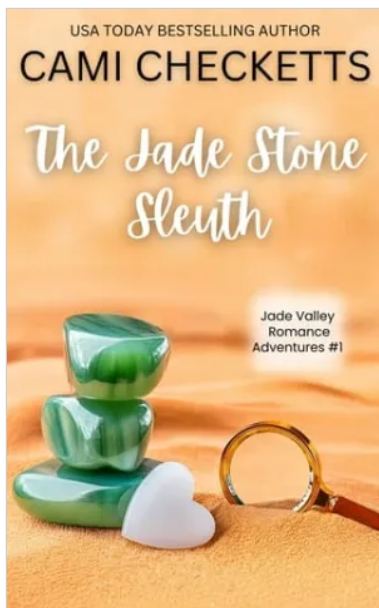




The Jade Stone Sleuth (Jade Valley Romance Adventures #1)

Author: *Cami Checketts*

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: A security operative navigating his first job. A charitable angel accused of murder. Can Brex discover the truth about the jade stones or will he be the next victim?

Brexten Cabella, a suave but insecure detective trying hard to prove himself, has been hired for his first big job as a security op for the elite Aiden Porter. The case is intriguing get close to seemingly innocent Clara Gem and prove that she is responsible for the accidental death of her three boyfriends with no clues other than a mysterious jade stone at the site of each fatality. Despite Brextens impressive resume, hes worried hell fail at this new task and lose his first million dollar bonus, the ticket to rewriting his future and proving he does have what it takes to succeed. Yet, as Brex gets to know Clara, he begins to rethink not only his initial suspicions, but his beliefs about life and love and what matters most.

Clara Gem, a carefree and optimistic youth pastor, has lost three boyfriends in the past decade to suspicious fatal accidents. Her heart has broken for their families and she's determined to not date anymore and put another man at risk. When Clara meets the charming detective Brexten Cabella, her resolve to guard her heart flies out the window. He's like something off the movie screen, but warm, caring, and funand he may be the ticket to finally unraveling the mystery of the jade stone and the accidents. Clara finds herself quickly falling for Brex, but is love worth the risk of him dying?

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Chapter

One

Brexten Cabella studied the couple seated across from him on the high-quality gray leather sofa. Late-fifties, polished, dressed in an expensive Brioni suit and a swanky dress—Donna Karan if he had to guess the designer—he didn't imagine anybody in this home ever relaxed or dressed down. The lady's earlobes, neck, wrists, and fingers dripped with diamonds he knew were as real as the Glock concealed in the inner pocket of his own Brooks Brothers suit. It was no Brioni, but he'd get there. If he pulled off this job, his first job in the private sector working for none other than Aiden Porter, he'd pay off his Range Rover, upgrade to a larger condo on the beach, and keep some extra for a Brioni suit.

Not a wrinkle dared soften the woman's face and he couldn't glimpse a single gray hair in her golden locks. The work she'd had was top-notch and took a decade and a half off of her, though Brex could see her true age in the flesh of her neck and upper arms. He'd met many women similar in looks during the past twelve years in southern California.

The man had enough gray in his hair and sagging skin on his face and neck to show that he didn't share his wife's obsession with the needles and chemicals fighting for eternal youth. Brex didn't fault either of them. His future wife might favor treatments similar to Mrs. Hendry in thirty years, but a majority of the ultra-successful men he admired didn't go to the extremes with beauty their better halves did. It was enough to drive the Bugatti and open the door for a wife like Pamela Hendry.

Their mansion was gorgeous, set all by its lonesome on a sagebrush-covered bluff above Jade Valley. The spacious home had large windows and was dominated by sparkling white and stainless steel. It was hospital clean and boasted a stunning view of the dry valley below and soaring red rock mountains beyond. It was early March, but the sun was bright and it would be at least eighty on this spring day.

Brex could only assume the area's founders had thought it a good joke to dub this desert landscape in northern Arizona "Jade Valley". He found the red rock formations fascinating and scenic, a different kind of beauty from his native lush and green Colorado mountains, but there wasn't a hint of the color jade in this open valley. Even the river that ran through it was a greenish brown. The closest any plant life in view could claim to be a shade of green was the grayish green of sagebrush, cacti, Palo Verde, and Joshua trees.

"You're hiring me to get close to your deceased son's former girlfriend and uncover evidence that she murdered your son," he said, reiterating what the lady had explained to him in many paragraphs and condensing it into a single sentence.

"Yes," Rulon Hendry answered for his wife. He leaned forward, pressing his thick forearms into his tree-trunk thighs. "Clara Gem and her entire family are revered in this valley, making them untouchable. They have the connections and saintly reputation to get away with anything. Clara's father, Curtis Gem, is a popular preacher. His congregation is full every Sunday."

Rulon rolled his eyes even as Brex's gut clenched. Popular preacher's daughter. The memory still stung—Alayna dumping him because he didn't look 'the part' of someone a popular preacher's daughter would date. It had motivated him to prove them wrong and dress and live far above his pay grade. This job would make it possible for him to finally arrive both financially and socially. Millionaire and Aiden Porter's operative ... the actresses, models, and influencers would be beating down Brex's door.

“Six children in the family who all appear talented, charitable, smart, and attractive,” Rulon continued. “It’s like the Stepford Wives but it’s the entire offish family—except the sixteen-year-old son; he’s a talented athlete but loud and obnoxious, somehow people still love him. No amount of money can buy the loyalty and esteem the Gems have in Jade Valley. The valley was settled by their great-grandparents and named after their jade-colored eyes.”

Well, that explained why the valley was named after jade.

Brex could read through the lines and the research he’d done and Aiden Porter’s team had supplemented for him. Mr. Hendry was a newer move-in to the valley and thought the metal fabrication shop he set up, the jobs he brought in, his mansion overlooking the rest of the valley, and his flashy cars and high-maintenance wife would make him a king here. He’d tried to displace the Gem family as the top dogs with his wealth and hadn’t succeeded.

Intriguing and something Brex could relate to, fighting to be respected and sought-after in the affluent and exclusive San Diego social scene. He couldn’t compute copious amounts of money not being revered here as it would in southern Cal.

Was the valley loyal to the ‘saintly’ and ‘weird’ family and shouldn’t be? Were they uppity and only pretending to be religious like Alayna’s father? Reverend Abraham was the king of evangelical television. It had made the man wealthy and pompous.

Could it be possible the Gem family didn’t have the skeletons in their closets Mr. Hendry wanted them to have?

“Everyone thinks Clara is some angel because she organizes and supervises mission trips for youth groups,” Pamela said in a soft Southern accent. The bio on Mrs. Hendry revealed she’d grown up in Georgia and had boasted a department-store modeling career before marrying Rulon and relocating to Phoenix and now this more

remote desert valley. Pamela had spent the last thirty-two years focused on being a fitness club and lunch-meeting wife and doting on their only son. Brex suspected she'd held onto the accent for over three decades because of the attention it attracted. It was a smart move on her part.

"We tried to warn Malik about Clara's reputation when he came to visit and met her for the first time." She said the word reputation with all the snoot of a southern belle.

"What reputation is that?" Brex asked.

"My local friends, who can see through the Gems' false benevolence, all warned me when they heard Malik had become enthralled with Clara. The vixen sets her sights on a man, and they're drawn in like bees to honey by her beauty and her 'adorable personality'. Then she kills them."

"How many do you believe she's killed?" Brex arched an eyebrow, though he wasn't uninformed or surprised. His research, and what his boss Aiden Porter's tech team had uncovered, showed the police had ruled the three deaths of Clara Gem's significant others occurring over the past twelve years as accidents.

The FBI had gotten involved in Malik Hendry's case, at the insistence of his parents, but had also found nothing amiss in Clara's actions, character profile, or the accident that claimed thirty-year-old Dr. Malik Hendry's life. They found no other suspects or evidence to indicate Malik's death was anything but a tragic accident. Hiking Angel's Landing in Zion National Park an hour north of here was treacherous, especially when it was raining with high winds.

"She's the common link between the three deaths," Pamela snipped, trying to arch her own brows, but Botox had rendered that movement impossible.

Pamela was right about Clara being the common link between the three deaths, but

there was something else the police had in their notes. An inexpensive jade-colored stone had been found at each crime scene. It was noted by the detectives to match Clara Gem's unique jade-colored eyes. A fascinating detail that had come to naught so far.

Brex shook his wrist and glanced at his Bulova wristwatch. It was a habit that had started years ago after Alayna had gifted it to him. He used to like to draw attention to the high-dollar time piece. Now he hardly realized he made the motion.

"Please," Pamela tried again when he didn't respond. "We need your expertise." She studied him with brilliantly blue eyes. The color likely came from contact lenses, but they were good enough Brex couldn't be sure. "When we got in touch with Aiden Porter, he promised he would send the very best."

Brex only nodded to that. He suspected Aiden claimed every one of his operatives was 'the very best'. Brex didn't have any bragging rights as one of Aiden's men, but he'd get there. He had signed on with the San Diego Police Department after he graduated the police academy in Colorado and moved to the coast for sunshine, surfing, dating semi-famous ladies, and escaping his dirt-poor upbringing. He had worked his way into detective. The pay was better but still didn't give him the clout to prove he was classy and wealthy enough to rule the San Diego social scene.

He'd collaborated with Nick Jacobs, one of the famed Aiden Porter's top guys, on a few cases and been blown away by how impressive, and surprisingly genuine, Nick and Aiden both were. When Nick offered him training and a job, he knew he was finally going to arrive—money, respect, and beautiful dates would line up and wait for him, just as they had for Aiden when he was single.

He'd learned a different angle of espionage, protection, and security expertise from Aiden Porter and his accomplished operatives over the past six months. It hadn't been easy, but he didn't mind hard work ... if it got him to his goals.

Brex had the experience as a detective and the training with security, espionage, weapons, and combat that should make it simple for him to get to the bottom of these accusations, but he was uneasy. Not only because it was his first job in the private sector or because it was difficult or unsolvable. He'd known it was a cold case, and Nick had told him it might be unsolvable but was a good one to fly solo on and get his feet wet.

No, Brex was bothered with the idea of getting close to Ms. Clara Gem to gain her trust and then exposing her. Assignments of this nature had been unsettling shades of gray with the police. He'd had to soothe his own conscience when he was working for America and the targets had been identifiable criminals. But now, working for the almighty dollar and Clara appearing innocent and benevolent troubled him. He and his friends in Aiden's tech team hadn't found any evidence supporting the Hendry family's claims. Neither had the police nor FBI. The only clue that anything was amiss was that jade-colored stone and one woman having three boyfriends die in accidents.

The million-dollar bonus attached to this job was his prime motivator and would make it worth his time. When Aiden offered to pay Brex his usual monthly salary, keep the Hendry's twenty thousand retainer for Aiden's security company, and give Brex the million-dollar bonus if he could solve this cold case, he'd jumped at the offer.

Now he felt a twinge of guilt about the huge payout. What if he was investigating an innocent woman? He hated wasting time on false claims, and he hated witch hunts, which he felt this might be. He'd been on far too many of those in his time with SDPD.

But a million dollars changed things.

He wanted to ask Mrs. Pamela Hendry more about what she'd thought of Clara Gem

dating her only son prior to Malik's death but didn't suspect that would go over well. From his research, Pamela and Clara were polar opposites. Pamela was polished and stylish and Clara was benevolent and had more of a natural, untouched type of beauty about her. Not that he was checking Ms. Clara Gem out. The women he pursued were enhanced and experts with makeup and clothing, to fit his image. Women like Pamela's daughter, if she had one.

"We need your help," Pamela said. "We need closure for our son's death. We also feel duty-bound to lock Clara Gem in a dark prison ... before she murders anyone else."

She said the last line too dramatically for Brex's taste, but he wasn't a parent who'd lost their only son. It was heartbreaking and he wanted them to have closure as well. Maybe the bubbly, naturally-pretty, charitable Clara Gem that he'd studied all the information he and the tech team could uncover the past few days on was really a dark monster. He'd seen crazier things.

Part of him was tempted to walk back out the door and tell Aiden and Nick to let some other security company go on this witch hunt, but they wouldn't have taken the case if there wasn't probable cause, and Brex wasn't in a position to reject the first job they sent him on. He was here. He wanted to prove himself to Aiden and Nick, and the truth needed to be discovered on these deaths. The million-dollar bonus was the icing on the cake—or maybe the money was the cake and the rest of the motivators were the icing. No time to riddle that one out right now.

Brex made up his mind to see the job through and nodded to Pamela and then to Rulon. "I'll get close to Clara Gem and find out if each of her boyfriends died of natural causes, as is stated in the police and FBI reports, or if she, or someone else, killed them."

Pamela studied him. She clearly didn't appreciate Brex's wording. She wanted Ms.

Gem to be held responsible for her son's death. There must've been bad blood while they were dating, or her son's death had devastated her and she needed someone to blame. Nobody would blame her for that.

How many times had his own mom probably been up all night praying for him since he'd left the farm and rarely returned? She and his dad would be devastated if they lost him or his sister.

Brex hadn't turned to prayer himself in a long time. Not since Alayna dumped him for not being 'pious' and 'refined' enough for her public persona. He appreciated his mom's prayers, but he'd seen a lot of darkness and sadness in his days with SDPD and doubted her prayers were doing much for his hardened soul.

"Thank you." Rulon stood, clearly done with this conversation. He held out his hand.

Brex stood and gave him a firm handshake.

"We appreciate you taking the job," Rulon continued. "We've paid Mr. Porter's retainer, and the million-dollar bonus is set to transfer as soon as the job is done."

"Thank you," Brex said. He understood Rulon wasn't trying to make this all about money, but he was a businessman and wanted the parameters set in all their minds.

Rulon turned toward the door. "I'll walk you out."

Brex turned with him. Pamela stayed seated.

"I need you to promise me one thing," she said, arching her head back to look at him.

"What is that?" Brex didn't make empty promises, not even to reassure a distraught mother.

“You’ll have to grow close to Clara, pretend to be her boyfriend, and risk being her next victim to get the information.”

Brex had to hide a smile at that. He might not be on Aiden or Nick’s level, but they’d trained him well and he’d been a seasoned detective.

Brexton Cabella was no woman’s victim.

“Swear to me you won’t fall for Clara Gem’s fake sweetness, sense of humor, or her beauty. I can’t have it on my head if you get distracted and lose sight of your purpose. You could die too.” Her eyes got bright. “I begged Malik not to get involved with her and look where he is.”

Brex frowned. What kind of professional did she take him for? Did she somehow know this was his first job for Aiden? He could list dozens of cases throughout his years with SDPD where he’d worked with beautiful and impressive women and kept an emotional and physical distance. He would never fall for a suspect.

“Mrs. Hendry, I am a professional. I would never allow an emotional attachment with a job or fall for a suspect’s sweetness, sense of humor, or beauty. And honest truth, Ms. Gem is not my type.”

He wasn’t sure why he’d added the last line, though it was true. Him dating a sweet Christian girl was laughable. His type was none of Pamela’s business, but he was tempted to show her a photo of his latest date, the beautiful actress Rachel Isom. She was gorgeous and on the cusp of being a household name. Her latest two leading roles with Amazon’s MGM Studios had gone well and she’d been thrilled with the notoriety Aiden’s name would lend to both of them. Not that they were dating seriously, but Brex wasn’t opposed to the idea.

Pamela stayed stiff in her chair but gave him as much of a smile as her pristine

features would allow. “Thank you. That eases my mind substantially.”

“You’re welcome. Thank you for trusting me with this job.” He nodded to her and followed Rulon through the living area and the two-story entry.

Rulon opened the front door and stepped back. Brex walked through it.

“Thank you,” Rulon said again. He brushed a hand through his bristles of gray hair. “It will give my wife some much-needed peace if we can resolve this. She thought Malik walked on water. He was the focus of her life, and she’s lost without him.”

Brex thought of his own mom again. He felt compassion for Pamela and also a sting of concern. She would be devastated if he couldn’t find any evidence of foul play. Every report and character witness attested to Clara Gem’s innocence. With boots on the ground he’d uncover anything the police and FBI had missed, but these cases were cold, years cold, and Ms. Gem might be as innocent as she was charitable and beautiful. If she was, he would be the jerk that wormed his way into her life under false pretenses and he’d lose out on a million dollars. He almost wanted the grieving parents to be right about her guilt. Even better would be to find someone else guilty of the murders. He’d still get the million dollars he longed for and Ms. Gem could bee-bop through her innocent, happy, faith-filled life.

“I’ll keep in touch,” Brex promised.

He shook the man’s hand one more time and strode off the classically decorated front porch past xeriscape rocks and desert-friendly bushes and to his silver Range Rover. He owed more than the vehicle was worth thanks to financing that gave him six months of no payments, but he loved this ride.

He’d driven the six hours from his condo in San Diego and liked having his own vehicle and all the weapons and surveillance equipment organized in the cargo space

that he might need for this job. He appreciated many benefits of working with the famed Aiden Porter. Access to weapons and gadgets more specialized than even the military could boast about was one of them.

After he settled in the leather seat, he pulled up a photo on his phone of Ms. Clara Gem. She was a breathtaking and pure-looking beauty, nobody could dispute that, with silky dark hair, smooth tanned skin, and those startling jade eyes. A little smoky makeup and eyelash extensions would make those eyes pop and her lips would stand out better with some liner and gloss. He'd dated a makeup artist three girlfriends ago and had learned a lot as she criticized other women's makeup routines.

The pictures he'd seen of the Gem family showed the dad was large and fair, a reddish-blond boasting the jade-colored eyes that the valley was apparently named after. How many of the extended Gem family had them? The mother was a second-generation American; her grandparents had relocated from Bolivia. Mrs. Gem was dark and beautiful like her sons and daughters. Three of the children had dark eyes like their mother; the other three had inherited the jade eyes. Six children and Clara was the second oldest, running church mission trips in conjunction with her father's ministry. Six children. As a brother of one sister, he could not relate to a family that large.

"What are you hiding, Miss Clara?" he murmured, studying her smooth tanned skin, regal nose, full lips, and those captivating jade eyes. Not captivating to him personally but pretty nonetheless.

Clara had been the one to point out the jade-colored gem found close to each of her boyfriend's bodies. Was she playing some kind of twisted game, or innocent enough to believe she was helping police find whoever caused the accidents? If they were accidents or if each of the men had indeed been killed. Nobody knew at this point.

It would be intriguing to get close to her and find out her secrets.

Three boyfriends dead.

Harrison Jones had died eleven years ago when Clara was nineteen. Mountain biking together in these red rock mountains, Harrison had launched off a rock and flipped, apparently showing off for his girlfriend. He'd only made it two-hundred and seventy degrees instead of three-sixty. He'd broken his neck and died instantly.

Kyle Tanner died six years ago when Clara was twenty-four. He'd been rock climbing with Clara not far away in Snow Canyon State Park. Clara had reached the top of the unpredictable sandstone rock cliff, but Kyle's harness had frayed and given out. He'd fallen over two hundred feet.

And the latest, Malik Hendry, had been killed almost a year ago when Clara was twenty-nine—slipped off a cliff on Zion National Park's famed Angel's Landing hike on a rainy and windy spring day.

Clara was now thirty. He wondered if she was still adventurous and mountain biked, rock climbed, or hiked. Was she traumatized from her boyfriends' deaths or had she caused them? Only time would tell.

Brex looked forward to going into investigative mode on a case long cold and with no leads. He didn't look forward to pretending to be interested in Ms. Gem and tricking her to gain her trust and get the answers he needed. But he'd played roles as a detective to save lives and take down criminals for the police. Now he was going to flourish as an op for Aiden Porter. He loved everything about Aiden's organization—the focus on taking down drug lords and traffickers, the unlimited budget, the fame of being associated with the Aiden Porter, and the potential to make a lot of money. A million dollars was plenty of motivation to find a killer and an incredible bonus for his first job.

Was there any risk of Brex falling for Clara's kindness or beauty?

He scoffed.

Looking at Clara Gem's photo again, he could understand how men could be drawn to innocence and beauty that leapt off the device like that, but not him.

No matter what role he had to play or how alluring Clara's jade-colored, jewel-like eyes were, Brex didn't need or want any romantic entanglements. He would never let down his guard on a job. Especially not his first job that promised to make him a cool million dollars.

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Chapter

Two

Clara Evangeline Gem pep-talked her exhausted legs up the incline of Zen Trail. She was on the steepest incline she would face this morning. There was no view of Jade Valley as the massive boulders she'd been skirting were currently boxing her in, and the sun wasn't quite up to give her the radiant vitamin D she craved.

Since her boyfriend Malik had plunged off the side of Angel's Landing and died over a year ago, she'd 'lost her sunshine' according to her family and friends and been terrified to hike by herself. She'd gone hiking, but only with a friend, a cousin, or one of her siblings along for moral support. She'd also led hikes and bike rides for her brother Vance's fitness retreat when he was down an instructor.

For the past few weeks, though, she'd been conquering her fears and putting Malik's memory to rest. Malik had been a fabulous guy—fun, successful, and thoughtful, a podiatrist out of Phoenix who she'd met while he was visiting his parents here in Jade Valley. His only drawback had been that his parents were livid about their only son dating a 'head in the clouds' Christian with no financial means, sense of style, or drive to be successful. Malik had appreciated how down to earth she and her family were and had felt welcome and at home with them. He'd told her it was the only time in his life he'd truly felt comfortable and accepted.

She couldn't claim that she and Malik had loved each other or that they had been headed for marriage. They'd had a fun time together and a lot of hobbies in common though. Malik had been easy to converse with and easy on the eyes.

She could say the same for Harrison and Kyle.

Her steps slowed as the familiar heaviness shrouded her. Three boyfriends. All great guys. All dead.

Because of her? The police had ruled out any foul play in each of the cases. Accidental deaths. But Clara had been there each time. She didn't know how someone could tamper with Harrison's bike, couldn't explain Kyle's harness fraying and splitting, and she could swear she'd heard someone talking to Malik before he fell off the cliff but she hadn't been close enough to distinguish the voices or see anyone.

She'd also found a jade-colored stone next to each body. Nobody could explain that coincidence. The police had analyzed the stones but found no fingerprints or anything suspicious about them besides the fact they were at the scene of each death. They were inexpensive and could be bought online or in any souvenir shop in the valley. They were fairly certain Harrison's stone had fallen out of his pocket.

When Malik fell, she hadn't seen it as he'd been ahead of her on the trail and around a bend. She'd heard a whisper of sound that could've been someone speaking to Malik, but it had been raining and windy so she wasn't certain. Malik had cried out as if in surprise and then she'd seen his body hurtling toward the ground over a thousand feet below. She'd heard him yelling, legs and arms wind-milling, and then she'd seen his body slam into the rocks. The awful finality after that tragic impact had only been broken by the rainfall, the wind, her own alternating screams of 'Malik' and 'help', and other hikers concerned exclamations.

She'd raced back down the trail to get to him, almost slipping and falling herself multiple times. Now she wondered if she should've gone the other direction and seen who was around the corner or if she'd been making it all up in her head. The police had never said she was crazy, but they also hadn't found anyone suspicious on the

always-busy trail or with ‘just cause’ anywhere near the scenes of any of her boyfriends’ deaths.

The FBI had gotten involved in Malik’s case. His parents had demanded it. It hadn’t been ideal dating Malik and knowing his wealthy mom and dad didn’t like her. Growing up in a close-knit community with many friends, cousins, and siblings and her dad the well-loved pastor, she hadn’t experienced dislike or prejudice often. She certainly hadn’t wanted to alienate an only son from his loving parents.

It was even worse knowing that his parents thought she somehow contributed to Malik’s death.

What if she had? What if each of her boyfriends had died because of something she’d done? The only commonality was her, and the jade stones.

Clara was horrified by the deaths but had no idea how to prove they were accidents or prove they weren’t. The only thing in her power was her trust in her Savior to pull her out of the funk she’d dipped into after Malik’s death and her determination that she’d never date someone seriously again. It wasn’t fair to any man to risk dating her, and she couldn’t possibly handle watching someone she cared about die again.

It didn’t matter if she hadn’t been in love with any of the men. It still ripped her heart out to have them die, and the guilt of thinking it was her fault dug at her every minute.

She shoved the pain and memories away, said a prayer for positivity and the Savior’s light to lift her, and focused on the hike.

“Come on, ladies,” she called to her legs. “Let’s step it up and pretend we’re fit, shall we?”

She smiled at her silliness. Her next younger sister Melody would be laughing with her and probably videoing for her social media channels. Her oldest brother, Vance, who owned and ran Jade Valley Health Spa Retreat, would be instructing her on how to mentally push herself farther and correcting her hiking form. Their youngest brother Lincoln would be composing and singing hilarious songs to make her laugh. Lincoln was the goofy, happy light of the family. She should've brought one of them, or her friends Weston and Jane, with her. Hiking alone was no fun.

"That's it," she called out. "One, two, three, four ... who's got the cutest legs on the floor? Five, six, seven eight, bend and straight, bend and?—"

Clara darted around a rock formation and slammed into something hard and soft at the same time.

She froze, eyes widening, and stared up at the most handsome face she'd ever seen. The man's eyes were a deep brown that seemed to pierce right through to her soul. What could he see? She'd been pep-talking herself because of her recent dark thoughts. What if he could read the despair and the attempted positivity?

His lips turned up in a smirk that made the skin at the edges of his eyes and mouth crinkle. His eyes had wisdom and depth to them and his tanned skin did as well. This was no twenty-year old hoping for a 'cougar' like most of the available men left in her small valley. This was a full-grown man who had seen the good and bad in life and could possibly be a gift from heaven above. If she was interested in dating. Which she wasn't. How quickly she could forget her self-made vow.

"Forgive me," he said in a deep and appealing bass. "I wasn't watching where I was going."

His gaze dropped to her hands and then back up to meet her gaze. It was then she realized that she had both palms planted on his chest, her fingers splayed and cupping

the muscles of his chest through the material of his obviously expensive shirt.

His very well-built chest. She'd never touched muscles that lovely and well-formed.

"Oh!" She pulled her hands away and stepped back. "No, this collision is all on me. I assumed wrongly that any human or animal could hear me singing and would be forewarned and running scared the other direction by my off-tune alto."

His lips turned up even more, a full grin now. He had perfect white teeth, like a model. Clara leaned against the nearby rock formation. That grin was powerful. Butterflies danced in her abdomen and her legs weakened from the force of it.

"I may have heard some impressive rhymes and a lyrical soprano. I changed course to investigate, but I didn't realize you were that close."

They both smiled, her with a little embarrassment, him with obvious enjoyment. He liked teasing her.

"The rock formations distort sound," she explained. "Nobody in their sane mind would call my voice lyrical."

"Ah." He chuckled. "Forgive my insanity."

She also laughed, liking the twinkle in his deep-brown eyes. She looked him over. His dark hair was perfectly cut and styled, and she could swear his eyebrows were plucked. He wore a fancy watch and hiking clothes and shoes she'd only seen on some of her brother Vance's high-dollar fitness clients.

He took her in as well. She shifted, wondering if he could tell her clothes were handmade. She was a great seamstress, and bought high-quality fabric on discounts but definitely no exclusive name brand tags on her clothing like his.

His gaze dropped, sweeping over her legs. It was smoky hot and alluring, but when he glanced back up the teasing glint was back. “I think you do have the ‘cutest legs on the floor’.”

Her face flared red. “Positivity helps when those legs are tired.”

“Is it all right to admit I admire the positivity and the ‘cute legs’?”

Her mouth went dry. This man was attractive, fit, and able to effortlessly flirt with her, but he appeared too perfect to be real. The entire interaction felt like a dream and the gorgeous man seemed like someone who should be on the big screen, not in remote Jade Valley.

“No,” she sassed back. “I don’t share my positivity or cute legs with strangers.” Her neck and cheeks got even hotter. That sentence had come out really odd.

“I’m Brexten Cabella,” he said. “Not a stranger any longer. My friends call me Brex.” He winked and put out his hand for her to shake.

Clara swallowed and moistened her lips, then ran her fingers against his until their palms aligned. Her stomach flip-flopped as unfamiliar sparks and tingles lit the pre-dawn air around them. He curled his fingers around her hand, and she knew she had found the safe space and the excitement she’d been looking for her entire adult life. This man, and the way it felt to touch him and be looked at by him, were unique. She felt like he’d stepped down from Mt. Olympus, yet the way he regarded her and flirted with her made her feel special.

Surprised and confused by her own thoughts, she stared at Brex in awe and concern. She couldn’t fall for some supermodel. She couldn’t fall for any man.

He looked a little unsteady as well, but his megawatt smile was still in place. “Your

name?” he asked in a soft, husky voice. “I don’t want to be strangers any longer.”

Strangers no longer. She was fond of that idea.

He studied her, and Clara realized she was supposed to say something.

She pulled her hand back and clasped her hands together. It was impossible to think straight when he was touching her. Who was this guy? What was he doing to her?

