know you’re ETA as soon as you figure it out.”

“I will,” I said, vowing to be better about keeping him informed as to my shenanigans, as he would say.

I took the phone off speaker and asked him about his trip. He told me all about

it—not just the food, accommodations, and breathtaking scenery, but also some of the nutty antics between him and the boys. We ended the call laughing, which was just how I needed it to be.

But as soon as the call was over, doubt seeped in as I thought about his slashed tires.

I wondered if there was a note.

I should have thought to ask.

Cade might not have even seen it yet or there might not be one at all, but I needed to know.

I shot him a quick text: Curious, did the tire slasher leave a note or anything?

While I waited for him to respond, Maddie said, “Everything okay? You got quiet, and you have that look on your face, the one you get when you’re about to wig out.”

Sometimes I would swear Maddie had a direct connection to the inside of my head. I took a deep breath in. As I released it, I showed her my text.

“Oh,” she said. “But that would make no sense. The guy’s here, not all the way up there.”

“True,” I said with a shrug. “But weirder things have happened.”

My phone buzzed with Cade’s response: Sure was a note. Tucked up under the windshield wiper.

“No way,” Maddie said.

I resisted the urge to send a flurry of texts and instead sent just one: What did it say?

Everything in me wanted to call him, except I knew my tone would give away all the calm coolness I'd displayed on our previous call.

Cade wrote: Guess I parked in someone's spot, and the guy got fired up over it.

Slashing someone's tires over a parking spot seemed a little over the top, but there was a nutjob at every corner. The good news was it didn't sound like "our guy" had left the message.

But I had to make sure.

Send me a picture of the note.

By some miracle, he didn't question my request and sent me a shot. A full sheet of wide-ruled notebook paper, chicken-scratch handwriting in pencil that said: Hope the message is clear, douchebag. Stay out of my space.

"Okay, so what happened to Cade is unrelated to what's happening here," I said, showing the image to Maddie. "Let's get some rest. My heart has been through enough for one day."

I set the phone on the nightstand and turned out the light, falling asleep to the rhythm of Maddie's soft snores.

At about one in the morning, my phone rang again.

This time, it was Andi's father.

CHAPTER 31

“Sloane, I’m sorry to?—”

“There’s no need to apologize. What’s happened?”

Maddie and I had turned our lights back on and were sitting straight up in bed.

His words came out in a rush. “Andi’s gone. I mean, she hasn’t come home yet, and it’s past her midnight curfew. She never misses her curfew. Not since ... well, you know. I can’t get her on the phone because?—”

“Ping her phone,” I said.

“I did. That’s what I was about to say. Her phone was on the grass next to our driveway. I have it in my hands right now.”

“Holy crap,” Maddie whispered.

I thought back to what I’d said during my previous visit, about Andi sticking close to her dad, not doing anything that would cause us to worry. With a killer running loose, why had she been allowed to go out tonight?

“Okay, Mike, let’s take a breath or two here.” Easier said than done. I couldn’t even catch mine. “Where was she tonight?”

“She was with her friend up the street, four houses down. I just called them, of

course, woke everyone up ... and they say she left there at just before midnight, like clockwork.”

“What time did you call them?” I asked.

“Just now. Everything happened just now. I fell asleep on the couch, and when I woke up, I saw the time. Checked the house. No Andi.”

His voice had begun to crack as he fought back what sounded like a rising panic.

I felt it too.

“Have you called the cops?” I asked.

“I have.”

“Good. We’re heading your way now.”

Even though she hadn’t been missing long, I hoped the local law would respond quickly to the fact that it was Andi Leland, and it was possible she’d been kidnapped again. That human trafficking investigation a few years ago had been a big deal. Worth a try, at least.

I looked at Maddie, and she nodded her agreement.

“This can’t be happening again, Sloane. Please ...” Then she leaned toward the phone. “Mike, it’s Maddie here. I’m sure there’s a good explanation. Let us get dressed, and we’ll talk more when we see you.”

“The cops are knocking. Can’t believe they’re already here?—”

“Good,” I said. “Go, talk to them.”

And he was gone.

