

A GETAWAY NOVELLA

AEQUITAS

Sometimes you have to go back to move on.



Hope Anika

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HOPE ANIKA

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Prologue

I KNOW WHO YOU ARE.

Don't worry; I won't tell.

She stared at the computer monitor, her heart beating in her skull like a drum. The words simply appeared, one horrific letter at a time. Panic shrieked in her ears.

My name is Lazarus, and we've something in common, you and I.

We're the same.

No. No one was like her. *No one.*

Certainly not this anonymous...infiltrator.

Won't you talk to me?

She leaned over slowly, carefully, as if the slightest twitch would detonate an explosion, and silenced him.

MY LOVELY, SLIPPERY LASS.

Always making me chase you.

Good that I love to hunt.

She glared at the screen. *Thousands of dollars.* Ill-gotten gains, but still. Ditching this jerk was getting expensive. And annoying.

And almost impossible. That scared her.

Talk to me.

No. Never.

You will.

I'll see to it.

Something within her went so taut, it hurt. Because this odd man, this Lazarus, whoever he was, he seemed...

“No,” she growled and pulled the plug.

I'VE BEEN THINKING ABOUT YOU.

She froze; the bright white flicker burned into her eyes. She followed the letters as they scrolled across her screen, unwelcome. Uninvited. Thousands of dollars, and now thousands of miles, too.

And yet, here he was.

I know what today is.

Fear burst within her, cold, certain. He couldn't know. He was just fishing, like always. *He couldn't know.* No. That was ridiculous. That would mean—

I'm sorry, lass.

I know it hurts.

Oh God. Who the hell was he?

She tossed back her wine; she'd almost downed the entire bottle. She shouldn't have, but she did. Because he was right. It *did* hurt. And she was tempted, so tempted to respond...

Share it, a rúnsearc.

It will help.

I promise.

“You promise,” she whispered, her breath fogging the wine glass she held.

You can tell me anything.

She threw the glass; it shattered against the brick and rained down, tiny shards she would have to pick up. Later, when she wouldn't be tempted to cut herself with them.

“I hate you,” she told him. But he couldn’t hear her. Because she never spoke. Because silence was safe. Because—

“Fuck it,” she snarled and yanked the keyboard to her.

“STALK MUCH?!” She typed furiously, her fingers clumsy, her hands shaking.

There you are.

Finally.

“PSYCHO,” she added.

Nay.

Just persistent.

“UNINVITED.”

But not unwanted.

She blinked in disbelief at the screen. “SAYS YOU!”

Aye.

“ASSHOLE.”

Sometimes.

Her teeth ground together; her chest grew tight. Excitement and rage and fear and memory, twisting around her like the tightest rope. Binding and suffocating and inescapable.

“WHY ME?” Because she wanted—needed—to know.

You’re not ready for the answer to that question.

Not yet.

The wine she’d consumed churned in her belly like the ocean during a squall.

“WHAT DO YOU WANT?”

Many, many things.

Which both horrified and thrilled her. Jesus, she was *screwed*.

“NAME ONE.”

To know you.

She stared at the screen, her heart beating too hard, and, oh, it hurt. Like a balloon swelling in her chest, but heavy and sharp, scraping her ribs and bruising her lungs. So much fury and pain; no matter how much vengeance she wreaked, it always hurt. Nothing was enough.

She was afraid it never would be.

“LIAR,” she wrote.

No.

I don't lie.

“EVERYONE LIES,” she added, the words appearing without intent.

Do you?

“YES.”

Not to me.

Never to me.

She blinked. “GO FUCK YOURSELF.”

Talk to me.

I know you're hurting.

Tell me about that day.

“I hate you,” she said again. Because she desperately wanted to tell him.

Someone. Anyone.

Give me the words, a rúnsearc.

Please.

Please, he said. But he was no one. *An enemy.* Out to hunt her, out to hurt her. Not someone she could trust. Not someone who cared for her. No matter what claims he made.

But the ache welling within her was beginning to blot out reason. Logic. Common sense. And even though she knew it was foolish—stupid, worse—her fingers found the keys and pressed. “BLOOD AND BRAINS AND DEATH.”

What else?

Who was he, and why the hell did he want to know? But she couldn't stop. She couldn't.

“SCREAMS AND SIRENS AND SHOTS.” Her hands cramped, and her fingers froze, but she forced them to move. “I CAN STILL HEAR THEM. POP, POP, POP.”

Silencers.

They knew what they were doing.

Yes, they had. The rage that slept so fitfully within her stirred.

“HOW DO YOU KNOW THAT?” she demanded, panic and fear knifing through her. “WHO ARE YOU AND WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU WANT?”

What else happened?

The screen blurred; inside her skin, her bones trembled. But her hands moved over the keyboard of their own volition. “THEY TOOK HER.”

I know.

I’m sorry.

“I’M GOING TO FIND HER.” She pushed back, away from the desk, and stared in horror at her words.

I can help.

But she didn’t want his help. She didn’t want anything.

“Liar,” she whispered, but she wasn’t sure if it was him she was talking to, or herself.

You’re not alone anymore, a rúnsearc.

His words made her throat swell, and the fury bubbled to the surface.

“DON’T NEED HELP,” she typed, growls working in her chest. “PSYCHO STALKER!!”

Nay, lass.

Just a fan.

“YOU KNOW NOTHING ABOUT ME.”

But I do.

I told you.

We’re the same.

Which only made her angrier. “NOT A GODDAMN THING!!!”

I know everything.

I know what you do.

I know why.

I know your hunger.

Your rage.

Your despair.

I know you as I know myself.

Devastating words; surely just the alcohol. The emotion that swelled within

her—need and want and such wrenching yearning that she felt rent in two—it couldn't be real. *No*. No matter that she was crying, hot, salty tears that dripped from her chin. That her throat ached. That she wanted to throw her keyboard at his head.

And if some secret, insane part of her was tempted by him...that *had* to be the wine.

Yes, just the wine.

A rúnsearc...

She turned him off and stumbled away.

HOW ARE YOU?

“Suck it,” she told the monitor. But part of her tingled.

Idiot.

When are we going to meet?

Her heart leapt, but she scowled. Even knowing it was a bad idea, she typed, “AS IF.”

Don't be like that, a rúnsearc.

You know you want to.

Damn him. She didn't have time for this. There were files to download.

People to manipulate. Men to kill.

The Eiffel Tower at midnight?

The Parthenon at daybreak?

Victoria Falls at noon?

Stupid, fanciful man.

“GO AWAY,” she typed, her fingers pounding the keys.

Never.

She didn't argue. She just tuned him out and kept working.

YOU TOOK CARE OF HIM.

Good.

I knew you would.

“You don’t know anything,” she said.

But he did. Inexplicably, he *did*.

And she hated him for it.

That’s my murderous girl.

“NOT YOUR GIRL,” she responded, hitting the keys a little too hard. Because, really, she couldn’t argue with “murderous.” And unfortunately, *not* responding was becoming impossible.

He was driving her insane.

Mine.

And the day is coming when you’ll not be able to deny it.

Soon.

She froze, and something wild and electric shot through her veins. Fear. Excitement. Dread.

Crazy. Goddamn crazy.

What was she doing? Encouraging him. Pulling the tiger’s tail.

It was stupid and irresponsible and dangerous.

And she couldn’t seem to stop.

Your time is running out, a rúnsearc.

Get ready.

She slammed her laptop shut, her heart beating hard in her throat.

“Fool,” she told herself.

Because nothing good would come of this.

Nothing good at all.

Chapter 1

CIAN LAZARUS AHEARN.

Born to eKaterina Skryabin (Russian immigrant) and Lochlain Ahearn (Irish citizen/might have been IRA?). Raised in Dublin. Police records indicate arrests for larceny, brawling, and general thuggery. Lochlain disappeared when Lazarus was twelve (again, IRA?), and eKaterina moved them to St. Petersburg, Russia, where they lived until she died of ovarian cancer when Lazarus was 16. Records disappear after that until the rise of Lazarus Resolutions over a decade later, an international corporation which first appeared in the Baltic States and spread operations to the Middle East, Africa and South America.

According to the website, Lazarus Resolutions offers “private security and problem resolution,” and includes guarding both bodies and various objects of value. Clients include celebrities, politicians, museums, galleries, gemstone dealers, private citizens, and several small countries. No bio is included on the site. Wikipedia info on Lazarus is speculative and unverifiable. No photos on the web, public interviews have never been given, and his private information is all but impossible to lay hands on.

“Wanker,” Honor Genovese muttered, staring down at her notes.

Rumors insist Lazarus is self-created, a mercenary who made good dealing in rare objects and providing protection until his reputation—and pocketbook—enabled him to go legit. Known for being cutthroat, ruthless and unforgiving of those who betray him, Lazarus is, paradoxically, also known for his honesty and

strength of character. The word “honorable” is used ad nauseam. Those he employs do not speak out of turn, and they are ridiculously loyal. Some say it is because those he surrounds himself with are people he’s helped, although this is hearsay, and not something easily demonstrable. Only one consensus appears to exist with regard to Cian Lazarus Ahearn: he is someone with whom one does not fuck.

“Hoser,” she added.

Because it had to be him. *Had to.*

Didn’t it?

The one who’d appeared out of nowhere, like a ghost solidifying from mist. The one who’d simply arrived one day, his words a shocking trespass as they’d scrolled across one of her flat screens.

I know who you are.

She hadn’t responded. Not at first. No, she’d destroyed her equipment and re-routed her connections. She’d told herself it was inevitable, that she’d known someone would find her eventually, and she’d rebuilt her security.