“Your name?” he prompted again, smirking at her now.

“Clara,” she rushed out. “Clara Gem.”

“I like that. Your jade eyes sparkle like the most exquisite gem I’ve ever seen.”

Clara flushed from his compliment. He had a silver tongue to go with his refined looks. She should be leery. She wasn’t.

“Thank you,” was all she could manage, no teasing or sarcasm anywhere to be found. Lincoln would be so disappointed.

She should walk away. She’d told herself moments earlier she wasn’t going to date seriously or get involved again. She couldn’t risk another man she cared about being killed because she grew close to him.

But she wasn’t dating Brex or caring about him. They were only meeting. There was little harm in speaking to a handsome man.

Rationalizing always worked.

“Where are you from, Brex?” she asked.

“How do you know I’m not from Jade Valley?” He shook his wrist and glanced at his watch.

“Seeing as I am the native and know all ten thousand residents by at least sight if not name, I’m hazarding a guess that you’re a visitor or an implant.”

He chuckled. “Guilty.”

“Where are you from?”

“Originally Durango, Colorado.” He cocked his head to the side and folded his arms across his chest. “But my current home is San Diego.”

“Oh.” Her mouth went dry as she studied the well-formed muscles in his shoulders and arms. He’d put them on display with that move. “Are you here ... visiting?”

Jade Valley wasn’t much of a tourist spot. They were an hour and a half south of Zion National Park and forty-five minutes west of the North Rim of the Grand Canyon. Occasionally a tourist would stop for a weekend, do some of the fabulous hikes or mountain bike rides, but Jade Valley, Arizona was only a suggestion on any travel blog, an add-on to the famous national parks nearby, the antithesis of Las Vegas, three hours away. Rarely a spot to stay. Unless a health enthusiast or person needing health reform was staying at her brother’s fitness retreat. Vance had put Jade Valley on the map with his beautiful and incredible spa. Her cousin Jude and sister Melody made their family somewhat famous with Jude’s extreme sports career and Melody’s silly social media posts that made her more money than she knew what to do with. Luckily for Clara she donated generously to her mission trips.

“I’m staying for at least a few months,” Brex said.

“Why?” she demanded.

He flashed her a grin. “Do you always grill the outsider?”

“As a rule.”

“Hmm. And if I don’t answer your questions?”

“The Jade Valley welcoming committee will haul you to the nearest highway and make you hitchhike home.”

“Interesting.” He smirked. “And if I do answer your questions?”

“The welcoming committee will make you some of her fabulous chocolate chip cookies to welcome you to the valley.” Her heart raced. She wanted to tell him she’d make him dinner or take him to dinner at one of the three sit-down restaurants in town.

“Are these cookies really worth spilling all my secrets?”

“The winner of the Fourth of July bake-off four years running.” She gave him a serious stare, holding in her laughter. There was no bake-off on the Fourth of July. On Jade Valley Days in September they had a bake-off but her friend Ginger who owned the bakery in town always won. Ginger had shared her chocolate chip cookie recipe with Clara because her family couldn’t always afford to buy them, and Clara’s were almost as good as Ginger’s.

“I see. That is a very convincing credential for a one-woman welcoming committee, Ms. Gem.”

“I’ll tell my Granny Pearl. She’ll be thrilled to bring you those cookies.”

He chuckled. “I’m sure Granny Pearl is delightful.”

“She is.”

“Like her granddaughter.” His radiant smile sucked the oxygen from her lungs. He tilted his head up the trail. “Would you like to hike together?”

“You were already coming back down,” she pointed out.

“I don’t think it will overexert me to get a few extra steps in.” He shook his wrist and glanced at his expensive watch again. Was he short on time?

She looked over his impressive build. “I don’t imagine it would.”

“You lead the way.” He gestured.

She stepped in front of him and followed the well-worn trail through the red rock. The unique and beautiful cacti were abundant on the valley floor, but only a few were present through the smooth rocks here.

“Are you going to answer my question?” she asked, glancing back over her shoulder. The sun was almost cresting the mountain, and he got better-looking each time she stared at him. Being from southern California could explain why his tan was so perfect, but with his manicured hair and Vuori exercise clothing, it was hard to believe he hadn’t stepped straight out of Hollywood. Maybe he was an actor.

“Why I’m staying in Jade Valley?”

“That’s the one. The first one, at least.”

“Grilled by a local,” he teased. “This morning couldn’t get any better.”

She turned to tease him as the sun peeked over the mountain and backlit him. His

tantalizing face and body were as brilliant as the sun's light.

He smiled, his dark eyes glinting mischievously at her obvious perusal.

She forced herself to look forward and watch the trail.

"I'm here to train the local police force."

So, not an actor. "On what?"

"Whatever the chief requests. The list for the next few weeks is hand-to-hand combat, tracking, international terrorism, deep-dive research, and hostage negotiation. I'll work with them and shadow them on their daily routines."

She stopped walking and spun to face him. He almost plowed her over. Wrapping his hands around her waist, he murmured, "Whoa. Warn me next time you spin to show off that beautiful face, will you?"

Her eyes widened. He was a smooth talker. He was an enticement, and she couldn't tell whether it was a good or bad enticement at this point. She was consciously shoving her pledge to not date seriously to the back of her mind. She didn't want to let her guard down too fast and be tugged in by his slick tongue, but she was far too drawn to him.

"I'll try to remember to warn you," she said. "How do you know how to train police on all those things?"

He smiled, but it was more closed off than he'd been so far. "I worked for the San Diego Police Department for thirteen years, the last eight as a detective."

"I'm impressed."

He smiled, nodded slightly, and released his grip on her, shaking his wrist and glancing at his watch.

Clara took that as her signal to turn. She forced her energized-by-knowing-he-was-watching legs up the trail. Brex was classy, impressive, and more fun to banter with than anyone she'd known, but she had to somehow hold onto her promise to not date anyone seriously. Unless ...

What if Brex was sent here by heaven to help her figure out who had killed Harrison, Kyle, and Malik? If she could find their murderer and know she wouldn't hurt Brex ... she'd be stoked to date this handsome police detective.

But closure for her former boyfriends' murders was too much to hope for. She hadn't found it in twelve long years, and the police and FBI had said the cases were too 'cold' and there just weren't enough clues to lead them to any suspect.

She'd finish this hike with Brex but doubted she'd see him again or grow close enough to beg him to solve her boyfriends' murders. Not that the police believed they were murders. The only people who seemed to believe there was foul play were the Hendrys, and they were pointing their fingers right at Clara.

Would she dare ask Brex to look into her boyfriend's deaths? What if he found evidence to point the finger at Clara also? It was smarter to let the past stay in the past and stick with her vow to stay out of relationships.

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Chapter

Three

Brex kept pace with Clara Gem even as his head felt like it had detached from his body. What had just happened? The world was spinning the wrong direction and only Clara's innocent, breathtaking, genuine smile could set it right. That was insane, but Clara was unexpected and more real than anyone he'd met since growing up in a farming community. Days and memories he'd put long behind him. She radiated with a glow that was natural, not store bought. Was it her Christian values, her positivity, or simply ... her?

It didn't matter. It couldn't matter. He wasn't falling for her, and he wasn't risking that million-dollar bonus by getting duped by the prime suspect.

Clara wasn't his type. He shouldn't be drawn to her. There wasn't a stitch of makeup on her beautiful face or high-quality workout wear on her fit body. She didn't understand the meaning of posturing. Flirting with her had come naturally to him and she made the no-name brand clothes she wore look good instead of the clothes enhancing fake curves. He'd pushed the job to the back of his mind, which was concerning but couldn't mean anything. He was fine. He wasn't yanked in by her genuine and unassuming appeal.

Pamela Hendry had been wise to warn him not to fall for her. There was no denying she was breathtaking. The 'cutest legs' was a bit of an understatement. Those legs were the variety philosophical men wrote poetry about. Brex was more of a researcher, an analyst, definitely not a head-in-the-clouds poet. He could analyze that

she'd hiked many miles to have legs that smoothly muscular and that naturally tanned. Her tan wasn't from a bottle or a tanning bed.

He forced himself to keep his gaze off her legs, watching her dark ponytail swish across her back. He wanted to run his fingers through that silky-looking hair. Did she even have product in her hair or highlights? How could the sun pick up red hues without highlights?

He suspected it was the sweetness, radiance, and humor lighting her up from the inside out that made her irresistible to him.

Not irresistible. Not to him, at least.

He shook his head to clear it. Clara was compelling and charming in her unaffected manner, but not irresistible to him. Probably irresistible to others. Of course she would be irresistible to most single men on the planet, but not Brex. He had to resist falling for the suspect. He could and he would. She would never fit in with the social circles he was aiming for, and he wouldn't want to expose her to them. He could only imagine the jealousy and cattiness Rachel, or any of the women he'd dated, would direct at such authentic sweetheart.

Deep breath. Refocus. Study the trail or the intriguing red rock formations or that unique cactus with a flower blooming. Not her legs or silky hair.

Brex had a job to do. He couldn't fail on his first field job for Aiden just because he couldn't resist the suspect. He'd been trained by the police academy and Nick to keep an emotional distance. If only real interaction was as cut and dry. He'd learned that it wasn't through years as a detective, but he'd never gone undercover. Nobody had trained him how to react if the woman he was supposed to grow close to for information had mesmerizing jade eyes, a radiant smile, a gorgeous and fit body, an unaffected air, and a fun personality.

With nothing to do but keep pace behind Clara and think, he couldn't stop his thoughts from wandering to the brief times they'd touched. What exactly had happened inside his body when she'd planted her hands on his chest when they initially ran into each other? He had to give himself kudos that he'd planned that first meeting perfectly. But what had happened to him when she ran her fingers along his palm until their palms aligned as they shook hands?

The connection and warmth he'd felt from her touch were new. Was that a trick she employed to get the men she killed to fall for her? It was hard to imagine a world where Clara Gem could kill a spider, but he had to think clearly and couldn't allow himself to be pulled in by her allure and miss a vital aspect of this case. He had to solve it. If he failed, he'd never move into the field work that he craved and definitely wouldn't be depositing that million-dollar bonus in the bank and changing his future.

He tried to analyze the unique feeling of her touch, but there was no way to catalog feelings. Feelings were a wild card and to be dismissed or avoided if possible. He'd keep up the flirtations for the job, but staying detached and not letting feelings come into play was imperative to this mission. More crucial than any previous job he'd been on.

"So you're some kind of advisor to police forces?" she asked as they hiked through the unique red boulders.

Nick had thought of the cover story before he came and Aiden had set it up with the local police chief. Chief Randall had been enthusiastic about the idea. Brex knew the chief was excited about one of Aiden Porter's men coming and hoped he wouldn't disappoint. He would train and work with whoever was available from the Jade Valley Police from one to four every afternoon. He'd also have access to all their information on the cases regarding Clara Gem's deceased boyfriends and a chance to get to know some of the officers who had worked on the cases. The mornings and evenings he was free, to pursue ... no, to investigate Clara.

“It’s a new thing,” he told her, trying for honesty as much as possible. The more true his story was, the easier it was to keep the cover in place. Besides the fact that he didn’t like lying. Especially when he was going to earn a million dollars lying to and tricking this unpretentious lady into dating him. He swallowed down the guilt. She wasn’t innocent like she felt; she was the lead suspect in the deaths of three men. He couldn’t get trapped by her.

But he’d never been around a woman who seemed less likely to be trying to trap him.

“I retired from the San Diego Police Department six months ago and have been working in the private sector since then. I haven’t trained other police forces before.” Jade Valley was small; they only had ten full-time police officers.

“Do you work as a private investigator then?”

“Not often.” That was exactly what he was doing with her. Unnerving to chat about it so casually with the target who he was supposed to get ‘close’ to. He’d trained on situations like this, but being in the moment was unsettling. “I was a detective before. Now I’m going to be more of a bodyguard or, depending on the job, I’ll work with a team to infiltrate drug lords, mafia, or traffickers in conjunction with the FBI or police.”

He hoped. If he could complete this case, collect his million dollars, and earn his spot on one of Aiden’s teams. He’d have women chasing him in San Diego if that all happened. Then he wouldn’t need to worry about a genuine beauty from an out-of-the-way valley.

“And you do all of that on your own?”

“No. I work for Aiden Porter.” He wondered instantly if he should have told her the truth. Was he bragging or trying to get her to trust him? But Aiden wasn’t one to hide

who he was. Nick had instructed him to trust his instincts about his real name and what he did. With Clara so seemingly innocent and pure, it was hard to hide the truth. Next he'd be telling her who hired him and what they'd hired him to prove. He shook his head at himself. He'd better control his flapping tongue. She could be the furthest thing from innocent.

Clara came to an abrupt halt and whipped around to face him. Brex almost plowed into her, his right hand bracing on a boulder and his left grasping her firm arm for balance. He felt that unfamiliar zing that seemed to happen when he touched her.

He drew back quickly. How was he supposed to grow close to her if he was affected so deeply by a simple touch? It didn't bode well for keeping his distance emotionally, and he wouldn't ask his debonair and impressive bosses Nick or Aiden for advice on that conundrum.

Clara looked from his hand to his face, her eyes wide. "Just when I think you couldn't be any more enthralling," she said in an awed whisper.

Either this beautiful woman was an open book or she used her innocent appeal to trick susceptible men. He was certainly susceptible to her, and that was not a good thing. He needed to do more deep dive research on her former boyfriends. Were they easily beguiled into falling for her and sped toward their own demise? Was there somebody else involved in Clara Gem's life who may have killed the men out of jealousy? He needed to research anyone close to her or to the deceased men.

Research he was good at. Research he could do.

But staying detached from the allure of those jade-colored eyes? He was failing.

"Aiden Porter?" Her voice pitched up and her eyes were lit with curiosity and admiration. Could that really be put on? "Have you actually met the Aiden Porter?"

He chuckled at the wonder in her eyes. “Yes, I’ve met Aiden Porter.” Aiden was very involved in his security company and touted himself as the ‘second top security specialist in the world’ behind the legendary Sutton Smith. Brex had met him three times and even received the honor of training with him once. Aiden could move like a ninja. Brex had never seen anyone fight on Aiden’s level.

“Is he as charming and handsome in real life as he is on talk shows and social media interviews?”

He laughed. “I’m always charmed by him and wowed by how handsome he is.”

She studied him, then smiled. Her smile was breathtaking. It was so real, so sincere. He sucked in a breath but still couldn’t get enough oxygen. “You’re making fun of me, but honestly ... Aiden Porter. My youngest brother Lincoln wants to be Aiden Porter. My brother Talon is a Marine and we suspect he focused that direction because of his idolism for Aiden Porter.”

Aiden was an icon and Brex was impressed and ‘wowed’ by the man, but not to this level. It definitely was an honor to work for him. Why had he let out who he worked for? Would knowing Aiden Porter was involved make her, or the murderer, cover up their tracks or show their hand?

“Wait until I tell Linc that you work for the Aiden Porter.” She whistled and stared at him as if he were Aiden—charming, accomplished, and desired by women the world over.

“Can Linc keep that between us?” He eased in closer, remembering he should build those bridges of trust. Unfortunately he was drawn to her and all he wanted was to be closer to her and appealing in her eyes. That wasn’t in the manuals he’d read or trainings he’d received, and he needed to remember she wasn’t his type.

At the moment, being close to her, he knew Clara Gem wasn't a 'type'. She was an ideal, an angel, and completely out of reach for a social-climbing, lying-to-her non-believer like him. A preacher's daughter. Holy and clean.

Unless she actually had killed three men.

"I don't mind that you know, or your brother, but if the entire town finds out I might get mauled and interviewed." He winked as if that were old hat for him. "I'd prefer to remain incognito."

Nick would probably tell him to stay incognito. Aiden often bragged to the entire world on podcasts, talk shows, and social media interviews about his and his people's prowess. Which angle was smarter in this remote valley and with this case?

She studied him. "I don't have to tell Linc. He'd be so excited, I don't know if he could hold it in. He's a little boy trapped in a man's body." She turned and started walking again. He could feel her disappointment from here.

"How old is Linc?" he asked, scrambling to think this through. Would it matter if Linc shared that Brex worked with Aiden Porter to everyone in town? Brex would have to explain to Rulon and Pamela Hendry why he was being so transparent. The policemen he worked with would know who he worked for and might share it anyway. If there was a murderer hiding behind these accidents with Clara's deceased boyfriends, would it make the person burrow further into their dark hole or attack Brex when he pretended to date Clara? Each word Clara spoke made it unfathomable to believe she could be the murderer. Half an hour in her presence and he was scrambling for other suspects and wanting to prove she was as genuine and guileless as she was mesmerizing.

"Linc is sixteen and absolutely hilarious. Honestly my favorite person in the world."

He listened as she sang him funny songs Lincoln composed. She bragged about how Lincoln was an ultra-talented athlete, loved to dance, and made them all laugh with his silly dances, lyrics, and jokes. She shared that everybody Lincoln met was his new best friend. Brex found himself looking forward to meeting the kid.

They climbed to the top of a series of boulders and had a view hundreds of feet down to the orange-red sands of the valley interspersed with houses, businesses in the small downtown area, and even some green farmer's fields, a golf course, and what looked to be a nice resort up against the west foothills. The red rock of the distant mountains framed them in. The Hendrys' house was to his far right. He could almost feel their exasperation with how he was letting down his guard from here. But that was ridiculous. They weren't watching him, and he was doing his job of getting close to Clara.

Clara shifted next to him and their arms brushed. It was a simple contact, but the feelings it stirred within him weren't simple at all. He felt excited and full of ... he didn't know the right word or emotion to pin on it, but then he realized it was hope.

He hadn't felt a lot of hope since Alayna, the famous preacher's daughter, had dumped him over ten years ago. Brex had stayed away from all things regarding faith and focused on flourishing in the dating and social scene. His job as a detective had been fulfilling but dark more times than not. Hope was new and tantalizing. Just like Clara. Right now he felt hope for a future of growing closer to Clara and touching a lot more than a brush of her arm.

Hope was out of character for him, and his thoughts were out of line for this job. His future was focused on working for Aiden, protecting innocents, righting some wrongs in this messed up world, and most especially rising financially to the upper crust of San Diego's elite singles. He could date any famous lady who caught his eye. He didn't get excited about much or look too far into the future. He might be dead tomorrow and relationships where his heart became deeply invested were a liability

for his work, for the lady, and for his plans of being one of the most sought-after bachelors in San Diego.

Brex stepped the other direction to avoid contact. He needed to keep his head on straight and not let this too-real angel redefine what he was looking for in a woman or his future plans that felt suspiciously shallow at the moment.

His foot slipped on some loose rocks.

“Careful, Brex,” Clara cried out.

He confidently stepped back from the edge on more solid footing. He turned to focus on her. Clara’s body was tight and her pulse was racing in her neck.

“Are you all right?” he asked, leaning closer. She smelled clean and fresh. Had his Dior Homme cologne worn off or did he smell good to her too? He’d bought the cologne originally because it smelled ‘luxurious’, but he liked the musk and linen scent. He doubted Clara would dub a scent high-dollar.

“It’s you I’m worried about.” She bit her lip and her jade eyes grew almost blue. “I ... can’t handle people getting hurt around me.”

He tilted his chin up in acknowledgement. As a police officer, he knew many normal people who couldn’t handle any sort of emergency, or people who’d been through trauma and couldn’t see any more. This felt more specific. He wanted her to confide in him about her boyfriends’ deaths. He couldn’t just admit he knew all about her watching two men she loved fall to their deaths and one die on a mountain bike. Of course she didn’t love Brex—she didn’t even know him—but her reaction was intriguing. If she’d killed those men, would she react so strongly to someone slipping on a ledge? Maybe. If she felt regret for killing them.

“I’ll be more careful,” he said.

“Thanks.”

She turned to head back down the trail, but Brex found himself reaching out to touch her arm despite his intentions to stay detached.

She glanced back at him, her mouth soft. She was captivating in her authentic appeal, and he was in trouble.

“Clara.” He cleared his throat and moved his hand off her arm. “What if I came to meet your brother tonight and then you could tell him who I work for?”

It was all for the job, to grow closer to her and find the murderer, but he hoped she’d say yes. He wanted more time with her, and he wanted to meet Lincoln.

Her eyes widened. “I don’t want to mess up your work. If you need to be incognito so you can catch the bad guys on future jobs.”

He cringed inside. How would she react if he told her she was the supposed ‘bad guy’?

“I think it would be all right to reveal my handsome face to the bad guys.” He grinned. It wasn’t as if he was famous like Aiden. Yet. “I could risk that for you, at least.”

“You’d do that ... for me?”

Brex licked his lips. He wanted to do a lot of things for her. She was far too intriguing, sweet, and naturally beautiful. He was playing his role well, gaining her trust and getting closer to her, but he knew being drawn to her wasn’t any kind of

roleplay. Her genuine allure was the only thing he was sure of at the moment.

“Sure,” he said.

“What if Linc spreads the news around the high school?”

“I’m betting the policemen will spread it as well. It’s fine. It’ll be old news quick.” He shrugged. This job was very different from the detective work of his past or his future infiltrating traffickers, mobsters, or drug lords, tracking down criminals, or protecting famous people. Those were all roles he’d prepared for with Nick and the other operatives. Usually he would be protecting someone from a clear ‘bad guy’, not getting close and cozy. And though he’d planned to play a role, he wouldn’t have felt guilty deceiving a trafficker, gangster, or drug runner.

He had to figure out the truth. After spending twenty minutes with Clara, he was about forty-five percent convinced that each of her boyfriends had died in tragic accidents. He’d give another forty percent to the theory that someone else had caused their deaths and fifteen percent had to keep doubting this innocent-seeming woman.

Could Clara Gem be the most impressive actress of the year and wasting her talents killing boyfriends and doing charity work on the side?

“Thank you!” She clapped her hands together and beamed at him. She looked for a moment as if she’d throw her arms around him and hug him.

Anticipation of feeling her close had him wanting to lean forward. He tensed instead, not sure how his body would react and afraid he’d forget all his professionalism and distance if Clara was in his arms.

She stiffened as if she’d noticed his reluctance or his internal battle. Giving him a smile instead, she said, “That would be a huge favor for me. Would you be willing to

come over for dinner tonight and meet Linc and tell him then? I'll have Granny Pearl make you those chocolate chip cookies from the one-woman Jade Valley welcoming committee."

He smiled. He was weaseling his way into Clara Gem's life quick, but that was exactly what he was supposed to do. Nick would approve. Rulon and Pamela Hendry would be happy. Rachel would be upset. He'd never been so confused.

"That sounds delectable," he said.

"Linc loves to say my cookies are delectable." She grinned as if they shared an inside joke. "He has to fight for his 'fair share', which means at least a dozen for him and two dozen for his buddies, but nobody else will be home tonight."

"How many of your siblings still live at home?" he asked.

"Only Linc, and me when I'm not on a mission trip."

"You do mission trips?" It was the right question. He felt like an imposter already knowing too much information about her.

"I organize trips for the youth in our area in the summer and I'm usually in the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Belize, Angola, Mongolia, Zimbabwe, or Cape Verde most of June, July, and August. The rest of the year I travel occasionally to volunteer, take supplies, work on relations, or assess needs, but I also raise money and goods here in Jade Valley through charity runs and bike rides, social media campaigns, and even bake sales with my famous cookies, and the help of my friend Ginger who owns the bakery. My siblings, cousins, friends, and our church all help. Especially my sister Melody with her social media following, my cousin Tess with her bike shop, my cousin Jude who is an extreme sports hero, and my oldest brother Vance who owns the fitness resort over there." She pointed to their left and the resort he'd

noticed.

“I’m impressed.” He knew most of this information. Her sister Melody was a social media influencer who was hilarious and didn’t mind embarrassing herself and others. And everybody knew Jude Gem who’d taken over Sawyer Creed and Corbin Johns’ stunt channel on YouTube.

It was interesting how Clara had given an almost practiced spiel. Maybe at thirty she was embarrassed to not have her own home, or maybe she was proud of what she did and liked to share. Maybe she wanted to look good for him since she thought his career was impressive.

Would she still be impressed if she knew he was hired to prove she was a murderer?

He cringed at the thought of this woman being a murderer. He barely knew her and shouldn’t be wanting to proclaim her innocence already. A million dollars would go down the drain if she, or someone else, hadn’t murdered those men. Was it morbid that he wanted her boyfriend’s deaths to not be accidents? Definitely, but it barely tipped the scale of morbidity for retired cops.

“Not as impressed as I am,” she returned, her jade eyes penetrating his very soul. Luckily, he was a brick wall; she wouldn’t see the truth. Throughout his years as a detective, he’d been trained in the most painful and humiliating ways to make sure he didn’t break, and he never had. He had scars to prove it. He might not be an expert on an undercover job like this, but he did have skills and experience in police work.

“Aiden Porter’s security operative,” she continued. “You’re like a Jason Bourne or James Bond. Lincoln is going to be stoked to meet you.”

“I’m nothing special,” he deflected, though he liked to think of himself as a Jason Bourne. “I don’t change the world through charity.”

“You change the world through protecting the innocent,” she returned. “And I can’t tell you how I appreciate what you do and the favor of you coming to share yourself with Lincoln.”

That was an odd way to phrase him coming for dinner, but he didn’t comment on it. If only she knew he was trying to prove she wasn’t ‘innocent’.

“I can’t tell you how I appreciate what you do serving children throughout the world and helping youth in your area to see how blessed they are and give back.” He sounded like a cheeseball. Suave undercover op? Not at the moment.

“Thank you.” She tilted her head and her long, silky, dark hair spilled over her shoulder and arm. Brex itched to run his fingers through it. He clenched them into fists instead.

“What could I do to thank you for the favor to Lincoln and me? Besides cookies and dinner, that is.” She stepped in closer and blinked up at him, moistening her lips.

He’d never envisioned a more beautiful invitation to kiss a woman. Heat filled his body. Leaning toward her was instinctive. Anticipation thrummed through his body. Clara was tantalizing and a kiss wouldn’t be out of line for a thank you. Would it?

He needed someone to slug him or throw cold water on his face. He couldn’t kiss her and keep his head on straight.

If he wanted to remain detached, a kiss was definitely out of line. He suspected kissing Clara Gem would upend his world. Would her kiss be as authentic as her smile and incredible attitude?

He should back away from a kiss and ask to spend more time with her. That would fit what he needed to do for the job and his newly created desire to be close to her. If he

could prove she was innocent, then maybe he could act on the other desires she created in him.

No, that still wouldn't be fair to her. After this job, he would head back to San Diego and dating actresses and socialites like Rachel. A genuine sweetheart like Clara didn't fit in his world, and he'd never fit in hers.

He flicked his wrist and glanced at his watch, taking the opportunity to step back. Her eyes registered disappointment.

"Could you take me on hiking adventures and show me the best spots to explore your valley?" he asked. "I'll be working with the police every afternoon, but I'd love to explore in the mornings."

A gorgeous smile lit up her face, as if he hadn't just stepped away. Was her very nature so giving that she didn't get upset? He'd seen grown woman who didn't get their way pitch tantrums that would impress a toddler.

"I would love that," she said. "There are so many great spots to hike and explore, but I haven't been adventuring much ... in a while. I'd feel safe doing it with you. Thank you."

"No ... thank you."

Brex had slid his way into Clara Gem's life. He'd go to dinner at her house tonight, and they'd hike or explore in the morning. Maybe he could come up with reasons to be together each evening. Before long, he'd find out her secrets, find the murderer, and hopefully prove she was innocent. Working with the police each afternoon would give him a way to gain their trust and get information and impressions from the officers involved in her cases that weren't recorded in the official notes.

Soon Brex would know if this lady could've killed three boyfriends, if the deaths were accidents, or if there was something at play here that no one had discovered.

He looked forward to the challenge. He'd involve Aiden's tech team on the boring research and he'd do the hands-on research ... with Clara. A few weeks around this beauty and a million dollars in his future. Life was good.

She smiled at him and turned, striding down the trail and looking enticing in her fitted T-shirt and shorts. High-dollar clothing usually made the women he dated look good.

With Clara ... she made the clothes look good. From her shining and uplifting personality to those lean, golden-brown legs ... definitely the cutest legs on the block, like her silly song.

Brex looked forward to more time with her. He couldn't let himself get invested, but staying emotionally detached around Clara Gem might be harder than he'd foreseen.

If she kept smiling like that and offering a kiss as a 'thank you', it might be impossible.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:03 am

Chapter

Four

Clara carried a green salad and dressings outside to the patio table, grinning at her youngest brother, Lincoln, grilling the chicken for dinner. Of course Linc couldn't simply watch the marinated chicken pieces to make sure they weren't burning and flip them on the grill. He had music blasting from his phone and was dancing and singing to a popular song, using the spatula as his microphone.