We threw on jeans and sweatshirts and bolted for the car. Earlier, I’d considered using the valet service but opted for the parking garage instead. I’d had a feeling I might need to leave in a rush.

This was one time I wished I’d been wrong.

CHAPTER 32

We parked on the curb in front of the Leland home. Mike was visible through the front windows, his arms flying around as he spoke to the two uniformed officers in the living room. He had a phone in each hand, I assumed his and Andi's.

"Let's wait a few minutes, let him get everything out before we go in," I said.

"Poor guy," Maddie said.

"Poor Andi," I added.

A few minutes passed. We sat in silence, Maddie biting her nails, me attempting to lip read, figure out what the cops were saying to Mike and he to them, and failing.

"Okay, looks like their wrapping it up," I said. "Let's go in and see what we can do to help."

We slid out of the car and approached the house. Before I could knock on the door, Mike opened it, his expression one of despair.

"Perfect timing," he said. "The officers are just leaving. Maybe you two can do what those two will not."

He threw a thumb behind him toward the officers, who stood expressionless with their hands on their belts.

Mike stepped aside, and we stepped inside. I'd hoped I would recognize the officers from the old trafficking case, but their faces were unfamiliar. I introduced us as family friends. They nodded, told Mike to keep in touch, then left.

The sound of their cruiser starting, then pulling away filled the space.

"Come on in, have a seat," Mike said, dragging his fingers through his hair.

Maddie rushed over and gave him a hug. "Oh, Mike. We're so sorry this is happening. What did they say?"

"Took the information I gave them down but can't file a report because it's only been, like, what? An hour? They thought I was nuts. And yes, they both knew about our prior traumatic experience."

"I would have expected that to have some impact, at least."

"I mean, maybe it did. Who knows? They're going to talk to the neighbor friend at least."

"They didn't look sympathetic," Maddie put in.

"Ya think?" Mike scoffed. "Hell, I don't know what to do with myself right now."

"Did you tell them about the note from the coffee shop?" I asked.

He slapped a hand to his forehead, head shaking. "Oh crap ..."

He hadn't.

It would have made all the difference, but I couldn't fault him for not remembering. I

hadn't even thought about it until just now.

"Call them, let them know about the note," I said. "They'll understand why you're all over the place. Meanwhile, we'll drive around and see if anything jumps out at us. If we're lucky, it'll be Andi."

"I'll come with you."

"I think it's better for you to stay put. You need to be here in case she comes home."

Maddie held up a finger. "I have an idea. If Mike is okay with it, why don't I take his car, you take ours, Sloane, and that way we can cover more ground together."

"Sounds good to me," I said, "Mike?"

"Yeah, great idea, Maddie. Thank you so much." He walked over to a wooden bowl sitting on a table along the wall and pulled out a set of keys. "Standard SUV. Nothing fancy."

Maddie took the keys. "I can handle that."

"We'll fan out from the neighborhood," I said. "You go one way, I'll go the other. Cover each block as best you can."

"Will do."

I turned my attention to Mike. "Call one of us if you hear anything else. And call the police department about the note. It might make a difference, convince them to look for her sooner than later."

And then we were off.

My route took me past Andi's friend's house. The empty cruiser was parked in the driveway, so the officers were talking to the neighbor family like they'd said they would. Much wouldn't come from it, but then again ... sometimes we caught a break in the crime-fighting world. I prayed this was one of those cases.

Thirty minutes into my search—with the windows down despite the cold—and all was quiet. Barely a vehicle on the road. No one walking about. No screams, no struggles.

I called Maddie, who was experiencing the same. We agreed to give it another half hour and then head back to the Leland home.

As my mind swirled, thinking of where Andi was and why she hadn't made it home, I did my best to shrug off the idea that the worst possible scenario may have come true.

I then dialed Mike to get and give updates.

I shared our lack of progress, assuring him we would put some more time in before heading back. I also reminded him that teens were known to miss curfews, and there was always a first time for everything.

But Andi's phone on the front lawn confused the issue.

It told me she'd made it home, to the driveway anyway.

Stalker Man came to mind.

The phone felt like a brazen dramatic touch, something his narcissistic self would do.

