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Desert Girls

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

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University of California, Riverside

The sun was high overhead, and the line of dirt bikes crossing the desert threw a trail of dust that marked their path. It was their Labor Day Weekend ritual, an escape from their day to day lives into the desert southeast of Twentynine Palms. They camped in an open clearing, cooked over a roaring fire, and drank lukewarm beer. A perfect guy's weekend.

Brandon whipped the tail of the dirt bike to the right and came to an abrupt stop as a sight from their younger years came into view. He parked the bike, shaking his head in memory. The rebar looked the same, twisted and gnarled into an angry darkness in the otherwise tan and brown of the desert. A well-intended person had, at some point, come through with wire fencing and built a partial perimeter around the abandoned mineshaft, protecting riders from wiping out into the mine. The depths were unforgiving.

As teenagers the brothers had played around the mouths of various mines, this one included, dropping rocks to the bottom to gauge the depth. One, two, three... seconds deep.

Brandon looked down into the best lit portion, where the color of the earth transitioned light to dark, but still couldn't see to the bottom. Smiling, he picked up a fist-sized rock, weighed it in his hands and dropped it down, listening for the plink of it hitting bottom.

It didn't come.

Instead, a moment later, a soft groan came up from the bottom of the mine, distinctly human.

"Oh shit. Hello? Can you hear me? Is someone down there?"

He dropped to his stomach, barely allowing the top of his head to crest the mouth, trying to see below. The darkness was endless; he saw nothing.

Brandon climbed back to his feet and waved his brothers over, flagging his arms and jumping for their attention. They were there within minutes.

"What's up? What's wrong?"

"You got a flat tire?" Matt asked, examining the bike.

Brandon shook his head. "I think I heard something down there."

David rolled his eyes. "Bats. Rats. Snakes. We've seen them all here before. That's all. Let's keep riding."

"No," Brandon said, putting his hand on his brother's arm, stopping him from walking away. "It sounded like a person. I swear, I'm not crazy. Listen."

He picked up another rock, this time considerably smaller, and dropped it down the mineshaft.

His brothers were silent, patient, mentally counting. Humoring Brandon, but still counting. Three, four...

Again, a faint groan echoed from the mine, sounding more annoyed this time than the last.

"Holy crap. Hello, is someone down there?" David yelled, cupping his hands and aiming his voice down the mine.

The brothers waited for a response.

"He- hello?" a broken female voice answered, barely audible above the crack of the dry air.

"Oh shit. We gotta call someone," Matt said, cupping his hands to yell down: "We're going to get you some help! Don't move!"

Brandon looked at his cell phone, saw the no reception icon. "I'm going to ride back toward camp until I have reception. I knew we needed radios. Damn it!"

He swung his leg over the bike and kicked the throttle, starting the engine with a roar, kicking a rooster tail of dust into the air, marking his path.

They waited.

#

"Sir, we just got a call from dispatch."

Sheriff Dale Winters looked up from his computer, his bushy eyebrows rising to his former hairline.

"There's a group of guys riding dirt bikes in the open desert; they think they found a woman at the bottom of one of the abandoned vertical mines."

Winters snorted. "You know what to do, Roberts. Do it."

He had already turned back to his computer screen.

Roberts cleared his throat. "I know, sir, we've called the search and rescue volunteers. They're mobilizing now. I'll radio back, let you know what we find out."

"Don't waste the time."

"Sir?"

"I've been doing this job for thirty-four years. We find someone alive, they fell in. We find a dead body, they either fell in, or were murdered. Live body means you can handle the investigation solo."

#

The rugged terrain and narrowing trails that snaked through the desert made it impossible for full-size emergency vehicles to make their way to the mine. Instead the search and rescuers travelled to the GPS location of the brother's camp by truck and jeep. When they reached the location, they followed Brandon back to the mine.

"What can we do to help?" David asked, meeting the men at their vehicles.

"Answer some questions while we wait for the mine rescue team."

"What do you mean wait?" Matt said.

"They can't go down there," Deputy Chris Roberts said, joining the group from the last of the vehicles.

The brothers repeated the question again.

"We can't," James O'Donnell said. He was a member of the search and rescue team, well aware of the rules that limited them. "Legally, we can't. The county requires that anyone doing mine rescue operations be licensed, and they can only afford to license one team. That team's in Barstow."

The brothers shook their heads. Barstow was nearly two hours away.

"So we just wait for two hours until they get here?"

"Actually," O'Donnell admitted, "It can sometimes take longer than that. Since the girl's alive, they'll get here as quick as they can, but they have to get all their gear together. We're looking at maybe four hours."

"So what the hell do we do for four hours?" Brandon snapped. "Sit and wait for her to die?"

"You answer my questions, first," Deputy Roberts said, guiding the brothers away from the search and rescue team. "Did the girl say anything to you?" he asked.

"No, nothing. We barely heard her at all," Brandon said.

"She didn't say how long she's been down there?"

The brothers shook their heads. "Nothing. She said "Hello" after we called to her. Then she didn't say anything. We called to her again, after Brandon went to call for help, but she didn't answer. She hasn't said anything since."

Deputy Roberts sighed. "Time is the biggest factor working against us. The human body can survive a few days without food and water. Depending where she is within those days, our best efforts may not be enough. That mine is obviously deep. If she fell down there, it's likely she sustained a variety of injuries."

They didn't speak for a minute. What could be said? The girl was slowly dying down below from trauma, dehydration, maybe both, and there wasn't a damn thing they could do.

"But it's good that she answered us, right?" David asked.

"Yeah, it is. It means she hasn't lost consciousness completely, that she still has a fighting chance."

The brothers nodded, clearly shaken by the turn their weekend trip had taken.

"She's also very lucky. It's been an unusually temperate weekend. Normally it's in the upper nineties this time of year, but it's topped out at the mid eighties and stayed relatively warm overnight. Now we're just waiting for the experts to get here. The nearest mine rescue team is from Barstow, over an hour and a half away."

"What can we do?" Brandon said, shifting his weight back and forth.

"We'll have more questions for you, about how you found her, what happened, what you did this weekend that led you to that mine. Anything you know can be of great help. We'll need you to come down to the station for an official statement. But if you're really willing to help, we need to prepare for the mine rescue team."

#

Les Kenyon squirmed in the passenger seat of the jeep. The remainder of his team was divided among the two other vehicles that tailed them. He was anxious before any rescue, but especially before the mine rescues, his team's specialty.

"This is Les Kenyon, incident commander of the Barstow Desert Rescue Team. Are you on site?"

"Yes. Yes, we are."

"Good. What's your name?"

"James O'Donnell. I'm with the search and rescue team, sir. My first mine rescue."

Les smiled at the admission. A mental picture of a young, unshaven rookie came to mind.

"Okay, James, we're on the way there now. We've just left Barstow, so we're about ninety minutes away. How's the girl?"

"No word from her, sir. We've been here for a few hours, but she hasn't answered us."

"That's fine. Have you sent the coordinates of your location to the helicopter pilot? He'll need to be available to medevac her out as soon as we have her topside."

There was a moment of radio silence while Les pictured the young man asking for confirmation.

"Yes, yes we have."

"Good. We don't know what condition that girl is in, so I need your help to ensure she's in the best condition for rescue possible when I do arrive."

"Okay. Sure. What do I do?"

"Have you established an LZ?"

There was a minute of silence. Les chuckled. He'd been green once before himself.

"Yes, sir. We've cleared an area where the ground is rocky but level, so the helicopter can safely land."

"How far is the LZ from the mine?"

"About five hundred feet. The guys who found the girl helped clear an area and marked the perimeter with their dirtbikes."

The jeep took a turn sharply, descending from Barstow through the desert. He grabbed the handrail to his right, steadying himself.

"You have first aid supplies? Water? Food? Flares? Ropes?"

"Yes, of course."

"And the rope? How long?"

"Yes. At least one hundred and fifty feet, I think, yes."

"Should be long enough. You'll just have to see. But if she fell... the human body doesn't often survive a fall further than that. Do you have a bag? Basket? Something you can put everything in for her?"

"Yeah, We've got a backpack."

"Good. Gather water, glow sticks, a blanket, and comm me back when you're ready. And no food, James."

#

O'Donnell bundled the last of the supplies together and clicked his radio alive.

"Sir, I've got it all together here. Backpack's full, and rope is ready to lower. Her radio's on channel three, so you can talk to her, if needed."

"Good," Kenyon said, exhaling fully for the first time. New teams always caused him some tension. Too many variables for his liking. "Attach a glow stick to the top of the backpack. That way she'll have some light to work with. You need to holler down, let

her know what you're doing." He took a deep breath, resisted the urge to state the obvious: whatever you do, do not drop the bag on her.

"We'll be lowering you down some supplies, miss," O'Donnell yelled. "There's water in there. Please, if you can, at least drink some water."

He waited for her response, but none came.

"She didn't answer, sir."

"That's okay. Go ahead and lower the bag."

"Okay."

He did, slowly, careful of the sides of the mine shaft. He didn't want to be that guy, the rookie who screwed up and made a precarious situation worse.

Finally the backpack touched the bottom. O'Donnell tied the fifteen feet of remaining rope to an iron rod he had driven into the ground.

"Good to go, sir," O'Donnell said.

"Well done, James. We'll be there soon."

2

The mine rescue team pulled up and immediately set to work. They assembled a large tripod structure over the shaft, careful to secure the feet clear of the mouth. It was equipped with a pulley at its highest point, where they threaded the rope. The process was slow, methodical.

Their point man Les stepped into his body harness, checking his equipment, preparing for the descent into the mine. The long rope that lowered him was secured with a direct tie-in.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Brandon yelled, striding back toward the mineshaft. "She could be dying, and you're what? We waited four hours for you, and you're taking even longer!"

"Who is he to her?" Victor Santos asked. "Husband?"

Deputy Roberts grabbed Brandon by the chest, stopping him.

"Come on. We're going to the station. You and both your brothers. I'll find out who this girl is, to you." He turned to his partner, Andy Cummings and said, "You got this here?"

"Yes, fine. Go."

Brandon kicked the ground in frustration as he was guided away.

The mine rescue team resumed their work, Les the center of the nine-man operation. A phone line with an absurdly long cord was attached to his side, its cord running parallel to the rope.

"We're ready, Les," Danny Richmond said, his teammates nodding confirmation. They looked to Deputy Cummings for approval before they moved.

"Oh, yes. Good, go ahead."

A short rope was secured to his back, and his team used it to steady him. They lifted him clear of the ground by the belay line, then used the shorter rope to slowly swing him clear of the tailings and over the center of the mineshaft. It was critical that

nothing fall down. They waited until he hung steady before they began lowering him at his verbal direction.

They couldn't use a mechanical system to lower and raise him, it wasn't precise enough for their needs. The slightest misstep could mean disaster. Instead, they lowered and raised their man on the descending rope by hand.

He tapped the phone strapped to his side and checked its cord for snags before he gave a final adjustment to the straps around his torso. He had a backpack of basic supplies behind him, and wore a safety helmet with a headlamp lit and ready to go.

"I'm ready. Go easy."

They lowered him slowly, moving with precision. He braced himself for the descent, his headlamp illuminating the mineshaft walls, casting shadows throughout the shaft.

"Stop. There's a large rock I can't avoid. It juts out here. Go real slow, I'm going to try to maneuver around it."

He put his gloved hands against the large, jutting rock, directing himself slowly past it, minimizing contact. He was careful to keep himself away from any loose rock or gravel, worried for the girl below but even so, the worst thing he could do, worse than jeopardizing her condition, would be to add himself to the count to be rescued.

Finally his feet touched bottom.

"Stop, stop, stop."

He found a secure place to settle his booted feet and allowed his weight to settle.

"I'm here," Les said, casting the beam of his headlamp around. "And I am not even close to the bottom. She landed on a ledge here. Maybe two, two and a half feet wide. How far down am I?"

"One hundred thirty-six feet."

"How is she even alive?" came over the line. Not one of his team, they knew better than to comment, but uncalled for, nonetheless.

"Kramer, shut it," followed afterward in the background. Then directly into the phone he was asked, "How's the girl, Les?"

He turned, casting the beam of the headlamp around the level of the mine. There she was, lying on her side, her back toward him, legs and arms splayed at unusual angles. She'd be uncomfortable in that position if it weren't for the endorphins still pumping through her system. He didn't know the answer to the question, but he would relay what he knew and find out the rest.

"Caucasian female, mid to late twenties. Brown hair," he said into the radio. Then he let the radio go silent and said, "Miss, can you hear me? My name's Les. Can you hear me?"

The girl groaned, rolled her head toward the sound of his voice.

"Don't try to move. What's your name, sweetheart?"

She licked her lips, attempting to moisten them, but they were as dry as before.

"Addy," she whispered, the effort painful by the sound of it. "Addison Stewart."

"We're going to get you out of here. Did you fall down here?"

Addy shook her head, the slightest movement, but it was a negative. "I don't know. Where am I?"

"Her name's Addison Stewart," Les said into the phone, "She goes by Addy."

He shimmied closer to Addy, moving carefully to not dislodge any loose ground below them. He knew the above-ground team would be taking the information he had given them and sending it through all the local missing person's reports, looking for anyone named Addy Stewart.

"Addy, I'm going to check out your injuries, okay? Don't move, but I'm going to take a look. Let me know if anything hurts."

He had seen enough of her injuries to know her left arm and right ankle were injured, likely broken. They'd have to be last. He began at her head, checking for wounds. There were bruises already formed, so he moved gently. She didn't appear to have any major lacerations under her hair, and her neck was clean of injuries.

"Okay, Addy, good so far. I'm sorry, I know that must've been uncomfortable, but I have to make sure you're safe to move."

"What if I'm not safe to move?" she whispered, her eyes wide, terrified. "You won't leave me here, will you? Please, don't leave me here."

He moved next to her abdomen, gently prodding, running his fingers up and down. She tensed at the touch but he pulled his hands away clean and dry.

"If you weren't, we probably wouldn't be able to have this conversation," he said, smiling. "I'm going to check your arms and legs now."

"Please don't leave me here."

"Just relax. I won't leave you. I promise."

"Good. Now, just relax, okay? We're almost out of here."

He started again at her feet, gently running his hands over her left ankle and calf, up to her thigh. No bones were protruding, no blood was pooling beneath her. He touched her right leg down to the knee, and left the remainder until after he'd checked her arms. He shifted positions, moving beside her and running his hands down the length of her right arm. She didn't flinch.

"Okay, Addison, I can tell you injured your left arm, but I need to see how bad it is, okay?"

She nodded briefly.

He touched it gently, gentler than he had her other arm.

She howled, reflexively drawing herself inward. She tucked the injured arm against her chest, holding it tight.

"I know. I'm sorry. Now the ankle is the same way. I'll be as gentle as possible."

He was, but she still tensed when he touched her right ankle, gasping in a breath and drawing the leg up toward her body.

"Okay," he said, "I'll leave the ankle alone. It looks like you're in fine shape to be moved." He picked up the phone line, "We're safe to move her. I don't think she fell down here."

"What do you mean she didn't fall? She didn't climb down there. There's no way. You saw the walls."

He secured the phone between his ear and shoulder, taking while he rifled through his supplies.

"I know she didn't climb down here. What I'm telling you is that her injuries aren't from a twelve story fall." He lowered his voice to a whisper, orienting his voice away from the girl, "I think she was lowered in here. Maybe dropped the last fifteen or twenty feet."

He pulled out two first aid casts from the pack, one for her wrist, the other for her lower leg. He slipped them over the injured limbs. "She's stable, but we need to get her out of here. I don't know how much longer she'll remain stable. She's injured, but she's fine to transport right now. Can you lower the litter now? I'm inflating the air casts."

A few minutes later the litter was beside him, and he was carefully moving Addy onto it. She didn't give much resistance: she had passed out from the pain of being moved and rolled. Her breathing was slow and steady, her pulse strong at her throat.

He secured the cross straps, an x-shape across her chest, securing her at the shoulders, and another securing her around the hips. Once she was tied in, they could lift the litter at any angle necessary, and she would not fall. She was in. It was time to leave.

He looked around for a second, taking in the unforgiving yet beautiful interior of the mineshaft. They were marvelous, but treacherous. The depth of this mine was impressive; it went on farther than his light allowed him to see. He glanced to the right on the level below him.

And had to take a second look.

"There's something else down here."

"Come on out, Les. Get the girl out, then you can go back down if you want."

He agreed. There wasn't another option.

He strapped his carabineer where the ropes holding the litter met. He lifted his weight off the ground, let the rope hold the combined weight. His legs swung naturally under the litter, his body beside hers.

"Okay, get us out of here. Thank God she passed out."

The litter started moving upward, and Les exhaled for the first time.

His years of experience didn't take the tension out of such rescues. They moved up slowly, and the rescue wasn't done yet. He still had to guide the litter, keep it from running into the edges of the mine, and keep anything from falling down on her. Or himself.

"Slow," he said as they approached a large rock.

He pushed away from the rock with her feet, guided them away from it.

When they were past it he said, "Okay, go."