She was relieved it was only her, Lincoln, and Brex for dinner tonight. Her parents had a dinner at the church. Her other siblings were either living out of the valley for work or school or had their own homes and she hadn't felt the need to invite them. Like Linc with cookies, she wanted her fair share, and then some, of the fascinating Brex. Did he think she was a loser being thirty years old and not having her own home?

Her focus throughout high school, college, and adulthood had been her mission trips and raising money for supplies for the schools and orphanages they supported in various countries. Living expenses were set up in the foundation, but she didn't use much of the money transferred into her account, only for rent money her parents didn't want, material to make clothes for herself, toiletries or shoes for herself, or presents for family and friends on holidays. She was trying to save for a home.

“Hey ... I had some help’,” Linc sang at the top of his lungs as he flipped a piece of chicken high in the air. The chicken missed the grill completely and splatted on the concrete patio.

“Linc.” Clara shook her head and laughed.

He whirled around with that irresistible grin. All of her siblings were a mix of their parents’ heritage. Linc had inherited their dad’s red hair and height but their mom’s brown eyes and caramel-colored skin. He had a unique and handsome look, but it was his fabulous attitude and humor that made him special in her mind.

“Baxter was hungry,” Linc said with a wink.

Their dog Baxter, a spunky Border Collie, gobbled the chicken then ran off, doing laps around the yard.

The doorbell rang. Clara dodged in front of her brother. “You focus on flipping the chicken onto the grill, not the ground, or you won’t get any.”

“Ah, sis. You know how hungry your boy always is.”

“Then stop wasting the chicken on Baxter.”

“Dissing on our dog now?” He shook his head, wagging a finger at her, but he turned back to the grill, already singing along to his song before she’d made it halfway through the main living area.

She slowed her pace as she reached the entryway. Looking through the sidelight, she was rewarded with a glimpse of Brex. Tall, dark, and handsome didn’t do enough to describe his mesmerizing brown eyes, manly and sculpted face, and ultra-tough body.

Pulling in a quick breath, she wished she’d thought to check her makeup, but Brex had met her hiking with no makeup and her hair in a ponytail and seemed interested. The little bit of mascara, eyeliner, and lip gloss she wore didn’t change her face to model-perfect. Did Brex usually date models, actresses, or influencers? She was

afraid to find out what his type was but knew she'd be asking Melody to do a deep-dive social media investigation on her new friend.

She yanked the door open wide.

"Hey," she said. He looked just as good in a dusty blue Henley that matched his eyes and gray golf shorts as he had in workout clothes this morning. She made most of her own clothing and knew material. It was easy to recognize that Brex's clothing was high-quality and expensive. He wore it well. Could such a classy, upscale guy—what her twin brothers Talon and Wade would call a 'swanky pretty boy'—fit in her valley or with her? There was an obvious wide gulch between their social and economic standings.

"Hey." He handed over a spring bouquet of flowers. Their hands brushed, and his gaze trailed over her face. "You look incredible."

"Thank you." With understated makeup taught to her by her younger sister Melody who was a social media expert, her dark hair in long curls, and a floral sundress that showed off her shoulders and legs, she felt attractive. His compliment and that look surpassed 'attractive'. She felt like she sparkled.

Brex bent and softly kissed her cheek. He smelled delicious, like a mixture of musk and clean linen out of the wash. His lips made tingles erupt from her cheek and throughout her body. She felt like she was in a movie where the dashing and charming hero with movie star looks brings the simple farm girl flowers and kisses her on the cheek. She loved it, but it felt far from reality.

He stepped back, and she clung to her flowers, swaying from the impact of that simple kiss.

"Did you just kiss me?" she asked, breathless and increasingly disoriented.

“Only on the cheek. My mother taught me to bring a gift to the hostess and a kiss of hello.” He smirked and arched an eyebrow. “Should I have made the hello kiss on the lips instead of the cheek?”

“I think I’m going to pass out.” She fanned her face with her free hand. His lips on her cheek made her head spin. What would his lips on hers do? She was unprepared for such deliciousness. “Water. We need water.”

He directed her through the entryway and toward the living area, wrapping his arm around her waist. She felt even more faint and leaned into him. The contact of her arm pushing against his abdomen added to the disconcerting euphoria.

They reached the kitchen, and he glanced around for a glass. “You need water ... so you don’t pass out from a kiss on the cheek?”

“No.” She grinned up at him. “For the flowers.”

He chuckled. “You got me.”

She stared up into his brown eyes, trying to remember to keep her distance. She couldn’t risk another boyfriend dying. Brex’s foot slipping on the edge of the cliff this morning had brought back all those awful memories.

Distance from Brex felt impossible at the moment.

“Sis!” Lincoln called out in a singsong voice. “I need a platter, or all the chicken will be burned and I’ll have to give it to Bax-ter.”

She laughed and pulled away from Brex. “Coming.” Turning, she grabbed a small platter and hurried out the open sliding glass door. Brex followed.

She handed the plate over to Lincoln. “Linc, this is?—”

“The man, the myth, the legend. You’re Brexten Cabella, Aiden Porter’s top operative and all around stud.” Lincoln grinned. “Clara couldn’t keep her jaw from flapping about you.”

“Ah,” Clara protested, even though it was true. She’d gushed about details from this morning and Lincoln had dug for more.

Lincoln shoved the platter and the spatula at Clara. “Please get the chicken off for me, sis. Pretty please. I need to shake Brexten’s hand like a man.”

Clara smiled. She didn’t mind. She lifted the chicken off the grill and shut it off while Lincoln shook Brex’s hand and gushed. He kept repeating he couldn’t wrap his mind around Brex really and truly working for the Aiden Porter.

They sat down to eat and after the prayer, Lincoln waited while Brex and Clara took what they wanted to eat. After asking several times if they’d indeed gotten all they wanted, he dumped the rest of the grilled chicken, cheesy bacon potatoes, and four slices of homemade bread onto his plate. He didn’t waste space for the salad.

Then he grilled Brex with questions while Brex and Clara ate and Lincoln consumed his food. Brex was patient and funny with Lincoln. Sometimes he couldn’t answer a question, explaining it was information that he couldn’t reveal. Lincoln loved that ‘super-spy guy’ answer and also loved anything Brex could reveal.

When Lincoln had devoured everything on the table but the salad, he announced, “It was delectable, sis, mostly thanks to my superior grilling skills. I’ll clean up quick, then I’ve got to jet. The boys are meeting at the park to pickle the ball, and I’ve got to smash them.” He made a motion like he was holding a paddle and slamming it into a ball, then turned to Brex. “Thank you so much for coming to dinner and answering

most of my questions, Brex. You're the best. I want to have your rizz someday, and I'm stoked you're dating my sis!"

He grinned, leaped to his feet, and started hauling serving dishes into the kitchen before Clara could correct that they weren't dating.

Brex turned to her with a lifted eyebrow. "Will he really clean up before he goes to meet his friends?"

"Oh, for sure. He's always happy to clean up because he likes to eat so much and if he leaves a mess, we all threaten not to cook or grocery shop for him."

Brex chuckled at that. "He is the friendliest and most impressive sixteen-year-old I've ever met."

"He's 'the best' like he always says." She nodded. "We all worry we're going to spoil him as the youngest and him being so 'well loved' as my mom likes to say. But in my personal opinion, he's as generous and fun as any teenager around."

"I can agree with that."

He grinned at her, and she decided she really, really liked him. He shook his wrist and glanced at his watch.

"Do you have to be somewhere?" she asked him.

"Oh, no." He glanced at his watch, then back at her. "Sorry. Habit."

"Nervous habit? Like I make you nervous?"

He grinned at that. "Maybe."

Of course he was teasing. He was too poised and accomplished to be nervous around her.

Lincoln rushed back out onto the patio, grabbing the rest of the serving dishes and announcing, “Did you want any of those cookies you made, Clara, or should I just take them all to the boys?”

“Linc. Don’t you dare steal all of those cookies!” She sprang to her feet and pushed around her little brother, who was twice her weight and half a foot taller than her.

“I wouldn’t steal all of them. Just a plate or two.” He looked as if she’d wounded him.

“Yeah, right. I know how you think.” Clara laughed and gathered up the paper plates and cups from the table to throw in the garbage.

Brex helped her and Lincoln and before long, everything was cleaned up or put away.

“I thought those cookies were for me,” Brex said, pointing to the trays of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies on the linoleum counter top.

Clara loved her parents’ spacious, comfortable, and clean, though outdated home. What did Brex think of it? Was he used to ultra-modern and fancy living spaces? Views of the ocean and all stainless steel and glass?

“They are,” Clara said, giving Lincoln a warning look.

“Ah, no way. Bad plan, my man,” Lincoln said. “You’re all built and buff. I don’t think you want that much sugar racing through your body. As a teenager, I can metabolize sugar and not have it affect my studliness.” He flexed. “But though you’re a legend, you’re kind of an old man, like what are you, almost thirty? You could

damage your perfect physique with more than a few cookies.”

“I’m thirty-four, and I’ll take my chances.” Brex chuckled and winked at Clara.

Thirty-four. She liked that. He was the perfect age for her. He seemed ideal in every way. If any man was worth letting down her guard for again, it would be Brex. He was classy but too tough for someone to murder. Like James Bond. Yet her other boyfriends’ deaths had all been seemingly accidents. Anyone could die in an accident. Her gut turned over at the thought.

“One plate,” Lincoln begged, putting his hands into prayer mode when his reasoning with Brex had failed. “The guys all love your cookies, my favorite and most beautiful sis.”

Clara and Brex both laughed. “One plate,” Clara said. “And promise you’ll share some with your friends.”

He grinned impishly, folded his hands under his chin, gave her an innocent, little boy look with his big brown eyes, and quipped, “May-be,” drawing out the word.

Clara laughed harder, exchanging a look with Brex. He grinned back at her as if he agreed that her little brother was the most hilarious and adorable teenager on the planet.

Lincoln overloaded a paper plate with cookies, inhaling four while he worked. He wrapped the plate in three layers of Saran wrap and then gave her a hug and Brex a fist bump. “Thanks for answering my questions. You’re the best! I hope you fall madly in love with my sis and I get to see you all the time.”

He winked at Clara, gave a silly wave with his fingers wagging but his hand not moving to Brex, and ran for the garage.

Clara couldn't meet Brex's gaze after that proclamation. She hardly knew him and Lincoln had just made this completely awkward. Knowing her teenage brother, he'd done it on purpose. Sometimes he seemed far too innocent and unaware, but not always.

"Clara." Brex stepped closer to her.

She glanced up. His brown eyes were ... uncertain and stormy.

"I ... don't know what to say," he admitted.

"Don't say anything," she said quickly. "Linc's a silly teenager. It didn't mean anything. Cookie?" She grabbed a cookie and handed it over.

Brex's eyes settled and he grinned, probably relieved she wasn't boxing him into a corner when they hardly knew each other. He took the cookie and a large bite. Chewing slowly, he studied her. Why did he look so intense and alluring if he didn't want to fall madly in love with her and didn't know what to say to her brother's teasing?

"Delectable," he murmured. He took another step in and extended the last bite of the cookie. "Would you like a bite?"

She'd already eaten enough cookie dough to satiate her sweet tooth for a while, but she could only nod in response. She opened her mouth and he gently placed the bit of cookie on her tongue. His fingers brushed her lips as he pulled back. She chewed and swallowed the delicious mix of brown sugar, butter, and chocolate, her eyes focused on him.

"Clara." He framed her hips with his hands against the counter, leaning in and setting her body on fire. "I'm only here for a short time and I'm sadly not in a position to

‘fall madly in love’.” He swallowed and his gaze swept over her face.

Clara felt the sting of disappointment. Not that she expected him to fall madly in love with her, but it still stung. What woman wouldn’t want Brex to fall madly in love with her?

“But I’d like to see Lincoln again,” he said.

“Lincoln?” she managed. Was he teasing, or was it an olive branch? He was only in town for a while, but he liked Lincoln and maybe he liked her too.

“Yeah.” He eased even closer, his chest brushing against her, his arms encircling her from the side, his body pressing her into the counter. “I’d really like to see Lincoln’s sister again. Share more cookies and kisses hello on the cheek.” He arched an eyebrow, and she got hot all over.

“If hello is a kiss on the cheek,” she said through her dry throat, forgetting all about the awkwardness of a moment ago and him not wanting to fall in love with her, “what happens at goodbye?”

His mouth curved in an enticing smile. “I guess you’ll have to wait and see.”

Fire raced through her. “I don’t want you to leave,” she admitted. “But maybe it’s time to walk you to the door.”

He chuckled at that but then leaned even closer. She inhaled his musk and linen scent. “Maybe we should practice goodbye right here in the kitchen.”

Clara’s stomach swirled with butterflies. She ran her hands along the firm muscles of his arms and up to his shoulders. He quivered under her touch. Maybe he wasn’t ready to fall madly in love. She shouldn’t be either and she shouldn’t long for love

when she was a boyfriend killer.

But something was happening between them, sparks unparalleled in her experience. She wanted to explore their connection and the warm tingles erupting inside her.

She arched up as he bent down.

The doorbell rang.

Clara bit back a groan of frustration.

Brex swiveled from studying her to glance toward the wall blocking them from the entryway. He looked back. “Dare we hope they go away?”

Clara laughed. “We can hope.” She entangled her fingers in his short dark hair and urged his head down toward hers.

His grin made her knees weak.

A pounding came on the door.

“Maybe if we sneak out back,” he whispered against her lips.

“I like that idea.”

Before they could move, she heard the door fling open and calls of, “Clara! Where are you, girlie?”

Her stomach sank. Usually she loved to see her sister.

Tonight she wanted to curse the interruption.

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Chapter

Five

Brex was losing his mind. If he didn't find it soon, he might mess up this entire job.

He'd never experienced flirtation or a desire to be close to and kiss somebody like this before. Casually dating Rachel or anyone else, no matter their beauty or status, was ruined for him.

Clara was all he could see. All he wanted to see.

And this gorgeous woman who was drawing him in wasn't his type, wouldn't fit in his world, and might be a murder suspect.

Brex wanted to curse the interruption, but it was for the best.

He couldn't see any scenario where Clara had killed anyone, but that was why he was here. He couldn't let Aiden or the Hendrys down, and he longed for that million dollars in his bank account. What was he doing almost kissing her? He'd done enough groundwork to spend more time with her. Kissing her would make him lose his mind and was stretching far over the line of acceptable protocol.

He and Clara straightened and turned to face a man and three women who burst into the kitchen from the front entry.

"Clara's cookies," the reddish-blond woman with jade-colored eyes said, but she

was studying him with questions in her eyes.

“Ultra-hot man,” the brunette with deep-brown eyes who he recognized as Clara’s younger sister, the influencer Melody, murmured.

“Who are you?” the man demanded, an average height, well-muscled blond guy about Clara’s age in a golf shirt and pants.

The third woman was pressed into the man’s side, a petite brunette with a soft smile and a vacant look in her eyes.

Clara sighed and lifted a hand toward Brex. “Brex Cabella, this is my sister Melody, my cousin Tess, and my closest friends Weston and Jane.”

Weston’s mouth turned down at the word ‘friend’. The possessive way he was looking at Clara said he wanted more than friendship.

“Nice to meet you,” Brex said to the three of them. He stepped forward and shook each of their hands. The first two women each gripped his hand normally. Jane’s grip was limp. Weston tried to clamp onto his hand. Brex put pressure with his thumb on the man’s median nerve in the thenar space between the thumb and first finger.

Weston winced and pulled away. Brex hid a smile and stepped back to Clara’s side.

“How did you meet my gorgeous sister, Mr. Brex Cabella?” Melody asked, grabbing a cookie and biting off half of it. She was loud and borderline obnoxious on her feed but well-loved by her audience. She was much calmer in person but still had a mischievous glint in her dark eyes. She reminded him more of Lincoln than of Clara.

“We met hiking this morning,” Brex answered. “Then she invited me to dinner. For Lincoln.”

“For Linc?” The cousin Tess’s eyes, so similar to Clara’s, narrowed. It was intriguing to see those eyes in a paler face with strawberry-blonde hair instead of Clara’s dark locks. “Why not for Clara?” She blinked long lashes at him, a seemingly innocent motion, but he could tell she was baiting him.

“Brex works for Aiden Porter,” Clara explained, “so I knew Linc would die to meet him.”

“Aiden Porter?” they all exclaimed. Except Jane who remained silent.

Weston looked even more annoyed now. Brex had to hide a smile again. He shook his wrist and looked at his watch.

“What kind of job could you do be doing for Aiden Porter in sleepy little Jade Valley?” Weston asked.

“I’m training the police,” Brex said evenly, folding his arms across his chest. He felt a strong desire to posture. This guy bugged him. What was his relationship with Clara? Why hadn’t there been anything in the police or FBI reports about him? He was a prime suspect in Brex’s mind. In love with Clara for years but always the ‘friend’. Having to watch her love other men and killing them in a rage of jealousy.

“Are you now?” Weston looked like he was ready to call Brex out and try to prove Brex was lying about working for Aiden. Did Brex not have ‘the imposing yet charming look’ down yet? Was his TravisMathew golf casual not impressive enough? What if Weston saw straight through him to this being his first field job for Aiden?

“That’s what I said.” Brex found himself puffing up as if staring down a dangerous animal. Weston wouldn’t have a chance against him in a fight.

“Can I get a selfie with you?” Melody asked, interrupting his and Weston’s stare

down.

“Not if you’re going to post it,” Brex countered.

“Oh, ha! Somebody’s done their research,” Melody grinned, obviously pleased to be recognized.

“You are the famous Melodious Melody,” he teased back.

“I am, and I promise I wouldn’t make fun of you on my post.” Melody blinked innocently. “I’d just brag about meeting one of Aiden Porter’s guys.”

He smirked at her, thinking he was playing this one correctly. Clara’s little sister was endearing with an intriguing mix of charisma and mischief. She wore similar clothing to what he’d seen on Clara—quality material and great fit but no labels. Even still she would make a stir and stand out in San Diego social circles.

Should he let Melodious Melody give him five minutes of fame? As a police detective, he would definitely have preferred incognito. With Aiden being flamboyant and charming the entire world, Brex didn’t think he’d get in trouble if this world-famous influencer bragged about meeting him. In his training they’d explained it depended on the job they were doing and what future jobs they wanted to do if they were more visible or hiding their identity.

“I’ll have to think about it.” He looked at Clara. “We do try to remain incognito.”

Clara grinned at their inside joke. “Though it’s hard when you’re Jason Bourne.”

“Then why did you brag to all of us?” Weston asked, interrupting their moment.

“He didn’t,” Clara pointed out. “I begged him to let me tell Linc, and I was the one

who bragged about him to all of you.”

“He told you who he was,” Weston pointed out. “Not very incognito.”

She gave Weston a look that clearly said to stand down. Brex could help prove her point with the guy if she wanted.

Weston raised his hands and changed the subject. “Are you coming on the bike ride with us?”

“I forgot,” Clara admitted. She glanced at Brex. “Would you like to come on a bike ride with us? Tess owns the bike shop, so she could get you a bike.”

“For sure.” Tess gave him a thumbs up. “Free bikes for Aiden Porter’s guy.”

“Thank you.” He chuckled. “That’s kind of you, but I need to take off anyway.” He questioned if he shouldn’t take them up on the offer, see what the dynamic was with Clara’s sister, cousin, and friends, but he was moving fast enough with her. His mind was still spinning from their almost kiss. He needed to get some space and perspective. Maybe he’d go to his rental home and research this Weston guy. What was his last name?

“I’ll walk you out,” Clara said.

“Nice to meet you all.” Brex raised a hand and smiled at them. He rested his other hand on the small of Clara’s back and walked with her to the entryway. She pulled open the door and walked out. He followed her, shutting the door behind him.

“You sure you don’t want to come on the bike ride?” she asked, studying him. “We’re doing the Emerald River Trail. It’s pretty and there’s some shade.”

“That river is called Emerald River?” He almost choked on a laugh.

“Hey. It’s greenish.”

He grinned. It was pretty, simply different from the sparkling blue rivers he was accustomed to. “I don’t want to interrupt something you have planned, and I need to get settled in my rental home and deal with some emails.”

Translation: research her and her friends for hours.

“You’re not leaving because Weston acted like a doofus? He’s a great guy; he just gets a little ... jealous.”

Brex’s gaze zeroed in on her. “Are you dating?”

“No.” She shook her head. “Friends.”

“Has he tried to be more than friends?” Brex might be pushing past boundaries asking that question. He needed to know for the job and wanted to know for himself.

“At times, but I’m not interested in him like that, and he went through a rough divorce a couple years ago.” She shrugged. “We’re better as friends.”

“Maybe you should tell him that.” He needed to know the timing of Weston’s marriage and divorce. There were years long gaps in boyfriend deaths.

“I have.”

“I could tell him for you.” He arched his eyebrows.

“Somehow I don’t think that would go over well.”

“You never know.” He smiled and raised his hands. “What does Weston do?”

“He’s the varsity football coach and teaches science at the high school.”

He nodded. It was more than enough to find the last name online.

Clara changed the subject. “You’ve seen Melody on social media?”

Brex realized his mistake of recognizing Melody. Though she had a massive following, her channel wasn’t one he would typically look at and Clara already knew that about him.

“When I met you this morning ...” He hated lying. He flicked his wrist and glanced at his watch. “I Googled you, and some photos of you were tagged on Melody’s page.”

“You Googled me, eh?” Her jade eyes grew warmer.

“What can I say?” He lowered his voice and stepped in closer. “I’m very intrigued by you, Clara Gem.” That was true personally and professionally.

He wanted to wrap her up in his arms and show her his kiss goodbye was better than his kiss hello.

A horn honked and an older Suburban pulled into the driveway. Clara stepped back and murmured, “Ah, no. You should’ve left while you could. Maybe you should run. Now.”

Brex studied the middle-aged couple as they parked the vehicle and the man hurried around to escort the woman out of her seat and across the grass to the front porch. He recognized them from the photos. Curtis Gem was in a suit and his wife Ruth in a

flattering pale blue dress. Their clothes weren't high quality, but they were presentable and attractive. They were also a great contrast as a couple. Clara's dad was tall, burly, and redheaded with the distinctive jade eyes. Clara's mom was brunette, olive-skinned, and petite with deep-brown eyes like Lincoln and Melody.

Gray interspersed with red in Clara's dad's hair. He didn't look like he'd ever had a facial, and he was driving a car older than Lincoln. Alayna's dad wouldn't have been caught in a family vehicle from the early 2000s and in a suit bought at Wal-Mart. Brex was surprised how comfortable those facts and Clara's home life made him. A large family in an older but well-kept home. No one but Weston had shown any inclination to posture or check out the label on his golf shirt.

"My parents," she muttered.

"I can't wait to meet them."

"Your funeral."

He chuckled at that but felt a blip of concern. Alayna's dad had separated them, determining Brex didn't make the cut. What if Clara's dad felt the same? Maybe it had nothing to do with his bank account and everything to do with his nonexistent faith.

He stepped forward, shoulders back and confidence oozing, even if it was a facade, offering his hand to her father first. "Brex Cabella. Nice to meet you, sir."

"Wonderful to meet you, son." Her dad gave him a hearty handshake. His gaze was welcoming and kind. Brex was instantly put at ease. "I'm Curtis Gem, and this beauty is my breathtaking wife, Ruth."

"Oh, you." Ruth pushed at her husband's shoulder with her palm, smiling hugely, and

then turned and shook Brex's hand. Her hand was small and her grip firm. "A friend of Clara's?"

"Yes, ma'am. Hiking buddies. She kindly invited me over for dinner and to meet Linc."

"Oh?" Ruth arched an eyebrow. "She didn't tell us about a handsome hiking buddy coming to dinner."

"Brex was just leaving," Clara said quickly. "I'm walking him to his ... SUV thingie."

It should've annoyed him that she had no idea what vehicle he was driving. He was in debt to drive the Range Rover. Clara didn't need to know what kind of car he drove and get certified financial statements before dating him. It was weird to him. And ... refreshing.

"Okay, darlin'," her dad said. "I wasn't going to grill him with questions."

"I'd believe you," Clara said, "if it wasn't common practice."

Her parents both laughed.

"Nice to meet you, Brex," her mom said.

"Come back again soon so I can grill you." Her dad shook his hand again. "You look like a fine, upstanding man."

"Thank you, sir. I try."

Neither of her parents gave him the top to bottom visual inspection. They kept eye

contact the entire time. Nonjudgmental, welcoming, and a preacher ... it might take a minute to wrap his mind around that one.

Her dad held the front door and her mom walked in the front entry. Her dad retraced his steps to the driveway, waving to him again before jumping in the vehicle and pulling the Suburban into the garage.

Brex liked them. They seemed like a normal, teasing, loving family. He was welcome and comfortable in their home. It was clean and outdated and felt like a happy family lived there.

The only red flags he saw on this job were the friend Weston and the hatred Rulon and Pamela Hendry had for these people. That might all stem from losing their son, but who knew? Lots of research to do tonight for certain. He didn't want to leave Clara's side, but research was safe and familiar and the million dollars had to remain his top priority, not the desire to kiss this unique, down-to-earth sweetheart and potentially mess up the entire job.

"Sorry," Clara said as they walked to his silver Range Rover. "The downfalls of living at home."

"Why do you live at home?" he asked, hoping he wasn't overstepping anything.

She folded her arms and looked more uncomfortable than he'd seen her look. "I'm not home often and my stipend for running the mission trips isn't very much." She looked down the quiet street. "I do make and sell my own dresses." She gestured to her flattering sundress. "But most of the time I donate that money to the mission fund." She squirmed as if embarrassed she'd admitted that.

"It's very honorable what you do," he said. It made sense why her clothes fit so well; they were tailor-made. She looked fabulous without the high dollar brands he was

used to seeing on ladies he dated. Clara was nothing like he thought he wanted in a woman. Somehow, she was much more.

“Thank you.”

The moment was lost; he wouldn't get a kiss goodbye. He shouldn't want one so badly. Glancing back at the house, he saw a lineup in the formal living room off the entry, pressed into the picture window and watching them like a shot from a movie scene on the big screen. Only Weston looked sour about the current entertainment option. The only one not paying attention to them was Jane, who was studying Weston.

“Are we still on for hiking in the morning?” he asked, reaching for his driver's side door and pulling it open. He'd accomplished a lot today and grown close to Clara, as per the objective. It was definitely time to go before he forgot the job objective and focused on growing close to Clara for his own selfish desires. That could sink him and skew his research and the case.

“Sure. Meet me at the Red Mountain Falls trailhead.”

“Sounds great.”

“Plan on getting wet. Leave your high-dollar watch at home.” She arched her eyebrows in a challenge.

“Sounds even better.”

She grinned but stepped back, out of reach. It was for the best. He loaded up and lifted a hand. She didn't move as he drove away.

Clara Gem. She was pure, charitable, and a genuine beauty. She was enthralling,

familiar, and yet more of a mystery by the minute. When he pictured her, it was different. He didn't see her in a condo with a view of the beach, a dress designed by Dior, hair and makeup professionally done to make her more beautiful. He just saw Clara—her face, her smile, her inner beauty that outshone the glitz and glamor he was used to.

If only he dared call Nick and ask protocol on wanting to kiss the suspect.

He rolled his eyes at himself. No way was he doing that. Calling Nick, that was. Kissing Clara might happen. His blood heated. He could easily claim it was part of the job.

Why that rubbed at his conscience, he wasn't going to investigate.

The job came first. Feelings for the angelic lady couldn't factor in. If only he could remember that. He'd never had feelings this strong for any lady.

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Chapter

Six

Clara had to endure a lot of teasing and questions on the bike ride along the Emerald River Trail and later that night with her parents. They all gave her a hard time and tried to find out everything she knew about Brex, which wasn't nearly enough. She shouldn't have let him leave early. Thinking about seeing Brex the next morning made it easier. A superstar had dropped into her life and she wanted to spend every spare minute with him.

She pulled into the parking lot at the Red Mountain Falls trailhead early the next morning, the smell of creosote greeting her when she opened her door. The scent was pungent to a lot of people but welcoming to someone who had grown up in the desert.

Brex's beautiful silver SUV was already there. Her older Sonata looked dowdy next to it. Did she look the same next to Brex? She wouldn't think about it.

Jumping out of her car, she hurried toward him. He strode her direction. The sun wasn't up, but it was light enough to see his handsome face.

She'd had three serious boyfriends as an adult and each one of them had tragically died. Brex seemed far too tough and confident to die, but that didn't mean he couldn't have a horrible accident like Harrison, Kyle, and Malik.

He wasn't her boyfriend. Not even close. He wasn't even here long term and she hardly knew him. Her thoughts were running away from her.

But she was drawn to him. Magnetized. Had the good Lord put Brex in her path to give her a chance to trust in a man and find love and a future? She always trusted her Heavenly Father and felt His inspiration in her life, but she wasn't certain if Brex was a gift from above or if she was so attracted to him she wasn't seeing clearly. He could be gone tomorrow.