I tried to imagine the scene that may have gone down. Andi could have left her friend's house to walk a short way down the sidewalk to her own home—in time to

make her curfew. A car pulled alongside, someone hopped out and dragged her into the running vehicle before peeling away, leaving Andi helpless in the backseat.

No, no ... that wasn't right. It couldn't be. Andi would have screamed. She would have fought. Someone would have heard.

Then, what?

Maybe the person acted like they knew her or needed help.

Maybe it was a two-person crime, where one person walked up behind her, knocked her out, while the other person pulled up in the getaway car.

To where?

Where are you, Andi Leland?

As I became lost in my own head, I realized Mike was saying something.

"I'm sorry, Mike, could you repeat that?" I asked.

"Yeah, so ... I've been going through Andi's phone to see if there was anything out of the ordinary. Like, maybe another friend had called and convinced her to go somewhere. I'm not seeing anything like that."

It was a much better scenario than anything going through my mind at the moment.

"Well, maybe someone pulled up when she left her friend's house," I said, then added, "Another friend, I mean."

"The phone on the lawn is odd. Doesn't make sense. She wouldn't leave it behind."

There was a moment of silence between us.

“I’m going to keep on driving. Maddie will too. We agreed to meet back at the house in about—” I checked the time on my phone “—oh, about twenty minutes or so.”

When he didn’t respond, I nudged, “Mike?”

“Yeah, I’m here. I just thought of something. If she did ...”

“If she did what?”

“Andi’s bird, Sloane.”

I had no idea what he was talking about, but he sounded excited. “Andi has a bird? I’m not following.”

“Not a bird bird, a Birdie. We call it the Bird. It’s a personal alarm. Small thing, but it packs a punch. Strobes, outrageous siren. She always keeps it on her. Tonight, she was wearing jeans, so she would have it in her pocket. Let me check.”

I heard drawers opening and closing, his breath heavy in the phone as he searched.

“It’s not here,” he said. “She has to have it on her. If she’s in trouble, she’ll use it. We practiced a million times.”

Assuming she could get to it—a thought I kept to myself. All in all, this was great news. Andi was a scrapper. If she had been taken, and if there was a way out, a means of escape, she’d find it.

“Mike, hold on to that hope,” I said.

“I sure will. See you soon.”

We said our goodbyes, and I called Maddie, telling her about the discussion I’d just had with Mike.

“Oh, please let the Birdie sing,” Maddie said through a yawn. “Sorry, I’m tired.”

So was I.

Exhausted.

And then she screamed, and I slammed my foot on the brakes, frozen at the wheel.

CHAPTER 33

I pulled over to the side of the road, my movements robotic.

“Maddie!” I shouted into the phone. “Maddie, answer me right now!”

All I could hear was a car door opening, shuffling of ... feet? I could hear her screams, but they were farther away now. She must have left her phone behind while she ...

Did what?

Things were getting out of hand, and I was helpless to stop any of it.

“Maddie!”

She was still screaming, short bursts ...

Wait, that’s strange.

On second thought, they didn’t sound like screams of pain or horror.

More like a squeal, the sound she made when she was excited about something.

More car doors opened and closed.

I heard Maddie’s rapid breaths, then she giggled.

“Maddie? Talk to me. Tell me what’s going on.”

“Holy crap, Sloane,” she said, huffing and puffing. “I-I found Andi.”

“What? Where is she? Is she okay?”

“She’s right here. She looks good to me. You good, Andi?”

I heard Andi say, “Sure am!”

“Where was she? How did you find her?”

“She ran right in front of me. I was stopped at a corner, about to turn, and then there she was there, bam , bam , bam , pounding on the hood.”

“You need to get out of there.”

“Already headed back to her house.”

I texted Mike a message that we had Andi and were heading his way

He texted me a thumb emoji, then a bunch of hearts, and a happy face, and a dancing man, then a single word: Hurry.

While we drove our respective vehicles, Andi filled us in on the highlights of her brief abduction and film-worthy escape. I worried she might need some time to decompress, but she was having none of that nonsense. She confirmed she had been kidnapped right when she’d hit the sidewalk to go from her friend’s house to her own. Grabbed from behind, thrown into the back of a car, her hands cuffed behind her.

“The dude had, like, pantyhose on his head,” Andi said. “Do those even still exist?”