They moved, got them to the top of the mineshaft. When they were both clear, his team grabbed the rope at his back, pulled him away from the litter, to his feet. On secure ground, he took a breath. They had pulled the girl clear of the mine and were carrying her to the waiting helicopter.

They'd succeeded in their part of the rescue mission; the rest was out of their hands.

Danny handed him a bottle of water and Les took a long drink.

"I gotta get back down there."

"Hey, take a minute. Breathe."

"I saw something. I could be wrong, but I thought it was another body."

"Alive?"

"Don't think so, no." He set the water bottle down, got to his feet and dusted his pants. "Okay, let's do this."

They swung him back over the mineshaft again, careful to let him steady before they lowered. When he was at the level where he'd found Addison, he looked around below.

There was something down there. If he was just a little closer...

"Guys," he said to the team, "I need you to lower me down a bit further."

"Les, we don't have limitless rope here."

"I know. Just give me a minute here, okay? It's maybe another fifty feet below.

Do we have enough for that?"

After a moment it was confirmed that there was enough.

The team had worked together long enough to trust Les when his instincts pushed them further. Les felt the rope slacken above him.

"Okay, go slow. I'm lowering myself off this ledge."

He did, very careful to avoid the edges. The girl was safe, but he was still several hundred feet down a mineshaft.

"Stop, stop, stop. I'm here."

"What do you see, Les?" Danny asked.

"Give me a minute."

He settled his feet, made sure his footing was solid. Then he turned to his left, and saw her. Another body. Female. Very dead. Dead longer than Addison had been in the mine. Much longer.

He took a quick breath before he spoke to his team.

"Guys, it's definitely another body."

"Alive?" they asked, the sound of readied anticipation in the background.

"No, no. Dead a long time by the look of her. She's been down here for a while."

"I'll call the coroner now," Deputy Cummings said in the background.

"Good. Bring me back up. We'll be waiting a while."

3

The brothers were separated into interrogation rooms at the sheriff's department in Joshua Tree as soon as they arrived. In the back of the patrol car, they'd been silent and unsure. They knew that Brandon's outburst had turned their attention to them, but they were smart enough and had watched enough *Law and Order* to know this wasn't a good time for the blame game conversation. Anything they said could be used against them.

They'd been at the station for at least an hour, and David had been put in the interrogation room almost immediately. He was told to wait, that they'd be with him soon.

He shook his head. How were they going to explain this to their wives? They'd left for the weekend, and were due back shortly. He glanced at his watch. Crap. They

were due back over thirty minutes ago. His wife would likely be calling his cell phone by now. It seemed this was proof that no good deed went unpunished.

"David Jones?" the sheriff asked, carrying a printed report from the computer in his hands.

"Yes. I told your deputy that, and showed him my ID." He straightened upright in the metal chair. "Please, my brother's always had a big mouth, ever since we were kids, but that doesn't mean he had anything to do with this. We don't have anything to do with that girl down there. We've never even seen her before."

The sheriff didn't sit. He stood on the opposite end of the table, staring David down. He'd dropped the report on the table, out of David's clear view, and had his hands on the back of the other chair.

"Now how would you know that? My deputy says you were taken from the scene before she was removed from the mine. How do you even know she is?"

David's gaze snapped up, met the sheriff's eyes dead-on.

"What? That's not what I'm saying. Yes, we were taken from there before she was rescued. But there is no way we had anything to do with a girl ending up in that mine. It was dumb luck we even found her. My brother just stopped his bike there, on a whim, and heard her calling up from the bottom."

"He managed to stop at the one mine in the entire desert that has a living person inside?" the sheriff asked.

David shook his head in frustration. "Yes, but—"

"What are the chances of that?" he continued.

"I don't know what the chances are. I have no idea. I'm a high school history teacher. But I know my brother. He didn't have anything to do with this."

The sheriff shook his head. "Do you have any idea how many families say 'It can't be my son? My brother?' It has to be someone's son, someone's brother. And they're always surprised. Always." He paused, waited for David to respond. He didn't speak, so the sheriff went on. "Maybe he put her there earlier in the weekend. Maybe you and your other brother were sleeping when he took her out there, dumped her body."

"No. Not possible. Brandon would not hurt anyone."

"Even his mistress?"

"His what? That's impossible. He wouldn't cheat on Julie. He's crazy about her. It's a little sick the way he is about Julie," David said, a half smile on his face.

The sheriff pounced on it.

"So you're saying he's unstable?"

"Stop twisting everything I say," David snapped, pounding his fist on the table. He ran his hands through his hair. He stilled, met the sheriff's eyes. "Do I need a lawyer? Do my brothers and I need a lawyer?"

"That's up to you," the sheriff said vaguely. "In my experience, innocent people don't need lawyers. So whether or not you feel that you need a lawyer depends entirely on what you're guilty of."

"Like hell it does. I'd like my phone call now."

#

"Matthew Jones?" Sheriff Winters asked the youngest of the three brothers. He was in a similarly drab interrogation room, but he'd taken a much more relaxed posture than his oldest brother. He had reclined the stiff, metal chair at an impossible angle and had his feet on the opposite chair.

"Yes, sir."

"Made yourself comfortable, I see."

"I'm adaptable."

The sheriff put his hand on the opposite chair. "May I?"

Matthew withdrew his feet and came to an upright position in his chair. The sheriff pulled the chair out and lowered himself onto the seat.

"What brought you and your brothers out to the desert this weekend?"

"We go every Labor Day weekend. It's a tradition. Our dad used to take us when we were younger. Now that our dad's passed, we carry on."

"And why not take your wives? Your sons?"

Matthew laughed. "Our wives do not like camping. That's the one thing they seem to have in common. And as far as sons go, I don't have any, yet, and my brothers' kids aren't quite old enough for dirt bikes. Probably in the next couple years they'll be old enough. For now, it's just us."

Winters grunted.

"When did your brother, Brandon, go off on his own for a few hours?"

"He didn't," Matthew said quickly. "You don't go off alone in the desert. It's asking for trouble, especially in unfamiliar territory. That girl... that's probably how she ended up there."

"You just said you spend every Labor Day weekend there. That's not unfamiliar anymore, now is it?"

"I'd say so, yes. At least not familiar enough to go out alone. Either we all go, or no one goes. That's always been the rules, probably always will be."

The sheriff made notes on the papers in front of him, then glanced back up at Matthew.

"Do you want to know what I think?" the sheriff asked. He didn't wait for a reply. "I think your brother brought her with him, and then disposed of her in the desert."

"That's impossible, sir."

"How so?"

"We drove together. All three of us, in my truck. We had the bikes in the back of the toy hauler. No way that Brandon brought anything other than a duffle bag and his dirt bike."

"Maybe you and your brothers conspired to get rid of her? And your brother developed a guilty conscience and tried to save her."

"With all due respect, that's a load of crap."

#

Brandon tapped his feet anxiously in the interrogation room. He knew, logically, that his outburst of disgust and frustration had been what landed him here and landed his

brothers in the other two interrogation rooms. He knew it, but didn't really feel particularly bad for it. The rescue was taking forever, and that girl's life was ticking away below them.

He just wished now that he was here that the deputy, sheriff, whoever, would come in already. Whatever they wanted from him, he wanted to get it over with.

Maybe if he apologized for the outburst...

The door swung open and the sheriff came in with two bottles of water, setting one in front of Brandon.

"Thought you might be thirsty," the sheriff said.

"Thank you," Brandon said, taking the water, cracking the top and taking a long swig.

"Heard you downright exploded out there," the sheriff began.

"Yes, I guess you could say I did."

"What made you so mad there?"

Brandon shook his head. "That girl was dying down there. It seemed very negligent to wait so long. She could've died. She might've still died."

"Hmm. But why were you so mad?"

"What? I just answered that."

"No. You explained what prompted your anger, but you haven't said why. Why that girl? Who is she to you?"

"Who is she to me?" Brandon repeated. "I don't even know who she is. I can't even guarantee that she is a she. I just found the girl, on accident."

"Yes, you did. You miraculously found her in the middle of nowhere. The Mojave Desert is 25,000 square miles. And in all that area, you managed to find her."

"It was luck. Pure luck."

At the look on the sheriff's face, Brandon said, "What are you implying?"

The sheriff held his hands up in the air, indicating pure innocence. "I'm just trying to find out how a healthy young woman ended up in the middle of the desert, and how you were the one to find her."

"I can tell you exactly how I found her. We were riding our dirt bikes. I stopped, because we would always stop at random mines when we were kids, and I decide to do what we always did. So I picked up a rock about the size of my fist and I dropped it down there to see how deep the mine went. Instead of hearing it hit the bottom, I heard someone groan. I think I found her by hitting her with a rock."

"Are you admitting to assault?"

"What? I'm telling you how I found her."

"Yes," the sheriff agreed, "And what you just told me was that you hit the victim with a rock."

"Not on purpose."

"But you did do it. And that is, by definition, assault."

"You're crazy. That part was an accident. And if I hadn't hit her with the rock, I wouldn't have known she was there. And if I hadn't known, she'd still be down there. Dying."

"Maybe you put her there. Then you got a guilty conscience, went back to rescue her."

"I'm done talking to you. This is ridiculous."

"If you're not talking, I'll be forced to charge you with obstruction of justice."

"Fuck you," Brandon said.

4

Addison was airlifted to the nearest regional level one trauma center at Loma Linda. Despite her stable condition at the rescue, no one was willing to take any risks. They drew her blood, sent her through several scans, and waited for the results.

She remained unconscious through the testing, didn't awake until several hours later when all the diagnostics had been performed.

"Welcome back, young lady." The graying Dr. Lewis said from the foot of the bed. "You're a very lucky girl. Your vitals appear stable for the moment. I'm going to keep you on fluids and repeat your labs every few hours for at least the next forty-eight hours."

"Why? What's wrong?"

Dr. Lewis sighed, moved to the side of the bed and sat down in the chair beside it.

"There are indications of internal bleeding in your lab work. The EMT said they thought you were lowered into the mine rather than dropped, and the CT came back inconclusive for internal bleeding, but I don't want to take any chances. Your abdomen is covered in bruises, more than the rest of you, in fact. If there is bleeding, it appears to be very slow moving, so I'd like to monitor you. There's every indication it will clot on its

own. Besides," he said with a bright smile, "since you're wide awake and talkative now, I don't want to anesthetize you unless it's absolutely necessary."

Addison nodded. "So, when can I go home? I have patients to see Monday morning."

"You mean this morning? In just a few hours?"

Addison blushed. "It's already Monday?"

"Yes. I'm afraid you passed out during the rescue, and you've been pretty out of it until now. You'd come in and out, but you wouldn't stay with us long. Just long enough to confirm you weren't in a coma."

"That bad?"

"I'm afraid so. What do you practice, if you have patients of your own?"

"I'm in the first year of my fellowship in pediatric oncology at Children's Hospital."

His face fell a little at the revelation, but he recovered his poise and nodded.

"Takes a strong person to practice that. Can't be easy, being around sick children every day."

"Some days aren't. Some days, when you get to tell the parents that their child is in remission, those days are really nice." Addison cracked the briefest of smiles and the blue-green returned to her eyes for the first time since she'd landed in the bottom of the mine.

Dr. Lewis sighed. She was a pretty girl, despite the tattoo, and if he were thirty years younger... He cleared his throat. "You can go home as soon as I clear you. I don't

know when that will be. We still need to repeat your labs, see what changes, if anything." He looked down at her chart, then back up and met her eyes. "You may want to call someone. It can get lonely here."

A knock on the door jamb interrupted the doctor.

Dr. Lewis tucked the chart into the sleeve at the foot of the bed and went to the door.

A minute later he returned. "Ms. Stewart, the San Bernardino County sheriff is here to speak with you, if you're feeling up to it."

"Sure, okay, I guess."

The doctor went to the door and ushered in a uniformed sheriff.

"Addison Stewart," he began, and waited until she looked up and met his eyes before he continued. "I'm Sheriff Winters. I'd like to ask you a couple of questions about the last few days."

"Okay."

"You have until the orthopedic team is ready for her," the doctor said, unwilling to give the sheriff free-reign. "They need to set the bones, and then place her permanent casts, so you'll be on hold until they're done. They'll also be coming to repeat her lab work in the next few hours, and you'll be asked to wait outside then, too."

The sheriff nodded, and the doctor left.

"How are you feeling, Ms. Stewart?"

"Addison, please. I feel okay, I guess. They've got me on pain meds right now, so I don't know. I don't hurt, which is nice."

"What on earth were you doing wandering in the desert alone?" he asked, wasting no more time.

His tone was slightly accusatory. Addison bristled.

"I wasn't. The last thing I remember is walking out of the gym, going toward my car. On Friday. Then I was there, in the dark."

"Did you make it home that night?"

"No," she said, but when she thought back on it, she wasn't sure. It seemed so far away. "I don't think so." Her brow furrowed in concentration. "I don't remember driving after the gym. Have you found my car? I'm still making payments on that car."

He ignored the question.

"What happened, exactly, when you left the gym?"

"I was at 24 Hour Fitness. I'd just left. It way maybe eight, eight-thirty? I don't know the address, but it's the only one in Monterey Park."

She paused, waiting for the next question but one didn't come. The sheriff just waited for her to continue, so finally she did.

"I think someone must have grabbed me. I don't remember seeing anyone or saying hello to anyone, so I think they must've come up behind me, but I can't really remember."

"Nothing? There's nothing you remember?"

"My head gets really fuzzy when I try to remember. It's like I can't remember anything between walking from the gym toward my car and the hospital, except waking up at the bottom of that mine, in the dark."

"Are you sure you didn't see the person who took you?"

"No. I don't know. I don't think I can be sure of anything. I can't remember. I was walking to my car." She began moving her good hand, pacing the movements in her memory. "I always park close if I can, because I'm at the gym late and I don't want to walk far in the dark. You always hear it's safer to park close." She laughed a little, at her own poor luck and foolishness. "It was windy that night, I remember that because I had showered at the gym and I was cold because I hadn't stopped to dry my hair. I just wanted to get into the car and turn on the heater."

"You didn't see anything or anyone out of the ordinary?"

Addison took a moment, tried to picture the gym parking lot that Friday night, but all she could recall was a generic mixed memory of the lot, how it looked every night.

"I don't know. I'm sorry. I can't remember."

"Okay," he said. "Let's try this. Have you ever travelled to the desert, visited Joshua Tree National Park, maybe? It's a popular tourist attraction in the area."

"No. I only moved here eight months ago. I heard the National Park was really pretty, and I wanted to come and see the flowers in bloom, but I haven't yet."

"What brought you to Southern California?"

Addison adjusted herself on the hospital bed, using her free arm to sit up straighter on the bed.

"I'm finishing up my fellowship in pediatric oncology and hematology at Children's Hospital. Great program."

Winters grunted.

Addison stiffened. "Yes?"

He didn't comment on the grunt, just continued to take notes as he had on everything she said with no indication of his opinion other than the occasional shift in his bushy eyebrows.

Finally he said, "You're awful young to be a doctor."

Addison smiled. "You're not the first to think so, but I promise I'm old enough *and* I passed all the proper exams."

He was staring at her mouth, and it made Addison feel uncomfortable.

"What?" she finally said.

"I just don't know how you don't scare the kids with your tattoo."

She furrowed her brow, confused. Her only tattoo was on her ankle, and her patients had never seen it. And it wasn't scary; it was an orchid. And how the sheriff had seen it, when she was covered by hospital bedding...

She drew back the covers to inspect her left ankle.

He laughed. "I'm talking about the one on your face."

"My face?" she gasped, throwing the covers back the rest of the way and moving to stand.

"Woah, stop that. Don't you have a broken ankle? What the heck are you doing?"

Dr. Lewis stormed back in at the commotion and stopped Addison physically from leaving the bed.

"What are you trying to do? Get back in that bed. Now, young lady."

Tears welled in her eyes, fueled by frustration. "But, he said," she began.

The doctor turned on the sheriff. "What, exactly, did you say to my patient?"

"I simply pointed out her tattoo. She didn't like it."

"I only have one tattoo. On my ankle. He's saying there's something on my face."

"Well," Dr. Lewis said, wasting no time. "There is."

Her expression fell at that, but Dr. Lewis was stern.

"Stay put. I'll get a nurse to bring us a mirror, but if you even think about getting out of that bed, I'm admitting you for a minimum of a week. You put weight on that ankle, I'm admitting you for three weeks. And don't think I can't. I've worked here forever. I can do it."

The doctor grabbed the phone, paged the nurses' desk.

"Yes, this is Dr. Lewis. I need you to bring a mirror into room 394. Doesn't matter what kind of mirror, I just need it. Immediately. Thank you."

5

They had waited for the coroner for so long that night had come and gone. They'd finally had to make temporary camp where the brothers had been camping.

When it was finally morning, they returned to the mine and the coroner, Dr. Javier Cortez, arrived.

"My apologies for the delay," he said. "I did not get your message immediately when I was performing an autopsy, and when I arrived in the town, I did not realize the body was so far remote. Where is she?"

"Here," Cummings said, leading the way to the mineshaft. "About one hundred eighty feet down."

Dr. Cortez leaned over just enough to look down, careful not to get too close.

"Yes, she is dead. Go ahead, retrieve the body."