And then it had happened again. And again. So often she came to know he would be there, no matter what she did. No matter how deeply she hid. No matter how far she fled. Which was infuriating.

And terrifying.

Because he stalked her with devastating skill, relentless and unwavering. He infiltrated her security again and again, finding her even when she was nothing more than a faint curl of smoke, the tiniest of digital signatures. He signed himself *Lazarus*, and he came and went like the ghost he resembled, and he drove her batshit crazy with his unwavering and—damn him—incredibly expert persistence.

He talked to her, and his words were familiar. As though they were friends. As though he *knew* her.

When no one knew her.

His communications were presumptive and intimate, as though he had every right to reach out and just...touch.

At first it had scared her. Then she’d grown angry. And when she couldn’t

shake him...

A mixture of rage and terror and *confusion*. Something she rarely experienced. And she wasn't grateful.

Not one bit.

But...this man on paper before her, this Cian, this Lazarus, he was a fighter. A man who had no trouble shedding blood—his own or anyone else's. He was a physical man, not a cerebral one. That he would be able to sit down before a machine and *find* her again and again was not typical of a man who thrived on the gritty nature of a corporeal hunt, the blood-pounding chase and heady rush of adrenaline. Another paradox, one which gave her doubt.

And Honor hated being uncertain.

She hadn't been uncertain of anything in the last seven years. Watching her brother and father die in a hail of bullets—and barely surviving the bloodbath—had turned her world starkly monochromatic. She'd been fifteen on that bloody day, and it had shaped every cell of her being into who she'd become: hard, cold, a warrior who fought with every weapon at her disposal.

Namely, her brain.

And there were no shades of gray in her world. Black and white, right and wrong. There was no *waffling*. Because they'd taken everything: her laughing, gregarious father, her protective, fierce brother. *Hannah*. The sister they'd stolen, the one she'd been searching for ever since.

The one she had finally found.

"Don't think about that right now," she told herself, annoyed. Because she wanted it too much, and that would make her impulsive and foolish, of which she was neither.

First, this. This damned man. *Lazarus*.

She needed answers.

Because—rock and hard place. Because she'd come to realize that she just might also need *him*.

If Cian Ahearn was, indeed, her Lazarus.

Her Lazarus.

"Puke," she said.

Because she didn't trust him. She didn't trust anyone. Well, maybe not anyone. There was one, but they were nothing alike.

She wanted evidence, something to convince herself that the risk was worth taking. But the paltry list of facts before her were mostly smoke and mirrors—she knew, because she was a master of illusion—and all she truly had to go on was the handful of interactions they'd had.

The few in which she'd taken part.

Some of it was pride—*burn*—because he'd found her over and over, forcing her to constantly scrub her tech and rework her entire network. No matter where she was—Seattle, Paris, Sydney. It didn't matter; he'd infiltrated all of her bolt-holes, following her as easily as if she'd left him a map stamped by a giant, glowing "X."

It didn't seem to matter that she was *Aequitas*—hacker extraordinaire, the faceless, genderless force feared by those whose commodity was flesh, number eight on the FBI's Most Wanted List. He stalked her like prey; he teased and probed and called her *a rúnsearc*, an Irish endearment which meant, literally, "secret love."

Which—seriously—freaked the shit out of her.

He knew who she was—when no one knew who she was. He found her, no matter how invisible she made herself. And he spoke to her as though he *liked* her.

As though he respected her.

"He's a copper," she told herself. "FBI. NSA. CIA. Interpol. MI-6. Badge-carrying motherfucker."

At least, that's what she continued to believe. Because it was safer that way, and safe was everything. She couldn't afford to let herself be drawn into whatever web he was spinning. And if she'd given in once—*thanks for nothing Merlot '95*—and allowed herself to share too much, the details of which were still a little fuzzy, well, she wouldn't be doing so again.

Because he was only getting bolder. Persistent and mystifying and inexplicable and—goddamn him—*tempting*.

When Honor was never tempted. Not by anything. Ever.

Which was why contacting him—for any reason—was a Bad Idea.

But...

Hannah.

The alarm had sounded at 4:43 a.m. A facial recognition hit, the sharp peal she'd given up hope of ever hearing. Like lightening, a jolt that froze her limbs and sent a painful wave of stinging heat across her skin. Part of her hadn't wanted to look. But she wasn't superstitious or fanciful; facts were her bread and butter. So she'd forced herself to turn on the screen and open the file.

She wouldn't have thought, after all that she'd seen, that anything could shock her. She'd been wrong.

Hannah.

For years she'd fantasized of finding her sister; imagined again and again that moment of discovery: the joy, the pain, the *hope*.

But the gaunt, hollow-eyed young woman she'd discovered produced only despair.

I'm too late.

Which was an asinine thought. No matter that the delicate, ginger-haired, giggling girl her sister had once been was now a shadow of her former self, a woman whose bones pressed hard against her pale skin, her cheekbones like blades, her mouth a narrow, unhappy line.

Her hair was flat black, unnatural, startling. A short cap that gleamed dully in the afternoon light. Her eyes were lined in kohl, heavily lashed, but still that bright, shimmering green, as lush as the first leaves of spring.

A shared trait.

Freckles dusted her skin, a pattern not unlike those that dotted Honor's own cheeks. But it was the scar that was unarguable. That deep, ragged line that halved Hannah's upper lip, faint now, nothing but a slender silver stroke, the result of a battle over Malibu Barbie a year before the men had come and blown apart their world. Honor had pushed her down, and Hannah had slammed head-first into the corner of the bed, splitting her upper lip wide open.

It was always something for which she'd felt deep shame and regret, but staring at the woman before her, Honor was glad. Because it was definitive proof

—something her wishful brain could not misconstrue.

This was Hannah. There was no doubt.

Honor did not consider herself an emotional person. Emotion was, as far as she could tell, useless and untrustworthy. It made people stupid. And while she was honest enough to recognize that everything she did was driven by the rage and pain that lived within her, it was not something to which she ever gave free rein. No, that monster remained under her bed, bound and gagged and chained to the floor.

But looking at her sister, seven years older, *changed*, her eyes dull and lifeless even as she stood before a brightly lit storefront whose windows displayed the most lavish of wedding gowns, Honor felt that monster stir.

What happened to her?

But Honor knew, if not the details, the grim reality of what likely had become of the beautiful, laughing girl taken at age twelve. *Stolen.* By men who traded life as commodity, whose evil and greed knew no earthly bounds. Honor had spent the last seven years hunting them and men like them, methodically destroying them one by one, an infestation without end. Men and women alike, hollow souls she felt no guilt for dousing.

And she understood like no other that little remained of the girl she'd once known and loved.

Not that that would stop her. No. She'd been searching too long. She wouldn't turn away, no matter what lay in wait. She couldn't. It simply wasn't in her.

But the clock was ticking. Because other than this brief, still photo and a general location, she had nothing else. No name, no identifying data; Hannah stood alone, adrift, unaccompanied by anyone who might provide more information on where to look.

And time was of the essence.

She needed to get to the location where the photo was taken—Tallinn, Estonia—and start there. Nothing less would do. But field work was not something with which she was familiar; she conducted her war from her own personal fortress, and the trenches were as foreign to her as the moon.

If she was to find Hannah, she would need help.

Sam, she thought, but Sam was getting married in a week. He was her sole friend in the world, her family by bond if not blood, and she knew he would come if she asked, but he'd been through enough on her behalf. He'd already saved her once.

She couldn't ask it of him again. Besides, the badge he carried held no weight overseas.

There were others, men and women she worked with, contacts she'd made, fellow soldiers in the war against human deprivation, but they, too, were busy. And their work was important.

Which left only....*him*.

Lazarus.

The bane of her existence; a man who tracked her as if she were a wounded, bleeding animal. Because if he was who she thought he was—and she was pretty sure he was—he was in a unique and powerful position to help her. And no matter how conflicted he made her feel, she would take advantage of that. *Of him*.

For Hannah, there was nothing she wouldn't do.

“Shit,” she muttered, her hands clenching around the papers she held.

She stared down at the words she'd amassed, the scraps produced by hours of tireless research. Behind her, the TV flickered, and *The Breakfast Club* inhaled.

“Shit,” she said again. Because it was inevitable. Choice was a luxury she didn't have. Not in this. No matter the repercussions.

Unfortunately, she had no clue—

Good morning, a rúnsearc.

I dreamt of you last night.

Do you ever dream of me?

“Goddamn it,” she hissed, her heart leaping to life when the letters populated on the screen she sat before, his timing so incredibly perfect it was suspect.

Still, no choice.

Her jaw clenched, but in her belly, butterflies took flight.

And part of her, a part she hadn't even known existed until this infuriating man had infiltrated her world, roared to life.

DO YOU EVER DREAM OF ME?

He didn't expect a response.

In the six months Cian had spent cajoling his Aequitas—also known as Honor Genovese—into communication, she'd only ever replied a handful of times—mostly to tell him to go fuck himself.

Good, then, that he was a tenacious bastard. Because regardless of Honor's refusal to talk to him, he wasn't giving up.

He planned on keeping her.

As he'd told her, they *were* the same. Driven by blood and vengeance and accountability. Righting the wrongs; warriors of the wounded. Dedicated to something bigger than themselves.

He would have never predicted the events that had unfolded before him, but he was no fool.

He knew a miracle when he received one.

And if she was a little obstinate in sharing his vision...well. He had all the time in the world.