Anyway, I couldn't see his face, but he for sure reminded me of the guy in the coffee shop."

He'd given no indication what he'd intended to do with her, Andi said, and I wondered ... Had he been planning to keep her? Or worse, kill her?"

"I assume you were holding your phone, and he grabbed it out of your hand," I said. "Then he threw it out the window as you passed your house? Did I guess it right?"

"Yep, 100 percent."

He'd done it for dramatic effect, as I'd suspected, offering up yet another in a series of breadcrumbs.

Keep it up, your good times are about to end, familiar stranger, whoever you are.

"After you were abducted, where did he take you?" Maddie asked.

"Uh, well, we just kind of drove around."

"Did he say anything?"

"He kept talking about the beach on Tide Island."

There were a lot of beaches around Savannah. We were on the coast, after all, But I'd never heard of Tide Island. Could it be ...

"Could he have meant Tybee Island?" I asked. "That was my guess. He must not be from around here."

"What did he say about it?" Maybe the beach was where he was hiding out when he

wasn't attacking people and writing threatening notes.

"Mmm, it was kinda scattered. I'm sorry. I didn't hear much other than the name of the beach. And I thought that's where we might be going, but he just kept to all these, like, neighborhood roads. Anyway, then I remembered the Bird in my pocket."

"You know what a Birdie is, right, Sloane?" Maddie asked.

"Of course," I said, like I hadn't been clueless about the safety device just a few minutes ago. "Andi, how did you escape?"

"So, he grabs me, and maybe I was having flashbacks or something because I just froze. Embarrassing, but true. And when my face hit the backseat, he managed to grab my hands and cuff me with real handcuffs."

"And then?"

"I came back to life, saw him fling my phone out the window, and I was, like, kicking the seat and screaming. But there's not much activity out here in the middle of the morning on a weeknight. I knew I couldn't wait to arrive at the final destination, whatever that was going to be—I needed to escape sooner than later. I stopped kicking and took some deep breaths to clear my mind. That's when I remembered the Bird, but it was in my front pocket, and my hands were cuffed behind my back, right? I tried to slip my hands through the cuffs, and voila , it worked."

"Awwwesome," Maddie sang.

"I know! I couldn't freaking believe it. When he slowed the car, I pulled the pin on the Bird and held it right near his ear. Blew his ear off. While he's going nuts from the pain, I dropped the Bird in his lap to keep it going, then reached around and unlocked the back doors. Got the hell out of there. No way he was going to catch me

at that point.”

“That’s amazing, Andi,” I said. “ You are amazing.”

“And you ran right into me,” Maddie said to her.

“Yup. First car I found, and it just happens to be my dad’s, oh my gosh. It’s all so crazy.”

She laughed, and it sounded a little hysterical, the adrenaline still pumping through her.

Through all of us.

When we arrived at the house—me just a second behind Maddie—Andi bolted from the car.

Mike was at the door.

“Dad!”

And she ran to him, collapsing in his arms. He carried her inside, leaving the door open for us to follow.

We stayed for a few minutes. Andi downed a glass of water and started to come back to life. She retold the story we’d just heard to her dad, arms flailing—just like her dad when he spoke with passion—her face contorting into all kinds of positions as she relived the gamut of emotions. After she’d gotten it all out, and her energy waned, she plopped next to her dad and tucked into him.

He leaned over, planted a kiss on top of her head.

Looking at us, his expression full of mixed emotions, he said, “Thanks, ladies. Again.”

“I’m so relieved it turned out okay,” I said, rising from my chair.

“Hold each other tight,” Maddie said, and we walked to the door together.

“But ... but you were going to tell me about your visit with Dr. Beetle,” Andi whined.

“Give it a rest for tonight, kid,” her dad said, and he pulled her even closer.

CHAPTER 34

We didn't say much during the drive back to the hotel, our bodies and minds weary, needing rest and lots of care. The remainder of the night was even quieter. No phone calls or texts. Just a dreamless sleep.

Miracles do happen , I thought when I stirred later that morning, feeling rested. Maddie was still sound asleep, so I dressed for the day, left her a note that I'd be right back, and headed out the door on tiptoes. A hot cup of coffee and some light food were calling my name, and I had never been so grateful as I was now about the breakfast they served in the pretty atrium on the main level.