The newer members of the team rolled their eyes at the ridiculous technicality. They couldn't retrieve a dead body until the coroner declared the body dead, but they could retrieve a live one. Made no sense.

"You ready, Les?" his team asked.

He adjusted the last clasps on his harness, clipped himself to the line.

"Okay, go ahead."

They lowered him again, and despite his two previous trips into this mine the day before, he was still apprehensive. Something could always go wrong.

"Okay, stop. I'm here."

He secured his footing and crouched down over the girl.

"Lower the litter," he said.

While he waited, he looked at her closely. Her hair color was close to Addison's. Beyond that, he couldn't tell.

He pulled the litter next to her, spending a great deal of effort trying not to disturb her body. She was dead, sure, but she still deserved dignity.

He moved her body gently, carefully, onto the litter, and strapped her in with the same care he treated Addison. When she was secured, he again clipped his carabineer above her.

"Okay," he said, his voice thick, "We're ready to go."

They lifted them both up, and as they did, he could only hope they would find out who she was to give her family peace.

6

Addison slowed her breathing, tried to keep calm. She couldn't help but reach her hand up to her face, feel her skin. It felt normal. Felt right. Didn't feel like something had been done, but then again, tattoos didn't exactly texture the skin.

A knock at the door drew her from her thoughts, broke the tension filling the room. Addison released a deep breath she hadn't realized she was holding, grateful for an escape route.

A nurse was there, holding a small compact mirror. "Dr. Lewis, I found one. I had to borrow it from Barb in Radiology, and she's going to kill me if I don't return it."

"Calm down, Nancy. Ms. Stewart is just going to borrow it."

"Are you sure?" Nancy asked, looking at Addison for the first time. "You were beat up pretty good. Might be better to wait a few days, let the bruising fade for a few days. You're all black and blue."

"I don't doubt it," Addison said. "I feel like a giant bruise. But I need to see myself."

She took the compact from the nurse and waited for a moment, taking a steadying breath. Then she opened the compact.

It wasn't the bruising to her forehead and her cheeks, or the swelling that accompanied them that threatened her sanity. No, it was the tattoo that marked her chin that broke her reserve.

There were dark vertical lines that began just below her bottom lip and ended at the tip of her chin. They marked her face in strong, stark lines, evenly spaced left to right. Eight lines, four on either side. Beside those lines were further horizontal lines, starting where the others began, moving across her cheeks like straight, immobile whiskers.

"Oh God. Oh my God."

"It'll go away," Nancy said, attempting to soothe her. Of course, she was speaking of the bruising. "Give it a week, maybe two at the most, and that bruising and swelling will be gone. You'll be back to normal."

"I won't ever be normal again. Look at me. Look at this."

She gestured to her face, around her chin.

"Calm down," the doctor interrupted. "Nothing you can do now. You need to be calm."

"I need this documented," the sheriff said, reaching for his cell phone.

"No phones in the ICU," the doctor snapped.

The sheriff ignored the doctor, moved to the window and called the deputy. "I need you here with a camera. The perpetrator tattooed this girl's face. I know. Now."

Finally, the nurse understood. "You mean you didn't have that tattoo before?"

Addison shook her head.

"Oh, honey," Nancy could only say.

It was enough.

Addison burst into tears.

A knock on the door interrupted the chaos within.

"Addison Stewart? I'm Dr. Andrews, from the orthopedics department. I'll be taking you to surgery..." he cut himself off when he saw the spectacle of the full room.

"What's going on?"

"Give us a few minutes, if you don't mind?" Dr. Lewis asked.

"Of course. I'll go get a coffee, come back after."

"Now, it could be worse," Dr. Lewis stated. "You're alive, and that's something to be grateful for. And Sheriff Winters will be doing everything he can to find the person that did this to you."

Her breathing had slowed down. She was no longer gasping for breath around the tears.

"Yes. We'll be doing everything we can to find out who did this to you, and bring him or her to justice. Part of that will be finding out what these tattoos mean. I've never seen anything like it."

"They look a little bit Mojave," Nancy said.

The sheriff threw a skeptical look at the petite blond nurse.

"What? My ex-husband's Mojave. His grandmother had some tattoo on her face. Not exactly this, but something similar. You might ask the tribe. They would know if it's theirs, if someone from the tribe might be involved."

At the light in the sheriff's eyes at the possible break, she quickly added, "I'm no expert. We were married less than a year. Wasn't right for either of us. And I'm not saying it is. I'm just saying it's similar."

Dr. Lewis gently pulled the compact mirror from Addison's hands, snapped it closed. "Thank Barb for me, will you?" he said, handing it back to Nancy. "Now, Dr. Andrews will be back in a minute, and I think it's time you had those bones set."

"I think I have most everything I need," Sheriff Winters said. "My deputy will be here in the next few hours with a camera, to photograph you. I have your contact information. I'll be in touch if there's anything else we need."

Addison shook his hand and turned back to the doctor.

"One more thing," Sheriff Winters said, drawing her attention back. "Do you have any idea where your purse is? Your keys? I have your phone number, but where is your phone?"

"I, I don't know. I had it when I was leaving the gym, but I don't have it now. Did they find it at the bottom of the mine?"

"No. No personal belongings were found with you. GPS chip in your cell phone wouldn't work that far underground anyway so it wouldn't have been any help once a missing person's report had been filed. You were lucky. Those boys found you before you were even reported missing. Your wallet would've had a photo ID, which would've made identifying your body easy, once you were finally found. I don't think the perp wanted you ever found or identified easily if you were."

The statement did nothing to increase her sense of security. The blood pressure monitor chirped in reaction.

Sheriff Winters plunged ahead, "How should we contact you, if your cell phone is missing?"

Addison didn't have an answer ready. After a moment she said, "I guess I can get a new phone when I leave the hospital."

"The nurse at the desk can give you her room extension," Dr. Lewis said. "She'll be here at least a couple days."

Addison sighed. She was resigned, but didn't have to like it.

Sheriff Winters cleared his throat. "Well, young lady, I'll be keeping in touch. If you think of anything else that might help the investigation, please feel free to call. We'll contact you if anything develops."

He handed her his business card then shook her unbroken hand gently once more before he left the room.

A minute later Dr. Andrews came back, an empty cup of coffee in his hand. He tossed it into the garbage can by the door.

"Well, it seems I had good timing. Are you ready?"

"I guess so, yes."

"I'll help you into the wheelchair, then we'll be headed to the surgery," he said, pushing the wheelchair over to the side of the bed. He locked the wheels so it stayed still, then turned toward her.

Addison threw her legs over the edge of the bed, her feet dangling. She shifted her weight forward slowly, putting her weight on the unbroken leg. Dr. Andrews helped her by the underarms, lifting and turning her into the wheelchair. She adjusted the soft casted wrist into her lap, cradling it close to her torso.

"How's your pain level?" Dr. Andrews asked, pushing the foot rests down and helping her position her feet. He unlocked the wheels on the chair and began to push the chair into the hallway.

"Not bad," she said. "Could always be worse. Any chance of a walking cast? I can't take two months off work."

7

He walked the short distance from his hotel to the nearest diner. It was en route to his office, and also had the best Eggs Benedict in the city. His step was light; success was again on the horizon.

He stepped into the diner, angling toward his favorite table in the front right corner window. He could see his office from the south facing seat. Location was key, it always was. Here he could quickly eat a breakfast before heading to his seven o'clock meeting. The long weekend had delayed the meeting to Tuesday, which he found irritating but irrelevant. The outcome would be the same.

His table, his table—there was a family of four, with children, at his table. And it was a mess.

He stood at the end of his table and stared. Waited. Waited for them to move.

They had to move.

"Hello," one of the children said, color as much on his table as on the paper.

"Can we help you?" the father said, his tone stern.

Candace, his usual waitress, tapped his shoulder and drew his attention away from the family with a bright smile.

"Hi, sugar. Didn't know you were back in town. Let's get you a table. Come on."

He followed her through the diner to an isolated table with no view at all.

"I'm sorry you didn't get your usual table, hon. Next time you're back in town, give me a call. I'll take care of you with the table, and maybe more than that, too." She scribbled her name and phone number on a sugar packet.

She reached forward and tucked it into his breast pocket, her eyes meeting his the entire time.

He put a smile on his face, forced himself to meet hers. "You're sweet to take care of me, Candace. Thank you."

She lit up—women loved when you remembered their names. He didn't really care who she was, but he knew it was important that she feel he cared.

"My pleasure. You having your usual?"

He nodded.

She walked away, and he returned to his own thoughts, the waitress forgotten.

The business deal that had taken over the past three months of his life was all but closed. He had done everything required of him to ensure its success. Now all he had to

do was wait. His skin, his muscle, his whole being practically vibrated with the sense of achievement.

The process had once again been perfected, and the latest tribute was everything the gods desired of him. And more. She would be theirs, and her death would be slow over the coming days. She would live down there, her life slowly expiring, as their covenant dictated. It had taken years to refine the process of depositing the tributes into the earth, but finally they had created the ideal process.

Now, the gods would be pleased, and his life would finally be everything he dreamed of. The papers had been submitted for approval Friday afternoon, just before he took her, and he knew, *knew*, that his tribute would ensure that they were quickly approved.

Candace came back to the table, carrying his coffee and a carafe of creamer. She set them both before him, then nudged the display of sweeteners his way.

"I stocked extra Raw Sugars, just for you," she beamed.

He smiled appropriately, voiced his thanks, and she left to check on his food. He returned to his thoughts.

It had been a long series of trials and errors. The first tributes did not survive the drop into the mines. The later tributes were lowered by rope tied around the waist, but they were heavy and the process exhausting. One treacherous night the loose sand at the top coupled with the weight of the tribute almost toppled both of them down into the mine together. The gods had decided otherwise, steadied his feet, stopped the fall before

it began, but the rope slipped through slack fingers and the woman hit the bottom of the shaft with an audible thud.

The television in the corner of the cafe transitioned from commercial to the daily news report. A pretty blond woman sat at the desk, reading from the teleprompter, her expression grim.

"A young woman was found at the bottom of an abandoned mine in the remote desert east of Twentynine Palms, California Sunday afternoon. A group of weekend vacationers were riding through the desert and happened upon the abandoned mine."

His hands froze mid-movement, paralyzed.

The reporter continued, "The vacationers reportedly stopped to examine the mine, when they heard the young woman groaning in pain. Rescue workers were able to safely retrieve her from the mine, and she is currently being treated at an undisclosed local hospital. Her identity is being withheld, and the extent of her injuries is still unknown, but the sheriff's department was able to confirm that she is in stable condition at this time."

The fork dropped to the cafe table, clattering off the edge to the floor.

Candace stepped forward, produced a clean fork and picked up the other from the floor. Her expression was a mix of confusion and concern. Perhaps a little fear, he couldn't tell.

Slow, deep breaths. Remember, breathe slowly.

"Thank you."

He forced his lips into a smile and met her eyes, forced himself to relax his expression.

After a moment the waitress smiled back at him, tension leaving her face. "You're welcome. Let me know if there's anything else you need."

The gods are challenging me, nothing more. This, too, I can surpass.

8

The sheriff's office was bustling with activity, searching for a connection between the young doctor and her abductor. They had ruled out the three brothers as suspects with a moderate amount of certainty. No part of their lives overlapped with the doctor's, so they let them go home.

The deputies were running parallel searches through Addison Stewart's personal and professional life, looking for anyone who might have had a less than positive interaction with her. It had been less than forty-eight hours since they had rescued her, and the investigation was progressing quickly, but not in the way they had hoped. They had found more victims, but had not found any leads that pointed to a perpetrator. No one in Dr. Stewart's life had an obvious reason to harm her.

"Well," Jason Roberts said, not even looking up from his computer screen, "there's not much about her online. She doesn't seem to be very active on social media sites."

Winters cleared his throat and Roberts looked up, swiveling his chair toward the supervisor. Winters nodded for him to continue.

"I've spoken with the program director at Children's Hospital Los Angeles, and she only has positive things to say about her. She's at work early every morning, works

overtime when needed, doesn't complain. Her notes are always in on time. Even the families who've worked with her have positive things to say about her, and their kids are dying. Listen to this." He turned back to the monitor and quoted, "Dr. Stewart made what was the hardest day of our lives easier with her compassion, understanding and patience." They're all like that. She's only been working there a year, but it seems she doesn't have disgruntled patients."

"She doesn't have disgruntled patients who voiced their complaints online," Sheriff Winters corrected. He moved to the whiteboard and picked up a dry erase pen. "That doesn't make them non-existent. She tells parents their kids are dying every day. Not everyone takes that well. We'll need her patient files."

He wrote "patient records" on the board.

Roberts nodded, taking the mild criticism from his superior in stride. "I'll head over to the hospital, interview the nurses and staff, see if anyone can recall a client who was less than thrilled with Dr. Stewart's work."

"What about her family and friends?" Kurt Davis asked, glancing up from his desk to meet his superior's eyes.

Winters turned to write "family" and "friends" on the board before he spoke. "Only child. Her mother died years ago. Father's still alive and well, by all accounts, just outside San Francisco. She hasn't been back there, at least by plane, in four years." He added "estranged" to family on the board.

"What about her dating life?" Roberts asked. "Have you found anything there? Boyfriend?" He paused. "Girlfriend?"

Winters humphed but didn't say anything, just wrote "boyfriend" on the board.

"If I didn't know any better based on my own daughters," Davis said, "I'd say she doesn't date, doesn't go out at all. She had a boyfriend in college, but doesn't sound like it was very serious. She's in her early thirties, she's not married, and she doesn't have kids. Her only personal obligation is a dog. She has to have a social life, she just isn't admitting to it."

"Someone keeping secrets that way makes me wonder what else they don't tell," Winters said.

"Maybe she's married to her work? Maybe she's committed to her career?" Roberts suggested.

"Women aren't married to their work," Winters said, snapping the cap onto the pen. "They're married to the first man who comes along and distracts them from their work. Time keeps moving along, but human nature doesn't change."

Sherri Donaldson stepped back into the room in time to hear Sheriff Winter's comment. She rolled her eyes. It wasn't the first time she'd heard his opinions on women in the workforce, but he was aware enough of sexual harassment law not to make the comments about her. At least within her hearing. She cleared her throat and moved further into the room.

"I found her personal belongings," Donaldson said, carrying an evidence bag containing Addison's things. "If you'll believe it, someone "found" her purse and keys outside of the gym that night and was nice enough to return them."

"How did you come up with that? Did the gym call with the information?"

Donaldson sighed. "No. We'd already searched the parking lot of the gym and found nothing. Her car was clean, only fingerprints were hers. So I asked the front desk at the gym. Sure enough, some guy came into the gym and handed in her purse, keys, and cell phone to the front desk receptionist."

"Regular at the gym?" Davis asked.

"She get a good look at him?" Roberts said at the same time.

Donaldson scoffed. "She didn't recognize him, and he didn't sign in to work out. She told me that they have "far too many" members for her to remember anyone in particular. She remembered that he had a ball cap and hoodie on, but late at night at a gym that's apparently not uncommon."

"They have a surveillance system there?" Winters asked.

"No."

"Damn hippies," he said. "Take her things down to the lab, maybe they'll be able to pull a fingerprint off some of it."

Donaldson picked up the bag and headed down the elevator to the lab.

#

"Sherri, hey," Erin Rawlins greeted from behind a microscope, glancing up only long enough to identify her.

"Hey, Erin. I've got some new evidence for you in the Stewart case. Found her personal things at the lost and found at the gym."

Erin laughed. "Fingerprints? DNA?"

"Whatever you can find. Inside, outside, whatever."

"I'm on it. I'll call you as soon as the results are in. We have anything to compare this to?"

"Victim's prints should already be here. We lifted them off her car. Otherwise, we don't have any suspects."

"I'll run everything I find through CODIS. Maybe we'll get lucky."

"Anything's possible."

9

The medical examiner, Dr. Javier Cortez, set his recorder on and moved to begin his evaluation of the body. He had heard the story of how this body had been found by pure luck. Everyone in the county had heard. It was a startling twist on an old story. It was not uncommon to be searching or rescuing one victim and stumble upon another. It was unusual to stumble upon a second body that bore a striking resemblance to the first, and was obviously there long before the first victim.

The sensational story added an element of pressure to what was otherwise quite ordinary—a dead body found in the desert. He had not been afforded any additional insight into either of the victims, nothing to corrupt his findings.

He broke the seals on the body bag and unzipped it. The only smell that escaped the bag was that of desert dust.

He grabbed his camera and began photographing the body, taking careful note of her jewelry, clothing, and distinguishing features. He took various pictures, then checked the quality of the images before he continued.

Her hands had been bagged as a precaution to preserve evidence in the event her death was ruled a homicide. He ignored her hands for the moment, collecting samples from the rest of her body.

It was then that he noticed the discoloration of her lower face, just below her cheeks and her chin.

"What the hell?" he muttered. He put down the tools he had in hand and reached for his UV light. He flipped the stark overhead lamps over, allowed the room to darken.

An intricate pattern emerged on her face, a mix of horizontal and vertical lines.