He'd already spent five years tracking her down, countless hours whittled away surfing the electronic highways of the world until he'd managed to pinpoint her location. And if she hadn't been who she was—taking the risks she took—he would have never succeeded.

He would have never known she existed at all. No, he'd found her by accident. Unexpected, stunning; captivating as hell. Sharp and efficient as any blade.

He hadn't expected the single, unilateral stroke that had changed his life, and if part of him had bucked at the perceived loss—after all, she hadn't owned that moment of vengeance alone—when he'd come to understand who she was, and why she'd cleaved his revenge out from beneath him, he forgave her. Because it

was hers as well as his, and when she'd acted, she'd avenged them both.

Whether she knew it or not.

His unknowing—and, he suspected, quite unwilling—champion. The biggest temptation he'd ever faced.

A delicate scalpel to his serrated blade. His perfect match. If only she would

I don't dream.

I need your help.

Cian blinked. He stared at his computer screen, and every muscle lining his frame went taut.

Well?

For a moment, he didn't move. Frozen, his heart thudding hard, his blood a sudden, furious rush. And then his fingers kicked in. "Took you long enough."

Suck it.

Which made him laugh, half-disbelief, half-delight. "What can I help you with, *a rúnsearc?*"

Stop calling me that.

I need...

No matter the miles that separated them, he could always read her. The fury, the pain, the frustration. The temptation she fought so valiantly, never realizing she couldn't possibly win.

They were fated. Nothing could stop that, not even her.

And her fear now was sharp and ripe, like the air that streamed in the window next to him, salty with the sea. She was pushing herself. Taking a risk. *On him.*

Finally.

"Tell me," he whispered, coaxing her with his keys.

This doesn't mean anything.

That I'm asking for help.

You're just...the most convenient man for the job.

Cian didn't care. She was coming to him. That was all that mattered. "What can I do for you?"

A long pause that made panic lick through him. Then:

There's someone I've been looking for.

I found her.

He knew immediately who she was talking about: her sister, Hannah. The child she'd admitted she was searching for during the one, true conversation they'd had. The child Vladimir Dragunov's men had stolen after they'd killed Honor's father and brother and left her to die in a pool of her own blood.

He wished they weren't dead, so that he could kill them.

"Do you want me to bring her to you?" he typed, everything within him stilling as he awaited her answer.

Another long pause.

No.

I want you to take me to her.

Adrenaline slammed into him. "I can do that."

Just a ride, some help on the ground.

That's all I'm asking.

Oh, but she would get so much more. She didn't even know.

He laughed again, and the relief and exultation he heard told him he wasn't truly as patient as he liked to believe. He wanted her beside him. Working, playing. *Being*. Because he knew she didn't live, not truly, and he was determined to change that. To give her the life she sacrificed in order to placate the fury and pain that drove her.

Separate they were powerful; together they would be unstoppable. "You know I'll help. Always."

Don't make this into something it isn't.

You say you're my friend—so be one.

He could do that, too. Because he had to start somewhere. "When?"

I can meet you at Charles de Gaulle in the morning.

Can you do that?

He would fly to the fucking moon if necessary. "Yes. Where are we going?"

Estonia.

His smile widened, and he turned to look out at the vast, deep blue stretch of

the Gulf of Finland. *The most convenient man for the job.*

Apparently so. Lucky bastard. “What else?”

She hesitated again, and his fingers stilled.

All I have is a photo and a general location.

Satisfaction slid through him. She was sharing. *Trusting.* And it didn’t matter, that he knew she despised the necessity, that it was—he was—nothing more than a necessary evil.

She’d come to him. Freely. His pathologically careful woman was throwing caution to the wind. It was more than he’d dared hope for. And he wouldn’t squander the concession.

Not in any way.

“Send it to me.” He typed in his private email, aware that he was trusting, too.

Because she wasn’t the only one hunted. But she’d obviously figured out who he was; not that he’d tried to hide. He needed her to understand who he was.

Why?

So belligerent. Honest and funny and so piercingly intelligent, he grew hard just thinking about her. “Time to trust me.”

No.

But just by reaching out, she had. Whether she wanted to recognize it or not. That was enough for him.

For now.

“I have contacts in Estonia.” He had contacts everywhere. “Send me the photo.”

She didn’t respond, and he knew she was wrestling with the urge to tell him to go fuck himself again. But he only waited, his heart a painful flutter in his chest, his blood roaring like the beast she stirred within him.

Fine.

Tomorrow at de Gaulle.

How will I know you?

Anticipation sizzled across his nerve endings and he stilled, savoring the

sensation. His email notification beeped, and he looked at the return address, *AequitasOne*, and everything within him settled into place.

Finally.

Hello?

“You won’t,” he wrote. “I’ll find you.”

A picture is better.

Because she wanted to prepare. Build the wall between them before they ever crossed paths. And he was not about to let that happen.

No fucking way.

“Tomorrow, *a rúnsearc*.” It wasn’t easy to sever the connection, to leave her when she’d finally reached out.

To leave her hanging.

He logged out and did anyway.

Chapter 2

“I KNOW IT’S A RISK, AND I DON’T BLAME YOU IF YOU DON’T WANT TO TAKE IT, but I would like you here.”

Honor turned away from the stream of humanity clogging the Charles de Gaulle airport, an undulating mass that moved in thick, churning waves, luggage dragged behind them like reluctant children.

She hated crowds. Flying. *People*.

Her hand tightened on her cell phone, and she scowled. “Maybe.”

“At least think about it.”

She had. She wanted nothing more than to share the day Sam got married; that’s what family did. But now there was this—*Hannah*—and she didn’t know what was going to happen. She couldn’t make a promise she might not be able to keep; she wouldn’t.

And she couldn’t tell him the truth. Because he’d get on a plane and come. She knew that. Hannah was personal for him, too.

“It’ll be private, small, here at my place. Just us and a few close friends.” Sam paused. “Lucia would like to meet you.”

An unexpected swell of emotion pulsed in Honor’s chest. *Sam and Lucia*. A relationship forged from blood and pain and loss. One she’d watched blossom from afar and approved of wholeheartedly. One she envied.

Lucia Sanchez was a good woman. Strong, brave, willing to do what was right, no matter the price. Not unlike Honor. She was a good match for Sam, and

Honor was glad he'd found someone, because he deserved to be happy. He'd spent years making countless sacrifices for others—for *her*—and it was time he put himself first.

"I'll try," Honor told him. "I promise."

Sam sighed. "You're safe here. You know that, right?"

She knew. He'd always protected her; that's what Sam did. He sheltered and defended. And he'd saved her, in more ways than he knew. When her belief had been destroyed, he'd given her faith. More, he'd given her life. Opportunity. *Purpose.*

So many things, and perhaps one day she would tell him. But not today.

Today would be hard enough.

Time to trust me.

When she didn't trust anyone. Sam, as much as she was capable. But no one else. She didn't want to. And part of her regretted reaching out, feared the repercussions, because there *would* be repercussions.

There always were.

The possibility that Lazarus might betray her to those who hunted her; that this might be just a game to him. That he wasn't who he appeared, but someone else entirely. Another monster, because the world was full of monsters. But beyond those grim possibilities lay the slim prospect of success.

And hope, no matter how foolish.

"You okay, kid?"

No. Not in any way, shape or form.

"Yes," she lied. Because everyone lied.

Do you?

All the time.

Not to me.

Never to me.

Asshole.

"Liar," Sam muttered.

And something within her clenched, because he knew her so well and accepted her anyway.

“I’m happy for you,” she said.

“Then come to my wedding.”

“I’ll try,” she said again. “I don’t want to miss it.”

“Then don’t.”

Her jaw clenched. “I have to go.”

In the background, a child suddenly squealed, and Sam said, “Why are you naked?”

Giggling, another squeal. A dog barking. A stream of Spanish—*Lucia*—and Honor listened carefully, her heart pounding hard. *Love*. That’s what love sounded like. Family. Home and hearth and *normal*.

Something she would never have.

For her, normal was forever out of reach. Still, she was glad it existed, if only in her periphery. The warmth, the light, like sunshine no matter the intractable shadow she stood within.

“I have to go,” she repeated.

The hair at her nape suddenly bristled, and goose bumps washed across her skin in a chilling wave.

Watched.

She turned and looked at the crowd, and her brain fired, as if inhaling hungrily. People were catalogued, positions, body language, and mood categorized accordingly. Sounds were discerned, scents identified. Every detail, every breath. And while none of it made her happy, there was nothing to fear.

Except Lazarus. Because he was there.

Somewhere.

The hair on her arms stood on end. Her skin prickled.

“Please come,” Sam said into her ear, his voice serious, and that painful swell of emotion returned.

“If I can,” she whispered.

“You be careful,” he ordered.

I love you, too.

“Always,” she replied.

And then he was gone. The weight in her chest grew heavier; her heart

fluttered. So many secrets. But that was her world. The life she'd built would permit no less.

Something she'd accepted long ago.

"Honor."

The voice startled her, low, rough, shaped by a lilting Irish accent. It came from behind her, too close, accompanied by the scent of the sea and a simmering heat that made her spine stiffen.

She froze, and her heart lunged to painful life. How long had it been since she'd heard that name spoken aloud?

Years.

Further proof that no matter what she told herself, she'd been found. And only one person had managed to get that close.

Lazarus.

Panic flared through her, followed immediately by something wild and daring and very, very dangerous: exhilaration.

"Turn around, *a rúnsearc,*" he said softly, the endearment almost like song.

Her blood roared in her ears. She didn't want to turn around.

She wanted to run.