I placed my to-go order at the atrium's reception desk, one for me, the other for Maddie. While I stood there and waited, I felt the unmistakable sensation that I was being watched.

I turned to find no one was behind me or even close on either side of me ... strange . I scanned the lobby area, but everyone was busy doing their own things, not paying one bit of attention to me.

Still, the sensation lingered.

The woman who'd taken my order handed me a bag of breakfast sandwiches and a tray of four coffees. Two may have sufficed, but it felt like it was going to be a multiple coffee type of day.

"Thank you," I said. "Have a good one."

I moved through the lobby, dodging two children who were running around, having fun. As I turned to head up the grand staircase that would take me to my room, my eyes were drawn to one of the leather lobby couches.

A hand-carved walking cane was leaning against it.

I took a few steps back, staying close to the wall, and watched to see who would come back for the cane.

Five minutes went by, and I placed my food order on a nearby side table, sipped on one of the coffees—black—and continued to watch.

Another five minutes.

And another.

No one came for the cane.

Time for a closer look .

I grabbed the tray and the bag of food, then walked over to the couch and sat down. I placed the food on the table and prepared the coffees. Cream and sugar. One at a time. Nice and slow. All the while I was examining the cane and its intricate carvings of a forest and small creatures.

A tiger's eye stone made up the knobbed handle.

Just like Dr. Beetle had described.

I swung my head in all directions.

Still, no one was paying me any mind.

But I wasn't about to leave.

I was being watched; I was sure of it.

It had to be him.

I took a sip of coffee and withdrew one of the wrapped breakfast sandwiches from the bag.

I unwrapped the sandwich.

On top of the biscuit, there was a note.

Surf's up, buttercup

Come prepared.

Alone, or someone else dies.

Would be a shame, wouldn't it?

Another friend you couldn't save.

You or them.

Decide.

After all, this is a life-or-death situation.

Or a death-and-death situation.

I'll be waiting.

He had been here.

Maybe he was still here.

Was he a server or a cook, part of the hotel staff?

Somehow, he'd slid into the right position so he could leave me this note on my food order. He was nowhere and everywhere at the same time.

The time had come for me to stop him.

And stop him, I would.

I turned toward the atrium. The same woman was still at the podium, taking care of hungry guests.

"I accept the challenge," I said, standing.

I took the cane and the note and trashed the food and the coffees. Not knowing whether he'd tampered with our order, I couldn't take a chance.

I walked toward the hotel entrance, pivoting for a moment when a thought came to mind:

What if the note was meant to lure me away?

What if today Maddie was his intended target?

I couldn't leave until I was sure.

I raced toward our room, finding yet another note stuck to the door.

It read:

If I wanted her dead, she would be.

You best hurry along now.

Tick-tock.

Unlocking the bedroom door, I found Maddie on the bed, still snoring away. I searched the room. Found nothing. He wasn't there.

He was gone ... on his way to the beach.

I grabbed a pen and paper.

Maddie,

I've gone to the beach.

This is something I need to do alone.

I'm sorry.

I tucked it beneath the lamp on her nightstand, feeling guilty, knowing I needed to get away before she stopped me. I knew the wrath I'd face for doing so later, but I refused to let anyone else in my circle get hurt.

I told myself it was the right thing to do, the only thing to do.

It had to be this way.

This was a mano a mano fight now.

CHAPTER 35

A gust of icy wind lashed at my cheeks, jolting my senses awake. Each breath felt like a spark of electricity coursing through my veins, fueling me with an unshakable resolve. Though my skin prickled and my lungs burned, the cold sharpened my focus, bracing me for the battle that lay ahead.

If my instincts are right.

I stood atop a sand dune and scanned my surroundings. There wasn't a soul in sight, an eerie sensation. Half a block behind me, residents and visitors of the quaint beach town were going about their lives, working and playing.

But not here on the beach, under the ominous gray of the winter sky.

He'd taunted me to come here.

The killer ... he had to be watching me now.

In an uncharacteristic move—for me, at least—I lifted my middle fingers in the air and turned a full 360, shouting, "I'm here!"