He reached for the camera again and fumbled for the camera bag on the table. He needed the UV filter to document this. In all his years, he'd never seen anything quite like it. It wasn't a tattoo; that would be visible on the surface of the skin.

He shook his head at the mystery but moved on. It wasn't his to solve.

He documented the rest of her injuries in order.

"Compound fracture to the right femur. Circular bruising pattern to abdomen. Indentation appears deep, possibly caused by some sort of rope."

Once his observations were recorded, he turned to the autopsy technician, Frank Jenkins. "Frank, I'm ready for you."

Frank stepped up and took over the doctor's position, preparing the body for autopsy. He had been working with Dr. Cortez for just over a year, and in that time had become a model technician. The bodies were treated with the utmost respect in Frank's care, and Dr. Cortez had learned to trust him and now used this time to input his notes.

Dr. Cortez returned to the autopsy suite, his notes up to date. Frank had prepared the body and was adjusting her on the autopsy table to place the body block between the shoulders.

"Thank you, Frank. You all ready for me?"

"Tools are laid out on the counter there. Gloves are beside the scrub sink, and your mask beside them."

Dr. Cortez smiled. He'd trained Frank well. "Scrub in, Frank. You're going to assist on this one."

"Are you sure?" Frank's eyes lit up at the prospect.

"I'm sure. Pull out another set of gloves, and get the spare mask from the closet."

He moved quickly, gathering the materials while Dr. Cortez scrubbed in the sink. He dried his hands on the sterile towel and then pulled on the first, then second pair of gloves before positioning his face shield on his head.

Frank was already in the sink behind him, scrubbing meticulously.

Within minutes Frank was standing opposite Dr. Cortez over the decedent's body.

"Are you ready, Frank?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Okay," Dr. Cortez began, "Scalpel, please."

Frank handed the sharp instrument to the doctor handle first, and he took it, carefully. It was a powerful blade, and if they were not careful he could injure his assistant or himself.

Dr. Cortez made a deep y-shaped incision in the decedent's chest, then adjusted his hold on the scalpel to allow him to peel away the skin, muscle, and various soft tissue that attached to the ribcage. As he moved, he pulled the skin flap over her face to expose the next layer of tissues.

He removed her ribcage, lifting it away carefully to expose her internal organs. He cut carefully, precisely, moving quickly, forgetting to explain to Frank.

He cleared his throat. "I'm making cuts at these locations, to disconnect the internal organs. We'll remove the organ set, all the organs, and examine them closely."

He continued to make the cuts then set the scalpel aside. He lifted the organs free and set them on the table.

Dr. Cortez glanced up, looked at Frank for the first time. The man was green.

"Frank? Frank? Are you all right?"

He didn't answer.

"Frank!"

Frank's eyes snapped away from the chest cavity, to Dr. Cortez.

"Are you all right, Frank?"

"I didn't know there was that much space. I didn't know."

Frank was breathing in quick, shallow spurts.

"Go. We'll try again another day. Get yourself something to eat and drink. I'll finish here."

He didn't waste time. He moved, fast, out of the room.

Dr. Cortez shook his head, lowered the mask, and continued his work.

Sheriff Winters took his role in the justice system very seriously, and very literally. He worked in the Twentynine Palms branch of the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department in the great state of California, and had for twenty-seven years. The county was the largest by square miles in the state, and his region had some of the most remote and unpopulated, at least officially. There were plenty of people off the grid who lived in the more remote areas.

He'd worked his way up the ranks over his career, rising to the role of sheriff in the desert region.

The first victim they found, but the most recent in the kill order, Dr. Addison Stewart, had been abducted within the county's jurisdiction, in Redlands. Barely within the county. But the city had its own police department. That meant it was not as simple as the sheriff's deputies leading the investigation; they would work in conjunction with the Redlands Police Department. The department had coordinated well with the county, allowing them to find Dr. Stewart's personal effects and dust for prints. None were found except hers, but it had given them some insight into the kidnapper's skill. Finding the second victim only enforced their already developing profile.

Sheriff Winters shook his head. The more victims that appeared, the more likely the case would reach a scale that exceeded his team's manpower. Already they had search and rescue working during light hours exploring the mines around the one where Dr. Stewart had been found.

Nothing yet, but they had only just started. Much of the desert was unexplored, and it was all uncharted.

He sighed, and climbed from his jeep.

Dr. Cortez had called from the medical examiner's office, said he had something very interesting to show him from the second victim.

He had asked to be told over the phone, but Dr. Cortez was uncharacteristically insistent that the sheriff come in person. And soon.

Sheriff Winters adjusted his pants as he walked to the building, then straight through to the coroner's office.

Dr. Cortez was at his desk, engrossed by whatever he was reading.

"Sheriff Winters, thank you for coming. I hope you understand why I needed you to come when you see what I found. I cannot explain it. I still..." he trailed off. "Please, follow me."

He moved to the autopsy suite and pulled open a numbered drawer. The body was covered with a sheet, but Sheriff Winters knew this wouldn't last.

He had never adjusted to this, the viewing of the decedent after autopsy. When bodies were found, whatever the condition, he did not have a problem. That was his job. This, this was not his, and he wished to keep it so.

He swallowed, tried not to breathe too deeply, at least through his nose. The smell of formaldehyde was strong.

Dr. Cortez walked away, left Sheriff Winters beside the body, and hit the light switch, throwing the suite into darkness.

"Dr. Cortez?" Sheriff Winters began.

"Please, you will see," the doctor said.

He pulled back the sheet, exposing the victim's face. He withdrew a black light from his lab coat pocket and clicked it live.

The doctor moved the light down over her face, slowly. At first, nothing. And then, the sheriff saw it.

He gasped.

There was a tattoo on her chin, seemingly identical to the one on Dr. Stewart.

The killer/kidnapper was the same. He ritually marked his victims. Branded them.

"I cannot explain it," Dr. Cortez said, though the sheriff hardly heard him. "I was looking online, trying to find some reference to this."

"The other victim," the sheriff finally said, "She was marked the same way, with the same tattoo."

"Oh, it's not a tattoo," the doctor corrected. "At least, not technically." He walked away, restored the light. "The skin was dyed, true, but it was done with an ink that is not permanent, but applied in a manner that left a deep tissue tattoo. That is what the black light showed."

"How would he do that?"

"I have no idea."

The sheriff stopped. He did not have a clue how that would be done, either. A "tattoo" that was visible on the live victim, looked as if it were real, but then on the deceased victim was invisible.

"Incidentally," the coroner said, interrupting the sheriff's thoughts, "I do have ID back on our victim. Came in just before you arrived."

The sheriff bit back an impatient remark.

"Oh?" he said instead.

"Yes. Her name is Jenna Martin. Twenty-five. She was a graduate student at Arizona State."

"In Phoenix? She's from Phoenix?"

"She's from Iowa," the doctor corrected, "But she was last seen in Phoenix, where she attends, attended, the University. Her car, keys, wallet, and cell phone were found a few weeks after she was reported missing."

Sheriff Winters nodded. "You got a copy of that?"

"Of course. I also have the name of the police officer I spoke with in Phoenix. When her ID came in, he got an alert. I guess he'd been watching the case."

"Thank you. Now tell me, doctor, is there a way to photograph these markings? Bruises?" the sheriff asked.

"I have those for you, at my desk. I can send them with you, or email them."

The sheriff could not mask his frustration.

"Why in the hell am I here, if you could have emailed me the pictures?"

Dr. Cortez was visibly taken aback. "I, I found this discovery fascinating, and thought you would prefer to see her in person, once you knew. In all my years, I have never seen anything like it." He cleared his throat. "My apologies, sheriff."

The sheriff didn't respond. He cleared his throat. "If there's nothing else to see, I'll take those photographs and the missing person's report and be on my way."

#

Back at the station, Sheriff Winters thumbed through the missing person's report while he dialed the police officer's direct line. Samuel Druthers.

"Officer Druthers," he answered.

"This is Sheriff Winters, of the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department."

"Ah, your medical examiner said you'd be calling. Fine man, Dr. Cortez. Very knowledgeable."

"Uh, yes," Sheriff Winters agreed. "I understand you were the lead investigator into Ms. Martin's disappearance?"

"Yes. That one was hard to forget. Her roommate reported her missing right away, the next morning when it was obvious she had not come home. Her car was still in the grocery store parking lot where she was last seen. The car was untouched. We dusted for prints; nothing. Only the victim. We checked her phone records, her email. Nothing unusual."

"Humph," Sheriff Winters said.

"Yes?" Officer Druthers asked.

"Hard to believe a twenty-five year old didn't have any unusual activity. They all seem to be out, doing God knows what."

"Believe me, sir, our technical analysts looked. We talked to her teachers, to her peers. She was well-liked. She was very studious, rather quiet. Even her family in Iowa didn't know of anyone who wished her harm. She was not a high risk type."

"With her family so far away, how would they know?"

"Phone records showed she spoke with her parents, her siblings, every day. At least an hour a day, talking to her family in Iowa. They seemed well informed of her daily life. They knew when she had dates, who with, where they were going. A very cautious young girl."

"Did you look into the men she dated?"

"We did. Spoke with both of them. They had solid alibis for the night she went missing. One was at work, under a security camera, the other was out of state, visiting a dying grandmother. All our leads lead to dead ends."

"Dr. Cortez said her belongings were found a few weeks later?"

"Yes. A clerk at the grocery store where her car was found eventually called to report her belongings. She didn't know who had turned them in; they had been logged in their lost and found book for the evening that Jenna went missing. The store didn't have security cameras then, but they do now."

"You look into the possibility she ran away, got tired of her life?"

"We ruled that out pretty early on. She didn't take her vehicle or any personal belongings. Her money was securely tied up between a bank and student loans. Friends report she never used cash, always her ATM card. She didn't have the resources to run away."

"So you thought she was kidnapped?"

"Wouldn't your investigation's findings reinforce that?" Officer Druthers retorted.

Sheriff Winters grunted.

"I've kept in touch with the local sheriff in Iowa. He's a friend of the family.

Sheriff, if you're agreeable, I'd like to call him myself, let him know that we've found Jenna, so he can tell her family."

Sheriff Winters agreed. "That would be best. Thank you for your time, Officer. I'll have my office fax you the final report, so you can close your case."

"Thank you, but if you can ask them to email it?"

"I'm sure someone here knows how."

Sheriff Winters replaced the phone in its cradle. The conversation had given him a headache. He had no more leads than he had started with, just what looked like the start of a pattern.

With all his experience, the biggest and hardest lesson he had learned was when to call in reinforcements in the form of the feds, and in doing so admit the case was beyond his limitations.

He gritted his teeth and opened the side drawer of his desk, reaching for the bottle of Aspirin he kept in the very back. He swallowed two pills dry.

He picked up the phone and cleared his throat before dialing the local FBI field office. He had committed the number to memory back when he became sheriff. He did not like needing information he didn't have immediately available, and he did not believe in cell phones. Had one, hated it. Needed it for the job, never turned it off, still hated it.

"This is Sheriff Winters of the San Bernardino County Sheriff's office, in Twentynine Palms. I have a case that, uh, we think might be better suited to your resources."

"Hold, please," the secretary said, not waiting for an affirmative.

11

Blake Richardson parked his car at the end of the growing lot of cars in the open area at the end of the dirt road. He'd driven to Twentynine Palms from Los Angeles on the expectation that he was needed at the scene of the crime. The directions had been forwarded to his GPS, but once he'd reached the city things went wonky. He'd had to call the main office for confirmation of the squiggled line on the GPS map, then headed south on a non-existent dirt road. He clicked the alarm on the car out of habit, though he didn't figure much would happen to the SUV in the middle of nowhere.

He walked toward the assembled group of men, digging in his breast pocket for his badge.

"Special Agent Richards?" the white haired sheriff asked before he could present his identification and introduce himself.

"Yes. Please, call me Blake."

The sheriff nodded, shook his hand. "Sheriff Winters. These are my deputies, Deputy Roberts and Davis."

The men exchanged pleasantries and shook hands while Winters continued.

"We waited to call you in till we found the third body. Didn't want to waste FBI time and resources until we were sure."

Richards gave Winters his full attention.

"Sure?" he asked. What did a third body confirm?

"Wanted to confirm they all were linked before we called you in. All three women went missing from locations outside of the local area. None of the women had any ties to this area."

"Your first victim was found alive?"

"Yes. The other women were missing much longer. Couple boys found her out in the desert east of Twentynine Palms."

"Did their parents authorize witness statements? I'd like to speak to them."

The sheriff stopped midstride, turned toward Blake. He raised his eyebrows.

"Parents?"

Blake shielded his eyes from the sun. "You said boys?"

"Hell, I'd call you a boy. They were in their twenties and thirties. I can get you their statements and contact information, if you need it."

"What made you think the crimes were connected?"

"At first we didn't. The first girl we found was taken from a gym in Redlands. Then we ID'd the second girl in the same mine. She was missing from Phoenix since April 2012. We thought she was a runaway, maybe, until we saw her photograph. She's remarkable similar in appearance to the first girl. She had the same hair color, eye color, overall appearance."

"And you waited until you had a third victim?"

The deputies looked ready to speak but Winters spoke up again.

He nodded. "Didn't want to waste your time if there were only the two girls.

Coincidences can happen, you know."

"Yes, I've heard that before," Blake said, following the sheriff to an assembled group of quads. "When did you find the third victim?"

"Sent out a search and rescue team into the surrounding area, with cameras lowered into the abandoned mines. They were searching less than twenty-four hours when they found another body at the bottom of a mine."

"Then you called us?" Blake asked.

"No. Wanted to have positive ID on the body, make sure she fit the type before we called you in. We sent her down to the medical examiner, and he ID'd her as a missing person from Sacramento in 2009."

Blake cleared his throat. "Uh, then can you explain why I'm standing in the desert right now if the body's at the medical examiner?"

Winters glanced down at Blake's dress slacks and loafers. "We just found another body."

"Fourth?"

"Seventh. Four, five, and six we found this morning," Roberts said, breaking into the conversation for the first time.

"I'm sorry, did you say seventh?"

Davis nodded. "It's disgusting. Now that we've got search teams out in full-force, we can't go more than a few hours without finding another body."

"All female victims?"

"Yes, so far," he said. "And they all seem to have the same color hair."

Les Kenton approached the group of men, geared up for the descent into the mine, and held his hand out to Special Agent Richards. Deputy Roberts handled the introductions.

"Blake, this is Les Kenton. He's the rescuer who found the first victim."

"Nice to meet you. You're leading the search?"

"Leading?" Les asked with a laugh. "Hardly. No, I'm just here to descend into mines and help recover the bodies. It's a lot more depressing, recovering dead bodies, than it was saving the first girl."

Blake nodded.

"You were the first one to speak with the victim?"

"Yes. She wasn't really talkative Saturday afternoon, but she was able to answer a few basic questions. She was more talkative when I visited her in the hospital."

He stopped walking forward.

"How was she, emotionally, when you spoke with her?"

"Scared. Disoriented."

"Can you show me where you found her?"

"Sure. You know how to drive a quad?"

The men rode off into the desert to the mine.

#

"How far down?" Blake asked, leaning forward to gaze into the mine. Les knew from experience that he couldn't see much.

"Over one hundred and twenty feet."

"No way did she fall," he said, assessing the mine shaft once more. "She'd be dead, or far worse off than they're telling me."

"We thought so too," Les agreed. "She doesn't seem to remember much."

"I need to get down there. Can you take me down?"

"It's not a secured mine," Les said.

It also wasn't a good idea for anyone untrained to enter the mines, FBI or not.

"I really need to see it," Blake insisted.

Les looked at Blake's dress slacks.

"They'll dry clean," Blake said. "I need to get down there, see it myself. The other mines, where the victims were found dead, I'm okay with pictures. This one, this is different. I need to see it."

"Okay, if you're sure."

Blake nodded.

Les wasted no time. He waived over his team and they had both men harnessed into gear within minutes. Les relayed the basic instructions and began his own descent into the mine.

Once he reached the bottom he said into the phone, "Okay, I'm here. Lower Special Agent Richards into the mine. Slowly."

#

Blake was lowered into the mouth of the mine and the darkness closed around him despite the illumination from his headlamp. He couldn't imagine what it was like alone in the dark without benefit of the light.

He called out instructions as he had been told: slower, steady, wait. Finally his feet touched the bottom and he looked at Les for confirmation.

"She was over there," Les began, pointing to where Addy had laid. "She didn't say much, and she was very disoriented. She was more talkative when I visited her."

"When did you visit her?" Blake asked.

"Monday evening. My wife and I went over, brought her some homemade chili. It's my wife's specialty."

Blake listened with half an ear. He was more focused on the change in the victim's behavior, not the chili. He crouched down on the ground, began scanning the ground with the light from his headlamp.

"Was Ms. Stewart bleeding at all when you found her?"

"Yes. She had several lacerations, none of which were critical."

The beam of light from the headlamp was too broad. He pulled a pen light from his breast pocket and passed it over the ground.

"What are you looking for?" Les asked.

"Blood," Blake said. "I want a blood sample from when she was down here, not one that metabolized through her system."

Les joined him near the ground, scanning back and forth slowly.