What was she going to do about this draw to Brex? If they did develop a relationship, how could she keep him safe? Maybe she should tell him about what had happened with the other men and beg him to stay safe and be ultra cautious. He could use his connections to Aiden Porter and figure out if there was foul play in her boyfriends' deaths. They could determine together if she dared get involved with him or, rather, if he dared take a risk on dating her.

No. She wasn't ready for any of that. Brex would think she was trying to get him to be her boyfriend. He might even think she was the one to blame for the deaths. She'd been the only one around and the creepiness of finding the jade stones that matched her eyes made her wonder if she wasn't somehow at fault.

"Morning," he said, gifting her with his incredible smile.

"Hi. Ready to get hiked into the ground?"

"With those cute legs of yours?"

"Oh, my." She groaned. "I can't believe you heard me singing yesterday."

"I was hoping for more singing today."

"Prepare for disappointment."

He chuckled and gestured. "Lead the way."

“All right, I will.”

She took off at a quick pace up the nearby canyon. The first part of the trail was on the edge of a stream that fed into The Emerald River that wound through Jade Valley. The farther they walked, the more the canyon walls closed in. The path through the red rock canyon grew narrow until the path was in the stream. Her valley would grow unbearably hot in the summer, but in March it was ideal, fifty to sixty in the early morning and rarely broke seventy-five at midday.

When they had no choice but to plunge into the chilly water, Brex said, “Well, this is unique. I don’t think I’ve ever hiked in the river.” He gazed up at the almost sheer red walls dozens of feet high framing them and the blue sky. The sun had risen while they hiked, but they couldn’t see it from here. The sky looked unerringly blue, almost fake like the sky at Disneyland.

“Have you never done The Narrows in Zion?” she asked.

“I’ve only been to Zions as a teenager with my parents and sister and we didn’t do much more than a short hike that ended with us playing in the river.”

“That’s probably Riverside Walk, the start of The Narrows. Were there red rock walls?” She felt a twinge at bringing up the national park. Malik’s death gouged at her. She hadn’t been back to Zion since he died a year ago, even though her friends and family had begged her to go in the off season. She loved the park but wasn’t fanatical enough to correct Brex for saying ‘Zions’ not ‘Zion’ like the locals would.

“Yeah. Is the Narrows hike more like this?” He gestured around.

“It’s a lot wider than this, but yeah, you have no choice but to walk in the river. For miles and miles.”

“I like it.”

She smiled. She’d hoped he would. “Are your parents still in Colorado?”

“Yeah.”

“And your sister?”

“Yes. She’s married and lives a few miles away from them. They’re pestering her about grandbabies all the time.”

“My parents don’t have any married yet, so they pester all of us about getting married and then making them grandbabies.”

Brex glanced back with a longing in his dark eyes that made her cheeks go hot despite the cold water up past her knees and the cooler air outside. Was it the getting married or the making grandbabies that he liked? She focused on placing her steps to give herself a break, or she might beg him to date her seriously.

They progressed through the stream and reached the first waterfall. A ladder propped against the side of the falls gave them access to the pools above. This sheltered spot was magical to her. The red rock, green water, and blue sky were all so beautiful.

“Are you up for a little adventure?” she asked.

“Of course.” His deep-brown eyes twinkled at her, and he gestured for her to go first.

She climbed the moss-covered ladder and reached the next level. Waiting for Brex, she glanced around at the steep red rock walls and the fast-moving stream spilling over the rocks in a twenty-foot drop. It was otherworldly.

Brex reached her side and looked around.

“What do you think?”

“It’s beautiful,” he said, looking at the red rocks, the green water, the bright blue sky, and then his gaze landed on her face.

She flushed as if he’d said she was beautiful, not the scenery. Brex was clearly interested in her or he wouldn’t have asked to hike with her every morning, but he seemed far out of her league —too accomplished, worldly, and polished for her. She didn’t dare hope he was interested in anything long term.

He moved to the edge overlooking the falls.

“Please,” she cried out. “Get back.”

Brex turned to her, a smirk on his face. “Worried about me?”

“Yes,” she admitted. “I don’t want you to fall.”

“I won’t.” His voice and his eyes were confident.

Brex didn’t know his own vulnerability. That terrified her.

He walked to her side and they wandered up the stream, wading through graduating pools. They hit the end of the box canyon. A steep waterfall descending to a small pool. There was no way to scale it. She’d only seen her extreme-athlete Jude make it up.

Pausing to drink from their water bottles and savor the view, they turned and headed back down the stream.

When they reached the ladder, Brex said, "I'll go first in case I need to catch you."

She pushed out a huffy breath. "Catch me? I'm an experienced moss-covered ladder climber."

"We'll see." He winked and scurried down the ladder. His speed made her heart thump quicker. She was tempted to ask him to be careful again.

Clara hurried down after him, intent on proving she wasn't a wimp and could move as fast as he did. Her foot slipped off a rung near the bottom. Brex grabbed her and hauled her down to the creek bed and against his chest.

"Good thing I was here." He smiled, and she knew he was teasing her.

"Yes, that plunge of one foot into this raging river could've been dangerous." She was cradled in his arms and wanted very much to stay there.

His eyes twinkled.

The thought of him in danger made her sick.

She wrapped her arms around his lower back and savored the feel of his strong arms surrounding her. The small waterfall splashed merrily next to them. This early in the morning, and with the water cooling their legs and feet throughout the hike, they weren't sweaty. They were in a magical oasis next to the scenic waterfall. Their own little world.

Was it too quick to kiss him? Their relationship was moving fast, and she shouldn't get involved with Brex and put him in danger. How would she live with herself if he died?

She should back away, but she was weak.

His gaze became full of desire for her, a look that made her stomach pitch and her legs weak. She leaned into him and he bent down.

“Clara,” he whispered against her lips. “I shouldn’t ...”

Clara wondered why he shouldn’t. He’d told her last night he was only here for a short time and not in a position to fall madly in love like Linc had teased them. Maybe he had a girlfriend back home. Maybe Clara wasn’t his type. Maybe he had made a vow to not date like she should have done.

She couldn’t waste any more time stressing about why he ‘shouldn’t’ when his arms lifted her closer and their lips met.

The air around them seemed to sparkle as their mouths connected and then danced together. Brex confidently took possession of her lips, and the morning sang with joy. Their kiss brought them together as if they were two magnets searching for each other their entire lives. Maybe heaven above had brought Brex to the valley and to her. He was a spectacular enigma, and she was fascinated by him. His kiss only made her more drawn to him.

Brex released her from the kiss and stared at her. His gaze was filled with the wonder of what had just transpired between them. How could this accomplished man who’d probably dated actresses and models look as awestruck as she felt? Their kiss was unique and binding, and she knew she wasn’t the only one who felt it.

“Clara,” he whispered again.

She’d always thought her name was plain and old-fashioned. Not on Brex’s lips. It was mystical and enchanting.

He captured her mouth again, and magic wasn't enough to describe how his kisses felt. The water babbled merrily nearby as their kisses intensified, became more passionate and more fulfilling. Clara was swept away in the joy of Brex and amazed to feel the depth of his longing for her in each kiss, each touch. Time passed, but she didn't catalog it. She savored kissing and being kissed.

Voices echoed from the canyon below.

Brex pulled back. His eyes swept over her, full of a hunger she'd never seen in a man's eyes and especially not a man as desirable and accomplished as Brex. Abandoning any ideals of not having a boyfriend, she was planning their future in her mind. She'd keep him safe. Somehow.

She moistened her lips, and his gaze sharpened and grew even more heated. She thought he'd kiss her again—who cared if whoever was coming saw—but he took her hand and turned. She said a prayer of gratitude for their magical exchange in this mystical and beautiful spot.

Brex didn't say anything as he led her down the river. They greeted the couple coming up the stream but didn't stop to chat. Clara recognized them but didn't know their names.

They progressed down the path and the silence between them became louder than the creek dancing over rocks. She didn't know what to say and wished he'd break the silence. Yet how could words fill the air between them that had been changed by their powerful kissing session? She'd naively fallen for him in those blissful moments. Had he just been enjoying the kisses, or did he feel anything deeply for her?

As the silence wore on, the rapture slowly fell away and an uneasy pit formed in her stomach. Brex was holding her hand. He looked strong and protective, but there was something off about them kissing like that, then neither of them speaking since.

Did he regret their kisses?

Did she?

She didn't know that she could regret kisses that pure and enthralling, but she'd promised herself not to get another boyfriend. What if Brex slipped off a cliff or wrecked on a mountain bike, was crushed by a falling boulder, caught in a flash flood, or struck by lightning? Jade Valley was known for flash floods and spectacular lightning storms, and she'd personally seen men killed falling off cliffs and wrecking mountain bikes.

Her heart beat high and fast and her hand gripped his more tightly.

How could she protect him? She was terrified to have something happen to Brex. Their shared interactions and their shared kisses were beyond anything she'd experienced with Harrison, Kyle, or Malik. She'd known Brex all of a day and wanted to pledge her heart and life to him. That wasn't smart or rational. On any level. He hopefully wouldn't die, but he'd eventually leave Jade Valley, and her, behind. He was too suave and larger than life. Too accomplished for this valley. For her.

The canyon widened and they were able to step out of the river and onto dry ground. Brex released her hand, and they picked up the pace. He gave her another glance filled with longing but said nothing. The next couple miles passed with her stewing over what he was thinking and what she was thinking.

They finally made it to the parking lot, their ethereal waterfall retreat far behind them. Brex walked her over to her car and turned to face her. She pressed her back into the car door and stared up at him. The sun lit his handsome face, but his eyes were dark and apprehensive.

“Clara,” he said, studying her, “I’m sorry.” He flicked his wrist and glanced at it, even without his watch to look at. “I shouldn’t have kissed you.”

She blinked up at him, the unease in her stomach becoming a cold rock. He was not only second-guessing their passionate exchange; he wanted to retract it. His repentance was deeper than her questioning whether they were moving too fast. He wanted to erase it.

“You’re sorry about those kisses?” she demanded.

He smiled and cupped her jawline with his palm. “I couldn’t ever be sorry about those kisses.” Sparks of desire in his eyes counteracted the concern. “I’ve never experienced a kiss like that, a feeling like that.” He looked her over. “Pure and powerful. Genuine. You are pure and powerful and genuine, Clara Gem. If I could, I’d kiss you every hour of every day.”

Clara’s heart hopped and tingles covered her skin. He was sincere. She could see it in his eyes and hear it in his voice. He’d felt that interchange as deeply as she had. She had no power, only through her Savior, but the thought of their kisses being pure and powerful hit exactly right. Definitely genuine. There was nothing false between them.

He released his hold on her and stepped back. The muscles in his arms engaged as he clenched his hands into fists. “But I’m on a job here, and I shouldn’t be kissing you and leading you on. That isn’t my objective.”

Clara’s hopes dove into the red dirt. Her heart felt squished into the red dirt as well. She’d been falling for him, and he was easily stepping away. She put up her defenses and scrambled for something to say. “That’s good ... really good ... because I’ve sworn not to have a boyfriend again.”

His gaze became searching. “You have? Why?”

She blinked up at him. For a moment she considered telling him her story, the horrifying deaths, and begging him to help her. But if he was only ‘leading her on’, she wasn’t going to confide in him.

“None of your business,” she snipped. “If you’re focused on your job and I’m focused on not having a boyfriend, it’s for the best that we not see each other and that we never kiss again.” The words hurt to say, and she prayed he’d contradict them.

He swallowed, his gaze still searching hers. “I don’t know if I could claim it’s for the best. Those kisses ... you ...” His hand swept over her. “All of you, Clara Gem ... You are as unique and beautiful as your jade-colored eyes.”

She felt the stirrings of hope and desire again. He thought she was unique and beautiful, but he’d also admitted he was leading her on. Who did that? He was too honest, which made his sweet compliments deeper but also made the rejection deeper.

She pushed any hope of developing a deep relationship with Brex away. It was for the best. It would keep him safe physically and keep her heart intact. She hadn’t had Melody research him on social media, but she could only imagine the classy and perfect woman a charming security operative of Aiden Porter’s would date.

“Please don’t,” she said softly. “You’re the one who said you shouldn’t be kissing me. Is that true or not?”

He drew in a breath and squinted at the sun, pushing out the air like a heavy burden. “It is.” The two words were slow and weighty. He didn’t want to say them, but he was being honest.

“Well ...” She said a prayer for strength. “It was very nice to have met you, Brex Cabella.”

Clara turned and ripped her car door open. She was humiliated, drawn to him, confused, and knew she was right that it was for the best they not kiss again. She could get him killed if someone had killed her other boyfriends. Besides, he was focused on his job and would be leaving the valley in a few months.

Training the police each afternoon. It seemed like a piddly excuse for a job from what Aiden Porter had shown his operatives to accomplish.

Then it hit her. Training the police was just an excuse. He was here for something bigger, something more nefarious.

No. That couldn't be, could it? Jade Valley didn't have much excitement or crime. What if there was a trafficking ring in her valley and she didn't even know about it? You couldn't be much farther from the southern border and still be in Arizona, but who knew. She wanted to pry out details, but this was hardly the time.

"Clara." He wrapped his hand around her arm and studied her. "I apologize again. I've never met a woman as innocent and angelic as you. You're not my type at all, but I can't seem to fight how drawn I am to you."

She was yanked from any speculation about why he was really here to the longing for her and confusion battling in his gaze. His words weren't all sweet. She wasn't his 'type at all' and her being 'innocent' wasn't particularly a compliment. He was used to high-maintenance and successful women; that was what he was drawn to. Clara hardly knew how to use makeup, sewed her own clothes, and her career was all charity work.

"It's probably better we never see each other again then." She begged him with her eyes to refute that. Maybe she shouldn't have a boyfriend again and put Brex in danger, but if any man could handle danger it was this one. She was drawn to him, and the thought of never kissing him again made her want to whimper with pain.

“No.” He shook his head. “Can we just ... be friends? Go on hikes each morning like we planned and maybe spend more time with my buddy Linc?”

“Friends?” She’d gotten excited about his quick no, but then he threw out the ‘friends’ idea. No way. She shook her head and backed into her car. “You don’t kiss someone like that and then go back to friend status.” She narrowed her eyes at him, frustrated, confused, and wanting to kiss him all over again. “Goodbye, Brex.”

Last night they’d teased about a kiss goodbye. They were far from that teasing now. He had kissed her—thoroughly and beautifully and repeatedly—but he didn’t want to develop something with her. Because he was leaving after this job or because his job was something he couldn’t share with her?

She slid into the car and yanked the door closed. He didn’t move to stop her.

As she drove out of the parking lot, she could see him watching her go. It wrenched at her heart to leave him like that, but it was for the best, no matter how they both longed for each other.

Either she’d leave for a mission trip or he’d finish his job and leave. They had no future, and she wasn’t his type.

No future.

No relationship.

No hope.

She touched her fingertips to her lips.

It gouged to think of never teasing with Brex, seeing that sparkle in his dark eyes,

being held in his strong arms, or kissing him again.

Even if being without him was the only path open to her.

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Chapter

Seven

Brex stayed busy the next few weeks following Clara every morning on hiking trails, diving deep into the investigation, and finding nothing. The research was frustrating, but staying busy was good. He couldn't get Clara's sparkling jade eyes, her authentic beauty, her teasing, or her kisses out of his mind. It didn't help that he follows her every morning.

The training with the police was going well. He was developing some friendships there and after the initial 'training' the first few days, he mostly just worked with them on their cases, improved shooting and sparring skills, and got to know the police and the valley. It was almost April and the weather was an ideal sixties to seventies every day. He spent a lot of time out of doors hiking, biking, at the shooting range, and meeting locals.

He got the lowdown on the Hendrys and the Gems from his fellow officers and the research he did alone in his rental home every night. He alternated between cussing himself for kissing Clara like he had and messing up the job and being grateful he'd kissed her like that because he at least had the memories to savor.

So far in his investigation, her family members all checked out. The Gem family were almost revered in the valley because of their kindness and charity. He could see why it bothered Rulon Hendry, a man used to his money and power making him revered. Brex was surprised at the reversal of what he'd known the past thirteen years ... money wasn't the end-all in this valley. It reminded him of his childhood on the farm,

but he was far removed from his childhood.

The oldest brother, Vance, owned a fitness spa retreat outside of town and everyone appreciated the jobs and revenue he'd brought to the valley and his fitness expertise. One of the twin brothers, Talon, was a Marine, respected for his service and dedication to God and country. The other twin brother, Wade, was a firefighter.

There had been some questions about Wade as he apparently didn't like Clara's boyfriends and he was also close friends with Weston. Darrough, which made him suspicious in Brex's mind. Brex had interacted with him a few times when he was with the police, but he'd keep an eye on him.

Melody, the social media influencer, was perceived by his police buddies as hilarious, beautiful, and genuine. Lincoln was beloved by all, even if the cops sometimes had to reprimand him and his friends for the occasional teenage prank that went too far. The cousin Tess ran the bike shop and was sought-after by the single officers. Her brother Jude was a hometown hero, traveling the world as an extreme sports guru.

And Clara. Clara was touted as a sweetheart, an angel, an authentic beauty, a charitable inspiration. He knew all of that was true. On a different playing field, too angelic for him, not his type, but she had kissed him back. Oh, how she'd kissed him back. The memory of those kisses carried him through the boring nights and woke him with longing in the morning. He'd been the one to say he shouldn't have kissed her and they couldn't have a relationship. She'd rejected his offer to remain friends. Not that he blamed her. He blamed himself. He'd crossed lines and was failing at this job.

He reported in to Nick every few days. The only thing new he'd found in all his hours of research on these cold cases was a close high school friend of Harrison Jones, who lived in Nashville now, saying something interesting in a phone call with Brex. He'd been with Harrison at a trinket store and his buddy had bought a jade stone to give to

Clara because it matched her eyes. That matched with the police report that the jade stone by Harrison's body looked to have fallen out of his pocket when he crashed. Could Harrison's death be different than the other two?

If only Brex dared call and ask his supervisor's advice. His pride and fear that this would be his last job with Aiden Porter's team held him back. He wanted that million dollars, wanted to succeed as a security operative.

He went to church each week, something he hadn't done since he'd left Colorado thirteen years ago. His mom would like that. He couldn't say he got much out of it. He spent the time watching Clara, surrounded by her family and friends. She didn't look his way very often. When she did, she quickly averted her gaze.

Weston Darrough often looked his way, giving him a triumphant glare each time. Brex hadn't been able to find any dirt on the football coach, dang him. He got more information on Jane Shipley, who worked at the school as an aide. Basically she was nice but 'socially awkward'. From the outside, she appeared to be a loyal friend to Clara and too attentive to Weston. Her gaze was often vacant, and the times he'd been close enough to listen in, Jane let everyone else in the circle do the talking.

When he paid attention, he thought Pastor Curtis Gem's sermons were relatable and unpretentious. He could imagine they were inspiring to the believer. Everyone but the children seemed to pay attention. Even the teenagers put their phones away for some of his sermons.

Luckily, the Hendrys didn't attend the service and notice that he was not 'close' with Clara but was in fact longing for her.

Harrison Jones's family didn't live in the valley any longer, but he'd been able to do some video chats with them, explaining he was checking into old cases with the police department for Aiden Porter. They were receptive but didn't give him anything

new. They believed their son's mountain biking accident was an accident and Clara Gem was a saintly woman. Harrison's friend's insights on the jade stone had been his only small breakthrough.

Kyle Tanner's parents were at church each week. They were friendly to him, and he'd seen them interact kindly with Clara and her family. He'd been able to interview them on the same pretense as the Jones family. They were almost defensive of Clara and insistent that no matter what the Hendrys thought, Clara was an angel. They did believe someone had tampered with Kyle's climbing harness, but no one had been able to prove it didn't fray and rip on its own.

He'd placed a tracker on Clara's car so he'd know where she was and he could trail her on her hikes each morning. When she saw him, she would give him challenging looks that said he should back off, but she was too radiant and sweet to be truly impertinent. He talked himself into believing that her jade-colored gaze said she was still as interested in him as he was in her.

Could it be true? If so ... what should he do about it? What could he do about it? He'd messed up the parameters for this job by kissing her so desperately. He wanted to ask Nick for advice when they emailed or chatted about the case, or lack thereof, but he couldn't imagine what his supervisor would say.

He spent hours researching everyone close to Clara and each of her former boyfriends. Her siblings, her two cousins, and her close friends Weston and Jane. Anyone could be a suspect, but there wasn't any evidence. Weston was currently the top suspect as his marriage and divorce had been during the time Clara didn't have a boyfriend, and the interactions Brex had seen between them showed the guy was very interested.

Brex imagined pinning the murders on Weston, earning the million dollars, and Clara kissing him like the hero he was. Sadly, none of that seemed likely. He found nothing

on Weston, though he had directed Aiden's people to do a deep dive on Weston Darrough and Jane Shipley.

Rachel texted him that she'd be in Vegas for the evening. He drove over to meet her, telling himself it would be a good break from the case and his longing for Clara. As soon as he stepped into the Top of the World restaurant in his Brooks Brothers suit, he felt hollow, fake, and as if he didn't measure up.

He strode up to Rachel, confident and suave, like he'd trained himself to act. She stood from the table to kiss and embrace him, her red lipstick smile over the top. It turned his stomach to think of meeting her lips with his. He ushered her head to his chest and gave her a chaste kiss on the forehead, earning himself red lipstick and taupe-colored makeup smeared on his white collar and the top of his dress shirt.

"Brex," Rachel hissed. "Your shirt." She grabbed a napkin and tried to wipe at it, glaring up at him as if it were his fault she wore such a covering of makeup. Her blue eyes seemed pale and lifeless behind the irritation.

He forced a smile and took the napkin from her, setting it down. "It doesn't matter." He ushered her into a chair.

It was obvious as she glanced from his marred shirt around the posh restaurant that it did indeed matter. His stomach churned, and he couldn't help but compare her polished beauty, even with smeared lipstick, to Clara's genuine and gorgeous face.

"Beau Alexander and Bermuda Gray are right there," she said in an undertone.

He glanced to his right and nodded. "Oh yeah. Beau had a great season last year."

Her eyes widened, her thick eyelashes looked like spider legs and the disbelief in her eyes made his skin crawl. "What is wrong with you?"

“Nothing,” he said smoothly.

He was lying. Something was wrong with him. He looked around the fancy restaurant, the million-dollar views of the gaudy city, and back to his dolled-up date. He realized he was jaded by it all and almost smiled at the irony.

A pair of jade colored eyes had ruined him.

Beau Alexander and Bermuda Gray were impressive, but he didn't feel in awe that he was in the same restaurant as the football star and the A-list actress. He wanted to care that he was on a date with a woman he'd previously thought he was interested in, but it was all shallow. There was no depth or value in this restaurant, this city, or the lady seated across from him. He was only dating her for appearances, and he knew she was the same.

He suddenly couldn't keep up the facade. What if he told Rachel he'd fallen for an angelic woman in Arizona and wished the actress the best of luck? It would be a dumb move, especially as he and Clara weren't even on speaking terms. He'd kissed Clara and hurt her being as honest as he could. He would hurt her more when she found out the whole truth. His insides churned with worry about Clara and how to be with her when he shouldn't be.

He somehow got through dinner, making small talk and drawing Rachel out about her latest part as she kept sneaking glances at Beau and Bermuda. He feared she'd run over there and bow to them if given half a hint that they noticed her.

Finally, he'd paid the bill and they were in the elevator. He couldn't wait to escape that restaurant, this city, and even Rachel. He wanted to be back in Jade Valley. He wanted real .

He wanted Clara.

And he had no idea how to make anything work with her. Still, he couldn't casually date someone like Rachel again. Rachel was only dating him for the clout and arm candy, and he'd been the same. She didn't inspire him or light a fire in him like Clara did. He was a desperate mess.

"Rachel." He pivoted toward her. "I need more."

"More of what?" She narrowed her eyes at him, those lashes so thick it was hard to see her eyes fully.

"More depth, more value, more substance." He gestured to her and then up to the restaurant they'd just left. "I don't need to spend hundreds of dollars on dinner to prove anything to anybody. Beau Alexander and Bermuda Gray seem like incredible people, but I don't care to fawn over them. I'm going to focus on my career with Aiden and not worry about the social climbing in San Diego anymore."

He could hardly believe those words had left his mouth, and obviously Rachel couldn't either. Her jaw dropped and fire filled her blue eyes. "Are you saying we're through dating?"

"Yes."

"Your social life will be shot without me. 'Social climbing'." She harrumphed. "You have no idea that you've just ruined your future."

Brex smiled. "That's the interesting thing. I feel like my future has just been given wings."

"Ah!" she cried out.

The elevator door opened, and she stormed out. She didn't look back, and he didn't

mind.

Rachel was right. He was making a disaster of his life and his future. Yet a future of social climbing felt empty. A future with Rachel felt stifling and barren.

Anything without Clara felt desolate, and he barely knew her.

The world wasn't rosy enough for him to prove Clara was innocent and have her fall in love with him and not hate him when she figured out he was here on assignment for her—he knew that. But he had to try to solve this case and figure out a way to spend more time with Clara. Maybe he'd never be the right man for her, but she'd inspired him to see a new world. He wanted more of it.

A couple entered the elevator, staring oddly at him as he hadn't moved. The man was in a Brioni suit, the woman a swanky Dior dress. He nodded to them and strode out. Their eyes cut to the makeup smears on his shirt collar.

He chuckled to himself as he headed for the front doors and the valet. He couldn't care less about his shirt being dirty, but the makeup smears represented how fake his life had become.

Was it possible for a selfish former social climber to change his path?

He hoped so.

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Chapter

Eight

It was early in the morning, a month after Brex had first met Clara and three days after he'd watched Rachel storm away in Vegas.

He'd felt so empty that night, and he knew he needed to be close to Clara. She was the one who had decimated his shallow existence and changed his life goals. He was stalled in his investigation, and he had to do something.

So Brex hatched a plan. He would use himself as bait. He would figure out why Clara was so irresistible and, if possible, get her simple life out of his system and get things back on track with a million bucks.

He was shadowing Clara through a red canyon that was getting narrower by the foot. She knew he was there, had probably known it every morning. Was she doing this hike to ditch him? He didn't think he was claustrophobic, but as the slot canyon narrowed and he was brushing his shoulders on each side, he decided maybe he'd wait right here for her. She'd have to turn around and come back down. Google Maps showed there was no other outlet, she had no climbing gear, and he'd never seen her scale hundred-foot walls.

Would it rip at his heart to talk to her? What would he say? He had to ingratiate himself into her life again. He was doing a miserable job of getting close to her like the Hendrys had asked him to. Could he get close to her and not kiss her or fall for her? Maybe he wasn't cut out to be undercover. If he got through this assignment

without losing his job, he'd ask Nick for an easy one like infiltrating a trafficking ring or tracking down the Taliban.

He heard her footsteps coming back down the slot canyon. This was it. He had to find a way to pretend to be her boyfriend and get the murderer to attack. Taking action would be a huge relief. Being close to Clara sounded even better, a soothing balm he needed in his life.

What if he fell in love and ruined the job? What if there was no murderer or Clara was the murderer?

No matter what, he had to change his mode of operation. Not being close to Clara was killing him, and he'd told the Hendrys he would get close to her. It was a win-win to get back into her good graces.

He waited as she rounded a bend and almost plowed into him. Her eyes widened, and she stopped and glowered at him. As much as a sweetheart like her could glower.

Her jade eyes sparkled like green jewels in the morning light. He knew how genuine her beauty was, but he'd missed seeing it up close this past month.

They were at an impasse in this narrow canyon. It was like their relationship, or lack thereof. He was jolted by being near her again. His memory didn't do justice to her authentic beauty and the allure of those jade-colored eyes. He needed to be with her, and he needed to be close for the case. It was the only way to move things forward and somehow figure out what she was doing to his mind and heart.

He reached out for her but retracted quickly, shaking out his arm and glancing at his wristwatch.

"So you're finally going to face me, not just stalk me every morning."

And every evening. He'd let her see him in the morning, but she didn't expect the evening shadow. She thought she was free because she knew he stalked her in the morning.

"I wanted to hike and explore your valley. I figured following you was the best way to do that. Since you are the expert at hiking Jade Valley and all."

"Don't try to act like it's not creepy that you're following me." She stepped closer and poked her finger into his chest. She was so adorable it was hard not to smile. "Stop it."

He wrapped his hand around hers. It was instinctive but not a smart move. His thoughts scattered and he only wanted to hold her hand, draw her closer, let her cuss him out, and then seize her lips with his. The tight canyon walls framed them in. They were in their own world, and he didn't want to leave it.

"You don't want me around?" he asked, not releasing her hand.

"I didn't say that." Her jade-colored eyes captivated him. "I don't want you skulking behind me."