The only response was the whistle of the wind, its silence as majestic as much as it was foreboding.

I sat where I'd been standing, the coolness of the sand seeping through the fabric of my jeans. Then I stood and walked along the shoreline, picking up seashells, the

foamy edges of the water almost touching my running shoes, then backing away.

The push and pull of nature was never ending.

But the push and pull of this case needed to end, to be finished once and for all.

I needed my life back.

My phone buzzed with phone calls and texts from, I presumed, Maddie. I ignored them, for now.

Where is he?

Had the note he left me been just another part of the game?

I thought of Cade. And Maddie. Boo. Henry, Kat, Andi—the list was long, my friends and loved ones. And here I was risking my life foolishly ... to solve a case that made no sense and a lot of sense all at the same time.

I brushed the sand from my hands and jeans, cursing myself for taking the bait. I had been reacting, a puppet on a string, the whole time.

I was playing his game, not mine.

And it was high time I started.

I picked up my phone and called Maddie.

“Sloane! Where are you? And what’s with the note you left me? What’s going on? I’ve been trying to reach you! You couldn’t pick up the phone?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to worry you.”

But what had I thought would happen?

Of course she would worry.

The buffeting of the wind was coming through the phone line, something she picked up on.

“Wh-what is that sound?” she asked. “Oh, hell no. Did you go to the beach without me? You said something about needing to do this alone? What ... Sloane, what?”

“I’m coming back now, okay? Everything’s fine. I’ll explain when I get there.”

“I would have gone to the beach with you,” she said. “But hey, alone time. I don’t like it, but I get it, I guess.”

“You’re not missing anything. It’s cold, damp, and dreary out here. I’m heading to the car now. See you in a few.”

“But—”

“No buts ...”

As I bent to pick up the cane, she made a noise that sounded like a growl, and I gasped.

The cane was no longer there.

CHAPTER 36

I turned to look for the cane and was hit from behind. Air escaped my lungs with full force, and I lost my footing, falling face first onto the sandy hill. The sharp grasses cut at my face and hands. I pushed up to my knees and did my best to spit the sand out of my mouth, to wipe it from my eyes with my shirt sleeve.

I knew what had hit me.

And who.

I scrambled back at the sight of a pair of boots, attached to a pair of legs, attached to a man.

Terrence Slade.

But ... how?

And though I still didn't understand why he'd come after me and those I loved, there was a connection, after all, between that case in Jackson Hole over a decade ago and the human-trafficking case I'd solved in Savannah.

But again ... how?

I'd just spoken with him last night.

He'd been at his house in Jackson Hole.

My contact had confirmed it.

As the realization dawned that I'd been duped, I cursed myself for not pinging that call. Such a simple investigative maneuver, yet I'd dismissed it—because I'd felt so certain that it was just too complicated for the villain to have been him. The simplest conclusion was usually the right one, per Occam's Razor, and that had been my reasoning for not bothering with tracing this man's phone.

Each of us took a fighting stance.

Him with the cane.

Me, crouched, with my martial arts training, two strong legs, and two bare hands.

No more waiting.

I launched myself at him, coming in with an intended throat punch. He swung the cane, and I juked backward. At the same time, I managed to catch the end of the cane with one hand, then two, and I twisted. He lost his grip, eyes wide with surprise when I turned full circle, the cane now in my hands.

Was I that good, or had he let me win the round?

I wielded the cane like a baseball bat, and he grunted a menacing laugh, holding his hands in the air, as if giving up the fight.

“Well done, Sloane. And so good to see you again. My brother enjoyed talking with you last night.” He winked. “I knew you'd call.”

His brother? So, that was how it had happened.

“Your brother ? Why would he pretend to be you?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe because you’re the reason we lost our lucrative side hustle.”

“Human trafficking?”

“That, and all the dirty work that comes with it. What else would I be talking about?”

“It was you , wasn’t it? You were involved in Olivia’s abduction all those years ago.”

He sneered, twisting his face into an evil grin. “It’s about time you put it all together.”

I’d just about pieced it all together, but questions remained.

“I’m guessing it’s the reason you lured me here, to Savannah, the place I took down Hugh Barnes,” I said.