"What exactly would be in her blood?"

"You said she was disoriented and incoherent when you found her. Two days later she's chatty. I'd like to submit a blood sample from the hours when she was in here, disoriented, and see what toxicology can find."

"She was kidnapped, lowered into an abandoned mine in the middle of the desert. Isn't it possible she was incoherent from the trauma she went through?"

Blake shrugged. "I haven't met the girl. For all I know, it's a personality quirk. And it is possible it's a reaction to stress and trauma. But I'd like to rule out an outside cause, too."

He moved the pen light over a group of rocks, pulled a lab kit from his backpack, and scooped the handful of rocks into a bag.

"I'd like a lab technician to be lowered in here, to gather anything else that might be of value to the investigation."

"Sure," Les agreed. "I'm happy to help however I can."

"We'll need your DNA, to rule out any samples that are yours."

"No problem."

Blake rose to his feet, brushed his pants half-heartedly, and said into the phone, "Okay, I've seen what I need here."

The rope became taut immediately and Blake began moving slowly upward. Again he repeated the commands with a touch more confidence.

When he reached the top, he took the hands offered to pull him over the ledge.

"I want my forensics team to collect evidence from the bottom of the mines, this one first. The evidence is the freshest it'll ever be here."

12

Three days after being admitted into the hospital, Addy was reclined in a hospital bed, covered in bruises that had finished filling in their color, bandaged in various places, and sporting two casts, one on her left arm and the other on her right ankle.

"Well, young lady, it seems you're very lucky," Dr. Lewis said, smiling down at Addy with something akin to affection. He was holding her chart, examining the most recent lab results. "It doesn't look like you'll need surgery at all. Your levels have stabilized back into the normal range. It looks like those bruises are holding steady, and that you'll make a full recovery in time. You'll be in the casts for at least six weeks, and you'll need to take it easy, nothing overly strenuous for the next two weeks, but we'll be able to let you go home tomorrow morning."

Addy nodded, tears filling her eyes. She reached her free hand out to the doctor and squeezed his hand.

"Rest now," he said, patting the back of her hand. "I'll be back to check on you in a few hours. Are you sure there's not someone we can call for you?"

Addy shook her head. "No, no one, thank you. I've called my boss and she knows what's going on."

"That's not exactly what I meant," he said, but he didn't push her.

Dr. Lewis left, but was stopped at the door by a stranger just outside of her view.

"Doctor, how's the patient?"

"You are?"

"I'm Special Agent Blake Richards of the FBI. How's the patient?"

"She's doing remarkably well. Won't let us call anyone though. She'll need to be on bed rest for at least a week, maybe two. What can I do for you, Special Agent?"

"Can I speak with her?"

The doctor glanced back at Addy, saw that she was watching him. "That's up to her. Are you ready to talk to the FBI?"

Addy nodded, tried to sit up straight in the bed and couldn't move. She succeeded only in slinking lower onto the mattress. The doctor smiled, stepped forward, and grabbed the control for the bed. He adjusted her into an upright position and grabbed a spare pillow, positioning it under her casted wrist.

Special Agent Blake Richards stepped into view, tall and broad-shouldered in a navy suit.

"Ma'am, my name is--"

"I heard from the doorway. Why is the FBI investigating my kidnapping? I thought the local sheriff was handling it."

He glanced at the doctor, his question unspoken but clear.

"She has a television, Special Agent," the doctor said, shrugging, "She knows it's become a somewhat sensational story already."

He nodded, met Addy's gaze and spoke. "I'd prefer if you answer my questions before I explain further, Ms. Stewart."

"Please, call me Addy. What can I answer for the FBI that I didn't already answer for the sheriff's department?"

"I'll probably repeat a few questions," he said, pulling over the chair and sitting beside her bed. "But please bear with me. I'll try to be as quick as possible."

"If you get too tired, tell him," the doctor said. "And if he doesn't listen, page the nurse's desk. I'll warn them to interfere if he gets pushy." He looked at Special Agent Richards. "If she doesn't tell you she's tired, and she obviously is, stop her yourself. If one of my nurses catches you pushing my patient beyond her limits, I'll contact your supervisors and make your life miserable."

With that, the doctor left them alone to talk.

"What were you doing the night you were abducted?" Special Agent Richards asked, poised to take notes.

"I left work around five, went straight to the gym, which is maybe fifteen minutes away. I was there for an hour, maybe hour and a half. I showered and went to go to my car. I don't remember after that. I don't remember if I got to my car. I don't remember if someone came up to me. I don't remember hearing anything unusual or scary. I don't remember. It's the strangest thing."

"Have you noticed anyone out of the ordinary around you in the days or weeks before? At work? At the gym? Maybe in your neighborhood?"

Addy shook her head. "I haven't noticed anyone, no. I work in a secure building. You can't come or go without a key card access. The gym is members only, and I haven't seen anyone new. I'm hardly home, but I haven't seen anyone unusual outside."

"Any unusual correspondence? Phone calls? Letters? Emails?"

Addy shook her head again.

"Why wouldn't you let the doctor call any family for you?"

Addy sighed. "My mom died when I was thirteen. My dad didn't take it well. We don't really talk."

"No siblings? No friends he could've called for you?"

"Why does that matter?"

Special Agent Richards let out a long breath. "You were chosen, specifically, for a reason. Every aspect of your life is potentially a factor on that decision, and could possibly help us figure out who took you. Everything. Hair color, eye color. Dating history. High school. Right now, we have to figure out how he picked you."

"He? You know it was a man?"

"We don't know anything, for sure."

Addy nodded, absorbing this. "Do you think he'll come back for me, since I got away?"

"It's possible. It depends, again, on why you were chosen and why he was dropping bodies down into abandoned mines."

Addy stiffened. "Bodies?"

Special Agents Richards swallowed hard. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to tell you like that. It's been discovered over the course of the investigation that you aren't the first victim. That's when I was called in to help."

"How did they know that? Had others been found before?"

Her expression was severe, her eyes moist, on the brink of spilling over. She reigned it in, took a steadying breath.

"No. Actually, you're the first victim we've ever found, and as far as we know the most recent. The mine you were in, when the rescuer was down there with you--"

"Les," she corrected. He and his wife had been by to visit her the day before, leaving a vase of flowers on the side table and promising to bring her some home cooked meals when she was able to leave the hospital.

"Les noticed another body down there after they were lifting you out. We've started sending teams out in the desert canvassing for other abandoned mines, and when we find them, we're GPS marking them and sending teams down to investigate them. So far, we've found four other bodies in the last twenty-four hours."

"*Four* more?" Addy said, struggling to comprehend the number. It wasn't a large number, as numbers went, but they weren't numbers, they were women who had been kidnapped and deposited into abandoned mines. They were just like her.

"We haven't identified all of the women yet, and we haven't finished notifying their families. We have to rely on dental records to be 100% accurate, and unfortunately that takes time. The more victims we find, the more we'll be able to find out about the assailant."

"So these women, they were missing for weeks? Months?"

"Addy," he said gently, his voice cracking, "one of those women was missing for eight years."

Eight years.

"Her family has been notified, and her mother actually flew into the area to claim her body for burial. She'd also like to meet you, when you're feeling up to it."

"Why would her mother possibly want to meet me?"

Special Agent Richards shook his head. "I can't answer that. Only she can. We can think about that when you're feeling better."

Addy cleared her throat. "So what do I do? What do you need from me?"

"I'd like to have one of my colleagues come in and speak with you. He's an expert in memory retrieval."

"That sounds -- painful."

Special Agent Richards laughed. "I promise it's not. He'll help you to tap into memories that you don't even know you have. It might not pan out, I'll be honest, but I'm willing to take a chance on it."

She nodded. "Okay. I'll do it."

13

Back in her home, Addy was restricted to bed rest, an order which she followed—sort of. For the most part she was obedient, but there were certain things she couldn't avoid doing with no one there to take care of them.

The doorbell rang and she shuffled to her feet, swinging the crutch under her good arm to take some of the weight off her broken ankle.

There was a man standing on the porch in a business suit, a briefcase in hand. He wore dark rimmed glasses and pushed them back into place while he waited.

"Can I help you?" Addy asked through the door, refusing to open it, even on the privacy chain.

"Addison Stewart? Do I have the right address?"

"Can I help you?" she repeated.

"Special Agent Richards sent me. My name is Nathan Olsen. I'm here to perform a memory retrieval procedure?" He shuffled back and forth on the porch, uncomfortable.

"Wait right there," Addy said, moving through the house to her purse. She pulled out Special Agent Richards' business card, and dialed his cell phone number. He answered the phone on the second ring.

"Addison, what's wrong? Is Nate there?"

She glanced toward the front door, lowered her voice to a whisper and said, "There's a man, says he's Nathan Olsen, yes."

"What's wrong? Is the memory retrieval procedure upsetting you? Did he explain it properly? Sometimes he skims over the details he doesn't feel are relevant. Put him on the phone."

Addy paused, not wanting to tell him the embarrassing truth.

"Addy? Are you still there?"

She took a breath, then said, "I don't know if he's really who he says he is."

"Did you ask to see his ID? He should've shown it to you when you opened the door, but he'll certainly show it if you ask him. Please, get Nate. Put him on the phone."

"I can't. I didn't actually open the front door. I think he's still on the porch."

"Okay," he said, frustration leaking into his voice, "I have a meeting in half an hour. Let me call; see if I can move it back a few hours. I'm on my way over. Tell Nate to hang tight, that I'm on my way."

"I'm sorry," Addy said, but he had already disconnected the call.

She made her way back to the door and looked through the peephole. He was still there, but he'd set down his briefcase and had pulled out his cell phone. He appeared to be sending a text message or playing a game, she couldn't tell which.

"Mr. Olsen?" Addy said through the door.

"It's Dr. Olsen, actually, but you can call me Nate, Ms. Stewart."

"Then please call me Addy. I, I called Special Agent Richards. He said to tell you he's on his way."

"All right. Do you mind if I have a seat on the bench here?"

"No, please make yourself comfortable. Do you like coffee? Tea?"

"Coffee is fine, thank you. You won't be bringing it out here, will you? We're waiting for Blake to show up."

Addy felt her cheeks redden and put her hand against the door to steady herself.

"It's all right," he said, his voice soft, understanding, "I didn't mean that as a criticism. I should've realized you would be hesitant to allow an unknown man into your home. You didn't see your kidnapper, so you understandably see him in anyone you don't know."

"Or even people I do know," she whispered.

"I understand," he said, hearing her even through the door. "Coffee would be great. I take mine with cream, Blake takes his black. We'd be grateful for it, when he arrives."

Addy nodded, grateful for the escape, and went into the kitchen. She put on the coffee pot, pulled a loaf of homemade banana bread from the refrigerator and turned the oven on to warm it. Then she sat down, waited.

14

He sat up straighter when the man walked up to her door. He was ordinary enough in appearance, unremarkable. He watched the man knock, saw his lips move as if he was talking, but the door didn't open. He watched the man reach into his breast pocket, pull out some sort of badge, hold it to the peep hole on the door.

It still didn't open.

His mind reeled. The patrol car parked out front had not stopped him. The man had stopped and talked to the officer in the patrol car.

They obviously didn't find him a threat. Then it clicked. Suit, badge, boring. He was a fed. Probably FBI.

Not good, not good at all. What to do? If he moved now, he might draw attention to himself. If he stayed, with the FBI across the street, they might notice him, decide to run his plates. The car was a rental, but that might even tip them off.

Better to stay, he decided. He hoped.

Twenty minutes later the doorbell rang. Addy looked through the peephole and saw Special Agent Richards standing on the porch. Dr. Olsen had stood up from the bench and was waiting beside him, adjusting his glasses again.

She opened the door, her expression sheepish. "I'm so sorry," she said, glancing between the two men. She reached to shake Dr. Olsen's hand. "I'm Addison Stewart. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"My pleasure," he said, "Can we come in?"

"What are you doing out of bed?" Special Agent Richards asked, ignoring her apology and stepping into the living room.

"I'm answering the door," she said, the answer lame in her own ears.

"Dr. Lewis was very clear in his discharge instructions."

Addy furrowed her brow. "What do you know about his discharge instructions?"

"I had the nurse forward me a copy. For the case report." He paused, waiting for her to speak, but when she refused he said, "He was very clear. Bed rest. One week at least, possibly two."

"I know that," she said, leaning heavily on the crutch, "I'm doing my best, but it's not easy when you live alone."

"I'm sure there are people who would be happy to help you," Dr. Olsen said, moving into the living room and closing the front door.

Addy didn't answer. She took one step between them, and bolted the front door locked.

"I'd even venture that people have offered to help, and you've refused them," he continued, watching her back stiffen at the words.

"Be that as it may," Addy said, shuffling the crutch under her arm and moving into the kitchen, careless if they followed or not and raising her voice to be heard through the walls. "It's my choice who is and isn't admitted into my house. You don't know who kidnapped me and dropped me down that mine. You don't even know for sure if it was a man or woman. Who can I trust? I didn't see this person. I'm safer alone."

She leaned the crutch against the wall and pulled the oven open, poised to remove the loaf of bread from the oven.

Special Agent Richards had followed her into the kitchen, Addy noted, rolling her eyes. Dr. Olsen had the good sense to wait in the living room.

"God save the world from stubborn females," Special Agent Richards said, stepping behind Addy and scooping her off her feet. He carried her back into the living room and deposited her onto the sofa. "Sit your ass down before you hurt yourself. I'm quite capable in the kitchen, my mother made sure of that. I'll get whatever you've made out of the oven and bring it in. Nate, see that she stays there."

She did, but not without a huff.

"Who does he think he is?" Addy muttered under her breath.

"You could've died," Dr. Olsen said, his voice low but his tone stern. "I've read the discharge instructions. Your doctor was very clear."

"Are you going to play the doctor card now?" she asked.

"Hardly. I'm a psychologist, not a medical doctor. I wouldn't know the first thing to do if you needed medical treatment. But I know if Blake's worried, you were badly hurt when they found you."

"I don't want to talk about that."

"Well, that'll be a problem. That's a big part of what we'll need to talk about, though I hope we can find a way to talk about it that doesn't cause you unnecessary stress."

Special Agent Richards came back into the room with a plate of sliced bread and carried it to the table. "Anything else?"

"There's a fresh pot of coffee," she said, gesturing to the kitchen. "Cups are above, cream in the fridge, sugar in the bowl on the table."

He left the room again, efficient as ever.

"He hates me," Addy said, taking a deep breath.

"Why do you think that?"

"You saw him. He was pis--angry. Really angry. He probably thinks I'm an idiot, refusing any help and hiding in my house alone."

"I find it's better to ask people what they're thinking rather than presume it for them. Tends to save confusion, and spares feelings."

Addy didn't know what to say, and she was spared the responsibility of a response when Special Agent Richards came back in carrying two cups of coffee. He set the cups in front of them and retreated to the kitchen, coming back with a travel mug.

"I still have to make that meeting. I couldn't move it back very much, just half an hour. It was enough time. Mind if I take a few pieces of bread for the road?"

Addy began to push herself to her feet and he chided her: "Sit! I'm competent, I promise you. I can get a couple napkins and bread."

He filled his hands, turned to Dr. Olsen and said, "Call if you need me. I'll be at the ME's office. Addy, he is Dr. Olsen. And in case you're still worried, he was at a conference in New York Friday evening, so there's no way he was the kidnapper."

With that, he left.

Addy blushed. "I didn't, that is, I didn't mean anything by it."

Dr. Olsen smiled. "I know you didn't. I understand. So does he, though he shows it in his own way."

Addy struggled to rise again, and Dr. Olsen waved her to stay seated. "You want the door locked?"

Addy nodded, thoroughly embarrassed.

Dr. Olsen stood, bolted the door, then resumed his seat and took a long sip of coffee. "There's no reason to be ashamed of your fears. You survived something that others haven't survived. One might even call it a miracle. A dozen other women suffered much the same fate you did, but they didn't live to tell about it. Perhaps in a way, theirs was the more merciful outcome."

"A dozen women? So many? Already?"

"They've been working long hours, scouting teams to mark the mines, camera crews are lowering lighted cameras down into the mines, and if anything is found, or

even the hint of any remains, they send a recovery crew down. Except now they know they're recovering a crime scene, so they aren't operating in rescue mode, they're gathering as much evidence as possible to build an eventual case."

"So you think they'll find the man, the person, who is doing this?"

"I've known Blake for years. He's as tenacious an investigator as you could hope for."

16

Special Agent Richards took the elevator down to the basement medical examiner's office, finishing the coffee he had started at Addy's house.

The medical examiner was waiting for him at the elevator doors.

"Special Agent Richards?" he said, and at his affirmative nod, he introduced himself: "Dr. Javier Cortez. Did you resolve your delay?"

"Yes, thank you for your understanding. The surviving victim was hesitant to allow our clinical psychologist into her home until I verified his identity."

"You can hardly blame her," he said, more to himself than to Special Agent Richards. "Are you ready to begin? I hope you're not squeamish."

He pushed the double doors open, stepping through to the morgue.

"Not particularly, no," Blake said, following close behind the doctor. "Have you determined cause of death?"