But she had done this, brought them together. She had a mission, and it didn't matter what she wanted. Or what she feared. There was no escaping this, not if she wanted to find Hannah.

This must be done.

So she took a deep breath and made herself turn to face him.

No matter how hard she'd tried, she hadn't been able to conjure him in her head, but nothing she'd imagined prepared her for the reality.

He was...terrifying.

And not because of his size—broad, tall, long bones wrapped in sinew and thick ropes of muscle—or because of the rough, craggy nature of his features, all harsh lines and blunt planes. Not his gaze—rich, warm hazel, speared by odd bits of blue and green and dark, chocolate brown—or the shimmer of something she couldn't interpret that moved across that gaze as he stared down at her.

No, it was her own immediate response to him that scared the bejesus out of

her.

Because every fiber of her being went on high alert. Her skin flushed; a visceral, almost primal awareness washed over her, and the blood in her veins simmered. She grew too warm. And she became aware, in a way she'd never before experienced, that she was female.

A woman.

Red-blooded and alive and—

“Good Christ, look at you,” he muttered and took a step toward her, too close. Clothed entirely in black, from the fine, ebony cashmere sweater and tailored woolen coat he wore to the tips of the leather boots that peeked out from beneath black chinos; glints of dark, blood red winked in his close-cropped, auburn hair. “You’re bloody beautiful.”

Honor only blinked at him. She knew what he saw: a short, round redhead with green eyes, a big mouth and an even bigger butt. Pale skin dappled with freckles, her father’s dimpled cheeks. Nothing special. Certainly nothing to garner the look with which he was studying her.

A look that was—

She halted that thought. She didn’t want to speculate on what the man before her was thinking or feeling.

Because she didn’t care.

Liar.

Yes, yes. So what?

“Are you ready?” she asked him coolly, lodging her bag firmly over her shoulder.

“Aye,” he murmured. “I’ve never been more ready.”

Which sounded ominous, but, again, she would *not* hypothesize. Because it simply didn’t matter, what he meant. Or how he looked at her. Or how ridiculously seductive that Irish accent was.

Superfluous and unimportant.

Eye on the ball, girlfriend. No matter the happy dance her hormones were currently doing. She wasn’t *dead*. That she was capable of reacting to a man was a matter of biology, not fate.

Not destiny.

“Lead the way,” she said with a regal nod of her head.

But he didn’t move, looming over her, a small, satisfied smile curving his mouth. His gaze was piercingly direct, intense, and when she took a small step back, he immediately followed. “What makes you think I want you behind me?”

Her brows arched. “You don’t trust me?”

“Aye, I do.” His voice roughened; he stepped even closer, which made her step back—again, damn it—and she bumped into the cool glass of the window behind her. She glared at him, her heart beating double-time. He was just...*too much*. The jerk. “But I’d prefer you walk beside me.”

He stared at her, and Honor saw a challenge, one she didn’t understand or care to interpret. No matter that something within her came to attention at that look, painfully still and...hopeful.

Fucking hope.

She stiffened her spine and gripped her bag and opened her mouth to—

“Shite,” he muttered before she could speak, and in her peripheral vision a man materialized, clad in a dark blue uniform, complete with shiny brass buttons and a badge that winked in the sunlight.

Airport security.

But before she could ascertain the threat, Lazarus was hauling her toward him with strong arms that wrapped her waist and trapped her against him. Her body slammed into his; his hands slid down over the globes of her bottom and squeezed.

White heat shot through her, electric, unexpected. Her knees went weak. Her breasts pooled against the hard, warm, unyielding plane of his chest, and the shock of the connection made a violent tremor move through her. He was tensile and strong and *real*.

Far too real.

His scent filled her lungs; his body heat wrapped her like a glove. His strength was unyielding, and *there was nowhere to go*.

“Och, I’ve missed you, lass,” he growled loudly and leaned down to nuzzle the tender place where her neck and shoulder met, shoving aside the neckline of

her t-shirt with his chin, and the faint scrape of his bristle against her skin made another tremor shake her.

“Stop it,” she hissed into his ear, her free hand clenched into the fine cashmere of his coat. But he only pulled her closer, until there was nothing between them but the clothes that separated them, and squeezed her butt again.

Goddamn him. As if he had every right to touch her! Possessive, greedy; aggressive.

And part of her responded. Without permission; some idiotic, stupid sliver of self wanted to arch into him and surrender to the façade.

Shite was right.

“Just a couple of reunited lovers.” Another scrape of whiskers up the line of her throat. His breath filled her ear; his accent beguiled. “Give him a show, and he’ll never remember our faces.”

His fingers tightened on her butt, and she snarled at him in her throat, and he laughed, a low, husky sound that made a second wave of heat sizzle through her. Sharp teeth nipped at her earlobe. “You smell delicious. I could eat you whole, one sweet, luscious bite.”

“I’m going to knee your balls into your nostrils,” she whispered furiously, squirming against him.

He laughed again. His hands squeezed. And liquid heat pooled in her joints and threatened to drown her. The arms around her tightened into unyielding bands, as dense and strong as steel.

“Now, you don’t mean that, love,” he chastised, his voice raised enough to carry, but he’d made sure, locking her into place against him. “We’ve too many babies to make.”

She growled; he nuzzled her jaw, her cheek, her temple. Gentle, loving, his mouth tender.

It was such a lie that pain suddenly knifed through her.

“No,” she whispered, almost choking on her fury.

And something of that fury must have gotten through, because he pulled back, and turned them both toward the concourse, dragging her beside him. When she tried to escape, he only hauled her closer, his strength obdurate.

“This was not our agreement,” she said through her teeth and heroically fought the urge to bash him in the face with her bag.

“There was no agreement, lass,” he replied, tugging her from the oncoming path of a teen engrossed in his phone.

“I told you not to make this into something it isn’t,” she told him. Her entire body was shaking, her skin was flushed with color, and she could still feel the rasp of his chin, the soft press of his mouth.

“I remember,” he said.

“Let me go,” she demanded, trying to wriggle from his grip.

“Don’t draw attention,” he murmured and leaned down to nuzzle her ear again. “We’re lovers. Best that we look it.”

“Not lovers,” she snarled.

“Well, we can’t be siblings, *a rúnsearc*.” He drew back to arch a brow at her. “We look nothing alike.”

“I’m going to gut you like a trout,” she promised.

But he only smiled down at her, and the excitement—*the anticipation*—she saw in him made her breath lock in her throat. “I’d expect no less.”

“A *TROUT*,” HONOR REPEATED, BUT SHE WAS TREMBLING AGAINST HIM, AND CIAN tightened his hold.

Her fear flared brightly between them, as hot and destructive as any flame, and he forced himself to slow down. *Calm the hell down*. Because she wasn’t ready for what he wanted from her, and if he pushed, she would disappear.

And he wasn’t about to let that happen. Not now, when he finally had her in hand.

She elbowed him, but she was tiny, barely reaching his breastbone, and the small blow did nothing to stop him. Soft and round, her cheeks furious with color. And that mouth—

“Where are we going?” she demanded, still trying to worm from his grip.

But he wasn’t letting go.

“Estonia,” he said into her ear and inhaled deeply: jasmine and sunshine. That’s what she smelled like. Her hair was a thick knot at the back of her head, brilliant red-gold, shimmering like the sunset.

She went to wrench away, but they passed another security guard, and she let him nuzzle her, her body stiff in his arms.

Cian knew he was moving too fast. Being too aggressive. *Taking*. Not giving. But she was *here*. Finally. He couldn’t seem to help himself.

Dressed in faded jeans, scuffed brown cowboy boots, and a dark green t-shirt, she’d blended in well with the crowd around her. Just a young woman on her way somewhere. But she’d stopped Cian cold. The photo he had was almost a decade old, and it hadn’t done her justice.

“How?” she wanted to know.

“My plane is ready and waiting,” he replied, steering them toward the entrance to the private tarmac. “We’ll take off within the hour.”

She halted, forcing him to stop with her, and stared at him, her brilliant green eyes glittering like the finest emeralds. “Promise?”

And he saw her hope, so carefully cultivated, peering through the fear and the fury.

“Aye,” he said softly. “I promise, *a rúnsearc*.”

She started walking again. “I told you not to call me that.”

“Does it bother you?” he asked.

“Go fuck yourself,” she muttered, and he smiled.

He was not a man who’d known joy, but she came close. When he’d first discovered her, he’d known nothing about her, but it hadn’t taken long for him to come to appreciate her skills. To recognize that piercing intelligence. To respect her mission. But it was only when he’d begun watch her unravel her foes that he’d begun to *enjoy* her.

To want her.

“Don’t be like that,” he murmured. “We’re in this together now, lass.”

She wanted to argue; it was written all over the mulish expression on her gorgeous face. But she couldn’t. Because they *were* in it together. A deliberate act on his part, and not wholly altruistic.

Because he was a selfish bastard.

“I can pay you,” she said. “Hire you.”

His hands tightened on her. “Not a fucking chance.”

She wiggled again. “I won’t owe you.”

“No, you won’t.” He turned them down the long narrow hall that led to the private boarding gate. “I’m doing this for you, *a rúnsearc*. No other reason. And I expect nothing in return.”

But he hoped. Oh, how he hoped.

“Bullshit,” she snorted. “What do you really want?”

A *chance*. But he wasn’t foolish enough to say it. Nay, she was skittish enough. Part of it was simply who she was: hunted by law enforcement far and wide, a moving target of the highest value. But more, it was the energy between them. Vibrant and intense, as palpable as touch.

Like fucking lightning. Even across a thousand miles; even virtually. Real and white hot and something he’d grabbed onto with both hands.