Brex studied her. "But we both agreed a relationship between us is not a good thing."

He wanted a relationship with her, and not for the sake of pretending to be her boyfriend or solving this case. That scared him, but he didn't back away. It was laughable that a month ago he'd claimed Clara Gem was 'not his type'. If he still trusted in his Father above, he'd believe Clara Gem had been created for him and all the shallow relationships in the past were not his type.

She studied him for a few beats, and he had the unnerving feeling she could see clear through to his soul. Finally she nodded, muttered, "You're right," and pulled her hand

free. They stood there for a beat, and he didn't know if he should beg her to give him a chance or turn on his heel and get out of here. He couldn't decide which was making him an uncertain headcase—the undercover work, this particular job, or Clara Gem herself. Maybe a combination of the three.

“How are you tracking me?” she asked.

“Device inside the bumper of your car.” He shrugged. “What can I say? I work for Aiden Porter. I've got a lot of devices.”

She didn't appear upset. She'd obviously known he was tracking her. “Why are you really here, Brex?”

“Here?” He gestured around the tight canyon, his heart thumping quick against his rib cage. What had she guessed? What could he tell her? He didn't believe Clara could kill anyone. If only he could confide in her without committing a breach of trust. The Hendrys were the clients, not Clara.

“Why are you in Jade Valley? From what I know of Aiden Porter's operatives, they don't waste time training small-town police forces.” She planted her hands on her hips and gave him a challenging look. “Are you stalking me because I'm in danger? Are you here tracking down a drug or a trafficking ring?”

His breath shortened at how close to the truth she was. But the angel in front of him was supposedly the dangerous criminal. It didn't fit, and he had no idea how to respond. They were in this tight canyon, face to face, at an impasse. He was stuck.

“I can't tell you why I'm really here,” he finally settled for. At least it was the truth.

“Am I in danger?”

He looked her over. If she was the murderer, she was the best actress he'd ever met, and he'd met many. If someone else had killed those men, Clara might be in danger. Yet the murderer could've hurt her any of the times he or she had killed, and they hadn't. "I don't believe you're in danger, but I want to watch over you anyway."

"Why?"

"You're important to me," he said before he could stop himself. Truth again. If only everything could be the truth. Could he be her 'pretend' boyfriend like he'd come up with? There was nothing pretend or false about Clara. Only about him.

"You don't even know me."

"I like what I know." He liked everything he'd learned about her, most importantly that she was real. Clara had no idea that she'd changed how he saw the world.

She raised a challenging eyebrow. "But you can't date me."

He pushed out a breath. "There is that." His fake dating idea was all he had left. The investigation was at a standstill. Could he date her to solve the case? It had been an okay plan to earn the million dollars. Now he didn't want to trick her or hurt her, but he desperately wanted to be close to her. What a muddle.

"Why toy with me?"

He looked her over. "You're mesmerizing to me, Clara. I've never met a woman like you. I've never felt a kiss like yours."

Again, it was all true, but he should've stopped before he began.

"I had Melody do social media research on you."

“And ...” He didn’t like where this was going.

“You don’t date women like me, Brex. You date polished, gorgeous, successful actresses and influencers. Melody couldn’t give it to me straight, but Tess did. I’m not your type.”

“Clara ...” His voice was too husky, too telling. If only he could tell her the revelations he’d had at dinner with Rachel only a few nights before. “I didn’t know a woman like you existed. I would never have dated actresses or influencers if I’d known there was a Clara Gem in the world.”

“Are you telling me the truth?”

That slammed into him like a brick wall. He wasn’t telling her the truth about why he was here, but he was telling her the truth about how incredible she was.

“Yes, Clara,” he said softly, but he had to clarify which truth. “There isn’t a woman in the world as grounding and magnetic to me as you are.”

The pulse point in her neck raced, and he would’ve given up anything to kiss it. A million dollars? Maybe.

“But for some reason we can’t date?” she asked.

“I want to date you.” Desperately, he wanted to add. “But my job would make it near impossible for us to have a long-term relationship.”

She swallowed and studied him. “Are you a hundred percent convinced you and I could never have a long-term relationship?”

“Eighty percent,” he said with what he hoped was a charming grin.

They couldn't have a relationship if she was the murderer. If he could prove she wasn't, he'd be free to pursue her. Every lady he'd dated had been a pretty distraction, a dinner partner, someone to help him climb the social ladder.

He truly had never known a woman like Clara existed. She didn't fit in his world, and he didn't know that he could fit in hers. He had a vision of him working at the Jade Valley police department, coming home to Clara every night in a little home like the one he was renting. He'd walk through that door, she'd be waiting, and the kisses they'd share would make the ones in the waterfall slot canyon look tame.

He shook out his wrist, checked his watch without seeing the time, and hoped she couldn't read his rampant thoughts.

"But I find myself needing to be near you Clara." He swallowed. "You're all I can think about."

She gave him a soft smile. "Could we get to know each other better and see if there's more to us than mind-blowing kisses?"

He desperately wanted to get to know her better, and it was in line with what he should do with this job. Even if it made him feel slimy, he ached to be close to her. The past month hadn't yielded much. He'd never get answers unless he drew her—or the murderer—out. Or he had to prove that the deaths were accidents and get Aiden or Nick to drop the case. The million-dollar reward from the Hendrys still ate at him though. He wanted that money, but he cared about this genuine woman in front of him and clearing her name. If he did, would she forgive him for lying to her? He cringed, imagining the hurt in those jade-colored eyes when she learned the truth.

"I'm desperate to be near you," he admitted. He'd like to kiss her and earn the million dollars, but both might be out of his reach now.

“Me too.” A slow smile started on her lips and spread across her face. She put her hands on her hips. “So we start with hikes every morning. Where you stay by my side, not shadow me like a wraith.”

“It’s a good start,” he said.

“All right then.”

They’d figured out the impasse. Together. For now.

They both turned sideways, and she tried to brush past him. There wasn’t enough room.

The instant her body connected with his, he was swept away. Could he even keep his head on straight while being close to her?

She drew in a breath and stared up at him, so inviting, so beautiful. It was all he could do not to pull her into his arms again.

They were wedged in together, this time by choice. The morning was lit with joyful possibilities. He was trapped by her eyes and her authenticity. She smelled of springtime.

After a deliciously long moment, she brushed past him, and he followed her down the trail. It was for the best. He had to keep his head on straight. And he had to not kiss her. He might have no choice but to call Nick for advice. What if Nick realized he was emotionally invested and assigned someone else to this case?

Watching Clara’s dark hair swish along her back and admiring her firm legs, he knew no one but him should be close to her.

And he didn't even know if he should be close to her.

This job was a mess. He'd never had such an emotionally challenging job with the police force, and this was his first solo and real job with Aiden. Were all undercover ops in the real world like this? He doubted it. There was no woman out there like Clara, and how many times did a seemingly innocent woman get accused by her former boyfriends' parents of killing their son?

No, this job was unique. Clara was unique and angelic. Brex had no idea how to navigate his feelings for her, and he had to figure it out quick. He didn't want to hurt her or mess up the job.

Clara glanced over her shoulder at him and gave him a cautious smile.

His heart clutched.

He had to prove her innocent or find the real murderer.

Then maybe he could turn this fake relationship into a real one.

'Maybe' bothered him.

A lot.

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Chapter

Nine

Clara enjoyed her and Brex's hikes each morning, though there was an underlying tension in the air. Because they were both fighting their attraction? She was fighting it and wondering why she had to. She reminded herself he wouldn't be in the valley long and she didn't want him to reject her again. Yet maybe she'd take rejection for more kisses like they'd exchanged.

They were getting to know each other, growing closer, and she kept pushing away the worries about the murderer thinking she had a boyfriend again.

Brex had all but admitted he was in the valley for more than training the police, but she had no clue what he was really doing here. Was it time to tell him about her boyfriends' deaths and her suspicions? He'd probably heard rumors from his police friends. Would Brex help her or want to stay away from her? With Aiden Porter as his boss, he could help her get to the bottom of the deaths.

The calendar turned to early May, and it was too warm, even during their early-morning hikes. In a month, she would leave on her first mission trip for the summer, and Brex's three months in the valley would be up about the same time.

Clara decided to go back to the ethereal Red Mountain Falls again, keep cooler in the water, and maybe recreate the magical moments and kisses she could never push from her memory. She and Brex were friends with an undeniable pull between them. She wanted out of the friend zone, even if it wasn't smart for Brex's safety or her

heart.

As she and Brex exited their vehicles, his gaze swept over her, fiery hot and filled with meaning. He wanted out of the friend zone too?

“Bringing me on this hike again, eh?”

“Don’t read anything into it,” she tried to tease, but her throat was thick.

“Oh, I will.” He approached her, and she let her eyes move over his well-built body. “Maybe I’ll catch you on the ladder again.”

“Maybe you’ll let me go first like a gentleman and you won’t have a chance to catch me.” He was a gentleman, always making sure she went first or escorting her, getting her door. It was fun to tease him about.

He stepped in closer, and his large hand cupped her waist and hip. “A gentleman would make sure his lady didn’t fall down a ladder.”

She gazed up at him, loving his brown eyes and his sculpted face. Two months ago he’d been an out of reach, polished pretty boy. Now he was her friend, but he still felt surreal and tantalizing.

“But I’m not your lady,” she managed to say.

Brex’s eyes grew warm. “Clara,” he said in a husky tone, “do you have any clue how irresistible you are?”

“No.” She managed a smile, but her legs were suddenly weak.

He blew out a long breath and then took her hand. “You are.”

Then he started walking toward the trailhead.

Clara held on to his hand and kept pace. Did this mean anything? This hand holding and telling her she was irresistible? If she was irresistible, why hadn't he kissed her? It had to be obvious she wouldn't turn him down.

They walked the two miles to the river and the mile up the river. They chatted about Lincoln's baseball game last weekend and the high school team's chances of making it to the state championship this year. Lincoln had high hopes. She'd seen Brex at the game but he hadn't sat with her. She wanted him by her side, cheering for Linc with her, and by her side in every other part of her life.

The conversation didn't distract her from what she hoped was happening between her and Brex. Was it smart to fall deeper for him? No. Would he be in danger? She glanced sidelong at him, and he gave her an alluring smile. Maybe. Her stomach turned over.

The red rock walls grew ever closer together and the magic of the mystical setting washed over her as she saw the water spray from the falls.

As they reached the moss-covered ladder, she stepped in front of him to go first but turned to face him, leaning against the ladder. Brex didn't disappoint as he eased in closer and rested his hand against the ladder. Should she tell him about the risk he was taking if they were in a relationship? Maybe after they kissed.

"If I'm so irresistible," she said, studying him for his reaction, "why do you resist me?"

He gave her a brief smile. "Because of my job."

"Oh." Disappointment filled her. "And you can't tell me what your real job is yet?"

“No.” His gaze swept over her face, hungry. He leaned down. “If I fail at resisting you ... is that fair to you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Clara.” His voice was husky and meaningful, the look in his eyes even more so. “I’m dying to kiss you, but I don’t want to confuse you or hurt you if things don’t go right with my job or I have to move on.”

He wanted her. That was all she cared about at the moment.

She flung her arms around his neck and arched up toward him. “I’ll deal with the confusion and hurt.”

“Oh, Clara.” He wrapped his hands around her waist, drawing her closer. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Then don’t.”

“But I’ll have to leave the first part of June. Leave you behind.”

“Maybe I’ll leave you behind first.” She raised a challenging eyebrow. “My first mission trip of the summer is in a month. Maybe I’ll be the one who rips out a piece of your heart when I go.”

He didn’t smile like she thought he would. “Being without you would rip my heart apart, no matter the reason.”

She knew he was right, but she also knew that he craved her and cared about her and for now, maybe that was enough.

“So are we going to waste time jabbering about who’s leaving who and who’s going to hurt worse, or are we going to enjoy the time we’ve got together?”

He did smile then. “You jabber, I’ll enjoy.”

She grinned. “What are you going to enjoy?”

“Kissing you in this spot.” His voice was gravelly, and he lowered his head until their lips were mere centimeters apart. “I’m going to kiss you deeply and thoroughly like I’ve been dreaming about since our last kiss in this magical haven.”

“You do that,” she challenged, “And no regrets. The hurt might come, but I’d rather savor these moments with you.”

“Agreed.”

He tenderly cupped her face with his palms, trailing his thumbs underneath her bottom lip and making her quiver. His dark eyes searched hers, full of yearning and promises she didn’t know if he could keep. Slowly running his fingertips along her jawline and into her hair, he massaged her scalp, bringing tingles with his touch.

Then he captured her mouth with his.

This was the kiss to end all kisses. He was true to his word; he kissed her deeply and thoroughly and it was even better than their first kiss in this mystical and beautiful refuge.

Brex’s hands slid down her back to frame her hips. He lifted her off her feet and into his arms. They moved closer to the gurgling water. She wasn’t sure how it happened, but they ended up under the water. The kisses grew even hotter as cool water intermingled with their warm lips.

This was a kiss unlike anything she'd ever known.

When they pulled back, Brex's skin was glistening with water and his eyes were sparkling at her. "Deeply and thoroughly?"

She nodded. "And absolutely incredible."

He grinned but then he sobered. "No regrets?"

"Not for me."

"Good." He held her close as she caught her breath. His gaze traveled over her, hungry for more, and then he kissed her again.

Voices came from down the river.

They ignored whoever it was until they were almost upon them. Then Brex pulled back and said, "Let's step aside. They can go up the ladder and we can kiss more in my favorite spot on earth."

"Sounds good." This was her favorite spot too, because of the natural beauty but even more so because she'd kissed Brex here. She needed many more kisses from him. Why had they been wasting time worrying about who would leave who, her heart being broken, him being killed? Maybe because they were serious issues that shouldn't be ignored, but she wanted to push them to the side.

They edged to the side as a man and a woman came into view.

"Jane? Weston?"

"Beautiful friend," Jane said, her dark eyes innocent. She looked at Brex and his hold

on Clara. “Wow, Clara. He’s hot.”

Jane was a sweet and loyal friend to her and Weston. They’d been protective of her since grade school when Jane used to get teased because she was ‘slow’. Weston had been a better friend to Jane lately than she had. He was a great guy.

“Hey.” Weston’s face lit up as he looked at Clara, but his mouth turned down as he took in Brex’s arm around her. “I thought you were done with him.”

“Just beginning with me,” Brex said, grinning as if Weston’s frustration made him happy.

Weston growled and started toward them. Jane put a hand on his arm. “You don’t want to mess with that guy,” she said in a quiet voice that Clara barely heard. “He’s ripped, and he works for Aiden Porter.”

“I’ll be careful.” Weston softly patted Jane’s arm. He was always so kind with her, a sharp contradiction to the tough football coach. He’d had Jade Valley High Football sweatshirts made specially for her and Clara that said “#1 Fans”. Jane wore hers often.

He turned to Clara, ignoring Brex. “You’re enamored with the Aiden Porter thing. He’s probably lying. He hasn’t known you for years and he’s not long for the valley, Clara. He’s nothing special.”

“He is special,” Clara contradicted, though Weston was right about Brex not sticking around. “Special to me.”

Brex’s arm tightened around her waist. He smiled down at her, and the joy of their connection overwhelmed the ugliness of one of her lifelong friends being so rude.

“Whatever.” Weston turned and stormed down the river and around the corner.

Jane lifted her hands and focused on Brex. “Sorry. He likes the three of us. He gets ... upset about Clara.”

“Would he ever hurt someone Clara is dating?” Brex asked.

Clara and Jane stared at him. Clara realized he must know something about the men she’d dated. Maybe from the police officers.

“No,” they both answered at the same time.

Clara smiled at Jane, but Jane looked upset.

“Who could hurt you, you a tough guy,” Jane mumbled.

“I am ‘ripped’.” Brex lifted his free hand.

Jane and Clara both nodded at that. Jane’s eyes were uncertain. Was she scared of Brex? She’d spoken more to him in the past few minutes than she had in any of their other interactions.

“I go after Weston.” Jane waved and turned, hurrying toward where Weston had disappeared.

Jane would help him calm down. She was a sweetheart and like the little sister Weston had never had.

“Sorry he’s acting so weird,” Clara said.

“Has he acted like this when you’ve dated other men seriously?” Brex’s eyes were a

deep brown.

She tried to think about it. “Maybe.” She shrugged. “It’s not like you and I are dating seriously though.”

Brex growled low in his throat and pinned her against the ladder. “You kiss men the way you just kissed me when you aren’t dating seriously?”

She was tempted to tease him but felt he deserved the truth. “I’ve never kissed anyone like I kiss you.”

Brex’s eyes grew warm again. “Good. Now I’m going to kiss you until you agree that we’re dating seriously.”

Clara laughed, her nerves tingling with anticipation. “It’s going to take a long time to convince me.”

“Well.” He shook his head. “Sacrifices must be made.”

Clara gave a grunt of outrage.

Brex leaned in but paused inches from her lips and groaned. His gaze grew heavy. “Clara. I’m gone over you, but I don’t know how this is going to work between us.”

Her stomach tumbled. She’d never felt like this for a man. Was she putting him in danger?

“Because you have to leave after you finish this job?”

“That ... and other things.” He studied her, his dark eyes too serious. “It’s risky dating you.”

Her own eyes widened, and her heart thumped against her chest. Someone in the valley, in the police force, had told him about her boyfriends' deaths. Of course they had. Working with Aiden Porter's people, he probably had inside information on everyone.

"You're worried about the risk of dying like the other men I dated."

He quirked an eyebrow. "Dying?"

Maybe he didn't know, but his comments to Jane said he did. She swallowed and admitted, "I've had three boyfriends die in tragic accidents."

"I'm sorry. I've heard about that."

Water splashed on them and a chill raced through her. She shivered, and he pulled her in tighter.

"I don't want to risk you. I don't want you to die." The words came out too stiff, not betraying the anguish she felt inside. She wanted to sob and cling to him.

"Clara. You understand that I'm far too tough to die."

"Anyone can have a tragic accident."

He studied her as if her comment had layered meanings. "I'm not worried about any physical risk to me."

"Then what are you worried about?" She blinked water out of her eyes.

"The emotional risk. To both of us. You've lost boyfriends. I've been through breakups as well."

Clara nodded. She wanted to hear about his past dating experiences and then go question the sanity of any woman who could walk away from him.

“But if you’re willing to take the risk ...” He looked over her face, his gaze heating her up despite the cold water. “I find myself longing to be close to you every moment.”

Clara wrapped her arms tight around his neck and kissed him fiercely.

He grinned against her lips when she pulled back. “I’ll take that feisty answer as a yes you want to date me.”

“Yes,” she whispered. “But I’m worried about you being hurt or killed.”

“Bury those worries. I’m far too tough.”

“Brex.”

He only grinned and cut off any protests with another kiss.

She’d tell him about how serious the risk was of dating her. Later.

He increased the depth of the kiss.

Much, much later.

Chapter

Ten

Brex was an absolute mess and certain he was failing at this job. Rulon and Pamela had called to check his progress after the brilliant kissing session in the waterfall and he'd had to admit he was no closer to finding the killer. They were obviously disappointed and Pamela kept saying Clara was the murderer, which made his gut twist and made him want to lash out. He'd calmly told her he'd keep working to find answers and ended the call.

He should be playing a part to get close to Clara and drawing out whoever might have murdered those men, but after their reconnection at their magical slot canyon waterfall, he couldn't keep his hands from reaching for her. Emotional distance was nowhere in his mind.

He hated lying to her and didn't like himself much right now. Except the way Clara seemed to see him. In her eyes, he seemed to be the sun, moon, and stars. How was a man from a shallow existence supposed to resist the genuine and unique beauty that was Clara Gem?

He and Clara spent their mornings and evenings together. He needed to be with her and wanted to draw out the attempted murderer.

Her mission trip and his assignment deadline were only two weeks away. Brex didn't know how he would let Clara go. Not just because this case was far from solved, but because he was falling in love with her and wanted her by his side every moment. It

blew his mind that he could fall in love with a Christian who was as naturally beautiful on the inside as she was on the outside. She wore very little makeup, homemade clothes that fit her perfectly, and social scene or posturing weren't even in her vocabulary.

Tonight they were having a barbecue in her backyard with her parents, the vivacious Melody, Clara's hilarious brother Lincoln, her oldest brother Vance, her firefighter brother Wade, her cousin Tess, her close friends Jane and Weston, and her entertaining grandmothers.

As they bowed their heads and Vance said a heartfelt prayer, Brex stewed about religion and what a huge part of Clara's life it was. They hadn't talked about the fact that he wasn't a believer. Maybe she thought he was. He attended church with her, bowed his head for prayers, never questioned her beliefs.

The prayer finished, and they all dished up. He looked around at the paper tablecloths, the mismatched chairs in the backyard, the plastic lemonade bottles instead of wine coolers, Baxter running around eating anything that someone tossed to him.

He loved the down-home feeling, the homemade food, her Grandma Gem and Granny Pearl teasing everyone, he loved all of her family truly. It stunned him how accepting her family was of him. Shouldn't her dad, an insightful and religious leader, see through him like Shayna's dad had? He pushed those memories away.

As they ate, Lincoln started telling jokes that his mom Ruth said were 'crass'. Brex couldn't help but laugh at Lincoln's jokes. He thought of any of these innocent people around some of his 'friends' from San Diego and was grateful for the protective bubble that seemed to surround Jade Valley.

Later, during cleanup, Melody bumped into his side. "Are you going to let me put

you and my gorgeous sister on my channel? I could raise a lot more money for her charity if I bragged about Aiden Porter's top operative dating my sis." She sang half the words and grinned vivaciously at him.

"He likes to stay incognito," Weston muttered behind him.

Brex gave the guy a pointed look.

"Weston," Jane whispered loudly. "Careful with the buff guy."

"Oh, Jane." Weston gently guided Jane over to play with the dog Baxter. The guy did have some redeeming qualities.

Did no one but him, and Weston, see the contrast between him and Clara? She was genuine, light, and joy; he was shallow and lying to her.

Brex focused on Weston talking quietly to Jane as he wrapped up paper goods in the throw away paper table cloths. He was struck by the contrast of an outdoor barbecue on the beach he'd been to with Rachel where they'd used china and real silver. Miserable people hiding behind fake smiles and cocktails, only there to make themselves look better than everyone around them. No one here was posturing, except maybe Weston. Weston aside, he loved how relaxed everyone was.

This casual family atmosphere was far from the life he'd imagined for himself. The million-dollar paycheck for this case felt as elusive as the murderer. It felt impossible to see past Clara's authenticity and light. The guilt of being here for the job and the money dug at him. Was he still that shallow, social ladder climbing guy, or was he becoming Clara's guy and could somehow make recompense for hiding the truth from her?

He tossed a wad of paper tablecloths, napkins, and plates in the garbage and turned.

Lincoln had Clara in a bear hug and lifted her off the ground. She looked small compared to her huge little brother, but Clara was substantial in every way that mattered.

Laughing, she let Lincoln spin her around, then she shoved at him and he set her on her feet. She glanced over at Brex. The moment seemed to catch and hold. Clara was all he could see and all he wanted to see. If they'd been alone, he might've fallen to the ground and begged her to marry him. She was real ... and exactly what he wanted and needed in his life.

After the barbecue, Brex and Clara said goodbye to everyone, ignoring the annoyed looks from Weston and the speculative looks from everyone else, and went on a late-night walk. Brex was armed and kept an eye out for danger. They ended up at a park by the river and sat on a bench. It was quiet and peaceful, the flow of the water their only accompaniment.

Brex wrapped one arm around her and took her hand with his other hand. He was failing at this job, but he couldn't let anyone know that. It was difficult to focus on anything but the enticing Clara. All of his research and Aiden's team's research had turned up nothing suspicious on anyone affiliated with the case. Even Weston was lily-white and clean.

Brex planned to schedule a chat with Nick and Aiden and tell them that Clara couldn't possibly have hurt anyone and get their advice on drawing out the murderer, if there was one. His and Clara's early morning hikes were the perfect place for the murderer to try to come after him. Yet Clara never took him on hikes with game-ending drop-offs. He would have to research some treacherous hikes close by and insist they do them.

"There's something I need to tell you," Clara said softly as she studied the river.

Brex's pulse sped up. Would she tell him she loved him? After three months of knowing each other? Two months dating? It was quick to admit something like that, but he could return the feelings he shouldn't have been developing. He felt something deep and real with her. It wasn't elusive and it wouldn't fade.

Maybe she'd decided not to go on the mission trip so she could spend more time with him while he was in the valley. That was a selfish thought on his part. Maybe she'd ask him to go with her. He could spin it to Nick and the Hendrys as part of his job.

What if she admitted she had in fact murdered her other boyfriends and he was next?

He smiled to himself at how silly his last thought was.

"Anything," he said, raising their joined hands to his lips and brushing a kiss across her knuckles. "You can tell me anything, Clara."

She studied him, and the night sizzled with anticipation. He shouldn't kiss her. Another intense kissing session would only prove how weak he was for her, draw them closer together, and hurt her more in the long run. He should stay in control and solve this case so he could earn the money and move on.

How could he ever move on from Clara? She was the only genuine happiness he'd felt since leaving home at eighteen.

She leaned forward and kissed him passionately. Their connection deepened and he couldn't find the strength to resist her. She had cracked his shallow exterior wide open and infused her depth and light into him.

He lifted her onto his lap and took the kiss to the next level, kissing her desperately and thoroughly. When they pulled apart, they both gasped for air, and she studied him.

“I know I can tell you anything, Brex,” she said. “I trust you and I’m falling for you.”

Was that what she’d wanted to tell him? She trusted him and was falling for him. He loved those words. He envisioned returning the sentiments and kissing on this bench until the sprinklers turned on, someone came to interrupt them, or the sun rose tomorrow morning.

“But it stinks that you still can’t tell me what your job here is about,” she said.

It did stink, and the reminder of why he was here sobered him. He couldn’t kiss her all night long. He shouldn’t be kissing her at all. He was a phony. He was playing a role, walking a tightrope, and he would hurt this angelic woman either way he fell. The thought of those jade-colored eyes filling with tears and hurt made his muscles all tighten reflexively.

“I wish I could. It’s not that I don’t trust you.”

Clara couldn’t possibly have hurt anyone. He trusted her.

She shouldn’t trust him.

What if he told her the truth? The idea made the cold knot in his chest loosen and the future seem brighter. Clara would understand. They could work together to find who killed her boyfriends.

Could he tell her the truth without the Hendrys’ permission? He’d told Pamela Hendry he was a professional and wouldn’t let his emotions get involved. He hadn’t meant to lie, but he was way past emotions getting involved. Every time he spoke to the Hendrys, Pamela fretted about Brex being killed by Clara. He knew he wasn’t invincible, and he appreciated her concern, but it was misdirected. Clara was genuine and trustworthy.

Why couldn't he just admit to Clara why he was here?

He studied her genuine, real, full of adoration jade-colored eyes. What if she looked at him with loathing after he admitted the truth? What if she could never forgive him or understand why he'd lied to her? His stomach clenched at the thought of losing her trust and that loving expression.

"It's that I've promised my boss and the client not to share any information," he explained even as he wondered how to get around it. "Once the case is resolved, I could share some of it with you. I'm sorry, but with my job there will always be things I can't share."

That was true, but this job was so much more twisted than a security operative unable to share classified information with his significant other. This job was a nightmare ... except for her.

She nodded and slid back onto the bench and off his lap. "I understand. Your job is important ... and I still trust you."

Brex could hardly swallow past his emotion. Clara was trusting and pure. If only he could confide in her and they could solve this case together. If only she wouldn't be hurt and possibly hate him when she discovered why he was truly here.

She clung to his hand and met his gaze. "I'm still going to tell you my secrets. Even if you can't tell me yours."

"I'm not worthy of you, Clara." Now that was the truth. He was lying to her, and he hated it. How could he have found the right woman for him, an unexpected opposite of the woman he usually dated, and he was hiding far too much from her?

"I know." She gave him a whimsical smile and a soft kiss and then she said in a rush,

“You know about each of my boyfriends dying tragically ...” She paused, and he nodded. “I’m convinced they were murdered.”

His eyes widened and his eyebrows shot up. It was an act, and he hated it. Clara was so trusting. She wouldn’t hide anything from him, even if he had to hide too much from her.

“I’m sorry, Clara. That’s terrifying, and losing them must have broken your heart.”

She blinked and then shook her head. “My heart broke for their families. Their deaths were disturbing and awful, but Brex ...” She swallowed and then pushed out, “I never cared deeply for any of them like I do for you. I had a lot of fun dating them and enjoyed talking and teasing with them, but there wasn’t this connection, this magnetic pull, this ... love.”

She swallowed again and studied him as if certain he’d reject her.

Brex couldn’t catch his breath. She’d said it. The word. He agreed with the connection and magnetism. He needed to be with her and wanted to love her. Was that selfish on his part, or had he finally found a giving and unselfish love?