"Yes and no. That's part of what I wanted to discuss with you."

Special Agent Richards stood opposite the doctor, across the metal drawer.

"The first victims died from acute trauma associated with a several story fall from the top of the mineshaft," he said, drawing back the drape to expose the first body. "The conclusion would be that the women were dropped down the mineshaft, at least at first. Their causes of death varied in the specifics: one bled to death from various compound fractures, several died instantly from cranial trauma, this poor girl's spleen ruptured and she died slowly from the toxins flooding her system."

He replaced the drape over her face and pushed the drawer closed.

"His M.O. has evolved? He grew into new and, by your expression, more cruel patterns?"

The doctor nodded, then sighed as he opened the next drawer.

"You can divide his victims into three stages. The first victims: as I described and who you saw represented by the first young woman. His second stage of victims was tied around the waist with a thick cord of rope, and lowered part way down the mineshaft."

He pulled back the drape, exposing the woman's torso, where even after decomposition had affected the flesh, there were obvious rope burns.

"From what I can tell, the ropes were tied in an elaborate slip knot of some variety. There are deep ligature marks around the women's torsos, but there isn't any rope, not even remnants, at the bottom of the mines."

"What kind of knot would do that?"

"I'm afraid I'm not at all familiar with knot tying techniques. You'd be better off consulting experts in fields where knots are common."

"And the third stage of victims?"

The doctor grimaced, closed the drawer tightly. He removed his glasses and met Blake's eyes.

"I haven't examined any in the third stage," he said, taking a breath, "From what I can tell, it seems your young lady may be the first in the new stage."

He didn't correct the doctor that Addison wasn't his, and answered instead, "Hopefully we'll find this son-of-a-bitch before he gets to any other girls. I don't want anyone else ending up here."

"I agree with you. But it's only a matter of time before he tries again. If he doesn't go after your young lady, some other girl will replace her. I would like to see her medical records and copies of her toxicology report, if I may. Based on the number of victims your team has discovered, it won't be long before another young woman goes missing."

17

Blake approached his team, a tray of coffees in hand. No one acknowledged the coffee, they were too engrossed in their work.

"Well, we've mapped all the kidnappings and deaths that we have positive ID on," Sean said, taking a cup of coffee.

"Hit me."

They had a large board with three horizontal lines, each denoting a several year span. Along the timeline, there were pushpins marking the dates: blue for abductions, red for deaths. Addison's, the most recent, had only a blue pin.

"It's a mess," Blake said, leaning forward to read the dates. "There's no real pattern. August eighteenth? May third? Is there any connection?"

"Not that we've found, no. But the dates have to mean something to the perpetrator, don't they?"

"I don't know," Blake admitted. "What do the facts say?"

"There's not a sequence to the dates," Kristin Watson said. "But it's unlikely that the kidnappings and killings are random. There's too much ritual, too much significance to it for them to be entirely random. But it's not numerical. It's not about the dates at all." Then, more to herself, she said, "The days might be significant, though."

"How so?"

"They're Fridays," she said, though the corkboard didn't show this. Kristin just knew it, the way she knew it wasn't a sequence, without looking it up. "The last day of the week. They go missing Friday, are dumped sometime over the weekend."

"What does that mean?" Blake asked.

"I don't know. Maybe nothing. Could just be that he works Monday to Friday, and occasionally takes a Friday off. Or he works a non-traditional shift. It's just a pattern."

"We've also started a search into missing persons," Sean said. "We're looking for any Caucasian females in their mid-twenties to mid-thirties. Obviously not a very narrow window. We've also limited the search to a local radius, encompassing a six hundred mile radius around Twentynine Palms."

"Not very limited, is it?"

Sean laughed. "Not really, no. But when victims are identified from as far east as Phoenix and as far north as Reno, we have to cast a wide net. For all we know, they're missing from further away, but we have to start somewhere."

Blake nodded, absorbing the theory without argument.

"How's Addison Stewart doing?" Kristin asked, taking a sip of coffee.

"Not great," he admitted. "She wouldn't let Nate into the house."

"Why not?" Sean gave Blake his full attention.

"Thought he might be her kidnapper."

"Can hardly blame the girl," Kristin said. "Think about it. Someone snatches you without being seen, then drops your ass in the bottom of a mine out in the middle of nowhere. I'd be scared of everyone, too."

"Even FBI profilers?"

"She should be scared of everyone," Kristin said. "The dates are obviously significant in some way to him to him. That makes the possible kidnappers, at this point anyway, anyone between his late twenties to forties who wasn't somewhere we can verify by eyewitness or video documentation. That leaves a lot of possibilities."

"He's also familiar with the southwest region. We have victims from as far south as San Diego, and as far north as Reno. Then there are victims from as far east as Flagstaff. This perpetrator is covering a large kidnap radius but returning to a very small kill radius. This makes the Mojave desert, perhaps Twentynine Palms in specific, very important to him in some way."

Blake sighed. "Still leaves a lot of possibilities. Addy should be talking to Nate now. Hopefully she'll be able to give us some insight into the killer."

18

"You're in a safe place now, Addison. No one can harm you here."

"Okay," she said rather sleepily.

She was lying on her back on the sofa with her eyes closed and her arms crossed over her body.

"I'd like you to go back to Friday evening, at the gym."

Addison scrunched up her face a little at the request.

"Remember, you're safe. We aren't going back in time, just back in your memory. Nothing can happen to you again that already happened that night. You made it out, alive, and he can't change that here."

"Okay."

Her facial muscles relaxed into a more natural expression, though a tiny furrow of worry remained between her eyebrows.

"Tell me what you see."

"I'm on the treadmill. Running."

"Look around the room, at the people in the gym with you."

"Okay."

"Does anyone stand out to you?"

"There's a woman on the stationary bike."

"What's special about her?"

"She's wearing a lot of makeup. I think that's weird. You go to the gym to work out. You sweat. It's gross."

Dr. Olsen laughed despite himself. "Good. Doesn't make much sense to me, either. Anyone else stand out? Maybe look unfamiliar, uncomfortable in the setting?"

Addison's eyes moved behind her eyelids, scanning her memory of the gym.

"No. No one stands out."

"Okay. Let's fast forward a little bit. What did you do after your workout?"

"I took a shower."

"Anyone in the showers when you're in there?"

Addison thought for a moment, turned her head slightly.

"No one I saw. I heard someone open the main door, and close it again, but I never saw them." Tension crept into her voice as she asked, "It's not him, is it?"

"Addison, stay calm. Breathe. We don't know if it's him or not, but he can't hurt you from here. You're safe."

She exhaled the breath she'd been holding. "Okay."

"Now, after you showered and got dressed, what did you do?"

"I went outside, headed to my car."

"Okay, go outside the gym, start slowly walking to your car."

"I didn't walk slowly. As soon as I stepped outside it was windy and a little bit chilly. I had forgotten my sweater at work, so I wanted to get to my car. I have a really good heater."

"Okay, but slow down for me now. You won't feel the cold. Walk slowly and look around as you. What do you see?"

Addison thought for a moment.

"I see my car. I had to park a little bit further away than I normally like to because the gym was really crowded when I showed up. The parking lot is emptier now. Only a few cars. I'm almost to my car."

"Okay, did you see anyone on the way to the car? Do you see anyone now?"

"No. I don't."

"Okay. What can you smell?"

"Smell?" Addison repeated. "I can smell my shampoo. It's citrusy. Makes me feel awake even if I'm not."

"Anything else?"

"No—wait. I do. There's something else. It's faint, but musky. Cologne maybe?"

"Have you smelled it before?"

"I don't think so, no. It smells good, but I don't recognize it. Is it him?"

Again the panic crept into her voice.

"Addison, please breathe. You're safe. He can't hurt you. I need you to listen; does he say anything to you now?"

She stops, obviously listening intently for any sound.

"All I hear is the wind blowing."

"Okay, which direction is the wind coming from?"

"Behind me. I don't know which way that is, but behind me."

"Okay, good."

"Now, keep moving forward toward your car."

"I don't want to!"

"You're safe. No one will hurt you here. We just need to see what you saw, hear what you heard. Please keep walking."

"Okay."

She moved her eyes behind her lids, taking in the last steps toward the car.

Suddenly she said, "Ouch!"

"What happened? What's wrong?"

She had clasped her hand to her neck, just below her right ear. "A bee stung me! Ouch, I forgot how much that smarts."

Dr. Olsen didn't say anything, let her continue toward the car.

"Everything's going black. I feel dizzy. I think I'm falling..."

She trailed off, losing her grasp on the memory. Her eyes flew open and she stared at the ceiling, unseeing, obviously shaken.

"Did you see anything else?"

"No. Nothing. It just went black, like the lights turned off in my head."

"You said you felt a bee sting you?"

"Yes. This damn citrus shampoo probably attracted it."

Dr. Olsen weighed his words carefully before he said, "I don't think it was a bee at all. Can I see the side of your neck?"

Addison sat upright, moved toward the doctor who met her in the middle.

Dr. Olsen pushed Addison's hair back, tucked it behind her. He looked just below and slightly behind her right ear, and saw a minute pin dot.

"I think he injected you with something," he said.

"What does that mean?"

"It tells us something about your attacker. Do you mind if I take a picture?"

19

He watched. He waited.

The second FBI agent had walked back to his car and left. He'd carried coffee and some sort of snack. She'd been feeding the FBI. Like friends, like family. He gritted his teeth.

The first FBI agent was still inside. It'd been a long time. Longer than he was comfortable with, but he'd committed to waiting. He hadn't caught much of a glimpse of her when the FBI agents entered, just a peek at her hair before the FBI agents stepped inside and closed the door.

But she was there, he knew it. He felt it. She was so close...

And then she was there, in his sight. He sat up straighter, his nerves tingling.

The FBI agent had opened the door when he was leaving, but she followed him out onto the front porch. She walked him to his car, shook his hand. Walked was the wrong word. She hobbled. She was injured. The FBI agent gestured to stop her from following him. She glared instead. He relented.

From the distance, he took a minute to assess her, to examine her injuries. This was the first he had truly seen her, at any relative distance, since the night he lowered her into the mine. He never expected to see her again, after he gave her to the earth. It was fascinating really, in a pseudo-scientific way. What had the time done to her? What injuries had she sustained from the short fall? Which injuries were not his to claim credit for?

She had a cast boot on her right foot, so it was obviously broken. Her left arm was likewise casted. There wasn't an exposed surface of skin that was entirely unbruised. The ceremonial mark on her chin was fading, but still visible when the light hit her just right.

"Get back inside, okay?" he heard the FBI agent say. "We'll call you if anything comes up."

"The sun feels good on my skin," she argued.

When he heard her voice, really for the first time, he was grateful he had rolled down the window the half inch. He'd done it for fresh air, but the sound of her voice sent his nerves on fire.

"Inside," the FBI agent insisted. "It's not safe out here."

"Oh please," she said, "Who would come after me with the FBI on my front step?" But she turned away, walked inside. She closed the door. Likely locked it.

He blew out a breath he hadn't known he was holding.

She was so close. He was just down the street. If he were a marksman...

No. She was not his, she was theirs in tribute. If she were dead, she would mean nothing. He must wait.

The wait was torturous. The gods were angry. They had made it clear during his meeting the Tuesday after she was found. Several errors had appeared in the acquisition documents, causing the project to be delayed. They were practically screaming their displeasure now. Mistakes the likes of which he had never made were creeping into his work. He could not focus, he could hardly eat. Their displeasure was palatable.

Addison Stewart had to die.

20

After much pushing, Dr. Lewis had agreed to let Addison go back to work. She'd been incredibly insistent, and when he'd been willing to negotiate, she was more than willing to make concessions.

She would work eight hour days, not twelve.

She would take a mandatory lunch break, at which time she would elevate her foot for a full thirty minutes.

She would not push herself too hard, or too soon.

She would ask for help, if she needed it.

She had agreed to all these terms, without argument. The police escort had been where she drew the line.

"No. Absolutely not," she told Special Agent Richards over the phone.

He hadn't bothered to come by in person, he was far too busy. But he'd managed to squeeze in the phone call.

"I certainly can't follow you around myself," he said. "But you need a police escort. There's still someone out there who tried to kill you."

"I know that," she said. "Don't think for a second I've forgotten. There's still a police car outside my house. I can see it every day. But I have patients, and they're kids. Sick kids. Do you think having a police officer following their doctor around will make them feel safer? Less afraid?"

"It's not my job to be concerned about their feelings."

"Well, it is my job. You can alert hospital security, you can have a police officer outside the hospital if you want to. But you are not bringing a police officer into the pediatric oncology department. Absolutely not."

"Plainclothes?" he offered.

"No. No officers on the peds floor. Period."

"Hospital lobby?"

"Fine. But if he even glances twice at my patients, makes even one of them upset, he's gone."

"Deal."

Addison hadn't exactly felt victorious when she'd finished the conversation with Special Agent Richards. She hadn't intended to compromise at all, but he drove a hard bargain.

Now, she was dressing to return to work. It had taken her longer than normal to get dressed. The two casts slowed her movements, exaggerated the amount of effort needed. She was sweating.

It had taken several minutes to find a shoe that was the same height as her boot. She was exhausted. Maybe it was too early to go back to work after all.

The doorbell rang.

She glanced at the clock. The taxi was fifteen minutes early. Damn it.

She looked out the peep hole, expecting to see the taxi driver.

No, it was Special Agent Richards. He had two cups of coffee in his hands and a beaming smile.

She opened the door, resisted the urge to smile back.

"What are you doing here?"

"Happy first day back to work. I thought I'd drive you in."

"I called a taxi."

"I know. You think you could tell if the taxi driver was the killer?"

"Really? You think the random taxi driver sent to my house would be the killer? You think that's what he does for a living?"

"No, I think he's sophisticated enough to steal a taxi if that got him close to you again."

Addison didn't respond. She took the coffee cup instead.

"We're vetting the taxi company now. We'll have the police officer assigned to your watch drive you to and from work."

"No."

"You aren't really in a position to argue."

"I can't have my patients, my colleagues see me arrive to work in a police car. That definitely gives the wrong impression."

"Ending up dead does, too."

"Oh please. It's been weeks. Don't you think he's moved on by now?"

She didn't truly believe her own words, but she hoped his answer would encourage her.

"No, I don't. It doesn't fit the profile."

"Really, Special Agent Richards, you couldn't even humor me?"

"No, I won't. You're not taking this seriously."

"I'm tired of taking this seriously. I want my life back. Hiding is boring. I don't know if you know this, but daytime TV sucks."

Special Agent Richards rolled his eyes. "Are you ready to go?"

"Yes, let me just grab my bag."

She reached for what she called a bag, an enormous messenger bag.

"That can't be light."

"I've got it, I've got it," Addison insisted, despite struggling under the weight.

Special Agent Richards lifted it off her shoulder, slung it over his own. At Addison's amused look he said, "Don't even go there. Let's go."

His heart had jumped when she left her house alone, climbed into a waiting patrol car. She was dressed for work in slacks and a blouse that hugged her figure. She was a pleasure to watch.

He followed her to and from work for three days, to work by seven every morning, out the door at four every afternoon. She had a routine, and he meant to take advantage of it. The police took her to and from work, but they didn't follow her inside. He did not know why, but he didn't complain. They did, however, station a patrol car outside her home overnight.

He couldn't get her at home, but he could get her at work.

At three-thirty, he parked the rented minivan in an open space in the hospital parking garage. He pulled the wheelchair from the back, and unfolded it, pushing it forward into the hospital.

He wore his most husbandly attire, jeans and a button down shirt. He looked slightly disheveled, and no one stopped him. He looked like a concerned, sleep-deprived husband.

"Can I help you, sir?" an orderly asked. There was no suspicion, no apprehension, just genuine interest.

"Point me to orthopedics? I'm afraid I got lost on my way back with the wheelchair."

"Sure. Third floor. Need me to show you the way?"

"No, thank you. I think I'll find it."

All he had to do was wait, until the clock hit four, and he positioned himself in the elevator nearest to her office. He stood in the back corner of the elevator, adjacent to the key pad. Several people came and went through the doors, oblivious to his presence. They saw him, they just didn't register him as memorable.

Then she was there. She looked right at him, met his eyes and smiled a silent greeting.

He didn't dare speak. He was afraid, despite the sedative he had used the first night he took her that she might recognize his voice. He even wore different cologne than his usual, and the smell offended him but it masked him. He nodded in greeting.

She stepped in front of him, turned her back to him. So trusting. So unaware. She pressed the button for underground parking. He could smell her, despite his cologne. Her shampoo, her soap, he wasn't sure which, but he remembered it. He breathed it in, relished the opportunity to restore order to his life.

The doors were closing. They were almost closed. Just a little further, then she would be his. He moved the syringe into his palm, felt the cool plastic against his skin. He removed the needle cover with one hand, slipping the cover into his pocket. No evidence, no fingerprints. Almost closed...

A manicured hand darted into the wisp of an opening, throwing the doors in reverse. The doors stayed open.

"Dr. Stewart? I'm sorry, I know you're on your way home, but Dr. Owens had taken over some of your cases while you were away. He's with Richie Kilroy right now.