Something he wasn’t willing to let go of.

“Friends don’t expect rewards,” he told her.

“Friends.” She snorted again. “Fat chance.”

So stubborn. So resistant. But he understood. Her entire world had imploded when she was little more than a child, and only one person had stood by her. Helped her. Cian was grateful to the man who’d risked everything to save her, but she needed to understand he wasn’t the only one willing. That Cian was there now, and he wasn’t going anywhere.

She wasn’t alone anymore. Her world had widened, whether she knew it or not. Whether she wanted it or not.

They were inevitable.

“I don’t have friends,” she continued, but she wasn’t fighting him any longer, walking beside him, allowing him to lead.

“Bullshit,” Cian said, throwing the word back at her. “Steele is your friend.”

She halted again at the opening of the hallway, where a handful of people milled, awaiting their private flights. Her eyes flashed. “You leave Sam out of this.”

Fierce and protective; for an instant Cian wondered if he had competition. But he knew better. Sam Steele was engaged to the woman he'd gone on the run with only a handful of months earlier; together they'd saved two children—and countless others—from the hands of a monster. A monster Honor had helped them defeat.

One she'd put down.

No, Sam was her family. He'd risked his badge with the U.S. Marshal's Office in order to make her disappear after her family was killed, after his own agency failed miserably to protect her. And he'd been watching out over her ever since. But they weren't together. The love between them wasn't that of a man and woman.

Thank fucking Christ.

"He's safe enough," Cian said and urged her forward. "He doesn't need you to protect him."

Honor resisted. "I mean it. You leave him alone."

Cian leaned down, his hand tightening on her hip. "He's not the one you need to worry about, *a rúnsearc*."

Color flooded her cheeks. She growled a little. "This isn't going to work."

"No?" He tilted his head and let his eyes roam over her, tracing her shape, lingering on the soft, wide curve of her mouth. She had a beautiful mouth. "Does that mean you don't want to know what I've learned?"

She froze against him, her eyes dark, searching his. *So transparent*. Everything she felt flitted across her features; no wonder she worked from behind a thick, impenetrable wall. Her poker face was nonexistent.

"Don't lie to me," she whispered.

"Never," he told her, meaning it. "That's not what's to be between us."

She blinked and shook her head. "What did you find?"

He looked around; no one was paying attention to them, but he wasn't willing to have the conversation where someone might hear. "Not here."

She swept a glance around the room and nodded stiffly. Cian urged her forward again, down the narrow entryway to the tarmac. Another security guard stood at the thick steel door that led outside, but when Cian pulled out his key

card and ran it through the electronic lock, it turned green, and the man only nodded in acknowledgment as they passed him.

The day was bright with sunlight, but brisk, cold, and when Honor shivered against him, Cian gathered her close. Noise bombarded them; jet engines whirling to life, rumbling as they took off along the long, paved runway. Beeps sounded as luggage carts wound their way through the mass of winged beasts; voices intruded as the sound system announced departures and arrivals.

The plane sat fueled and ready, a sleek, slender Bombardier BD-700. As they approached, Akachi descended the steps, his large form as dark as night in the bright sunlight. Scarred and hard as stone, the huge Sudanese was Cian's most trusted employee. They'd been together for almost a decade, since the day Cian had strong-armed Akachi out of the child army he'd been stolen into and carried him kicking and screaming out of Sudan.

"Shall we prepare for departure?" Akachi asked, his accent thick, his gaze veiled as it moved over Honor.

"Aye," Cian said and urged her up the stairs in front of him. "I want to be wheels-up as soon as we have clearance."

Akachi disappeared into the cockpit; the wind cut through them like a slender blade until they stepped into the lush warmth of the jet. Cian took Honor's bag before she could protest and pushed her gently down into one of the thick leather seats that dotted the interior.

She scowled at him. "Woof."

He smiled and leaned down to rub his knuckles over the blade of her cheekbone. "Just making sure you stay."

She pulled away, her eyes narrowing. She grabbed her bag from him and sat it at her feet. Then she gathered herself as if donning armor.

"I want to know what you found," she said, sitting back, folding her hands in her lap.

"Patience, lass." He nodded to Akachi as the other man pulled the door shut and locked it. "Food first."

"I'm not hungry," she muttered, watching him.

"Did you eat?"

She only stared at him.

“Then we’re going to eat.” He turned to Akachi. “As soon as we’re up.”

Akachi nodded and disappeared.

“What to drink?” he asked Honor, moving to the mini bar.

“Just stop,” she ordered. “I don’t need a wait staff. I need answers.”

“And you’ll get them,” Cian told her seriously. “But first, I’m going to take care of you.”

Her cheeks flushed. “I don’t need you to take care of me.”

“Nay, lass. You are a force unto yourself. I ken that.” Cian poured them each a glass of champagne. “Doesn’t mean you don’t need a little pampering now and then.”

“Not from you.”

He turned to look at her. “When was the last time someone took care of you?”

Her hands were clenched in her lap, her knuckles pressing white against her skin. She glared at him.

“That’s what I thought.” He strode over to her, holding out the champagne. “Come, let’s celebrate.”

“Celebrate what?” she asked, brows arching. She didn’t take the glass he offered.

“Our partnership.”

“We aren’t partners,” she said. “We aren’t anything.”

Och, that hurt. But he was nothing if not persistent.

“We’re going to get your sister back,” he said and thrust the glass at her. “Don’t you think that’s worth toasting?”

For a long moment, she didn’t move. Then, grudgingly, “You know everything, don’t you?”

“Just the facts.”

She searched his gaze, her eyes dark.

“Your secrets are safe with me, *a rúnsearc*,” he promised quietly. “I’ll not betray you.”

“We’ll see,” she said.

Which wasn't what he wanted to hear, but it was the best he was going to get.

For now.

She took the glass with a sigh.

"To Hannah," he said.

"To Hannah," she agreed.

And they drank on it.

Chapter 3

“HIS NAME IS ANDREI PETROV. HE’S A WEAPONS MANUFACTURER OUT OF Tallinn. While it’s highly likely he sells arms to anyone with the funds, I couldn’t find any evidence of wrongdoing; the man reeks of legitimacy. His company does business globally, but he’s careful to stick to dealing on the right side of international and local law. He’s not a major player, but also not a man you want to cross. He’s loosely connected to the Stavos Brotherhood, a collective of Russian loyalists who’ve dedicated themselves to reuniting the Soviet Union, and he has a reputation as a hard, unbending bastard who doesn’t take kindly to being fucked with. I don’t know how long he’s had Hannah, or how he got her. I don’t know if she’s with him willingly or under duress. But she *is* with him.” Cian paused. “On that, there’s no argument, at least. Petrov has an estate on the outskirts of the city, manned by a dozen hired guns and a state of the art security system. He won’t be easy to infiltrate.”

Honor stared at the information spread out on the table before her, painfully aware that she was going to owe the man beside her, no matter what. Because here was everything she needed—and then some.

We’re going to get your sister back.

She was beginning to believe it.

Damn him.

How did he know? Who she was, who Hannah was? More importantly, *why did he care?*

She didn't know, and that scared the shit out of her.

A fat, decadent pastry glazed with shiny white icing sat next to her. Bacon, eggs, French toast. Belgium waffles, crepes, fat, sizzling sausage links. Fruit, granola, yogurt. Anything anyone could possibly want for breakfast was laid out like Thanksgiving dinner, and Cian indulged in everything, eating so much she was surprised he didn't split at the seams. For a man so...fit, it was surprising.

And tempting. That stupid pastry was calling her name.

But she didn't want to accept anything; she'd already allowed too much. He was a man who would take her over if she let him. She didn't need to be experienced with men to recognize that. He was like Sam: he got the job done. And he didn't bend. He did what he thought was best, and to hell with anyone who disagreed.

Perhaps it should have relieved her, his resemblance to Sam, but it didn't. Because Sam was honest and strong and good; she trusted Sam.

She didn't trust Cian. Not even a little bit.

The way he looked at her... No. She didn't know much about men—relationships, love—but she wasn't blind. He wanted her. And he didn't bother to hide it. Instead, he challenged her with it, and damned if some part of her didn't want to take him up on that challenge. But the rest of her knew better, understood how out of her depth she was, how painful a lesson she was courting.

Hannah. Focus on Hannah.

Get in, get her sister, get out.

With herself intact.

Her secrets intact.

Jesus, how much did he know?

For a woman who lived in the gray area, it was shocking. And she wanted to know what he knew and how. Because him knowing anything was very, very dangerous, and no matter how often he reassured her that he could be trusted, Honor knew better.

No one was safe.

“Petrov is having a benefit at his estate for Syrian refugees tomorrow night,” Cian said and popped a strawberry into his mouth. “We're on the guest list.”

Honor stared up at him. “How?”

A flash of that roguish smile, one that made her stupid heart skip a beat. “I’m a good man to know, *a rúnsearc*.”

That she could believe.

He nudged the pastry toward her. “You know you want to.”

Always with the daring.

“Indulge,” he murmured, and when her gaze met his, his eyes gleamed, and she knew he was talking about more than the pastry.

She looked away, back at the photo on the table.

Andrei Petrov. The man who had Hannah.

He was average. Average height, average looks; the only remarkable thing about him was his twenty thousand dollar suit. In his fifties, with a head of salt and pepper hair and indistinct features. Flat eyes, narrow mouth.

Nothing special, one way or the other. Who was he? How did Hannah end up with him?

What happened to you, little sister?