“Hugh was my friend. We worked together back then, before you meddled in a business that wasn’t any of yours. You ruined everything. Everything! I thought I could put it all behind me. But I couldn’t. I stewed for years, and then one day, I decided there was only way I’d ever get past it. I needed to take you down.”

My breathing was short and rapid, the adrenaline and the cool wind cutting my lung capacity, despite my physical fitness. Not to mention my gritty eyes, which had started watering. With my vision blurred, all I had to go on was instinct now.

“This ... is over,” I said.

Another laugh. “Oh, but it’s not.”

He withdrew a pistol from his waistband. “On your knees.”

My first instinct was to lunge, reach for the gun.

But I knew better.

He had the upper hand—for now.

I moved to my knees.

“Throw me the stick,” he grunted.

I tossed the cane back to him.

My mind whirled. I had been unprepared for the showdown—just reacting instead of working within my typical well-planned offensive. Terrence was going to shoot to kill.

I need one more chance . One more chance to make things right. To put him behind bars, protect my loved ones.

The click of the gun cocking echoed in the wind.

A voice from behind the dune rang out. “Terrence Slade, put the gun down.”

Every part of my body was trembling, and I fought to stay upright. Relief surged through me, and I gave in to the feeling, falling to the sand ...

A gunshot cracked through the air.

I jolted and covered my head. It was impossible to tell for sure, but it seemed like I

could hear the whoosh of the bullet near my ear.

Then more gunshots. I stayed low.

“How could I have missed her? Such an easy shot,” Terrence said, like he was talking to himself. Then, shouting now, “You’re good, officers. But you didn’t hit the bullseye. Not yet.”

I lifted my head. Terrence had shifted his position, taking cover behind several massive boulders.

I turned and saw two officers.

They dropped to their bellies amidst the sea grass and shrubs.

If one of their bullets hit the boulders, it could ricochet and hit any one of us.

I prayed they had backup.

“Officers, I care not if I live or die,” Terrence bellowed. “Just stay out of my way while I take care of some unfinished business.”

Another shot rang out.

This time, Terrence hit his mark.

CHAPTER 37

The bullet sent me onto my back, white-hot pain searing my shoulder. My mouth open and closed, but nothing came out. No air, no words. Someone in the distance was calling for an ambulance.

Then I heard, “He’s running. Go, go, go,” and the sound of feet bulldozing through the sand.

I turned, trying to get a look at what was happening down the beach. Pushing up on my one good arm, I shouted for them to take him down, not to let him get away. I lifted to my feet, holding my hand over the bullet wound, and saw the officers running, then slowing, turning their guns toward the dunes, spanning the space.

Terrence was nowhere in sight.

Had he gotten away?

Disbelief had me dropping to my knees. I glanced at my shoulder, at the hole burned through my sweatshirt, all the sand and blood mixing together into a thick paste.

I fell onto my back once again and tried to slow my breathing, to will the shock to subside, so I could find the killer and ...

Do what, Sloane?

You have no weapon.

I don't know how long I lay there. More officers had arrived, as did the EMTs, who were working on me now.

I needed to call Maddie.

I reached out to one of the techs. "Can I have my phone?"

"You won't be needing that, Ms. Monroe."

"Huh?"

I turned my head.

Terrence was standing in front of me, his gun aimed straight at my head. He must have come full circle, and the cops were there , not here ...

He waved the techs away, and they backed up, hands raised.

What else could they do?

I shut my eyes, prepared for the end—my end.

And then a long, wild scream rang through the air.

What the ? —?

I opened one eye.

Maddie was on Terrence's back, pulling his hair, ripping at his eyes and mouth. He bucked and twisted, but she wouldn't let go. He tried to turn the gun on her, holding it high, then low, trying to get the proper angle. But she knocked it from his hand. Then

she did something I didn't expect, even for her. She jerked her head to the side and bit his ear.

The shock from my bullet wound was replaced by the shock of seeing my best friend riding this man's back like a wicked rodeo queen.

Terrence ran in a circle, bending to swipe at the fallen gun.