If only he could spill it all and work through the issues he and this job had created with Clara. When could he? Should he do it now? He felt like his tongue was bound and his hands were tied. He’d taken this job, let himself fall for her, let her fall for him, and now he’d messed it all up. He’d like to see anyone else do better, find the right clues, resist her. No, actually he wouldn’t. He couldn’t stand the thought of Clara in anyone else’s arms.

He needed a heart-to-heart conversation with Nick. He was in over his head. Maybe he wasn’t even cut out for undercover ops like this. Maybe he should quit and just focus on being by Clara’s side. The million dollars gone. His future gone.

Brex studied her, wondering if a future without her was any kind of future at all. For the first time in his adult life, solving the next case, making more money, being successful and appealing to a crowd of famous women didn't matter. He only wanted to appeal to her.

When he didn't respond, she leaned back against the bench. "If you don't feel the same ..."

"Clara."

Don't do it. Resist. Resist. Don't hurt her. Don't mess up this job.

The money wasn't the motivator any longer, but protecting Clara was. What did he care about money, social status, wearing a Brioni suit, or having a condo on the beach if he couldn't have Clara? In three months, his vision of what was important had changed. Clara was his anchor; she brought true happiness. Brex had never felt that before, and Clara was worth carving a different future.

Could he tell Aiden and Nick he'd messed it all up? Maybe there was no murderer, but he was going to stay by Clara's side to protect her. He'd sell his Range Rover and his condo, see if the Jade Valley police force would hire him, or maybe he could do research for Aiden. He was good at research.

The river rushed by and he sat on a park bench in the middle of nowhere. He wasn't on a red carpet, in some VIP room at a club, or in a box at the Chargers game with a starlet. But he didn't want to be there. He only wanted to be wherever Clara was.

He couldn't let Clara think for one more second that he wasn't gone over her.

Brex swooped her off the bench, against his chest, and held her close. "I have never been so drawn to a woman. Never. It's too quick, and I know you have to leave for

your mission trip and I'll leave as soon as this case is solved, but I want to have a future with you. Somehow, we have to make it work. I've fallen for you, and I don't ever want to let you go."

Her eyes softened and grew bright at the same time. Was she about to cry?

She threaded her fingers into his hair and tugged his head down instead.

Their kisses lit up the dark night. Brex could hold her and kiss her all night long.

Eventually, they drew apart and walked back to her house holding hands. Brex felt content and almost giddy. He was going to humble himself, risk his boss and mentor telling him he'd failed, and get some help with this case and advice on how to tell Clara the truth. He would solve the case so he'd be free to love Clara. He had no idea how that would work with his job or hers, but love had to conquer all. It had to.

He'd never had such cheesy and unrealistic thoughts in his life. He didn't care. Nick and Aiden could make fun of him or fire him. All his old friends and the beautiful women in San Diego could mock him.

All that mattered was Clara.

"Brex," she said when they reached her front porch. "With your background, resources, and connection to Aiden Porter ... could you help me investigate my boyfriends' deaths?"

His eyes widened again. Did she know? He studied her gorgeous jade eyes and knew that she genuinely wanted his help. She wanted closure just like Malik's parents did. Well, maybe not just like; Clara wouldn't accuse someone innocent of killing her boyfriends. This could play into exactly what he was supposed to be doing here, but he couldn't use Clara like this. How to own up to the truth? Right now he feared if he

did, Clara would hate him and he'd mess up the job and her life.

"Your certain the deaths weren't accidental?" he asked, wondering if this wouldn't be more of a breakthrough than anything Aiden and Nick could help him with.

"I don't know for certain, but there were out-of-place sounds and just that feeling that something was wrong or somebody was there when Malik died. I can't help but think that Kyle's climbing harness shouldn't have frayed and ripped like it did. And then the jade stone I found next to each of their bodies..."

He played innocent. "A jade stone?"

"Yeah. I can show you pictures. I gave them to the police."

He'd seen the stones at the station, inspected them. "Did the police rule the deaths accidental?"

She nodded. "The FBI even got involved last year after Malik died. They didn't find anything suspicious."

"So they think the stones were ...?"

"They never said, but it can't be a coincidence. Especially with my eye color and the valley being named after my ancestors because of that eye color. Right?"

Brex nodded. He shook his wrist and glanced at his watch, not even seeing the time. "It seems suspicious. Would you mind if I interviewed you about everything, took notes, and had Aiden's people do some deep dive research? I can talk to my friends at the police station too. If there was foul play, we should be able to figure it out."

"You'd do all of that for me?"

“I’d do a lot more than that for you.” He tried to be charming and tease, but his gut was churning. He was doing this to clear Clara’s name and get closure for her and the men’s families, but he was also doing his job. When could he tell her the truth about that?

His muscles tightened, and he feared there would never be a right time. Not if he didn’t want to hurt her, and the last thing he wanted to do was hurt her.

“Thank you.” She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him.

Brex got wrapped up in the kiss and prayed he could find the perpetrator and keep Clara in his arms and heart.

It was a tall order for a new security operative who’d never thought anything would be more important than success, money, and social standing. Who’d never fallen in love before.

What was he doing?

With Clara in his arms ... he didn’t care about anything else.

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Chapter

Eleven

Clara could not complain about spending more time with Brex and his insight and expertise as they spent hours talking through each death and anyone suspicious associated with her and her boyfriends. When he found the information about Harrison having purchased the stone, according to his friend Jason, and the police thinking it fell out of Harrison's pocket, it made them both wonder if there was a copycat killer after that first accident.

Sometimes it still felt like Brex was resisting kissing her or growing closer. He'd expressed concern that they had to go their separate ways, but she wondered if there was something deeper, maybe something in his past that kept him from wanting to fall for her. She hoped he'd confide in her, but she prayed for patience and her love for him deepened every day.

Often when they were alone, he dumped any resistance and they kissed with wild abandon. She replayed those moments over and over again in her head. Soon they might only have the memories. Going their separate ways wasn't something she liked to dwell on, but him being killed like Harrison, Kyle, and Malik was her biggest fear. She warned him often to be careful, and he'd reassure her he was, but she couldn't rid herself of her fear.

It was Saturday, one week before she was supposed to fly to Angola, and Brex had insisted they do the Vortex hike. She'd avoided any hikes that had sharp drop-offs and high elevation.

He parked his fancy SUV, smiled reassuringly at her, and came around to get her door. Taking her hand, he led her to the trailhead.

“Brex.” She dug her feet in, and he stopped and turned to her. “You know this hike has game-ending drop-offs?”

“Exactly why we’re here.” He flashed her a cocky smile. “It’s obvious to the entire valley that I’m your boyfriend.” He said the word proudly. Then he lowered his voice and leaned in. “If the deaths weren’t accidental, we need to draw this guy out.”

Her heartbeat picked up. “I don’t want to risk you.”

“I’ll be fine.” His smile was placating, and she didn’t appreciate it.

“Brex, don’t act like you’re invincible. I can’t lose you.” She could easily recall Harrison, Kyle, and Malik’s broken bodies. It had taken years and loads of prayers to heal emotionally. Seeing Brex broken would devastate her. He was a bright shining star and had so much to live for. The world needed more protective, brave, and honest men like him.

His smile became more genuine, and he searched her eyes with his deep-brown gaze. “I’m not taking my own safety lightly,” he said softly. “I don’t want you to lose me either.”

She let out a garbled laugh.

He gave her a quick, hard kiss and then tugged her forward. She didn’t resist, even though she wanted to force him to drive to a different trailhead, a safe trailhead where he couldn’t fall and die. But other accidents could happen. Look at Harrison dying on a mountain bike.

They walked hand in hand until the trail became too narrow. Then Clara led the way since she'd been on this hike many times.

Walking in front of him on the sandstone cliffs as their elevation rose higher and higher, she glanced back. He was fit, his defined muscles gleaming in the morning light. He still looked like a 'pretty boy', but it was obvious he was tougher than most. Still, she wanted to protect him from danger. It was laughable that she thought she could, but the image of Brex dead on the rocks below made her throat feel like it was closing off. The drop off to her right was at least two hundred feet and the loose rocks and sand on the smooth sandstone made the trail unstable. On her left, the cliffs rose toward the morning sky. She edged to the left, but the smooth rock gave her nothing to hold on to.

Her heart beat high and fast. She stopped and took a long drink of her water bottle, splashing it down her chin. Wiping it off with the back of her hand, she turned to Brex and squeaked out, "I think we should pray."

He tilted his head and regarded her. He didn't say much about his faith, but he came to church with her and had been part of her family prayers at mealtimes.

"Pray about what?" he asked in a quiet voice that made warning bells clang in her mind.

"Keeping you safe."

His brows rose at that, and then he gave her a smile that felt stale and insincere. "Clara, I promise you I'm taking this seriously."

He shook his wrist and glanced at his watch. It was an unconscious gesture and she usually liked when he did it, but right now it felt as if he was showing his impatience.

“I’ll keep both of us safe because of my skills and experience.” He touched the pack he carried that she knew had a gun and a knife inside. “It’ll be okay.”

He gestured for her to walk again.

She shook her head. “No, Brex.” The feeling they should pray grew stronger. “You are strong and have skills, experience, and weapons, but God is over all. He will keep us safe. He might use your skills to do that, and it might be something neither of us can foresee. I don’t know the outcome, but I know we have to pray.”

If only she’d thought of praying with Harrison, Kyle, or Malik. Why hadn’t she? Every year that passed, she found she was much more inclined to turn to prayer every moment of her life instead of only praying in the morning and at night or at church.

Brex studied her, his dark eyes unreadable.

“Are you not a believer?” she asked, her palms sweating. She loved this man, and she would love him regardless of where he was on his faith journey, but she’d innocently assumed he was a committed Christian. Maybe because most of the people in her life were. She’d helped Malik find his faith, and he’d been grateful, even if his parents hadn’t. Could she do the same for Brex?

He shook his head, his posture tight and closed off. Then he pushed out a heavy breath and looked at the sandstone cliffs, squinting at the rising sun. “I rely on myself, Clara, not on some unfeeling being in the heavens.”

Her stomach squirmed.

Focusing on her again, his dark eyes looked stormy. “That probably changes your feelings about me.”

Her own eyes widened. “Why would it change my feelings about you?”

“You’re a committed Christian. Your dad’s the pastor and your mom’s his angelic supporter. You spend your life organizing and supervising mission trips for youth. You’re genuine, light, and happy.” He flung a hand at her. “How could someone as charitable and inspiring as you want to shackle herself to an unbeliever?”

He said these words as if he’d practiced them or heard them before.

She stepped in closer to him. “You aren’t just some unbeliever.”

“What do you mean?” He didn’t back away into the cliff rising behind him, but she could tell he wanted to.

She took a deep breath and pushed it out there. “You’re the man I’ve fallen in love with.”

Brex blinked at her, as if coming out of the darkness into the sunlight. He shook his head and blinked at her again.

Clara wondered if she should stop, but she wanted to explain. “I hope you’ll be open to learning about my faith and the love, safety, and blessings God wants to impart to you, but my love for you isn’t conditional on you believing the same as I do.”

“Clara.” He said her name on a groan. “You are out of your mind.”

Clara startled. Not quite the response she’d hoped for.

“Oh, Clara.” He edged back toward the rock wall, tugging her with him, away from the dangerous drop-off.

Brex gave her a soft smile, framed her face with his hands, and kissed her. One of his hands threaded into her hair and massaged her scalp, making her tingle. His other hand wrapped around her lower back as he bent her slightly backward. She wrapped her arms around his neck and held on. The kiss must've looked like something from a movie. It felt even better. He kissed her so deeply she felt like she was floating on clouds of bliss.

He loved her back. Of course he did.

Finally, Brex pulled back and gave her a searching look. Clara's own smile was tremulous. Emotion collided and overwhelmed her. That kiss, the love she felt for Brex, the love she knew their Father above had for him, and the fear of him falling off a cliff ... it all made her want to cry.

Well, the kiss made her want to kiss him again.

The thought of a cliff made her lean into him and away from the terrifying drop-off behind them.

"You know, I haven't asked you this because I don't want to upset you," Brex began.

The out of this world sensation disappeared and the only thing grounding her was his hands on her. What was he going to upset her with? Telling her he didn't love her back? He acted so brave about being her boyfriend, but maybe he didn't love her like she loved him. He'd said she'd lost her mind. Three months was quick to fall in love, but she knew her own mind.

He released his grip on her and straightened. "Do you think Weston could've murdered your boyfriends?"

"Weston?" She scurried to the side and leaned back against the rock wall, needing

support without his touch, her stomach squeamish because of his accusation and redirection. Hadn't they been talking about his spiritual journey and her love for him? Why was he accusing her friend? She looked out over the yawning cliff below them and her stomach dropped.

"No," she said. "No way. He's been one of my best friends since grade school. You might as well accuse Jane."

He arched an eyebrow as if he'd considered it.

"Brex." She shook her head, trying to think how to defend Weston when her mind was still caught on their kiss and admitting her love and him not returning the words. "No. I know Weston seems possessive of me, but we're the best of friends and he's a great guy. It was only him and his mom growing up, and she died when he was a young teen. He's protected Jane since we were teenagers, even though the tough football player and now coach watching over a girl who's 'slow' has brought him grief at times. He clings to me and is overly protective of Jane, but he could never hurt anyone." She studied him when he didn't respond. "Did Aiden's people find something to point fingers at Weston?"

His jaw worked, but he shook his head. "No."

"Oh, good." She sighed with relief.

"Instinct tells me he's our guy." Brex shrugged. "Unless the deaths were all accidental."

"I don't think they were." But that was all they had, her thinking there was something suspicious. She wanted closure for her and their families, and she wanted to know that Brex was safe and wouldn't be the next victim.

Silence fell between them.

Brex tilted his head. “Let’s keep hiking. See if we can draw this murderer out.” He gave her a devil-may-care grin that turned her stomach. She loved his bravery and toughness, but it might get him killed.

“Please, Brex.” She put a hand on his arm. “Let’s pray together.”

He shook his head, not meeting her eyes. He turned and started up the path.

Clara hurried after him, bothered he wouldn’t pray with her, concerned he could push away her declaration of love, and terrified that something was going to happen to him. Her heart thumped hard against her rib cage, and the squeamish feeling in her stomach became more pronounced.

Suddenly, Brex stopped. On their right, the smooth cliff still descended hundreds of feet. The view of red rock, cactus, and even palo verde trees would be awe-inspiring—if she wasn’t panicked about him going off that cliff.

Was he going to pray with her? Tell her he loved her too and they’d both lost their minds? Why had he stopped?

“Brex,” she whispered.

He held up a hand and glanced over his shoulder. “I heard something up ahead. Stay here.”

Then he took off at a run. On the dangerous trail.

“Brex! No!”

Clara rushed after him. If it was the murderer, would he or she kill Brex before Clara could get to them? The trail continued to have terrifying drop-offs on her right. She edged toward the safety of the left cliff face and had to slow to a fast walk.

They had never prayed together, and now they were separated. It was just like the other times.

Chills raced over her skin and her stomach tumbled.

No! Please not Brex!

She prayed in her mind, a constant repeat of, Help him!

She heard voices up ahead and her pulse skyrocketed. Brex had found someone. Could it be the murderer? This was a particularly precarious part of the trail. It was thin and slick with dirt and rocks covering the sandstone and the cliffs stretching sharply upward on their left. No handholds or vegetation to cling to. The sheer face was hundreds of feet down on their right.

Cautiously creeping round a corner, holding on to the wall as best she could, she saw Brex. His back was to her, his posture puffed up and threatening. Who did he have cornered against the cliff side? What if that person pushed Brex into the yawning opening to his right? All it would take was one solid shove.

“Brex.” She rushed to him.

He glanced over his shoulder and held up a hand. “Stay back, Clara.”

“Who is it? What’s happening?” She didn’t listen and hurried to peek around his side. “Mrs. Talon?”

Clara could only stare at the forty-something lady. Mrs. Talon was an English teacher and the track coach. Her children were younger than Clara, but she knew them from church. Mrs. Talon was battling breast cancer but loved to explore the mountain trails. It was inspiring to see her up here again. Was she recovered from her surgery and treatments?

“Can you listen so I can keep you safe?” Brex held Clara back.

“So you can interrogate Mrs. Talon?”

The lady looked confused and a little annoyed.

Brex arched an eyebrow. “She claims she hikes the trails alone almost every day.”

“I do,” Mrs. Talon said.

“Then why haven’t we seen her on any of our many hikes?” Brex folded his arms across his chest.

“Because I’ve been recovering from a double mastectomy and chemotherapy,” Mrs. Talon flung at him. “Today is the first day I felt well enough in almost eight weeks to come to my mountain sanctuary.”

“Oh.” Brex’s eyes widened, and he backed closer to Clara. “Oh.”

“It’s true,” Clara told him quietly. “She has stage four breast cancer.”

“Oh, man.” Brex pushed a hand through his hair and held it palm up. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay.” She gave Clara a fleeting smile. “I’ll just ... continue on my hike.”

“I apologize again,” Brex said.

She nodded, turned, and headed up the trail, her steps slower than Clara had seen them on hikes previous to her treatments.

Brex leaned against the rock wall. “Oh, man. That went well.” He flicked his wrist and glanced at his watch.

“At least you’re safe. I was flipping out. You can’t just go running away and risk getting pushed off a cliff.” She gestured to her right and leaned closer to the safety of the rock wall, tugging on his arm as her stomach twisted again.

He frowned. “I just want to draw this guy out. I don’t know how you’ve dealt with not knowing if there is a murderer and who it could be for years.”

“It’s been rough. I really appreciate your help. Sorry you interrogated Mrs. Talon.” She smiled to try to lighten the mood.

“Me too. Awkward.” He rolled his eyes. “Are you okay to keep going, or should we head down?”

“Can we head down, please?” Her stomach was nauseous, her skin cold and clammy. Seeing Brex next to the cliff was too much. For now he was safe, but she couldn’t shake that feeling of concern. If it had been the murderer and not Mrs. Talon ...

She peeked over the edge of the game-ending drop-off. Her stomach pitched and bile climbed her throat. The gruesome pictures played through her mind ... Harrison, Kyle, Malik ... each unmoving, lifeless. Why did they have to die?

Clara focused on Brex’s face. She loved him, even if he didn’t love her back, and she would lose him just like she’d lost the others.

Brex gave her an encouraging smile and gestured her forward. She wanted him to go first so she could see he was safe, but she was too sick to her stomach to protest.

She put one foot in front of the other, moving slowly. The yawning cliff mocked her. It would suck Brex away from her, batter his body, take his spirit.

She glanced over her shoulder. He was okay. For the moment.

Cold chills covered her body, and she trembled. Bile rose up her throat again.

Finally, finally, they reached a spot where the trail widened and moved away from the cliff face.

Drained and horrified, Clara dropped to her knees on the path. Vomit rose in her throat, choking her. Tears raced down her cheeks as she spewed.

“Clara!” Brex dropped next to her and held her as her body heaved. The comfort of his strong arms was exactly what she needed.

When her stomach finally settled, he pulled out her water bottle. She rinsed and spit and then took a long drink. He helped her to her feet, and they shuffled together down the trail. A few minutes later, they reached a safe spot that didn’t smell of vomit.

“Clara. Are you all right?” He tugged her close and held her in his arms.

“I was a mess when you chased her. What if it had been the murderer? That drop-off right there... I could see your body broken on the rocks below.” Clara hated admitting this to him. She was so weak, and she wanted to have faith. She fisted his shirt in her hands, her stomach still sick. “I can’t lose you, Brex.”

He gently kissed her forehead and held her tightly. “I’m sorry, Clara. It’ll be all right.

We'll stay safe and figure this out."

She clung to him, but his promises were empty. The murderer might never be found. There was no guarantee Brex would stay safe.

Her faith was failing her. They hadn't prayed together, but thankfully he'd been all right. Why had she felt such a deep urge to pray? Why was her faith so weak?

Was Brex the love she'd longed for?

All she knew for certain right now was she never wanted to leave Brex's arms.

Chapter

Twelve

Brex didn't push Clara to hike any cliffs over the next few days, but he knew they needed to. They were running out of time, and it was the only way to draw out the murderer.

Watching Clara throw up and holding her while she cried had been a gut punch. She was petrified he would die. He could try to claim her panic was because she'd watched three other boyfriends die, but it felt much deeper than that.

The genuine angel had told him she loved him. That had slugged him harder than anything. How could she love someone like him? Brex. Not the image of a successful, tough, suave, Range Rover driving operative for Aiden Porter. Simply him. She didn't even know what car he drove. He'd never bragged to her that he owned a condo in ultra-expensive San Diego.

Clara saw him and believed that he was good. That befuddled him. Shouldn't a light-filled being see darkness and want to stay away from it? Her light was so bright that maybe it eradicated the darkness and that was why she couldn't see it. That was how it felt when he was with her.

She'd claimed she loved him no matter that he didn't have faith. That blew his mind. Alayna had dumped him because he didn't have enough faith, clout, or money and her dad wanted her to be with a 'substantial man of faith'. He hadn't been enough for Alayna.

Clara couldn't care less about clout or money. She cared who he was.

What would she do when she found out he was a liar?

Her faith was extremely important to her, but she wouldn't push him away for not believing. How could she be so genuine and good?

All he wanted was to be near Clara, see the light sparkle from her jade-colored eyes and that cute smile on her face, hold her close and kiss her. Be the man she thought he was.

He'd counseled with Nick on drawing the murderer out and his uneasiness with the case, but he hadn't admitted that he'd fallen in love with Clara and was messing this case up because of that or possibly because of his lack of experience in cases like this. Yet how many cases were there like this? It was as unique as the woman he'd fallen in love with.

He wanted to proclaim his love for Clara to her and to the world, but he couldn't. Not yet.

When Nick called two days before Clara was supposed to leave for Africa, Brex was driving to the police station. He pushed the button to take the call in his Range Rover.

"Brex," Nick greeted him, friendly as ever. "Anything new?"

"No." He drove with one hand, squinting a bit. Even with sunglasses on, the sun was bright in this desert valley. He liked the red sandstone and desert landscape, though he imagined he'd always prefer the green mountains of his youth. Especially as the temperatures were soaring into the hundreds in the afternoons now that it was almost June. He definitely preferred summer days with highs in the eighties like Colorado or San Diego's temperate climate.

“Clara flies out in two days,” he reminded Nick. “Do I tell the Hendrys we’ll have to try again when she returns?” What could he accomplish without Clara here?

His gut tightened at the thought of Clara leaving, of giving up on her or the case. He saw no clear path, and it made him sick. He was going to lose a million dollars, the chance to prove himself successful, but more importantly ... he was going to lose Clara.

“Or tell them the case is too cold, with no real evidence, and might never be solved?” Nick asked.

“That is an option.” His hands grew slick on the steering wheel. Surprisingly, it wasn’t just the loss of all that money that gave him cold sweats. It was fear of how Clara would react when he could finally tell her the truth.

“Don’t take this too hard, Brex. Sometimes the clues, the evidence, the killer, they just aren’t there. But you know that from years as a detective.”

“True,” he agreed, pulling into the parking lot of the police station. How could he express his fear of failing when Nick had just told him not to take it too hard? This was a cold case with little to no evidence. Maybe it wasn’t his fault for falling in love with the prime suspect.

He smiled at that. Clara was no suspect, and he’d been doomed the day they met. There was no way to resist her angelic and genuine nature.

“You have no suspicions of Clara Gem being the murderer like the Hendrys believe?” Nick clarified.

“None at all.” Did he say that strong enough? Did he need to describe the way she’d lost all the color in her face and vomited, crying and trembling, because she couldn’t

handle the thought of him falling to his death? That was only one of hundreds of experiences where Clara had shown her angelic and benevolent nature. No way on the earth was Clara any kind of murderer.

“We might have to call it.” Nick paused. “I need someone in Venezuela. With your dark coloring and unknown face, we might be able to get you into a trafficking ring that has eluded us for a few years. How’s your Spanish?”

“ Es justo a medio ,” he said, ‘fair to middle’.

“ Bien .” Nick chuckled. “Are you ready for a change?”

“Honest truth ... I’d love a change, a challenge. I need to see if I’m cut out for this or if this job is indicative of how I’ll do in the private sphere.”

Maybe that was too honest, but Nick needed to know he had some doubts about himself and his abilities.

Officer Chase Tenley parked next to him in his restored Ford truck. He wondered why Chase was in his personal vehicle and not his Durango Pursuit. He liked Chase. The guy was near his age and had a humility you didn’t always see on the force.

“I think you are cut out for this, Brex,” Nick said. “I think you’re ready.”

Brex appreciated Nick’s vote and support, but with the honesty starting, he couldn’t stop there. “More honest truth, Nick ...” He drew in a breath, then let it out. “I don’t know how I’ll walk away from Clara. I love her.”

There was a pause, then Nick let out a low whistle. “I wondered.”

Brex leaned back against the headrest, raising a hand to Chase as he exited his truck

and walked into the station.

“You going to call this quits before you give us a chance?” Nick asked.

“I don’t know. Everything’s a mess inside me. I love her. She’s a genuine angel, but I’ve been lying to her this entire time. I still feel like there could be a murderer out there, but I can’t find him or her. I don’t want to leave her, but I want to work with you and Aiden and be a security op.” He couldn’t believe he was being this honest with his supervisor, but it had been stirring inside him for a while and it was a relief to get it out. If only he could be this transparent with Clara. Would she hate him? Maybe.

There was silence, then Nick said, “I get it. I’m married to an angel, and I had to lie to Darcy when I fell in love with her.”

“What?” He knew Nick’s wife ran children’s homes in Mexico and Nick was there as often as he could be.

“Darcy’s ex-husband was a drug dealer and murderer. I was working to bring him down when I got paired with Darcy on the Chance for Charity reality television show, Mercedes Belle’s brainchild.”

Brex remembered those shows that had aired last fall. He’d watched a couple and thought they were intriguing and fast-paced. He wanted to find Nick’s episode now.

“Some of your SDPD buddies assumed Darcy was in league with her ex, Johnny Trattori.”

Brex knew that name. How could he live in San Diego, be on the police force, and not know a scum like Trattori? He hadn’t been assigned to Trattori’s case, but he’d heard of Trattori’s traitorous ex, Darcy Saint. He’d had no idea it was Darcy Jacobs,

Nick's wife. How intriguing that Nick had been involved in the capture of his wife's ex. This story was almost as messed up and confusing as Brex and Clara's.

"I was leery at first, but I couldn't resist Darcy's angelic sweetness, and I fell hard for her. I don't think you want to hear all the details about our love story." There was a smile in Nick's voice.

Brex chuckled. "Not particularly. But you were lying to her the entire time?" he clarified, a knot in his chest loosening. Angelic sweetness was exactly how he'd describe Clara. Nick had lied and it had obviously worked out for him and Darcy. Could it work out for Brex and Clara? Could he tell her all and beg her to forgive him?

"Yeah. It about tore me apart."

"That's how I feel."

"It sucks."

"Yeah, it does."

Chief Randall and two other officers walked out of the building. They turned to their cars. Only the chief saw him and raised a hand. Brex waved back, but he wasn't ending this conversation for anything.

"But Darcy forgave you when you told her the truth?"

"She was devastated and thought she couldn't trust me. It was a rough couple weeks, but Aiden helped me with a grand gesture and the rest of the story is magical."

He could hear the tease in Nick's voice, but Brex was happy it had worked out for

them. Would it work out for him, or would Clara never forgive him?

“I need to tell her the truth.” Brex knew it deep down. It was past time.

“The Hendrys are your only issue there.”

“True.” He pushed out a breath. “Do we close this case?” He couldn’t believe he’d said that. A million dollars, his future ... gone.

Clara was his future. If he could work things out with her.

Nick had confidence in him. He still had a shot with him and Aiden. There would be other opportunities to make a huge paycheck again. Maybe. It felt like giving up his future firstborn son to say goodbye to a million dollars and all he thought the money could do for him and his future.

“I think this case was a witch hunt from the Hendrys,” Nick said, breaking into his thoughts. “It’s tragic they lost their son, but you’re certain Clara is innocent and there are no other leads. The jade stones might always be a mystery.”

That bothered him, but if Clara would forgive him, maybe someday they’d figure out the mystery together. All that mattered to him now was being with Clara.

“Okay. I’ll work things out with Clara and go to Venezuela for you. She’s going to be in Africa for three weeks anyway.” It hurt to think of being apart from Clara, and it made him uneasy. What if they couldn’t work it out and she wouldn’t forgive him?

At least he’d be done with the lies and a case that had no resolution. Even if it meant he had to sell his Range Rover or his condo and may never wear a Brioni suit. Those things were empty compared to Clara’s light and love.

“Let’s do it,” Nick said.

Relief filled him at Nick’s quick answer.