“We’ll get her back,” Cian said softly, and Honor could feel his gaze, as heavy as a physical touch.

She was still angry over the way he’d handled her, as if she was a child in need of leading. His possession was misplaced, and she didn’t appreciate it. He had no right to touch her, especially not like *that*.

He wanted something. Something beyond her in his bed; Honor was certain. He had to. People didn’t do for others; they did *to* others. That was the world. So what was it?

And why did she have the feeling it would be something she couldn’t afford?

“Eat,” Cian said.

She looked up at him. “It won’t work.”

“What?”

“Seduction.”

His brows rose. “Is that what I’m doing?”

“Don’t pretend,” she told him. “Is that why you’re doing this? For a fuck?”

Darkness slid over his features, and he leaned down, so close she could smell

the sweet scent of strawberry on his breath. Heat flashed through her. “Don’t malign it.”

She blinked. “Malign what?”

“I like you, lass. I respect you. There’s more to it than just the fucking.”

Another jolt of heat, turning her joints liquid. Among other things. *The fucking*. As if it just was. “There will be no fucking.”

That darkness spread, until his face was hard and lined, and she saw, in that instant, the man who’d built an empire from nothing. A man feared in some circles and revered in others. A man with blood and death on his hands.

But her hands weren’t any cleaner, and goddamn it, the sight of that man made her...want.

You are totally fucking fucked.

“Aye, well, we’ll see about that, *a rúnsearc*,” he said, and there was no mistaking the promise—threat—in him.

She licked her lips, and his gaze followed the movement, and something within her flared, an ache, a demand. “I have money, connections, invaluable contacts. We can make a fair trade.”

A smile curved his mouth, but there was nothing humorous, nothing pleasant. “I told you: I’m doing this for you. And I expect nothing in return.”

“Yes, you do.”

“Nay. I may want something, but I don’t expect it. There’s a world of difference between the two.”

The smell of him invaded her nostrils. His hands came down to brace themselves against the table, muscle hardening beneath the sweater he wore, which fit him like a glove. A tremor moved through her, and she had an insane image flash through her head: him, above her, naked, his body rippling as he—

“No.” She took a deep, gulping breath, struggling to regain the control he stole so effortlessly. “I don’t...I’m not... Just no. No.”

“Why not?”

She shook her head, and an odd, painful yearning sliced through her. *Goddamn him*. “I’m alone. I like it that way.”

“That’s because it’s all you know,” he said, his voice gentle. “I ken that, lass.

But you're not alone any longer. Best you accept that. Things will go easier—for us both.”

She glared up at him. “There’s nothing easy about me.”

“Nay, you’ll make me earn it.” He leaned closer, so close that—for one terrified and thrilling moment—she thought he was going to kiss her. “I’m prepared for that.”

“Why?” she whispered, baffled.

“Because you’re worth it.”

Those words made a thin fissure erupt within her, a line so deep she knew it cracked the wall she lived behind all the way to its foundation. But before she could respond, the huge, scary African man Cian called Akachi appeared behind him.

“We are going to land,” he said, his black eyes hard.

Distrust and warning emanated from him; he watched Honor as though he expected her to palm the silver, and while she was mostly offended by that, she knew it was simply a sign of his loyalty to the man who stood above her.

And she could respect that, even if it annoyed the crap out of her.

“Thank you,” Cian said, unmoving above her.

Akachi nodded and disappeared.

“We’re not done talking about this,” Cian said, his voice hard, his gaze boring into her.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” she replied.

“First, Hannah,” he continued. “And then you and I are going to dance.”

He turned away, and Honor watched him go, her heart beating hard in her throat.

She’d known she was taking a risk when she reached out, when she’d asked him for help. It hadn’t truly been necessary; she *could* have hired someone. An entire team of men to do the digging, to retrieve Hannah. Yet, she hadn’t. Instead, she’d given into the dangerous temptation Cian presented. She’d gone against every tenant she lived by, abandoned every precaution. And held out a hand.

She had done that. Why the hell had she done that?

But she knew.

He was standing right in front of her.

HONOR STOOD BATHED IN THE FADING SUNLIGHT, HER HAIR A FIERY HALO, HER skin kissed by gold.

The ache she created gutted Cian.

He didn't understand it; he never had. But he wasn't a man who needed understanding. The world was too complex, and life had a way of giving one what they needed, even if they didn't recognize the gift when it was presented.

"Come and eat with me," he said.

She looked over her shoulder, her eyes dark. Beyond her, the gulf shimmered beneath the setting sun, glittering like diamonds.

In his home. Finally.

It didn't bother him, that she'd retreated to the room he'd given her as soon as they'd arrived. The conversation they'd had on the plane had shaken her, but he wasn't sorry.

Best that they were on the same page.

He wasn't going to force her into anything; he wanted her to come to him freely. But that didn't mean he wouldn't do his best to tempt her.

"We need a plan," he added, because it was true. "Petrov is an unknown. We need to be prepared."

She nodded and turned to walk toward him. Still in her faded, butt-loving jeans and t-shirt. Her feet were bare. She looked comfortable. At home. And it was far too easy to picture her here *always*.

She halted before him. Her chin lifted.

"Thank you," she said coolly, her gaze meeting his.

His brows rose. "For what?"

"For helping me."

"I'll always help you," he told her seriously.

Color bloomed in her cheeks. "That's foolish. You don't know me."

But she was wrong; he knew more than she comprehended. He'd told her once they were the same, and it was true. Perhaps he needed to spell that out, so she understood.

"Come," he said, and laid his palm in the small of her back. A small touch, but one she didn't fight, and one he needed. To have her so close and deny himself...

It was harder than he'd expected—especially after how he'd touched her at the airport. His palms continued to tingle with the sensory memory of her in hand. Firm, round, as lush as that tempting mouth.

He wanted to touch her again, and in far more intimate fashion.

They went down the sweeping curve of stairs, and he steered her out onto the wide stone patio, where plates were set at a glass-topped, wrought iron table. The scent of fresh bread and simmering potatoes mingled with the smell of the sea. On the water, lights winked; in the distance, far across the gulf, the trees were a dark smudge of green.

She accepted the chair he offered, and he poured them both a glass of the white wine Akachi had left chilling in a stainless steel bucket.

"It's beautiful here," she said after a moment. "I didn't realize."

Few did. That was one of the reasons he made his home here. That and it reminded him enough of the country he'd spent a fair chunk of his childhood exploring—enough, but not too much. And Tallinn was a bustling city with a vibrant economy. Few realized it was the headquarters for the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defense Center of Excellence and one of the top digital cities in the world. Tallinn's harbor was the busiest in all the Baltic States.

"When I was a child, my mother would bring me here," he replied. "She had an aunt in Toompea."

Honor's gaze followed him as he sat down. "Your mother?"

"Aye." Cian sat back and took a sip of his wine. "Would you like to know about her?"

Honor shrugged. "If you want to share."

Translation: yes.

"She was an impulsive woman, my mam. She married my da after only

knowing him a day, a decision she came to bitterly regret. He was not...a good man.” Cian shook his head, remembering the hard headed—and hard fisted—man who’d made his childhood a living hell. “They met in a pub. She was there visiting the university; he was there getting sloshed. Love at first sight, she called it. More like lust at last call. But she claimed they were happy, for a while. Until she realized my father was involved in...very bad things.”

Honor’s mouth opened, then closed.

“What?” Cian asked.

“Your father...” She shook her head. “It’s none of my business.”

“I’m making it your business,” he said.

A look of consternation, her cheeks pink. “Was he IRA?”

The question was too precise, and Cian realized she’d done some extensive digging. *Of course she had.* He shouldn’t be surprised; she was an expert at information extraction. That she would’ve dug as deeply as she could have went without question.

“Aye,” he said. “A bomb maker. Until he blew himself up.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I wasn’t.” Cian shrugged. “My da, he was a ripe, bloody bastard. Too fond of drink and breaking bones. He killed people for the Movement—women and children—and he boasted about it. He was fucking proud. I was glad to bury him.”

Cian knew he sounded bitter; he could hear it, see it in Honor’s careful expression. But there was no changing how he felt about the man who’d bred him, and he didn’t care to try.

“My mam,” he continued, “was a different matter. Flighty, irresponsible, too careless, but a fine woman, and a loving mother. She did her best.” Even if every decision she’d ever made had been the wrong one. “I loved her. When she died, I wanted to die, too.”

“I’m sorry,” Honor said again, and he knew she didn’t realize it, but her voice softened. “Cancer, wasn’t it?”

Yes, she’d definitely done some digging.

“No,” he said and watched her blink. “That’s what they said, but it was a lie.

She was murdered.”

Honor sat up. She gripped her wineglass. “Murdered?”

“Aye.” Cian smiled, dark, hollow. “She’d met a man, one I didn’t know about until it was too late. Until she was dead from the drugs he fed her.”

“Why the deception?”

“He was a powerful man who covered his tracks well. I knew who he was, but I couldn’t touch him. I was just a kid, and an orphan to boot.”

She watched him, and Cian knew she understood. Her mother had died young in a horse riding accident. Her father was all she’d had, and he’d been taken from her brutally. But unlike his own da, her father, for all of his faults, had—by all accounts—loved his daughters fiercely.

“What happened then?” she asked softly.

“I left. Russia was cruel. No one cared that I was homeless and hungry, no one but the predators. I stole to survive, and when I had enough, I took the train here, to Tallinn. I thought I could live with my aunt in Toompea, but she was dead, and as far as I knew, I had no other family. My da didn’t talk about his people, so I never knew them. I was alone, truly alone. So I did the only thing I could—I set to stealing enough to get to Ireland.”