He just told them that he's terminal. They're hysterical. Mrs. Kilroy is crying for you, says you're the only one she wants to speak with."

He clenched his fists, careful not to prick himself with the exposed needle. He forced his face to remain expressionless; inside his head he was screaming. Seething.

"Not a problem, Tess," Addison said, exiting the elevator. She moved out of the sweep of the doors and they started to close. "What room are they in?"

The doors continued to close. He tried to breathe. When the door closed, he punched his fist into the elevator paneling and screamed inside where no one could hear.

#

He couldn't leave the hospital, but he knew he shouldn't stay. Instead, he paced back and forth near his rented vehicle. He was a live wire, every nerve vibrating in his frustration.

Then he saw her. Not the doctor, no, she was lost to him tonight. The nurse. That bitch. She'd stolen the doctor from him, delayed his success even further. What was her name? Tess. Yes, that was it. He tasted her name on his lips, and it only fueled his anger. She had gotten in his way, stopped him from taking Dr. Stewart. If she hadn't, he'd already be part way to the desert with Dr. Stewart in the back seat.

The woman walked to the bike rack, unlocked a purple and green Schwinn, and climbed on top. She started riding in his direction, went right past him.

He drew in a deep breath, and then decided. He would follow her. See where she lived. That was all.

It wasn't a long drive. She only lived about a mile away. The greater challenge was driving slowly enough to follow, without being obvious. He found looping around blocks, appearing lost to be highly effective.

She pulled over in front of an apartment building, locked the bicycle to the rack.

He parked a block past where she was locking the bike and moved quickly to catch up to her. She was unlocking her apartment door, letting herself into the apartment.

He stepped behind her, silently, unknown to her. She turned to close the door, and then she saw him.

She gasped, startled, but not afraid. He knew his face, knew he didn't inspire fear at first glance. It was only later. Much later.

"You surprised me!" she said with a laugh.

"That was the point," he said.

He pushed her backward, off balance and awkward, into the apartment. She gasped again but didn't scream. The air was temporarily knocked from her lungs.

He slammed the door, taking a moment to flip the deadbolt.

"Who are you? What do you want from me?"

"I don't want you," he said, staring into her eyes. "I wanted her. I needed her. But you got in the way. You stole her from me."

"Stole who? I don't know what you're talking about."

"It doesn't matter if you know or not. You did it. She was within my reach, so close, and you took her away." He moved closer to her, was right in front of her. He stared down at her, breathed in the scent of her hair, her fear.

"Whatever I did, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to."

He grabbed her by her arm. Hard.

The fear seeped into her then. He saw it rise up in her, settle in her eyes. She didn't cry yet. But she would. He knew it. He could feel it.

"Please. I'm sorry. I didn't know. I won't get in your way again."

He smiled, but it was cold.

"No, you won't," he agreed.

He increased the pressure on her arm, causing her to gasp.

Then something in her snapped. He saw it in her eyes a second before he felt her knee collide with his groin. He released her arm, immediately, before he even realized what had happened. She twisted past him, ran toward her bathroom.

While he tried to catch his breath, she threw the door shut. He heard the latch turn.

Fuck. This was not going well.

He heard rattling, banging in the bathroom. What the hell was she doing?

He looked around the apartment for something. A weapon, a tool to open the door. He settled on the knife block. She had a decent knife collection there. He grabbed a large chef's knife, and a paring knife to pop the lock.

His heart was thudding against his ribs. He'd never felt this intense rush before. The women, the tributes, had always been drugged. They were part of the process, they were necessary but passionless. This, this he had never felt before.

He pushed the paring knife into the lock and turned it, unlocking the bathroom door.

She gasped inside. Was she surprised it was so easy to open?

He adjusted the knife in his hand but didn't set it down. The chef's knife was in his dominant hand, the paring in the other. He turned the door knob just enough to gap it open.

And heard her rapid, shallow breathing.

He waited, just a second, and then kicked the door open all the way.

She screamed then. She had taken the tank lid off the toilet, was holding it in her hands. She had it pulled up, like a bat, poised to swing it. She was also standing in the shower, as far away from the door as she could get.

"Go away, and I won't hurt you," she said, but the tremble in her voice betrayed her words.

He smiled. He liked her.

"This isn't my fault," he said, moving toward her. "I didn't want to kill you. I had no interest in you. But you got in the way. Really, this is your fault."

Her eyes flashed at that; she was angry.

"Fuck you," she said.

He didn't like that. Not one bit. He moved forward toward her, invaded the confined space, but she didn't back away.

Was she stupid or angry? He didn't know. Not that it mattered.

When he was close, she swung the tank lid at him. It hit him in the shoulder. Hard. He felt an explosion of pain in his shoulder, and the chef's knife fell from his grasp. He'd lost control of his hand.

She was triumphant for a moment when the knife hit the tile floor. But just as quickly, fear reentered her eyes. Despite the pain, he smiled as the blade went handle deep into her side.

As he removed the knife, he felt her hot, thick blood pour onto his fingers.

She gasped.

He withdrew the blade and stabbed into her stomach again.

And again.

And again.

It eased his pain, seeing her pain. She gurgled a breath, and he watched the life leave her.

His skin tingled, burned.

He stepped to the sink, washed his hand, washed away her blood. And watched more of his own blood take its place. He'd been cut by the knife. It wasn't just her blood here, her DNA. His was here, too.

"Shit."

Then he looked around at the room. There was blood. Everywhere, there was blood. On the floor, on the walls, in the shower. On his clothing.

"Fuck!"

He had to think, and fast.

#

He stood in her kitchen, in his underwear. His jeans, his shirt were in the washing machine. Thank God the apartment had an in-unit laundry.

And thank God the woman liked a clean house. She had a gallon of bleach, nearly full, a bucket and gloves under her kitchen sink.

He had bandaged his hand, wrapping it in gauze and medical tape. It hadn't been easy, but he'd managed to do it without screaming. But boy did he need a drink. His hand still hurt, a lot, but it wasn't bleeding.

The gloves were snug, even more so with the bandage, but they kept his fingerprints off everything he touched.

He filled the bucket with fifty-fifty bleach and hot water. The smell was painful, but no more so than his shoulder or his hand. He couldn't use the arm. Probably dislocated. He carried the full bucket in his cut hand and set it down on the bathroom counter.

He grabbed the sponge, wrung it out, and began wiping down the walls. He rinsed the sponge off in the shower after each swipe of the walls, letting the water wash her blood off the body, down the drain.

He continued the walls, wiping until they were pink, then white.

After, he moved to the floors with the same routine: wipe, rinse, wring, repeat.

The washing machine chimed from the other room. He pulled off the gloves, painfully. He loaded the clothes into the dryer. Set it to hot.

When the bathroom was clean, sparkling, filled with bleach fumes, he poured the bleach-water in the bathroom shower, over her body, down the drain.

Back in the kitchen, he poured another bucket of bleach-water and filled the kitchen sink with the same mixture.

He dropped both knives into the sink, let them soak, destroy the blood and DNA.

The dryer chimed. His clothes were dry. He left them to cool in the dryer, finished cleaning.

This time with a kitchen rag, he wiped down the surfaces he had touched. Knife block, cabinet doors, walls. He wiped the bathroom doorknob, the jamb.

Finally, all the surfaces were clean.

He opened the dryer with the gloved hand, and then painfully pulled it off. He dropped the gloves into the bleach-water, let the liquid fill the gloves.

He pulled on his clothes, but he couldn't button his jeans with one hand. They'd have to go as they were. His shirt was clean.

He left the kitchen sink full of bleach water, the bucket on the floor with the gloves.

At the door, he leaned over the sofa, grabbed a handful of tissues to obscure his touch on the doorknob. And bumped his shoulder on the lamp.

He howled before he could contain himself, caught his weight on the table.

After a deep breath, he opened the door, closed it behind him, and smiled.

He walked away to his car, and drove immediately to the walk-in clinic down the road. He couldn't go any further with his shoulder like this.

Addison moved through the hospital efficiently, having finally adjusted to the walking boot. She carried a stack of patient charts under her bad arm and a cup of coffee in her good hand.

She stepped into her small office, prepared for a brief session of record writing, and found Blake seated at the desk. He had been considerate enough not to take her seat, but he'd obviously made himself comfortable. He had his feet on her desk and was playing some game on his cell phone.

He turned at the sound, sitting up straight and shutting off the game.

"Addison, how've you been?"

"What do you mean 'how've you been'?" she said back, surlier than she'd intended. "I've been here working, trying to move forward with my life, trying to forget that someone tried to kill me and still hasn't been caught. How's the investigation going? Have you found him yet?"

"We've reached a bit of an impasse. We don't know much more than we did two weeks ago, when we last spoke." He ran his hands through his hair, frustration emanating from him. There has to be a pattern to what he's doing, but whatever it is, we don't see it. We have plenty of theories, though. He does operate on a timeline, once he's kidnapped a victim, she's in the mine within twenty-four hours."

"I'm not sure what that has to do with me now," she said. She dropped the charts on the desk and propped her hip against the side. She was uncomfortable. She had thought he was done with her when she hadn't heard from him for the past two weeks.

"You can help me by giving me more information."

Addison sighed. "What is it you want to know? I told you and even Dr. Olsen everything I knew. I let him hypnotize me. I answered everything I could remember about that night. I let you read through my non-confidential correspondence. I gave you my phone records. You have everything I could possibly give you about that night, and the three months leading up to it. You said he kills once every three months. You said that. What more information could I possibly give you?"

He didn't answer for a minute, and Addison pounced on the silence.

"Do you want to know that a friend of mine died? I was the last one to see her alive. She was murdered, stabbed to death in her apartment."

"Why didn't you tell me about that?"

"Why would I? You haven't contacted me since you dropped me off here and arranged the local police to give me a ride. They were very informative about Tess' death. They think it was her ex-boyfriend. She had a restraining order against him."

"What if it's relevant to the case?"

Addison scoffed. "I told you what the police said."

"Was there DNA evidence? Did they find his fingerprints at the scene?"

"The scene was cleaned. There wasn't any DNA, only a partial hand print that they couldn't positively ID as his. But who else had motive?"

"God damn it, Addison. You really think the killer isn't still out there?"

"I don't know," she snapped. "How would I? You haven't kept me in the loop."

"What do you want from me? I'm trying to find this guy, keep you safe. You won't open up with any more information that I need, that could help me find him."

"What more could I tell you?" Addison asked, her eyes shining. Damn it. She didn't want to cry.

"You could tell me about your past," he said.

Addison tensed.

"You never told me anything about your past, not even where you're from. The research team had to find those details for me."

"It's not relevant," Addison said.

"How do you know?"

"My past has nothing to do with my life now. I've completely turned my back on it. I haven't gone home in ten years. I've worked hard to get where I am now, and I'm damn proud of it. My past has nothing to do with why a psychopath kidnapped me and left me to die."

"But how do you know? How can you be sure?"

Addison didn't answer.

Finally Blake said, "Because you don't know. And neither do I. It's my job to find this bastard. I can't do that if you won't help me."

Addison felt the anger rise up, the frustration. "I did help you. I told you everything about that night. I let you look into the last three months of my life, opened everything up for you and your team. Everything else is irrelevant."

Blake stood up, moved forward, leaned into her space.

"What if it isn't? We don't know why he chooses the women he does, what about them makes them special to him."

"We all have brown hair; we're all about the same age. Isn't that enough?"

"Not if I'm going to find him. That can't be it. It's too simple, and his process is far too complicated."

"I won't let you go on a fishing expedition through my life. It's none of your business."

"Everything pertaining to this case is my business."

"Why? Why does it matter so much? Why do you care?"

Blake's face stiffened and he backed away from Addison. He didn't answer for a long time, and when he did his voice was low. "My sister Beverly went missing seven years ago."

Addison felt her heart skip a beat at that. "Did he, the guy who took me, did he take her?"

Blake shook his head. "I don't know. Maybe. She fit the general type, brown hair, young. Pretty. But none of the victims so far are her."

"Have you identified all the victims?"

"No, not yet."

"I'm so sorry," Addison said, knowing the words were hollow. Worthless. People had been telling her how sorry they were that she had gone through the kidnapping, that she didn't deserve it, and that the man who did it had to be a horrible, soulless monster.

None of it helped. None of their words stopped the nightmares, the fear that he would be coming back for her. All she could do was push forward.

Blake smiled at the apology. "At least you know why I need to know. It's not just the job, not this time."

"But you don't know for sure that she is one of his victims. That has to be very confusing."

"Yes." He didn't look at her.

"It's okay to be upset," she continued. "You want to find your sister, to know what happened to her, to have closure. But if you don't find her, there's still hope that she's alive."

"Yes." He exhaled the one word answer, finally met her eyes.

"I'm sorry. I really am sorry, but I can't go backward. I've spent years moving forward, I don't want to go back. Maybe it was just random after all."

Blake shook his head. "It wasn't random. It's never random."

Addison took a long time to answer. He looked so expectant, so hopeful. He wasn't going to like her answer, and she didn't like disappointing him. "I can't."

"Don't you get it? You're the only living victim. You're it. All the other women, all of them, they're dead. I can't ask them about their pasts. I can't ask them what they have in common with one another. I have to rely on their parents, their friends, for that information. You're the only one who can help me."

"No. *You* don't get it. I'm not a body on a slab for you to dissect. I still have feelings. I have to live with the repercussions of every detail of my life. I don't want to go backward. I've spent a decade making sure I move forward."

"You're the only one I can ask."

"I'm sorry. No."

"Damn it, Addison. I need you to be honest with me. Transparent, even. I'm trying to help you, find the person who tried to kill you."

"No, you're trying to find the person who might have killed your sister."

"It's the same thing! And you're stonewalling me at every turn. Anytime I need to ask personal questions, you put up these ridiculous walls. You're making it impossible to do my job!"

"I have rights, damn it. I have the right to privacy, to a personal life." Addison met his eyes, held his gaze for a moment. Finally she let out the breath she hadn't realized she was holding. "Forget it. Take over my office, I don't care. I'm not talking about this."

With that she gathered up the charts and stalked out of the office, slamming the door behind her.

23

Blake made it to his car before he picked up his cell phone, dialed the main office in Los Angeles, direct to his supervisor's desk.

"Special Agent Avery," his supervisor said his voice clipped, efficient.

"Sir, it's Blake."

"What can I do for you? Have you caught a break in the case?"

"Unfortunately, no, sir. Ms. Stewart isn't being very forthcoming."

Blake switched the phone over to the car stereo, and his supervisor's voice came through the speakers.

"You're still pursuing her? What makes you think she has more information to offer? I've read the reports from your interview, and from Dr. Olsen's sessions. She seemed fairly informative, given the circumstances."

"It's a hunch. The victims don't have enough in common. Brown hair? Similar age? It doesn't seem right to me. Doesn't seem like enough."

"How can I help?"

"I'd like to fly up to her hometown. It's only about forty minutes outside San Francisco. I could be there and back within twenty-four hours."

"And who would you talk to up there? Who could possibly speak to her life now in Southern California?"

Blake hesitated. This was where the hunch travelled off the conventional path, and he knew his supervisor well enough to know where it was likely to end.

"I don't want to look into her present life. I'd like to look into her past, find out if there are any parallels, any overlaps, between her and the other victims."

Special Agent Avery sighed. "I can't authorize that. Call the field office in San Francisco. I'm sure they can help you, send an agent out to interview the people you'd like to speak with."

"Sir, with all due respect, I need to conduct the interviews myself."

"I can't do it. Call the field office. They'll send someone."

The call disconnected on Avery's end, and Blake couldn't help glancing at his phone to confirm.

"Damn it," he muttered. He glanced at the time display, two-fifteen.

He used his cell phone to pull up flight times from LAX to SFO. If he could be there by three-thirty, he could be in San Francisco tonight.

Without thinking too much, Blake punched the car into drive and headed toward the airport.

24

The plane touched down in San Francisco early in the evening, just before dinnertime. Blake stretched, uncomfortable and stiff from the commuter flight. Comfort certainly wasn't the priority on such short flights. He checked his phone, saw it was a little before five, and debated a moment before he placed the call.

"Mr. Stewart, are you available to speak with me this evening? My plane just landed. I'm probably thirty to forty-five minutes from you if there's no traffic."

Ken Stewart grunted at that, but said, "S'pose now is as good a time as any. You need directions?"

"No, thank you. GPS should get me there just fine."

"Suit yourself," he said.

Blake made his way to the rental car kiosk and handed over his ID.

"Right this way, sir," the kiosk attendant said, directing him to a black sedan.

Blake laughed to himself. When the FBI rented a car, it was always black, but they never made that request. It was just assumed.

He started the car and turned on his cell phone's GPS, plugging in Addison's childhood home.

#

He pulled the car to the side of the residential road and checked the address he had written on the back of his own business card. It had taken him nearly two hours in the gridlock traffic, but now that he was this far, he couldn't help seeing it through. The address in front of him and the one on the business card matched, but his perception of the house certainly didn't. He wasn't sure what he had expected, but a sprawling Victorian mansion wasn't it.

The exterior was well maintained, beautifully and freshly painted with obviously groomed hedges and lawn.