“Should I go visit the Hendrys and terminate the assignment?” he asked.

A million dollars down the drain. Eight weeks ago, that would’ve devastated him. Now the only thing that could devastate him was Clara not loving him. He didn’t need the validation of the money or success. He needed Clara. He smiled, thinking of her, though his worry that she’d hate him when he came clean made his gut churn.

“I’ll call them,” Nick said. “They’ll be upset that you didn’t find proof Clara was the murderer. You don’t need to get in the middle of that. I’m an objective outsider at this point, and it’s my call to close the case. If they want to hire someone else, that’s their prerogative. But I’ll firmly discourage them from that course.”

“That’s all true,” Brex admitted. “But I need to call them. It’s my case.” He wanted to protect Clara from the Hendrys and any accusations. He’d insist that there were no leads, no murderer.

“I can respect that.”

Brex liked the respect he heard in Nick’s voice. Maybe not as much as the million dollars, but he liked Clara a million times more than the million dollars. He smiled at the cliché.

“We’ll chat soon.”

“Okay. And Nick? Thank you.”

“Of course.”

The line went dead.

Brex sat there for a few beats. He felt ... free. He was done with this case, trying to investigate Clara or her family and friends. He was done reporting to the Hendrys. Well, in a minute he would be.

He forced himself to press his finger on their contact information.

Rulon answered after one ring. "Brex?"

"Rulon." His heart thumped quicker, and his palms grew sweaty. He shook his wrist and glanced at his watch. "I've wrapped up the case and I'm calling with my preliminary findings."

"Okay." Rulon sounded excited. A few beats, then, "We're both here. Did you find the proof that Clara murdered Malik?"

His hands and heart settled. "No."

"No?" Pamela shrieked.

"There is no proof of any kind of murder," Brex said, confidence infusing him. "I'm sorry, but Malik's death is a tragic accident and this case is closed. I'll send over a full written report."

"No! You're wrong. Clara Gem killed my son," Pamela cried out.

"There's absolutely no proof of that, ma'am. Clara Gem is innocent."

"How dare you?" Pamela screamed at him. "You fell for her! How could you?"

Brex felt compassion for this mother, but it didn't change the truth or how angelic Clara was.

"I will be speaking to Aiden Porter about this," Rulon threatened.

"You have every right to do that. I've consulted throughout the case with him and Nick Jacobs, and they agree with me."

Aiden would back Brex up.

Pamela's screams muted and Rulon growled into the phone. "You're willing to give up a million dollars for that woman?"

How they'd guessed he'd fallen for Clara he couldn't be sure, but the entire valley had bought that they were together.

A million dollars. It would've ripped him apart to lose it ... before he fell in love with Clara.

"Clara Gem is innocent. That is irrefutable. I hope you and your wife can find peace and move past your son's death."

"Don't you dare tell me how to move past my son's death!" Rulon yelled. "You're finished. And I'll find a way to finish Aiden Porter as well!"

The line went dead.

Brex hated the way that conversation had gone but hadn't expected much better. He'd had ugly conversations plenty of times in his years as a detective. He'd warn Nick and Aiden that the Hendrys would most likely try to press lawsuits or defame them, but he knew he had his boss's support.

Now he was free of any association with the Hendrys, any guilt, and he'd given up a million dollars to prove, at least in his mind, that Clara meant everything to him.

He had to tell Clara the truth. Only two days before they'd go their separate ways. He had to find the perfect moment. If only he could pray that she'd forgive him, but he didn't have any faith that God would help him. He'd been too distant.

He thought of a story his grandpa had told him of an old cowboy caught in a blizzard with a dead truck battery, praying for God to start the engine. When the cowboy got to heaven, God explained he'd started a truck's engine in Montana instead of North Dakota in a case of mistaken identity. He'd been confused that the old cowboy had prayed when he hadn't spoken to God in fifty years.

That was Brex. He'd let himself become distant from God because of Alayna's rejection and had grown away from the faith of his youth. He'd never denied it or gotten bitter like he'd seen some do, but the darkness he'd seen throughout his years on the police force had taken its toll on him and he'd become selfish and status-driven.

Clara. She was light and joy and everything heaven above would want her to be. What if the good Lord above didn't want an angel like her with a lying man like him?

He closed his eyes and prayed. "Please, Father. If you can, help Clara not to hate me. Most of all, help her to be happy and to stay genuine and filled with light and Your love. Help me not to hurt her. Amen."

It was lame as far as prayers went, but he felt good. The conversation with Nick. The closure with the Hendrys. Rising above the lure of the money and the shallow goals that had motivated him for years. Attempting to pray.

Clara was genuinely good. If anyone could forgive him for deceiving them, it was

her.

Brex would tell her the truth.

He might be ending all happiness in his life, but he couldn't be fake anymore.

No matter what, he couldn't go back to the shallow life he'd led before.

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Chapter

Thirteen

Clara noticed that Brex seemed brighter and happier than she'd ever seen him. He was dressed casually for her farewell barbecue in her parents' backyard with most of her family and many friends from church and the community. He still looked incredibly handsome in a T-shirt and joggers, and his clothing still probably cost more than anybody else's, but he wasn't as decked out as usual. Interesting.

Was he happy they were parting ways? No. He seemed more invested in her than ever and didn't leave her side or hardly look away from her face all evening. He didn't even shake his wrist and look at his watch.

It was as if a burden had been lifted. She was anxious to get him alone and hoped he would share what had changed. He also kept trying to get her alone, but it never happened with the crowd inside and outside her parents' house.

When she walked him to the front door to say goodbye, his dark eyes grew intense. "Clara ... I need to tell you something."

"Okay." Anticipation filled her. What if he'd made arrangements to come to Angola with her? What if this was goodbye? His job here was done and he didn't know when he'd return?

Grandma Gem and Granny Pearl shuffled into the entryway. "Ooh, forgive us," Grandma Gem crowed.

Granny Pearl winked at Clara. “Kissing time.”

“My favorite time of the day.” Grandma Gem’s jade eyes sparkled.

Granny Pearl turned and gestured wildly to Grandma Gem. “What do you know about it? You haven’t kissed a man in ten years.”

Grandpa Gem had died ten years ago of a heart attack. It would seem like a harsh comment but these two ladies loved each other, and teased each other nonstop. Granny Pearl’s husband Papa Juan was still alive but didn’t leave the house much, so her two grandmothers were always attached at the hip. She adored them, but they were a lot sometimes.

“Shows what you know,” Grandma Gem said. “Greg at the hardware store likes to steal kisses every time he delivers to my house.”

“Oh!” Granny Pearl gasped, her dark eyes full of mischief. “He delivers to your house once a century, so I know you’re lying.”

“He makes up excuses to come by.” Grandma Gem pumped her eyebrows at Brex and Clara.

“I thought you told me everything,” Granny Pearl threw at her.

“A girl has to have some secrets.” Grandma Gem winked at them and tugged Granny Pearl out of the entryway as Granny Pearl demanded more details.

Brex grinned at the interchange, but there was something in his eyes that hinted at almost desperation to get whatever he needed to tell her out.

“Sorry,” Clara said with a laugh. “They’re a pair.”

“I think they’re great.”

“Thanks. What is it you need to tell me?” She couldn’t stand waiting much longer.

Lincoln danced into the entryway. “My favorite sis and my favorite guy!” he called out. He looped an arm around both of them, almost kinking Clara’s neck. “You want to go make dry ice bombs with me and the boys?”

“No.” Clara laughed at her rambunctious brother and ducked out of his elbow. “Don’t you dare make bombs.”

“Ah, sis, they’re harmless.” He lifted both hands innocently. “Who needs a mailbox?”

“That’s a crime,” she shot at him.

He laughed, not a concern in the world. “I’m gonna miss you two. Wait. Brex. Are you staying here while Clara ditches me?”

Ditching him. When he was nine or ten he’d sobbed as she hugged him goodbye to go on a mission trip and told her she didn’t love him and was ditching him. They teased about it now but it had broken her heart then. Lincoln was dramatic and so loving.

“I’ve got a new op in Venezuela,” he admitted, his eyes looking a little frantic now.

No wonder he wanted to get her alone and talk to her. Venezuela. The country was a hotbed for a lot of terrifying activities. Brex was tough, but she couldn’t handle knowing he was in danger. Was she cut out to be the girlfriend of a security specialist?

“Sweet! My man. Taking down bad guys.” Lincoln bumped his fist and then backed

away. "I'll let you two get busy. Sorry to interrupt the make out."

"Thanks, man." Brex stepped in close to her brother and explained to Lincoln how to safely make a dry ice bomb and avoid prison. He talked to him like a man, and Lincoln beamed. It showed Brex's goodness and the relationship he had with her brother. She remembered Malik needing some space from Lincoln when the kid got too crazy.

They bumped fists and then Lincoln cheered. "You didn't even deny you were making out! Dang, my future bro is rizzy ." He danced off.

As soon as her little brother disappeared, Brex focused on her. His deep-brown gaze seared through her with warmth and longing. Lincoln was right that he was rizzy, she wished he was going to be Lincoln's future bro, but all she could concentrate on right now was him going to a terrifying country to perform a terrifying task.

"V-Venezuela?" she managed. "Is it a dangerous job?" She realized how silly the question was as soon as she got it out.

He nodded.

Clara let out a whimper, flung her arms around him, and cuddled close, clinging to his strong lower back. "Couldn't you have lied to me?"

His eyes widened and filled with guilt. She didn't mean He felt awful that she was stressing about him. Brex was so good.

"Ah, Clara." He hugged her fiercely to him, as if some external power could pull them apart. Then he claimed her mouth with his. The kiss was intense and passionate. He loved her and didn't want to be apart. She completely agreed.

They pulled apart and studied each other. He had a desperate, almost guilty look in his eyes. She needed to reassure him. Of course she didn't want him in danger, but she loved how brave he was and his willingness to fight for innocents and right wrongs. He was a hero; she couldn't hold him back with her fears.

"Brex, don't worry about me. It's terrifying to think of you in danger, but I'll pray hard and trust that God will protect you."

He blinked at her. "Clara ..." He shook his head. "You're far too good for me."

"That's not true."

He only arched his brows, then claimed her lips again. The kiss was fierce and possessive and only made her want more of his kisses.

"Clara, there's more I have to tell you," he whispered against her lips. His voice was urgent, his eyes as intense as his kiss had been.

"Okay." She nodded her encouragement.

"I'm afraid you'll hate me."

"What?" Clara shook her head. "There is no world where I could ever hate you, Brex Cabella. I love you."

His body stiffened against her, and she worried it was too fast. She thought he loved her too, but she was the only one who kept saying it. Brex was so honorable. He probably wouldn't tell her he loved her because he feared he might lose his life and she'd be more heartbroken knowing the depth of his love.

"Clara, you think you love me, but you don't know everything about me," he said

softly.

“I want to know everything, but I love you no matter what.”

His gaze was full of wonder and full of her. “You are light and happiness, Clara. It’s no wonder I’m so driven to be close to you. I ... haven’t been genuine or truly happy in years.”

“Because of your work?”

He nodded. “And my lifestyle. I wanted to be showy and semi-famous, dress the part, drive the right car, and date the actresses and super models and ... it was all empty and shallow.” He studied her, as if testing how she would react.

She’d felt that discrepancy between them. He was polished and like a superhero off the big screen, but he was real with her.

“You are more than enough, Brex. You don’t need fancy clothes or cars to be desirable, to be perfect to me. What someone has isn’t who they are. I’ve learned that in desperately poor countries around the world. With some of the best people, incredible people, like you.”

His brows went up, but then he said quietly, “Thank you, Clara. I know that’s true with you. I’m safe ... with you.”

“You are.” Was that what he wanted to share with her?

His eyes darted back toward the living area, and then he lowered his voice, concentrating on her. “When I was new to San Diego, I thought I fell in love, ironically with a renowned preacher’s daughter.”

That surprised her. Melody had found lots of beautiful and semi-famous ladies photographed with him in her social media search, but not a renowned preacher's daughter. She didn't really love the parallel. "What happened?"

His mouth twisted. "Alayna dumped me because I wasn't spiritual enough, didn't wear the right clothes, drive the right vehicle, or live in the right area."

"A preacher's daughter?" She shook her head in disbelief. "She sounds like a shallow brat."

Brex chuckled. "In ways she was, but her father was one of the top evangelical pastors on television. They had a persona to uphold."

"That's stupid." She felt jealous and was saying petty things about some unknown girl. The woman had Brex's love and had dumped it for such inane reasons. Was that why he wouldn't tell Clara he loved her? Or did he not love Clara like he'd loved this girl? Alayna. It was a pretty name. She was probably beautiful.

"That initiated my irrational drive to be successful. The competitive San Diego singles scene fueled it. I loved the police force and being a detective, but I knew I'd never make enough money there to reach my goals. So I got in debt to live a lifestyle I couldn't maintain. When Nick made me the offer to work for Aiden, I thought it was my path to success. I wanted to be the next Aiden Porter. But I wanted to do it without any of the faith that Aiden has and for the wrong reasons. I didn't even realize how selfish and ugly I'd become, a pretty boy facade that was very ugly on the inside, until I met you."

"You aren't selfish, and you're the furthest thing from ugly," she insisted. Could he not see how heroic and impressive he was?

"Clara. You've rescued me. Thank you. I didn't even realize how irrational my

shallow dreams were until I met you and saw how much more I wanted to live for.” They shared a look so deep and fulfilling she had no doubt he loved her like she loved him. He clasped both of her hands in his. “There’s more I have to tell you. Some things that might be difficult for you to forgive.”

Her stomach twisted at that. What would she need to forgive? Something he’d done on his path to prove himself in San Diego?

Footsteps came, and they both turned to look as her brother Vance came into the entryway. “Apologies.” He held up his hands and gave them his slow smile. “I’ll go out the garage.”

Brex chuckled and ushered her away from the door so Vance could get by them. He released her hands. “It’s okay. I need to go as well.”

Vance gave her a quick hug. “Stay safe, little sis.”

“I will, big bro.” Her oldest brother was incredible. He was thicker than Brex, more of a bodybuilder shape. He had clients who traveled from around the world to stay at his beautiful facility and use his skills as a trainer.

“Love ya.” He kissed her forehead, raised a hand to Brex, and headed out the door.

Brex held onto the door, warm air spilling into the air-conditioned house. “This obviously isn’t the time to spill all my secrets.”

She smiled, but he was too serious for her liking. “We can chat on the hike in the morning.”

“Okay. That’ll be good. I don’t want anyone to overhear.” He glanced back at the entrance to the foyer. Her family was large, and friends were coming and going as

well.

He'd already told her some very personal things and risked them being overheard. What kind of secret was this? Him going to Venezuela for work had been big enough. Then he'd shared about his first love and his desires for wealth and prestige. What else was there? Cold pricked at her skin even though it was a warm early summer night in the desert.

Brex gave her a soft kiss. "I'll pick you up at five-thirty."

"See you then."

She watched him stride to his Range Rover parked across the street and two houses down. The street and driveway had been full of friends and family's cars earlier, but it was gradually emptying.

His car was fancy, and he always dressed in name brand clothing. Even his T-shirt and joggers were Lululemon. He'd admitted he got into debt to live that life. Did he still want the high-society lifestyle? She was the furthest thing from that with her homemade clothes and her low-paying but charitable job.

"When are you going to dump him?" Weston asked from behind her.

She turned to see him and Jane standing side by side. Jane's eyes looked compassionate.

"Never," she hurled at him, anger filling her. No matter what Brex had to tell her, she would stay by his side and love him. Figuratively. They would be separated in two days. "I love Brex. He's the real deal. You need to stop being so weird about me dating him."

Weston's jaw was clenched tight. "He's hiding something from you. Aiden Porter's op? In Podunk Jade Valley? It doesn't add up."

She glared at him, though his words made her spine prickle with unease. "Back off, Weston. We've been friends a long time and you need to trust me that Brex is incredible and the right one for me."

"The right one? You're going to choose him? Over us?" He gestured between him and Jane.

Jane said nothing. She was usually so calm but she suddenly looked panicked. Jane was loyal to Weston. Always. Clara understood that. Weston had always watched out for Jane and Jane innocently loved him. It ticked her off that Weston was forcing her to choose. She was thirty years old. Maybe the friends of her youth needed to be relegated to her past.

"Yes, I am." She stomped past them and bypassed the living area, heading straight down the stairs and to her room. Once she was inside, she fell to her knees, confused and worried.

Had she just dumped her closest friends? Jane was innocent and needed her. Weston had been through so much and was a loyal and great guy.

But she loved Brex.

What secret did Brex need to tell her?

Could Weston be right and Brex wasn't who she thought he was?

No. That wasn't possible.

She bowed her head and prayed for insight and for Brex. She loved him. Even if they had to be apart, they could somehow come back together.

She had to have faith that would happen.

Or she'd fall completely apart.

Chapter

Fourteen

Clara was apprehensive about their hike and didn't sleep well. Brex had something to tell her, something beyond him falling in love with a selfish preacher's daughter who had broken his heart and made him focus on material possessions to prove he was enough, more than going to Venezuela to fight gangsters, traffickers, murders, drug runners—who knew? She wanted to love him and support him in his career, but it was terrifying what he did and unnerving not knowing the details.

What if Weston was right and Brex was hiding something nefarious from her? Brex had obviously been hiding something, but now he was volunteering to tell her. They'd work it out. That was all that mattered. Weston had been a great friend to her, but he'd always wanted more and he'd been jealous of each of her boyfriends. Jane had even admitted to her that Weston's marriage had partially ended because his wife 'wasn't Clara'. He was only acting jealous again. She'd chosen Brex over her lifelong friends last night. That hurt, but Brex was worth it.

He picked her up early the next morning and neither of them said much as they drove toward the trail. She realized he was driving to Oljeta Canyon northwest of town. They'd hiked this canyon a couple times before, but she didn't like the forty to fifty foot drops from the highest point as the trail weaved up through a slot canyon and gradually came out on top of the canyon walls. The slot canyon's walls were jagged at some points and sheer cliffs at others. Her brother Lincoln loved to come here and try to free climb up the jagged spots. He usually gave up after about fifteen feet.

They parked in the lot with a few other cars, their occupants already out hiking, running, or biking. As they got out, she strapped on a small backpack with water, lip balm, tissue, and her phone in it. She knew his pack had a gun and knife in it. His world was foreign and intriguing to her. She thought of him infiltrating bad guys in Venezuela and shivered.

“You cold?”

She shook her head. “Just thinking of you fighting bad guys in Venezuela.”

He smiled briefly, then pulled her into him, hugging her tightly. “I’ll be okay. I’m as worried about you in Angola.”

“I’ve done that trip five times. We have two security guards, and the locals watch out for us. I’ll be safe.”

He nodded against her hairline and then kissed her forehead. “I don’t want us to be apart.”

“It feels like I’m ripping my heart out and sending it to Venezuela,” she admitted.

His lips trailed down the side of her face. His warm breath made her skin tingle. “That’s exactly how it feels.”

She closed her eyes and savored the sensation of his body surrounding hers, his lips taking their time kissing her cheek and then her jawline. His lips moved to her neck and her entire body heated at the sensation. His lips dipped toward her collarbone and fire filled her.

“Brex!” She grabbed his cheeks and said his name too loudly for the quiet morning and their intimate position.

“Yeah?” He glanced up at her, his dark eyes full of desire. For her.

This might be one of their last moments alone before she flew out in the morning. She didn’t want to interrupt the heated kisses he was placing on her neck, but she needed to. Too much passion and getting out of control physically could damage their trust and love.

“Shall we pray?” The words sprang from her lips.

“Pray?” He chuckled uneasily, and any romance and heat fled his gaze. He straightened to his full height, released his hold on her, and stared down at her. He didn’t look upset, but definitely not comfortable with her suggestion.

“Sorry to interrupt,” she squeaked out.

He grinned then, and it was beautiful. “It’s probably for the best.” He shook his wrist and glanced at his watch, then focused on her with an intensity in his dark eyes that made her pulse speed up. “My thoughts weren’t very focused on prayer at that moment.”

She knew exactly what he meant, and she flushed, embarrassed but also wishing in a way she hadn’t interrupted. She could’ve directed his head up instead of letting his lips progress to her collarbone and neckline. Brex would’ve worked his way to her lips and they would’ve been involved in a different version of heaven right now.

Was that what he needed to tell her? He’d been intimate with multiple women and worried that she’d think less of him? Her stomach squirmed at the thought, but she wouldn’t judge him for his past. Everyone made mistakes, and if he wasn’t a believer, he wouldn’t have thought being intimate was a sin. Most of the world didn’t see it that way.

“Prayer?” she asked again, concerned about what he had to tell her and afraid he’d reject the idea of prayer like he had yesterday.

“Okay,” he conceded, then muttered, “We might both need it.”

“What do you mean?”

He shook his head. “Let’s pray, then we’ll talk.”

Relief filled her. He’d agreed to pray with her. She offered her hands, and he grasped each of hers in his larger ones. “Do you want me to ...?”

“Your idea.”

He looked slightly uncomfortable, but at least he was willing to pray with her. She’d told him her love for him wasn’t conditional on him believing the same as she did, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t share her faith and beckon him to partake of God’s goodness and light.

She bowed her head, closed her eyes, and clung to his hands. “Dear Father in Heaven. We come before Thee humble and in need. Tomorrow we will be far apart. Please keep Brex safe in his travels and his work. Please bless us with miracles to be able to come back together, to love each other as Thou would have us do, and to someday have a beautiful family of our own.”

She could feel Brex startle, and his grip on her hands tightened.

“Please keep us safe today, spiritually and physically. Please bless Brex to know how loved he is by Thee and by me. Whatever he needs to tell me ... help me to be understanding and full of love for him. In the name of our Lord and Savior, even Jesus Christ, amen.”

Brex echoed the amen. Then he released her left hand but kept her right inside of his and started up the trail. The predawn was beautiful and peaceful. They passed two hikers already headed back down the canyon and said hello.

They often chatted as they hiked, but today it felt like a spiritual solemnness was upon them. From her prayer or their imminent separation, or maybe preparing her for whatever he needed to tell her?

Reaching the top of the canyon walls, they walked along the ledge and then stopped and stared at the view for a bit. She glanced nervously around, but they were safe. No one was here to shove Brex off the cliff.

Maybe there was no murderer. Maybe all those horrific accidents were just that, and she needed to let that angst go and focus on loving Brex.

If he would ever tell her he loved her back.

As they headed back down the trail, Clara felt pressure building in her chest. They were safe from the edge, but there was a secret coming. Whatever he needed to tell her, she needed to hear it soon. They reached level ground and paused next to a tall, jagged red rock wall to take a drink. She couldn't take it much longer.

"You said last night you have other secrets to share ... besides going to Venezuela?"

He nodded, studying the rock wall.

"Are you still wanting to share those with me?"

"Wanting to?" He lifted his brows. "Not really wanting to, but I definitely need to." He shook his wrist and looked at his watch, then focused on her. The sun rose in the east and a shaft penetrated the canyon angle at that moment and framed Brex like a

halo. Clara was certain this man was heaven sent. Did he recognize that?

He took her hand and started walking slowly back down the trail. “Clara, I didn’t come to Jade Valley to train the police.”

She nodded. “You’re here for a different assignment from Aiden Porter?”

“Yes. The police training was the cover.”

“Okay.” She wanted to be excited he was sharing, but he was too solemn and her stomach felt uneasy. “What is your mission?” Something dangerous in Jade Valley? It didn’t fit.

His mouth twisted, and he didn’t say anything for a few beats. “I’m afraid you’re going to hate me.”

“Hate you?” Clara stopped walking and turned to face him. “I already told you, Brex, there’s no world where I could hate you.”

He studied her deeply, as if looking for holes in her sincerity. Then his eyes filled with determination. “Clara. I was hired by Rulon and Pamela Hendry to prove that you murdered Malik Hendry, Harrison Jones, and Kyle Tanner.”

She blinked at him. Was he pulling a prank on her? The depth of seriousness in his eyes terrified her. She’d known Pamela never liked her, thought she was below Malik’s status, but to think ...

Yanking her hand free, she backed up a couple steps. “The Hendrys think I’m the murderer, even though the police and FBI cleared me?”

He nodded.

“And they hired you, through Aiden Porter, to prove I did it.” It clicked so quickly she wondered why she hadn’t had an inkling of the accusations until this moment.

“Yes.”

“But that’s ... there’s no proof. Not even the FBI found anything, and you didn’t find anything, right? Or are you hiding something else from me? Do you believe ...?”

“No, Clara.” He stepped up closer. “No. It didn’t take me long at all to see you were an innocent angel and the accusations are unfounded. But I wanted to try to find the murderer, if there was one, so I reunited with you to use myself as bait and draw the murderer out.”

That was horrible. She felt unsteady and chilled as she tried to process what he was revealing.

“I agreed to the job,” he continued, as if trying to explain. “I signed the contracts, and there was a million-dollar bonus on the line.” He looked at her as if she’d scream at him.

Clara didn’t want to scream at him, but she was having a hard time wrapping her mind around the man she’d fallen in love with investigating her for Malik’s parents. That he’d gotten close to her with an ulterior motive.

“A million dollars?” she asked.

He nodded.

“That’s a lot of money.”

“It is. But it’s not about the money.” His dark eyes seared into her. “Before I met you,

the money and status were what I lived for. Like I told you, I'd become a hollow shell of myself. I thought the million dollars could make me happy, clear my debts, give me a chance to soar in the social scene." He shook his head. "But I'm not here for the money anymore."

"Then why are you here?" She licked her lips, uncertain if she could trust his answer. For months she'd been falling in love with him under false pretenses. He'd only been dating her as a cover. The pain and betrayal of that hit her like a hammer.

"I'm here for you, Clara. I want to protect you, stay by your side, love you."

Now he brought up love? Trust and love went hand in hand. He hadn't trusted her. In fact, he had lied to her. Their entire relationship was built on falsehoods. Her stomach twisted and her neck tightened.

"Brex. All of this ..." She gestured between them. "You got close to me, dated me, kissed me, because I was your assignment and you were supposed to prove I was the murderer?"

His eyes were wary, but he nodded. "Originally, yes."

Clara's world dropped out from under her. She backed away from him. "Do I even know the real you?"

"Yes." He didn't move toward her, but his dark gaze begged her to trust him. "I'm still coming to know myself, honestly, but you saw the real me, saw through my pretenses. I'm still the same man you claimed to love."

How could he say she only 'claimed' to love him? That wasn't fair or true. She was confused and upset, sick to her stomach and betrayed, but she still loved him.

“I was conflicted and hated that I was playing a role,” Brex continued, “but I fell for you, Clara. I was lifted by your light and your goodness, your sincerity. Amazed by you and completely gone over you.” He paused, waiting for that to sink in. She wanted to love the words but didn’t know if she could trust anything he said now. When she didn’t respond, he said, “I’m so sorry that I had to keep all of this from you.”

“You had to?”

He looked miserable. “It’s the nature of my job, undercover work. If I told the suspect why I was interacting with them, it wouldn’t play out very well.”

And she was the suspect.

“Is this playing out very well?” She gestured between them.

He drew in a breath. His shoulders lifted, and he shook his head. “No.”

“What did you expect? What do you want me to say?” Her chest hurt, and she was having a hard time catching her breath.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “I hoped you could forgive me and love me still, but I wouldn’t blame you if you want to scream at me and throw rocks at my head.”

She was somewhere in the middle of those two extremes. She backed up and turned away from him.

He followed her.

“Please don’t.” She held up a hand, not looking at him. “Give me some space so I can pray and figure out how to deal with ... you.”

“Okay.”

He backed away, and she closed her eyes. She didn’t even know what to pray for. She’d been lied to, deceived. Brex claimed to have fallen for her, but it was all a pretense. He’d pretended to be her boyfriend for his job. Thinking back, she remembered the times he’d seemed conflicted or said he shouldn’t kiss her. He’d been struggling with his conscience.

No matter how conflicted he was, he’d played her, hadn’t trusted her, had lied to her and taken advantage of her for a job.

A wisp of sound came, and then a rumble. Was that an earthquake? She spun, looking around. Then she spotted the massive boulder launching off the cliff and on target to smash Brex’s head open.

“Brex!”

He dove forward, seeming to fly toward her. Wrapping her up tight, he rolled and skidded on the sand-covered trail. She was protected by his arms and larger body. The boulder crashed to the ground and shot dust and small particles at them.

Brex looked to where the boulder had fallen, and his jaw tightened. She glanced over. A jade-colored stone sparkled in the dust next to the massive rock.

He lifted her off of him and murmured, “Stay here, Clara.”

Then he pushed to his feet. He ran three steps and jumped, launching off the fallen boulder. He grabbed handholds in the jagged cliff side and scrambled up it like a mountain goat. What was he doing? What if he fell or was pushed back down the cliff?