“And did you?”

Cian remembered that cold, terrifying trip, filled with strangers and dangers he hadn’t even known existed. A crucible, that’s what that journey had been, and he’d come out of it harder, angrier and far more dangerous himself. “Aye, eventually.”

“And then?”

Akachi appeared, his hands laden with plates, and Cian stood to help as he served them. Fresh ahi, boiled potatoes, a crisp green salad. Bread, butter, tiny, tart pickled beets. More wine.

“Eat,” he told Honor as he sat again, and Akachi quietly disappeared.

She only stared at him.

“What?” he asked.

“Finish it,” she ordered.

Which pleased him. Even though he knew she was gathering intel, that it

wasn't necessarily personal. But the way she was watching him...his lass was curious.

"Eat," he said again. "And I'll tell you."

Suspicion crossed her features, but she picked up her fork. With her first bite, she sighed, and a sound of appreciation worked in her throat. It was a sound that froze him, one he wanted to hear under very different circumstances.

"In Ireland, I met a man who changed my life," he said. "His name was Duncan Blanchard, and he hunted artifacts. Treasure. I was picking pockets in Dublin, and I tried to pick his. Best mistake I ever made. Duncan took me off the streets and taught me his trade. Saved my life."

"Why?"

Now it was her bitterness that colored the air. Cian sipped his wine. "There are some wonderful people in the world, *a rúnsearc*. Believe it or not."

"I know that," she said defensively and stabbed a beet with her fork. "I just wondered why he helped you."

"I don't know. Perhaps I reminded him of someone he'd lost. When I asked, he just said it was his turn to do a good deed, and I was that deed." Cian shrugged. "I traveled with him for three years. I saw the world; we hunted everywhere. The Sahara, the Amazon. India, China, Africa. I had a knack for finding things, and he knew where to sell them. He died of malaria in the Congo when I was nineteen."

"You miss him."

It wasn't a question, but Cian answered anyway. "Aye."

"What then?"

Then he'd taken a wrong turn. "I killed."

She blinked. "I'm sorry?"

"I was a merc, a hired gun. I killed for profit."

He watched her digest that, the disgust and fear that flickered over her features. He wasn't proud, and he knew the disclosure would do damage, but he wanted the truth between them.

"No women or children," he clarified, not that it made it any less damning. "Soldiers, warlords, men who had no problem slaughtering entire villages in

their greed. I played one against the other and hunted for treasure along the way. Learned to live off the land, how to read the stars and the sky. I survived. Until I met Akachi. He changed everything.”

Honor sat forward, her food forgotten.

“Eat,” Cian told her again. “Before it gets cold.”

She scowled, but obediently speared a potato. “Then talk.”

He smiled. “If I’d known you were this interested, I would have shared long ago.”

She gave him a dark look. “Liar.”

“No.” He sobered. “I told you: I’ll not lie to you.”

He held her gaze until she flushed and looked away.

“Akachi was a child soldier,” he continued quietly. “When I met him, he was nine, carrying an ancient M16 through the desert. He’d been sent to a village close to where I was staying, and he was on his way to shoot everything that moved. And I do mean everything—every man, woman and child. Even the fucking cows. I take comfort in knowing the men I killed deserved it. What those child soldiers do...what is done to them...that is true evil. Many in the world choose to believe it doesn’t exist, but it is alive and well.”

Honor met his gaze. “Yes.”

“I was bigger, stronger, trained by then to fight, so I stopped him.” Cian shrugged. “I took away his weapon and tied him up. I spent hours talking to him, trying to pierce the veil of the brainwashing, the trauma that had been done to him. He was a just a kid, but he acted like the walking dead. It wasn’t until I started talking about family that I reached him. I found out that the men who took him—those he fought for—had killed his parents, his sisters, his entire village. They’d spared only the young men and boys, and they’d taken them into a camp and trained them to kill. They’d used the threat of further annihilation to ensure obedience—for Akachi it was his younger brother—and they made them into an army.”

“Sick, sadistic fucks,” Honor whispered.

“Aye. I told him he could be free, that I would help. But he wouldn’t go without his brother. And so, late one night, we snuck into their camp to retrieve

him.”

Cian fell silent beneath the memory. *So bloody stupid.* Arrogant and filled with piss and vinegar, and death had followed. That Akachi never held it against him spoke to the man he’d become. But then, Cian had never forgiven himself, and perhaps Akachi knew that was penance enough.

“What happened?” Honor asked, her voice hushed.

“Death,” he replied flatly. “We weren’t careful enough, and his brother died. It was all I could do to get us both out alive. I had to carry Akachi away.” Crying, screaming, cursing Cian’s name. “That we got out was a miracle. That he forgave me afterward…” He shook his head. “He is a better man than I.”

“You were trying to help.”

“I was an arrogant fuck who got his brother killed. I regret it every day.”

For a long moment, Honor said nothing. Then, “We all make mistakes that hurt others.”

“Aye, *a rúnsearc*. I know.” He smiled at her, warmed by her comfort. “Sadly, that never changes.”

“No,” she agreed softly.

Cian drained his wine and poured more. He took a bite of his ahi.

“What then?” Honor asked, shooting him a look.

“Then I did what Duncan had trained me to do: I hunted. I was good at it, and Akachi was a quick study. Before we left the continent, we’d made enough to disappear forever.”

“But you didn’t. Instead, you built an empire.”

He heard something in those words, but he wasn’t certain what. “Aye. I built a company uniquely designed to protect the treasures of the world from men like me, and to protect against men like I had once been. I had to. Because I’d never forgotten the man who killed my mother, and I knew that—when I was ready for him—I would have to be in a position of power in order to take him.”

“You went after him?”

“I did.” Cian sat back and lifted his wine glass, his gaze intent on her face. “Alas, much to my surprise and, I admit, bitter regret, he was already dead. From what I was able to piece together, he’d been murdered by his own bodyguard

after it was brought to light that he was skimming from the collective profits of the organization he was a part of—an organization run by a group of Chechens, one which traded exclusively in women, children and heroin. Not an uncommon occurrence, I suppose, among men such as that.”

Across from him, Honor sat frozen, her fork hovering in the air.

“I was very, very angry at the discovery,” he continued softly. “For years I had dreamt of killing him slowly, crushing every bone, peeling away his skin, layer by layer. And I wanted to know who’d taken that from me. Who’d stolen my revenge. So I began to dig.” Cian smiled, sharp, deadly. “Like you, I’m very good at digging. Do you know what I found?”

She didn’t respond, staring at him, her pulse a wild flutter in the hollow of her throat.

“The man I was hunting, who’d killed my mother, who had the temerity to be fucking *dead* when I was finally ready to skin him alive, had been exposed by a ghost, a heretofore unknown force that didn’t even have to be on the same continent in order to exterminate him. A mysterious, terrifying power that had pulled every skeleton from his closet and hung them out to dry. A terrible, dangerous apparition known only as *Aequitas*.”

Honor stood, but Cian’s hand flashed out and wrapped her wrist, halting her there, beside him, and she stared down at him with wild eyes, color ripe in her cheeks. In his hold, her delicate bones trembled.

“You took my vengeance,” he whispered to her. “And I wanted to kill you for that.”

She swallowed; her gaze flickered to the utensils on the table.

“If I could not have him,” Cian continued softly, tightening his hold. “Then I would have you.”

For a long moment, they only stared at one another, the tension sharp and painful. Honor’s chin lifted; her eyes flashed. But beneath his hand, she shook.

“I made it my life’s mission to unmask you. To track you to the ends of the earth and take the revenge I hungered for.” He stroked his thumb across her inner wrist, where her pulse beat erratically. Her skin was like silk. “But you weren’t who I expected you to be. You weren’t a hired gun, as I had once been.

You didn't sell your skills to the highest bidder. You were different." He tilted his head, stroked her again. The color in her cheeks bloomed, and her breasts rose and fell quickly, as if she'd run far. "You worked for no one. So I began to watch you. I began to track your marks and unravel your machinations, and one by one, I watched you slay the world's dragons. Ruthless and bloodthirsty and unforgiving." He could hear the lust, vibrant in his voice, but he didn't care, and he knew she heard it, too. "I began to respect you. *Admire you*. And when I finally managed to discover *who* you were, and why you'd gone after Vladimir Dragunov, I forgave you."

Another violent tremor moved through her. She licked her lips, and his hand tightened. "Why?"

"Because you deserved revenge, too," he told her gently. "I could hardly hold it against you."

"But you wanted to."

"Aye, I did."

"Is that what this is about?" She waved her free hand at the table. "What I took from you?"

"Nay." Cian shook his head, watching her. "This is about what I want from you."

She stiffened in his hold. "And what is that?"

For a long moment, he didn't respond. She wasn't ready to hear the words, but he wouldn't lie. Not to her, and not *for* her.

"You," he said. "I want you."

Chapter 4

“NO,” SHE SAID.

Nothing more, staring down at him, her cheeks so hot, she was dizzy.

“Why not?” Cian asked, his voice deceptively soft.

Honor could only shake her head, hyper-aware of the warm, rough skin of his strong hand wrapped around her arm, the rasp of his callused thumb across her wrist. Her heart beat heavily, and her skin prickled, and if her head was screaming *no*, the rest of her was ready, willing and able.

“Talk to me,” he said, his hold unwavering, that strange, beautiful hazel gaze steady on hers.

She opened her mouth, closed it. What was there to say?

You’re too much. Too tempting, too dangerous.

I’m afraid.

No.