Blake clicked the alarm on the rental car and pocketed the keys before he walked up the front path. He reached the door and rang the bell, taking his sunglasses off while he waited.

"Can I help you?" a rough male voice said from behind the closed door.

"Kenneth Stewart?" Blake asked.

"Who wants to know?"

"I'm Special Agent Blake Richards," he answered, holding his badge up for the man to see through the peephole. "I called, spoke with you about forty minutes ago, told you I would be coming by?"

A moment later the door opened.

"Can't be too careful who you open the door for," Ken Stewart answered. "Come on in, Special Agent."

Blake stepped in and Ken closed the door behind him.

The interior was much more like Blake expected: the wallpaper had faded and begun to peel, the room was coated in a fine layer of dust, and the furniture had obviously not been updated in over thirty years.

"Can I get you coffee?" Ken asked, turning toward the kitchen to get his own cup.

"Sure, that'd be great."

From the kitchen, Ken's voice called, "I only have sugar, none of that cream crap."

Ken returned a minute later with the two cups, set one on the dining table and indicated for Blake to sit before he settled himself across the table.

Blake took a sip of the coffee and fought the urge to cringe. There was black coffee, and then there was this. It was thick, bitter, and blazing hot. No wonder Ken took his with sugar.

"Don't know why you flew all the way from Los Angeles to talk about Addison."

"She tell you what happened last week?"

"She hasn't told me a damn thing since she left for college. That girl's got a stubborn streak the likes of which you can't imagine. I check up on her, though, from time to time, read up on how she's doing."

"She was kidnapped last month and left to die in the bottom of an abandoned mine."

Ken surged to his feet, fire in his eyes for the first time.

"She's not—"

"No. She's okay. She broke an arm and an ankle, but otherwise she's fine. What I'd like to ask you about is her childhood, her teen years. The perpetrator, the man who did this, chose Addison for a reason. I need to figure out what that reason is."

"Why fly all the way here yourself? Don't you have local people who could come speak with me for you?"

"We do, yes. I prefer to do my own research, whenever I can. If you don't mind, I'd like to jump right in."

Ken nodded, drinking his coffee.

"What was Addison like as a child?"

Ken didn't speak for a moment, his mind rolling back the years. "She was the prettiest little girl you'd ever see, and the sweetest. She'd go out of her way to bring her mother or me things that fascinated her, that might please us. One time she caught this butterfly in a jar, came tearing into the house with the jar. She ran so fast, so excited to get that butterfly to us, that she fell over a loose floorboard, crushing the jar beneath her and cutting her arms up. Probably still has the scars on her arms."

"You were close to her then, when she was a little girl?"

Ken gave him an incredulous look. "She was my daughter. Of course we were close."

"I didn't mean anything by it. Just that, you aren't close now."

Ken sighed. "A lot changed between then and now. There are things I've done that I can't undo, things I've said that I can't take back. Addison isn't a very forgiving girl."

"Have you asked her to forgive you?"

Ken shook his head, his expression softening for a moment.

"We haven't spoken since the day she left for college. Not that Addison really needed me, after her mother died and she turned eighteen."

Blake gave him a puzzled expression, obviously confused by the cryptic information.

"She didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"Her mother was from old money. When she died, Addison was left to inherit a small fortune when she turned eighteen. I couldn't touch the money, my wife and her family made sure of that. When Addison inherited, she told me what she thought of me, and left."

"And you never tried to mend fences? Never reached out to her?"

"What for? I have my house, free and clear. Only trouble I get is from the historical society, to keep the outside maintained. Otherwise, I do as I please. Why would I invite that mouthy daughter of mine back into my life?"

Blake didn't comment. "Anyone else I should speak with while I'm here?"

"She saw a counselor for a while. Doesn't know I knew, but I did."

The next morning, Blake made his second and final stop in Northern California, after a miserable night's sleep at a cheap motel. The Bureau didn't put them up in fancy hotels, but they were better than the one he'd slept in.

He drove to the psychologist's office and didn't have to knock at the door before it was opened.

Dr. Neil Rutherford met Blake's eyes and held his gaze unnaturally long. Blake didn't blink. He also didn't reach out for a handshake when the other man didn't offer his.

"Come in, Special Agent Richards," Dr. Rutherford said. He closed the door behind him, and led Blake into his office.

The austere office was very clean, very orderly.

He gestured for Blake to take a seat on the sofa, where he imaged all the patients sat.

"Thank you for meeting with me," Blake said.

"I could hardly say no to the FBI," Dr. Rutherford said. "Though I don't know what insight I can offer into Addison Stewart."

"No?" Blake asked.

"She was very close with my son Evan when they were in high school. But that was years ago. I haven't seen her since she left for college. And as far as I know, Evan hasn't heard from her."

"Addison wasn't a patient of yours?"

"No. I offered my services to her family, her father specifically, when her mother died. He refused. He was very adamant. He didn't think either of them needed help. I feel sorry for the man. He's obviously still in need of counseling."

Blake noted this then said, "I heard that you spoke with her, counseled her."

Dr. Rutherford stiffened at that.

"Never anything official. But in my line of work it's hard not to get drawn into a tough case like hers."

"How do you mean?"

"Her mother had a very public affair, made a spectacle of herself really. Then she decided to run off with her lover and leave her husband and daughter behind. No one saw that part coming, Maggie leaving Addison behind. Most people thought she'd divorce her husband, kick him out of that big house. It belonged to her family, after all, not his. She was the one with the money."

He stopped, poured himself a glass of water from the side table. He didn't offer one to Blake, but Blake hadn't really expected it.

"Maggie and her lover were driving north, supposedly headed to Napa, when they were in a car accident. Didn't make it past the Dumbarton Bridge. Lost control of the vehicle, drove off the edge, and flipped into the salt ponds below. They both died on impact."

Blake didn't know what to say, and Dr. Rutherford had stopped talking.

"How did that affect Addison?" Blake finally asked.

"Addison was a very troubled girl, probably still is, really. She was affected by her mother's affair, certainly, but she still had a mother. Her mother's death left a chapter of her life unclosed. I don't know if she'll ever find closure on that. Perhaps if she continues therapy..."

"How did she deal with her grief?"

"She lashed out at everyone who tried to help her. Her grades suffered. She was spiraling out of control. At least, that's what Evan described to me. She was pushing him away. He was very worried about her. I honestly think he had a crush on her, though he never admitted it to her or me."

"Did Addison want your help?"

"At first, no. She was as angry at me as she was at anyone. But over time, she started talking. Then, eventually, it was difficult to stop her talking."

"Can you walk me through it, then? You said her father refused your offer of help?"

"Yes, he did. Stubborn man. I ever offered my services at no charge, since Evan was so close to his daughter. He didn't want to be helped."

"How were you able to help her then?"

"She was studying with Evan at our home. She was withdrawn, sullen, obviously angry and upset. I had come downstairs, into the kitchen where they were studying. Evan excused himself from the room; I honestly think he was hoping I would talk to her. I can still see her, young and radiating emotion. She was a live wire. I sat down, and I waited."

He paused. For a long moment he paused. Perhaps recreating the waiting he did for Addison that afternoon in his kitchen, Blake didn't know. He fought the urge to react. He waited.

Finally, Dr. Rutherford continued, "Then she spoke. I can still hear her say, "I hate my mom, and she's dead." It was incredibly sad, but incredibly honest. I waited a bit longer, didn't respond. She broke into tears, probably for the first time since her mother died."

Blake felt his throat tighten for the young girl in Addison's past. He cleared his throat. "You started counseling her then?"

"Yes. She talked to me that afternoon, and when it was time for her to go home, I offered her my services. Her only concern was money, she obviously couldn't pay. Evan was back in the room then, and he told her that I'd do it as a favor to him. He was very chivalrous toward her. I agreed. She obviously needed my help."

"How did you manage to see her, if her father refused therapy for them both?"

"She told her father that she was studying with Evan when she had her sessions with me. Evan was more than willing to cover for her, especially when she started smiling again. Mind you, she wasn't happy yet, not by a long shot, but she was able to smile.

"Within a few months," he continued, "She was doing better in school again. Her grades from the previous quarter were abysmal, though. Her teachers knew about her mother's affair and then her death, everyone in town did. So they let it slide, gave her extensions on the work. She didn't use them. She was so far behind that she nearly didn't

move on to the next grade. The principal stepped in and excluded that quarter from her grades. He averaged the first and third quarters for her second quarter grade. It wasn't right, legally, but then with what she'd been through, no one really thought it was wrong, either."

"Why would the principal do that?"

"She wasn't involved with him, if that's what you're asking." Dr. Rutherford said.

It wasn't what Blake was asking, not by a long shot, but the emphatic denial was interesting.

"The principal was more interested in the boys than the girls, if you get my meaning. I honestly think he felt sorry for her. Everyone did. She was such a bright girl, and to let something that wasn't her fault destroy her future seemed unfair. Probably wouldn't have gotten into that fancy medical school if he hadn't done it. Her mother had an affair and then died, while her father vanished into a bottle. She was left pretty much alone to finish raising herself."

Blake didn't say anything. He continued to make notes, waited for the therapist to tell his story.

"She opened up to me quite a bit about her father. She often shared stories of what it was like living there, what she went home to. She'd wake up in the morning for school, and he'd be passed out at the kitchen table, an empty bottle beside him. She'd come home from school and he'd be half way through another bottle. She said he rarely ate. Never cooked meals. She'd take care of it all, cooking, cleaning, laundry. She did the grocery shopping for him. She stepped into her mother's role in the household."

"How old was she?"

"Fifteen."

Blake soaked that in, imagined what it must have been like to have her childhood end so abruptly.

Blake swallowed his reaction before he said, "Did her father ever know that you counseled her?"

Dr. Rutherford laughed. "You know he didn't. Like I said, he seemed like he was a mean drunk. If he knew about it, either she or I would've had the bruises to prove it. He seemed like a very controlling man. Besides, if he knew, it's likely the whole town would've known."

26

Blake was exhausted when he pulled into his apartment complex, the return flight from San Francisco even more cramped than the one there. He'd found out some interesting information, but he could deal with that in the morning. He walked up the two flights of stairs to his apartment and stopped dead ten feet from his door.

Addison was sitting against the door, half asleep. She'd obviously been waiting a long time.

"What are you doing here?"

"You spoke with Dr. Rutherford?" she said at the same time, her voice thick with emotion.

"How did you find out where I live? I'm not listed."

"How could you speak with Dr. Rutherford?" she countered. She had her arms crossed over her chest, defensive and angry.

"I had to talk to him. He was a very significant figure in your life. How do you know I spoke with him? I just got back in town an hour ago."

"He called me at work," she said, accusation underlying the words.

"How did you know where I live?" Blake repeated.

"I may have called a patient's mother who works at the DMV."

"It's illegal for her to give out that information."

"So arrest me," Addison snapped.

"I'd be arresting her, not you. You didn't give out the information. Dr. Rutherford said you hadn't been in touch with him since you left for college."

"I haven't. He looked me up, based on the information you gave him, I'm sure, and called me at work. Do you have any idea how embarrassing that was?" Tears pricked the back of her eyes.

"Addison," he began softly, "I wasn't trying to pry. I'm sorry I barged my way into your past. But I don't know why you're so upset. I was doing my job."

"You talked to him."

"What's the big deal? Lots of people see therapists."

Addison's tears evaporated at that. "You think he was only my therapist? He didn't tell you the rest?"

Blake grew very still.

"What didn't he tell me?"

Addison stonewalled. "What did he tell you?"

"Do you want to come inside? The hallway isn't the best place for this type of conversation, though the hour isn't ideal, either. We can resume this in the morning if you'd prefer."

"Like hell," she said. "I'll come inside, though."

Blake unlocked the door, ushered her into the apartment first, reaching in and flicking the light switch on.

"Can I get you something? Coffee? Tea?"

Addison shook her head.

"Okay. Let's sit down."

He gestured to the sofa and she sat in the nearest seat. Blake allowed her a moment to get comfortable before he sat down to her left, in his favorite chair.

Blake took a breath and slowly relayed the summary of his conversation with Neil Rutherford. Addison listened, not interrupting him, the color slowly draining from her cheeks.

"Is that all he said happened between us?" she finally asked when he was done.

"Yes. What did he leave out?"

Addison obviously didn't know where to begin when she asked, "Can I take you up on the tea after all?"

Blake understood her motivation and only nodded.

He left her alone with her thoughts while he boiled water. From the kitchen he asked, "Sugar? Honey?"

"Please."

He returned a few minutes later with two cups, still steaming.

She took hers, blew across the top of the water to cool it, and took a tentative sip.

"Perfect, thank you."

"You don't have to tell me, Addison," he heard himself saying. What? He'd only been pushing her for information on her past for the last weeks. He must need sleep.

"No, you know enough, may as well know it all now."

She set the cup of tea down on his crossword puzzle.

"The table's not that nice," he said.

She looked at her hands, twisted the rings on her right hand. It was the first time he noticed she wore the two rings.

"I'd been seeing Dr. Rutherford for almost two months. He'd recommended that I come twice a week. Pushed for it, really, now that I think about it. I thought it was for my own good. I couldn't really afford therapy, and my dad certainly wasn't going to pay for it. We had the money, I don't mean to imply we were poor. We weren't. You saw the house. My mother's family came from money. When she died, since the house would pass to me when my grandfather died, nobody kicked us out. I don't think they wanted to add to the injustice."

She took another sip of the tea.

"Anyway, I had been going to therapy for almost two months. I felt like it was helping, to talk about my feelings to someone who listened, who didn't have his own feelings tied up in it. My father was too caught up in his own grief to even notice mine.

He would drink a lot, and when he'd really drink, I mean really drink; he'd confuse me with my mother. He would yell, call me all sorts of names, he even hit me once when he was really bad. Well, that night, after our session, Dr. Rutherford told me he wouldn't be able to see me any more as a patient. I thought it had to do with the money that he couldn't afford to work for free. I told him I'd call my grandparents that I was sure they'd pay for it. He said it wasn't about the money."

She stopped. She was staring at her hands again, at the rings.

"I can still remember what he said. I can practically quote him, even now."

"What did he say, Addison?"

Her eyes were distant as she slipped into the memory. "I know it's helped you a lot, talking like this," she repeated, "But my family life is going to be affected if we don't stop now. You're a beautiful girl, you have to know that. Evan's told me how the boys at school like you, how they all clamber around to help you whenever you need it. I'm a man, Addison. I only have so much control over myself, over my needs. And I can't do anything about them. For me to act on them, against your will, that would be a crime. I don't mean to hurt your feelings, but I can't imagine you feel the same way. So that leaves us with no choice but to end your therapy."

Blake didn't know what to say, so he just stared at her.

"I know what you're thinking. It's what I've thought over the years. How could that possibly work? But it did. I climbed into his lap and kissed him. I'd never even kissed a boy my own age, but I kissed him. From there, well, you're a smart man. I'm sure you can fill in the rest."

"That bastard," Blake finally said. He was angry. He didn't know if he was angrier for what he'd done to Addison or for the fact that he had tricked him.

"No, I've thought about it, a lot. I was fifteen years old. I should've known better."

"Are you kidding? You treat fifteen year old kids, Addison. You know they're still kids, despite everything they say to the contrary."

"I still should've known better."

Blake didn't bother repeating his argument. He knew how long it took to dislodge deep seated beliefs.

"How long did it last?"

"Until I was eighteen. I kept trying to end it, but every time I mentioned breaking things off, he said he'd have to tell my dad."

"It's a miracle you didn't get pregnant."

Addison laughed. "He was smarter than that. He took me to a free clinic a few towns over. They thought he was my dad."

"How did you finally end it?"

"The day I turned eighteen, I went to his office. I wasn't scheduled, I just showed up. He thought I wanted to see him, for my birthday. He even told me he had a "birthday present" for me in his office."

Blake made a grossed out face and Addison chocked out a laugh. "I know, right? Sounds like a bad movie, but I swear he said it. I told him that I was an adult, that I had rights, and that if he ever came near me again I would call the police. He threatened, again, to tell my dad. I told him to go fuck himself, and that he could tell my dad, if he

wanted his wife and kids to know. When I turned eighteen, I inherited enough money from my mother's estate to go to school wherever I wanted. So I applied to several prestigious universities, all on the east coast, but I went to Brown. I told Rutherford if he ever contacted me, I'd call the police."

"Did he? Call you, I mean?"

"Today he did."

"Are you going to call the police?"

"I just told the FBI, didn't I?" she asked with a laugh. Her laughter was short lived, and she toyed with the rings again.

"Okay, what's with the rings?"

"They were my mother's. Her wedding rings. To my father, not some rings the other man gave her." She stared off into space, "They recovered them from her body after she died. She didn't leave the rings behind, like she did my father and me. They were too valuable to leave behind, probably still are. Why didn't the man who took me take them, do you think?"

"I'm not sure. Probably wasn't important to him. Maybe he didn't think of it. Why do you wear them, if your mother chose the rings over you?"

"They're a reminder; every day, of why I do what I do and why I don't do what I don't do." Addison blushed a little, averted her eyes. "Maybe that doesn't make sense to you, but for me it works."