He missed, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw the cane. I scrambled toward it and grabbed the tiger's-eye knob with one hand. Rising to my feet, I tossed the cane in the air and caught it for a better grip. Then I ran straight for him, swinging back and then upward, right between his legs.

CHAPTER 38

Maddie stayed with me in the ambulance as we made our way to the hospital, where they checked me over and bandaged me up good. I refused to spend the night, reassuring the staff that I was in capable hands with my medical-examiner friend. We also gave our statements to the police, but as always, there would be more questions to answer and revelations to share in the coming days.

On the way back to the Marshall House, I asked Maddie the burning question that had been swirling in my brain.

“I didn’t get to hear your entire statement,” I said. “How did you know?”

One side of her mouth quirked up in a lopsided smile. “How did I know where you were? That you were in danger?”

“Yeah, that.”

“I never hung up,” she said and withdrew my phone from her pocket.

I hadn’t even realized I didn’t have my phone on me.

“And neither did you,” she continued. “Your phone was on the whole time. Look.”

She showed me the length of our last phone call.

“I knew something was wrong when I heard all the scuffling and then his voice. It

was enough to know you needed help. I called the police, told them you were in danger somewhere on the beach.”

“They found me just in time.”

“They sure did. And I caught a ride with my motorcycle friend?—”

“Wait. You have a motorcycle friend in Savannah?”

She winked. “I do now.”

“Your timing was perfect.”

“It was sheer luck. I wanted to make sure you were okay, you know ... after the cops showed up. Then I saw Terrence with a gun approaching from the parking lot, right in the middle of the cop cars and everything. I knew I had to do something, and fast.”

“You sure did. I mean, I knew you were savage, but ... wow.”

We laughed, and I brought her in for a hug as we walked through the lobby. “Thanks, Maddie, for everything.”

“Don’t ever run off on me like that in a situation like this again.”

“I’ll try to behave,” I said. “Suppose we should give Dr. Beetle her cane back?”

Before Maddie could respond, someone behind us cleared their throat loud enough for us to hear.

We turned.

“Doc ... Dr. Beetle?” Maddie exclaimed.

The root doctor’s grin was wide as she cackled, holding her beloved cane high in the air. “Good fo mo dan walking, ain’t it now?”

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It was one of those happy endings, I supposed, though the weight of all the harm caused by someone seeking revenge on me wouldn't go away, not for a long time.

Terrence's anger and sinister plotting, just to terrorize me and the people in my circle, had propelled him from one end of the country to the East Coast. Killing, thieving, stalking, and manipulating all the way. He'd be behind bars for the rest of his life, if not longer, and I felt some justice in that, but I also felt it was not enough.

Dr. Beetle's crossroads symbol was front and center in my mind.

Questioning the trajectory of my PI career was a natural end result of this harrowing case, and question it I did. I weighed all the good I'd done against the lives taken, the sense of safety stolen. I thought often about Kat and her trauma—how it had made her rethink her commitment to the badge.

Would I do the same?

I wasn't sure.

I wanted to rise above it, but I was tired—so, so tired.

Maybe time was all I needed.

Time: the great healer.

Tonight, I was in New Orleans, curled up on the couch with Cade, sipping wine and listening to the velvety baritone of Frank Sinatra on an old record player. And as had

often been the case in recent months, our conversation turned to the future.

“You retired, and you’re doing fine,” I told him. “Maybe I should too.”

“Ahh, Sloane,” and he pulled me to him. “I’m not 100 percent believin’ you’re ready for that just yet.”

As always, Cade was supportive of anything and everything I wanted to do in life. Maybe he knew me better than I knew myself.

“But I feel like I’m cursed or something. Without intention, I bring so much danger into our lives.”

“Just one of those things that comes with the territory,” he said. “I’m just so grateful you’re still here ... to make me crazy and all.”

I laid my head on his shoulder. “I do that, don’t I?”

“You do,” he said. “Crazy in love.”

I smiled. “Mmm, that’s nice. I’m thinking ...”

“What’s that?” he asked, lifting my chin so our eyes could meet.

“I’m thinking ... maybe just one more case.”

~ THE END ~

Thank you for reading *The Familiar Stranger*, book 5 in the Sloane & Maddie, Peril Awaits mystery series.