That jade colored stone blinked at her and made her stomach convulse.

Brex.

Broken, lifeless, dead just like Harrison, Kyle, and Malik.

“Brex!”

Clara couldn't lose him.

He'd betrayed her and hurt her, but she still loved him.

Please protect him , she begged their Father above.

Chapter

Fifteen

Brex launched himself off the downed boulder and flew up the side of the cliff, using whatever crack or jagged out-hanging he could find for hand and foot holds. He was too angry at himself and the attempted murderer to be afraid of falling or feel any fear of a person that would send a boulder down to split his head open.

He was spurred on by so many emotions—anger at himself and the perp, thirst to know who'd just tried to kill him and who'd killed three other men, fear that Clara would never forgive him, longing to be accepted and loved by Clara and his Savior.

Reaching the top, he saw a flicker of a blue shirt on a slight build, a baseball hat. The person was moving fast along the slick rock.

“Stop!” he hollered.

The person glanced back. He couldn't tell, but he could swear it was a woman.

He raced after the person. They were heading back toward the trail that he and Clara had come down earlier this morning from this very outlook. If he didn't reach the murderer first, he or she could hurt Clara. But if it was the person who'd killed her other boyfriends, they hadn't hurt Clara yet. She had never been the target.

The person disappeared around a large boulder. He raced toward it. Suddenly a body lurched out at him, a small person's head connected with his chest, and he stumbled

backward. He would've gone off the fifty-foot ledge behind him, but he spun out of the woman's grasp, pivoted, and landed on his chest with a hard thump. His head and shoulders hung over the ledge.

"No!" the woman screamed as her legs sling-shot over the drop off. She grabbed Brex's outstretched hand before she fell and he yanked her to a stop. His shoulder screamed at the abrupt pull of muscle and ligaments.

"Hold on," Brex grunted, wrapping his other hand around her forearm. "I've got you." He lay face down, arms, shoulders, and chest over the edge of the cliff. Her weight and momentum inched his upper body the wrong direction. He tried to dig in with his feet, but the sand and the slick rock gave him nothing to dig into.

"Please," she begged.

He looked down into her face. "Jane?"

Jane's blue eyes were wild.

Brex slipped farther, his feet not gaining any purchase.

"I'm sorry," she screamed. "It was for Weston. I'm so sorry."

He'd known Weston was the perp. He'd known it. The guy had forced the innocent, guileless Jane to do his dirty work. What a scum.

"Jane! We're both going to go over if we don't change the trajectory." He was sliding slowly, but still sliding. Unless he released her, he couldn't stop the movement. "On three, I'm going to swing you to my left, your right. Swing your body that way. I'll lift you up here." He didn't know if it would work, but he wasn't letting her go and he wasn't going over that edge. Fifty feet down and headfirst, he'd definitely be dead.

“One ... two ... three!”

He swung her to the left, and her legs flung up toward the safe space. He realized he had to release her, and as he did, he lobbed her up onto the safety of the ledge. Thankfully she was light enough that it worked.

The momentum shoved his body toward the ledge. He scrambled with his hands and feet, trying to push backward.

He was able to get on an angle but it didn't stop the momentum. He was going to go over.

Brex said a prayer in his mind as his body slid rapidly toward the drop off. Fifty feet ... he might survive. But with rock and the uneven surface down below ... probably not.

“No!”

Hands grasped his left arm, torso, and leg. Two pairs of feminine hands, yanking him back toward safety. Inch by agonizing inch. He glanced back and saw Jane and Clara each tugging on him, leaning back and gritting their teeth.

He was able to scramble with them, using his free hand and leg. Then he was on his knees and wrapping Clara up tight, ushering her away from the edge and away from Jane.

The dust settled, and he leaned against a rock with his back, clinging to Clara. They all sat there, panting for air for a few beats.

Clara stared up at him. “You're all right?”

“I’m all right.”

“Thank the good Lord and all His angels. I’ve never sprinted up an incline so fast in my life.” Her beautiful jade eyes grew bright. Tears crested her eyelids, and she buried her head in his chest and let out a shuddering sob.

He held her close, keeping his focus on Jane.

The woman didn’t appear to be a threat. She lay in a crumpled heap, sobbing. “I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry.”

“Jane.” Brex’s voice was too sharp. He tried to temper it. “You’re okay. I’m okay. It’s over. Calm down.”

Jane kept crying but seemed to calm marginally.

Brex glanced at Clara. “Your prayer. You coming for me. It was miraculous that you could run that fast. You saved my life.” He wanted to kiss her long and hard, but he had to get Jane to the authorities first. The woman obviously wasn’t right in her mind, but she’d helped Weston kill Clara’s boyfriends. He hadn’t seen that coming. He’d believed there was no killer, or that it was Weston.

“I love you,” Clara said. She arched up and kissed him fiercely.

He let himself savor her mouth moving urgently against his for a few beats, but then he had to break the kiss and usher her head to his chest. There would be time to kiss her and tell her he loved her. Later. He hoped.

“We’ve got to get Jane to the authorities and riddle this mess out,” he said. Helping Clara stand, he studied her. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” she said, but her voice was weak and her lower lip trembling. “Okay, no. Not really.”

“It’ll be okay,” he tried to reassure her, but it made him sick that seemingly harmless Jane had been the perpetrator.

He pulled out his phone and called 911. Jane and Clara both watched him as he reported the crime, telling the police to bring Weston Darrough to the station, and to send officers to come meet them at the trailhead.

“Not Weston’s fault,” Jane whimpered over and over again. The poor girl was so deluded and misused. “I’m sorry, Clara.”

“Jane,” he commanded, keeping the call open but sliding it into his pocket. “We’re going to walk down the trail. You’re going to stay in front of us and don’t make any sudden moves.” Brex edged even farther away from the ledge.

Jane obeyed and stood, her legs trembling. She slowly walked in front of them. He held onto Clara’s elbow to steady her, and they followed.

His mind spun through the events of the past twenty minutes. He’d almost died. Both women had saved him. It was a miracle. Maybe God and Clara could both forgive him.

He glanced askance at Clara. Her hair was a mess, her face was mottled with tears as she turned red-rimmed eyes to him. He saw love there, but also confusion and suspicion. He’d just admitted that he’d been lying to her the entire time they knew each other. And she’d just found out her two best friends had killed her three boyfriends. She had to be a mess. If only he could hold her and comfort her, share how deeply he loved her.

“I’m sorry,” Jane suddenly wailed from in front of them. They were to the spot he’d revealed the truth to Clara, where the boulder pushed by Jane would’ve landed on his head. He glanced down and saw the jade stone winking up at them next to the boulder.

“You tried to kill me.” Brex put his phone on speaker so the 911 operator could record if this was a confession.

“I’m sorry. You nice to Clara and love her. I didn’t want to hurt you too. But Clara choose you over us. Weston so sad last night. I have to help him. He’s my Weston.”

Weston. That scum. He couldn’t even kill the men himself but sent disturbed Jane to do his dirty work.

“Jane.” Clara’s voice was soft. “Did you kill Harrison, Kyle, and Malik?”

“No Harrison,” she said, walking in front of them and not looking back. “Accident on his bike. No me. Jade stone.” She shrugged. “Gave me idea when you date Kyle. Weston sad and Kyle not nice. I remember Harrison die, jade stone. I find his climbing thing in car at your house. I use my brother’s knife, make little cuts. I follow you. Leave jade stone and pray he falls.” She admitted all of this in a dull voice.

“And Malik?” Clara asked, her voice more dull than Jane’s. “You pushed him off the cliff at Angel’s Landing?”

“Yeah. He never think me hurt him. Surprised I was there. I push and the rain help make it slick. I drop jade stone as he fall. His family.” She shuddered. “Meanies. No like you. He no good for you.” She looked back. “You see? Weston love you. Please.” She stopped walking and faced them. “Love Weston.”

“Jane.” Clara looked as sick and pale as when she’d vomited after Brex chased and

confronted the middle-aged mom with cancer. “You need help. You don’t kill people because you love your best friends and want them together. I don’t love Weston. I love Brex.”

Jane’s eyes went wild. “No! You love Weston.”

“I’ll never love Weston. I love Brex.”

Brex’s body warmed. Clara had said it twice, even after he’d hurt her so deeply. He stared down at her, so in love and wishing he could tell her everything that was in his heart.

Movement caught his eye. Jane launched herself at Brex, a flash of silver revealing a knife in her hand.

Clara screamed.

Brex pushed Clara to the side. The knife plunged into his bicep. The sharp bite of pain made his stomach flip over.

He yanked the knife out and tossed it, grabbing Jane and flipping her to face away from him, pinning her hands behind her back. Blood trailed down his arm from the wound. It stung but had missed any arteries. He’d be fine.

Jane thrashed and screamed, “No! Weston and Clara! Weston and Clara!”

Jane had instinctively helped Clara pull him back to safety, but now she was flipping out again. What had Weston done to her? The poor girl was literally insane. No one had suspected her because of her innocent guile. It was heartbreaking and disturbing.

“It’s over, Jane.”

He looked over at Clara. She stood and brushed off, scraped but okay. He wished he could hold and support her, but he had to control the writhing Jane.

“No! Weston and Clara! Please!”

Brex couldn't believe the brainwashing this woman had endured. Even with two deaths and one attempted murder on her head, she'd get an insanity plea and be put in a home that could help her. But Weston wouldn't. That scum was going to prison.

“Are you all right?” he asked Clara, feeling inept as a boyfriend as he watched more tears streak down her face.

“No.”

“I'm so sorry,” he said over Jane's cries.

She only shrugged and focused on his wound. Pulling tissue out of her pack, she hurried over and held a wad of Kleenex against his wound.

He glanced down at her. She was a ministering angel, as always. Her jade-colored eyes were full of sadness as she glanced up at him. He'd lied to her. She had to feel betrayed by him, and now her two best friends had also betrayed her.

Ah, Clara.

If only he could fix this mess. But how could he take back the lies and gain her trust?

Chapter

Sixteen

Clara watched the police and EMTs arrive and haul Jane off screaming about Weston. Her heart broke for her misguided friend. She couldn't believe Jane could hurt anyone. It ripped her apart. She hoped Weston wasn't involved, but everyone seemed to believe he was and everyone seemed to be betraying her.

Some of the police went to collect evidence while the EMTs focused on patching up Brex's wound.

Brex looked like a beat-up hero, red dust clinging to him, his muscular bicep wounded, his clothes torn. He had been a hero scaling that cliff and then saving Jane when she turned out to be the attacker. Her confused friend had tried to kill him, twice. Clara couldn't wrap her mind around sweet Jane, her lifelong friend, being a murderer. Was Weston really involved? No matter that he'd been jealous of her boyfriends, she'd always believed Weston was a good man.

She focused back on Brex. Could he be Clara's hero if he'd lied to her and they had no trust? He'd never once told her he loved her, and she'd said it multiple times. Her cheeks went hot at the recollections. She'd acted like a desperate, naive, head in the clouds, in love with love adolescent. Brex was tough and worldly, used to classy and stylish supermodels. Though he claimed he wanted to be with her, she didn't know what to believe.

He met her gaze and the commotion around them settled. In his deep brown gaze, she

could see that he loved her, that he was sorry, that he wanted a future with her.

She looked away. She wasn't ready for that deep of a soul-searching gaze. Her insides were too muddled.

Her faith should be soaring. Their Father above had answered her prayer and kept Brex safe. But even with that miracle at the forefront of her mind, her faith had some holes punched in it. Not her faith in God, but her faith in Brex, in her lifelong friends, and even in herself.

How could Jane have murdered two men and tried to kill Brex? How had Clara fallen desperately in love with a man who was playing a part for a security detail? Which part of their fledgling relationship had been real and what had been fabricated for his undercover job?

She hugged herself, chilled despite the eighty-degree morning, and horribly confused.

They had to go into the police station and she endured many, many questions about Brex, Weston, Jane, and all of her previous boyfriends' deaths. It dredged up pain and more questions. For years now she'd thought finding the murderer would resolve so much anguish but it had only brought more.

She also remembered right before she met Brex she'd been determined not to have another boyfriend, to keep the man safe. She'd blown past that parameter, but now it was her heart that wasn't safe.

Finally, the police released her to her parents' care. Her mom fussed over her as they took her home, trying to talk her out of flying out in the morning. That was the only thing she could see clearly. She needed to go on her mission trip, forget about herself and serve others. Brex would go to Venezuela. Would they ever come together? She honestly didn't know. She prayed, but her faith felt lacking.

She was able to get a breather from her mom as she took a shower and started packing for her trip. Usually she'd have a suitcase out a week in advance and add things to it as she thought of them, but she'd been too focused on Brex. She felt empty inside thinking about being away from him. She did love him, but the hurt and questions overrode the love she thought they were developing. He'd dated her for the job and even though he claimed to need her, after the job in Venezuela he'd go back to his high-dollar life and the upscale people in San Diego. He'd probably become enamored with super models and actresses again, realizing Clara hadn't been what he was searching for. The gulf between them was too large, even if she could forgive and forget.

The doorbell rang upstairs. Clara's insides tightened and her stomach gave a happy pitch. Was it Brex? She wanted it to be, but she was terrified to talk to him. How could she claim to be a Christian and not forgive him? Yet the Savior wouldn't ask her to put herself in a hurtful relationship. She had to figure out how to forgive him but not let her heart be entangled with his. That hurt. She loved him and wanted her heart to be entangled with his.

The doorbell rang again. She wasn't getting it.

Tears streaked down her face just thinking about Brex. She was in an impossible tangle. She had to get away from here. Her mission trips were always rejuvenating and rewarding but she usually had a hard time leaving her family, friends, and valley behind. Not this time. Tomorrow morning couldn't come soon enough.

Footsteps descended the stairs, then a soft rap sounded on her door.

"Yes?" she managed, wiping ferociously at her tears and pasting on a fake smile as her mom opened the door.

"Brex is here to see you, love." Her mom looked hopeful, as if Brex could make

everything better.

“Thanks. I’ll be right up.” She nodded and thankfully her mom didn’t wait for her.

Clara hurried into her bathroom, brushed her teeth, splashed water on her face, and studied her red-rimmed eyes and mottled skin in the mirror. She should put on some makeup, but Brex had never seemed to care that she wasn’t dolled up. Yet his focus before coming here was status, appearance, and a beautiful woman on his arm. She put on some mint lip gloss, said a prayer to know how to deal with this situation and have God’s insight and confidence in herself, and forced herself to walk up the stairs.

Brex was in the entryway, alone, waiting for her. His deep brown eyes lit up as he saw her. “Clara.” He rushed to her and gathered her in his arms. “Are you all right?”

“Not really,” she admitted. She clung to him for a few beats, then she forced herself to be strong. She pushed out of his arms and backed up, bumping into the wall.

Brex’s gaze became wary. He flicked his wrist and glanced at his watch. She wanted to tease him about needing to be somewhere, but there was no tease in her. Her heart was breaking in two. Could he heal her heart? Not if she didn’t trust him.

She looked at his bicep and the large bandage on it. “Stitches?”

“Only three.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No.” He shook his head and brushed at his hair. “You are the only person who should not be sorry.” His gaze deepened, and he took a step closer. “I’m sorry, Clara. So very sorry.”

She studied him and then finally managed to say, "I know you are."

"Can we fix this?"

"I don't know, Brex." She folded her arms around her midsection. "Not easily. Not today." She swallowed. "Maybe after your job in Venezuela and my trip to Angola, we can talk."

But what would talking do? All she knew was she needed some time and space. Even as she looked at him, she wanted to have him hold her close, kiss her deeply. But that wouldn't solve anything. Brex didn't date women like her. They'd been thrown together because of his job and it had all been fake. Her heart hurt.

He didn't say anything to her suggestion.

"When do you fly out?" she asked.

"Aiden's jet is waiting for me in San Diego. I've got to drive home and unload everything, pack up and go."

She nodded but had to change the subject before tears escaped. "How did everything go with the police? Did Weston encourage Jane to ..." She couldn't say it, still couldn't wrap her mind around her two best friends betraying her. At the same time, the man she loved had betrayed her. It was a theme in her life currently.

"The police believe Weston is innocent." He obviously didn't believe it. "Everything Jane says backs that up." He shrugged. "They'll have to sort it out."

She nodded.

"Crazily enough, the Hendrys showed up at the station."

“Oh.” That was another gouge of pain. Malik’s parents thought she’d killed him. She supposed they could still blame her as it was her friend who had killed him.

Jane. A murderer. It still didn’t compute.

He arched his brows. “They both thanked me for finding their son’s murderer. I earned the bonus.” He shook his head.

“Wow. Good for you.”

With a million dollars, he could easily have the high-dollar society life and dates he’d wanted before he met her. Now he could go back to the life he had before. It all was working out.

If only she wasn’t broken.

“They also told me that they want to come see you and ask your forgiveness.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh.” She swallowed and managed, “Of course I’ll grant it, but I hope they wait until after my trip. I need some time to heal.”

She realized what she’d just said as his eyes brightened with hope. She’d grant forgiveness to him too. Of course she would. But time was definitely something she needed. And prayer. Loads of prayer. The innocent and impoverished children in Angola would help her put everything in perspective too. They always did.

“Clara ...” He studied her. “I might be gone for months. I don’t want to leave with this pain hanging between us.”

She shook her head and bit at the inside of her cheek. “You lied to me, Brex. Our entire relationship you were playing a part. Even if I can pray and forgive you, I’m

not part of your world. I can't ..." She broke off, a sob rising in her throat.

In a blink, Brex's hands framed her face and he was staring deeply into her eyes, his brown gaze sincere and probing. "I pray someday you'll forgive me for misleading you. It was my first job in the private sector and I probably went about it all wrong. I'm so sorry. I know there will always be things in my job that I'll have to keep from you, but I hope they're never anything that hurts you. I'd do anything to heal you. You are my world, Clara."

Was she cut out to be the girlfriend of a security specialist? Definitely not. She didn't want her boyfriend or husband hiding things from her, and she wasn't shrewd enough to sort through truth and lies. Him saying she was his world made her heart leap and long for it to be true.

Could Brex's kiss heal her? Maybe, but she needed divine help to forgive him first. And she needed to trust him. Could she?

"I also know that without this job, I wouldn't have met and fallen in love with you." His gaze searched hers. "I love you, Clara Gem. I love everything you are, what you've taught me, what you've given to me. I love your charitable heart, your light-filled soul, your positive attitude, your genuine beauty, your unerring faith."

Clara blinked fast but couldn't stop the tears spilling over. Her faith in mankind was at an all-time low. Because of him and Jane. She'd trusted both of them and they'd betrayed her. His beautiful words couldn't sink in and soothe her raw pain, no matter how she wanted them to.

"Please forgive me," he beseeched her, "and know that I am desperately in love with you."

He didn't wait for her answer but bent and gave her a tender kiss. The kiss was sweet

and didn't ask anything of her. It gifted her with the deepest love and devotion she'd ever experienced.

Clara wasn't ready to accept it.

She pulled back and out of his arms, whimpering as she touched her lips with her fingertips.

"I can't," she managed.

Rushing down the stairs, she half hoped he'd chase after her.

He didn't.

It was for the best.

But somehow, him not following her hurt almost as much as him claiming he'd fallen in love with her while lying to her.

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Clara pushed her heavy ponytail back over her shoulder and swiped at a thick layer of dust on the bookshelf she'd just cleared of textbooks. She loved the mountainous villages close to Malanje, Angola and Kalandula Falls. The highs were around eighty in June, cool compared to the hundred degrees back home in Arizona.

They were deep cleaning the small school today. With no glass in the windows, the dust and fly poop got thick. She looked around at the crew of youth working and teasing together. She loved these young people. Some were from her own valley, but many were from other areas around the states. They'd all grown close the past two weeks, working together and loving the people in the different villages they visited.

She only thought of Brex every minute or two. Not bad, in her estimation. She missed him and as the days passed she was starting to understand how he'd had to play a role to do his job, but it still hurt that he'd waited so long to tell her the truth and that the relationship she thought they had wasn't built on trust. He'd only started dating her to get close to the killer. She imagined he'd go back to his previous life, be distracted by beautiful ladies, and soon not think of her at all.

Still, if he appeared, she'd kiss him for a very long time.

Her nerves tingled thinking about their many shared kisses. She longed for him but doubted they'd ever be together.

A loud, rumbling vehicle approached outside, and her stomach tightened. The villagers watched out for them and she hired two security guards to accompany them on the trip, but there was fighting less than thirty miles away and any vehicle arriving at the village always made her uneasy.

She met the questioning gaze of some of the youth and held up a hand. “Stay in here,” she cautioned. “I’ll go check it out.”

Joseph, one of the tall, strong boys who reminded her of Lincoln, shook his head. “I’m going with you.”

“Joseph. I’ve got this.”

He gave her an impertinent look and hurried to her side, shadowing her as she edged to the door and peeked out.

It was a four-wheel-drive Army-looking vehicle. Oh, no. The villagers had disappeared, and the dusty village square was vacant save her two security guards. They stood with hands on their pistols, looking nervous but brave.

She pushed Joseph back. “Send everyone out the back door and to the river.”

“Not without you.”

“I’ll be right behind you.” She had to see what they were dealing with. It could be one of the men from the village visiting his family. It could be a murderous warlord here to conscript teenagers into his army or rape and kidnap young ladies.

Please protect the villagers, my youth, and our security guards.

The doors of the vehicle popped open, and she shoved at Joseph. Two men hopped down, sending up plumes of dust. She and Joseph were closer to the driver’s side and could see clearly?—

“No way,” Joseph cried out. “That’s Aiden Porter.”

Clara sagged against the doorframe as she studied the well-known security specialist.

He was handsome, smiling, and well-built, as impressive in real life as he was on television or social media.

Clara edged back, hiding in the doorframe. She was not ready to talk to Brex's boss.

Aiden's charm seemed to ooze from him as his blue eyes circled around the quiet village and zeroed in on the security guards. They approached him with outstretched hands, obviously knowing who he was and thrilled to meet the icon in person.

"Guys!" Joseph hollered back into the school. "Aiden Porter is here!"

Relief filled Clara. It wasn't anyone intent on hurting the villagers or her volunteer crew.

But Aiden Porter was here. Why? Maybe he had a job nearby. Of course, seeing Aiden Porter in the flesh brought Brex to the forefront of her mind. Did he have news about Brex? Her stomach tumbled with fear. Had he come here to tell her Brex was killed in Venezuela? Why else would Brex's boss show up on her doorstep in the middle of nowhere?

The youth burst through the door of the school, rushing past her. She smiled as they surrounded Aiden and started firing questions at him, though worry was still building inside her. The children and mothers from the village appeared in doorways, watching the interaction.

Aiden gestured to the children as the man who'd exited the passenger side of the vehicle opened the rear hatch. The other man's back was to her, but Clara could see the muscles in his arms working smoothly as he lifted boxes out of the back —food, clothing, toys. She couldn't see all of it but enough to know Aiden was gifting this village with supplies. She and her crew had brought some, but it wasn't easy to haul much on the airplane. The villagers were all smiles, some clapping their hands, the children rushing forward now.

The other man's back and muscular arms looked familiar. She didn't dare let herself hope, but then she saw his fancy silver watch glint in the sunlight. At that moment, he turned, grinning down at a young boy who'd scurried over to inspect a box of toys.

Her heart threatened to burst out of her chest.

"Brex!" His name ripped from her lips as she stepped out of the doorframe.

His eyes darted toward her and his face lit up. "Clara!" He dodged around the boxes and the gathering children and raced for her.

Clara stepped forward, unsteady and uncertain but overwhelmed with happiness. Brex had come to Angola. For her?

He reached her, swept her off her feet, and swung her around.

"Clara." He held her aloft, staring up at her as if she were the most beautiful woman in the world. Then he slowly lowered her into his embrace and captured her mouth with his.

His kiss was warm, full of longing and reconnection. His lips and strong body sent tingles and joy through every cell in her body.

She registered cheering and laughter, but all she could focus on was Brex's mouth, his strong body surrounding her, and his insistent and wonderful kisses.

He pulled back and smiled gently at her. "Clara. Ah, I've missed you."

"I've missed you too," she admitted.

The students and children were clapping and cheering for them.

Brex looked around and waved a hand. He focused back on her. “Is there somewhere quiet we could ... talk?”

Clara wanted to kiss, not talk, but she knew they needed to talk. She nodded, took his hand, and tugged him around the corner of the school. Glancing back, she saw Aiden Porter watching them. He lifted a hand and gave her a charming smirk and a nod. She attempted a smile back but it was wobbly.

“Aiden Porter?” she managed as she and Brex walked through the trees and down to the riverbank.

“Best boss I’ve ever had.” He turned toward her. “After I got the information they needed from inside the trafficking ring, he, Nick, and ten other operatives showed up and we dismantled the traffickers, rescuing over fifty youth and children.” He smiled grimly, but there was pride there too. “Then Aiden and I chatted about his and Chalisa’s love story and he thought I should do a grand gesture. When I told him my idea, he insisted he was headed to the island of Magna to be with his wife, baby girl, and in-laws, and Angola was a quick side trip.”

“Wow. That’s generous of him. All those supplies, bringing you here.” It was a grand gesture, them bringing things for this village, Brex coming to Africa to find her. Angola was no quick side trip from an island near Spain.

“Clara ... I thought I wanted glimmer and shine, but that’s all fake. Without you in my life, I feel like I’m a house made of straw. I want—no, I need real in my life. I need you.”

Clara took in his words. They were a balm for her aching heart. She didn’t know how to answer.

“Do you want me here, Clara?” Brex suddenly seemed uncertain and a little shy. “You needed time, and I don’t want to push you if you’re not ready.”

She looked at the river, then into his deep-brown eyes. “I’ve been trying to muddle it out in my head. I felt betrayed and of course I wished you hadn’t lied to me.”

He nodded his understanding.

“But I do understand that’s the nature of your job. What if I had been the murderer?” She shrugged. “I don’t know if I can be a good security operative’s girlfriend. I don’t like feeling like you don’t trust me. I want to trust you.”

“I can understand that. I want you to trust me.” He took both of her hands in his. “Aiden told me that if we’re married, I can confide things in you, as long as you want to hear them and I won’t risk national security.”

“What are you saying?” Her heart thudded too hard against her rib cage.

He smiled. “You don’t think you’d be a good security op’s girlfriend, but what about wife? I think you’d be the most incredible wife in the world.”

“Brex ...” She couldn’t catch a full breath. “Have you lost your mind?”

Brex chuckled at that, obviously remembering when he’d said it to her. He eased closer and wrapped his arms around her waist, his firm hands splayed across her lower back. “I have, Clara.” He bent down and his warm breath tickled her mouth. “I’ve lost a bunch of fake, petty fantasies and found the real thing. I’ve lost my mind and have fallen desperately in love with a charitable angel.”

She loved him too, but ... marriage?

“Where would we live? When would we even be together?”

“I’d love to buy a little house in Jade Valley,” he said softly. “I really like the pastor there, and his daughter.” He whistled. “She’s hot.”

“Brex.” She half-laughed and half-groaned. “You sound like Linc.”

“I like him too. I’ve always wanted a crazy little brother.” He kissed her gently and then drew back. “Take the time you need. I don’t want to pressure you. But you need to know that nothing else matters to me, not compared to you. I paid off my Range Rover and sold my condo. I put a couple hundred thousand in an investment Aiden recommended, earmarked another five hundred thousand for the house I want to buy you, and donated the rest to your mission organization.”

“Brex,” she breathed in awe.

“I don’t care if I ever own a Brioni suit or live in a high-dollar condo by the ocean or get caught on camera on the red carpet. I know it will be hard when you’re on a mission trip or I’m on an assignment, but I’ll come with you any time I can and all I care about is that I come home to you. I love you, Clara. If you need a year to think about it or to pray to forgive me, I’ll understand. If you need fifty years, I’ll wait for you. I love you, and no one but you will ever do for me. Now that I’ve found what’s real, I can never settle for a life without substance.”

Clara computed his words and realized for the first time she felt seen and appreciated. She’d been fine being invisible, a window to God’s love, but she never knew how good it would feel to find that one person who saw her and loved her. That completed her, and the chasm she thought was between her and Brex ... he built a steel bridge over it.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. She kissed him until shadows of evening approached and Joseph and Heidi came to tell them they were missing dinner and a huge celebration.

They pulled apart, promising they’d be right there.

Brex took her hand to walk her back to the village center.

“Brex.” She put her other hand on his arm. “I never answered you.”

“Those kisses were a brilliant answer.”

“I hope so, but you need to know that I’ll forgive you and I do love you. Now that I’ve felt your love and understanding ... I don’t need it from everyone, just from you. You’re all I need. And someday soon, I’ll marry you and let you buy me that house in Jade Valley.”

Brex’s eyes widened and then he whooped and lifted her in his arms and kissed her thoroughly.

They missed dinner.

Neither of them cared.