“Honor,” he murmured, the lilt in his voice turning it into a melody.

“No,” she said again. But even as she shook her head, a tremor moved through her; she was painfully aware of his heat and his scent and his strength. Of how easy it would be, to want him back.

To surrender.

“I came for Hannah,” she said, hating the desperation she could hear. “She’s the only reason I’m here.”

“I ken that, lass,” he replied and stroked her again. She felt it low in her

belly, and something there tightened in response. Tension filled her, and she stilled, hating and savoring the sensation. “But she’s not the one waiting for you.”

Honor blinked, and something huge and painful swelled in her chest. *Waiting*. Damn him. Double damn him.

“What do you want from me?” she snarled.

“Everything,” he said, his eyes boring into her.

She shook her head again, but when she went to step away, his hold tightened, and she halted. “I don’t know what that means.”

His gaze glinted. “You do.”

Her belly fluttered, as if a thousand wings had taken flight. “Why? Why me? I’m not...special.”

He frowned and began to draw her closer. “What makes you believe such nonsense?”

She pulled back, suddenly afraid, terrified he would touch her, and every crazy impulse she felt would take hold and she would *act*.

“Easy, *a rúnsearc*,” he murmured. “There’s no rush. I’ve all the time in the world.”

That’s what she was afraid of, because for her, the clock was ticking.

“Let go,” she told him, her voice low, followed by another useless tug on the arm he held.

“Nay, we’re going to speak of this.” His hold tightened. “You canna think—”

“Cian.”

Akachi’s voice broke between them, and Honor started. She looked up to see the large Sudanese standing only a handful of feet away, a stark shadow outlined by the shimmering, golden kiss of sunset.

“Aye,” Cian said, his voice grim, his gaze locked on Honor.

“You have a call. It is important.”

For a long moment, he only stared at her, and Honor tugged again at her arm.

“Aye,” he said finally.

Akachi turned and disappeared.

“Let go,” she said again.

“We’re not finished,” he warned softly. He slid his grip down her arm, captured her hand and pressed an unexpected kiss into her palm. Heat speared from his lips straight to that place between her thighs. Something hungry and restless stirred in response; a drumbeat that echoed through her in demand.

“We never began,” she told him.

His gaze flickered, a dangerous glint that made her breath tighten. The man he was—he *truly* was—peeking out at her from behind that façade of gentle, teasing warmth. The blade he kept so carefully sheathed.

Remember, she told herself, but it did little good, when the blade held as much appeal as the warmth.

More.

He stood, her hand trapped in his, casting her in his huge shadow. His heat licked at her, and his scent flooded her nostrils until she felt almost drunk on him. He was too close, invading her personal space as if he had every right. “I’ll be back.”

“Don’t rush on my account,” she muttered, her cheeks hot.

He only smiled, a crooked, beautiful grin that made her heart again skip that painful beat. “Eat. I won’t be long.”

And then he was gone, leaving her staring after him, her palm tingling, a throb of hunger heavy in her blood. Disappointed and relieved and tense with anticipation.

IT WAS, SHE ACKNOWLEDGED THE NEXT MORNING, A GOOD THING CIAN HAD never returned.

When Akachi had appeared with an apology and said Cian would be tied up until late into the night, she’d been dumb enough to be *upset*.

So fucking fucked.

And because of that, part of her was ready to run.

What the hell was her problem? The man was not her *date*. Not her suitor. Not even her friend. He was...the means to an end.

Nothing more.

And regardless of what he'd said—*everything!*—when he'd drawn the connection between them in the form of Vladimir Dragunov, Honor had finally understood. Cian's abrupt appearance, his damnable tenacity.

Why he'd chosen her to hunt.

And, damn it, she couldn't blame him. If Cian had managed to get to Dragunov before her, she would have been furious, too. She would have set her sights on the man who'd purloined her vengeance, but unlike Cian, she wasn't certain she would have forgiven him—no matter his motivation.

Because you deserved revenge, too. I could hardly hold it against you.

She would have.

Destroying Dragunov had taken years. Months spent tracking the men who'd slaughtered her family and stolen Hannah; a year to discover and draw the shocking and infuriating connection between the Russian mobster Vladimir Dragunov—who owned those men—and her own father, the stupid, foolish man who hadn't understood the danger he courted with his residence in the land of money laundering. And then, once she'd known who Dragunov was, another year spent trying to figure out how to get to him.

Because bullets were too easy. Honor had wanted him...*undone*. Exposed, vulnerable. She'd wanted him to know it was over, that men he'd called friends were coming for him.

That nothing he could do would save him.

In the end, it'd been appallingly easy. Just a matter of taking aim and firing. Strangled by his own man, in his own home.

Too bad it hadn't made her feel any better. Her father and her brother were still dead; Hannah was still missing. Uncovering Dragunov hadn't led her to the end of that labyrinth. No, it had only left her with an entire host of wrong turns and dead ends.

Not that she regretted it...but revenge wasn't the upshot she'd hoped. It had left her hollow and angry, and so cold, she'd feared turning to ice. So she'd moved on to other monsters, beginning with the men Dragunov had done business with, men who profited from the screams of children. One after another

after another; an endless vat of human debauchery and greed.

It barely made a dent. And yet, what else could she do?

Because it was never enough, not any of it.

The sole consolation was the lives she saved; she knew she made a difference. And while she made that difference, she looked for Hannah.

Hannah, who was the only reason she'd reached out to Cian. Why she'd come *here*.

Hannah, who was finally within arm's reach.

They hadn't gotten around to discussing a plan for this evening's benefit, but Honor was confident they would come up with something.

No doubt Cian could be quite underhanded when necessary. A thought that should *not* have drawn her, but did.

Her stomach growled loudly. She hadn't eaten much yesterday. She'd been too nervous, and then Cian's tale had stolen the spotlight, and the last thing she'd been thinking about was food. Once he'd left her, all she could do was think about what he'd revealed.

Akachi. Dragunov.

I want you.

"For shit's sake," she told the ceiling. "Stop thinking about it."

But she couldn't. She'd tried.

And Cian wouldn't let her hide from those words; she might not know him well, but she knew that. It should've been simple: *thanks, but no thanks*. Because that was best. She had no business getting involved with anyone; she didn't live that life. She never would. And even if she was that...brave—stupid—whatever—Cian was the last man on earth she would choose. Arrogant, high-handed, far too used to getting his own way. So what if he was also charming and intelligent and—allegedly—honorable? So what if she was drawn to him like a moth to a flame?

So what if she wanted him back?

She wasn't stupid. *She knew better.*

Which meant this ridiculous back-and-forth inside her head could just damn well stop.

But something about him touched her—deeply, insistently, inescapably. And that had never, ever happened before. For someone who lived shrouded in darkness, her experiences only ever lived vicariously, that inexplicable feeling of connection was dangerously seductive.

So fucking fucked.

Her stomach rumbled in demand again, and Honor rolled from the bed and stood up to stare out at the glittering, blue-green sheen of the gulf. Stupid, gorgeous place. It wasn't fair. This beautiful but warm and oddly welcoming house. The smell of the sea. The echo of the foghorns; the lush green of the surrounding pine forest.

She was...comfortable here. When she was rarely comfortable anywhere.

"Shut up," she told herself, and left the room. She descended the stairs and approached the kitchen on quiet feet, wondering if Akachi was around.

She hoped not. The large Sudanese didn't like her. No, he watched her like one watched a snake, wary, untrusting, prepared for a strike at any moment. Honor didn't understand why—and, seriously, who cared?—but she *did* care, and that irritated the hell out of her.

The kitchen was empty. A bowl containing a collection of fruit sat on the gleaming granite counter, and something sweet and decadent scented the air. The room could have been a professional kitchen, all sleek stainless steel and broad, long stone countertops. Cherry wood cabinets lined the walls, and a large, rectangular island sat in the center of the room, surrounded by sturdy stools padded with thick brown leather.

She wandered over to the refrigerator and looked inside, astounded by the amount of food that greeted her. Just how much staff did the man have?

"Hoser," she muttered.

She wasn't much of a cook, so mostly everything she spotted was out. But if she could find some peanut butter and jelly—

"You are hungry."

A small, startled screech escaped her, and she whirled around to see Akachi standing behind her, his eyes dark and watchful.

"No," she said, embarrassed, but her stomach growled loudly in defiance.

One of his brows rose. He was a younger man than she'd realized, and a handsome one, with striking features, broad bones and a wide, unsmiling mouth. Skin like the darkest pitch, hair shorn close to his skull. But those eyes...as cutting as any blade.

"Well, maybe," she conceded. "A little."

"Sit," he replied succinctly. "I will feed you."

"Oh, no," she protested. "That's not necessary. I can—"

"Sit," he repeated and turned away.

Honor didn't move. "I was just going to scrounge up a PB&J. If you could just—"

"Sit," he ordered.

Nonplussed, Honor sat.

"What is a PB&J?" he asked, opening a cupboard and pulling out a handful of items.

"A peanut butter and jelly sandwich," she replied.

He glanced at her over his shoulder. "This is what you eat?"

"Sometimes." *All the time.* "It's good. You should try it."

He snorted and bent down to retrieve a small sauce pan. "I do not think so."

"Your loss," she told him with a shrug.

She watched him gather ingredients: eggs, cheese, onions, peppers, fresh spices.

Her stomach growled again.

"You should have eaten your dinner," Akachi said, breaking the eggs into a bowl and whisking them.

"Ya think?" she retorted, annoyed.

"Yes. Or I would not have said so."

Great. A literalist. Just what she needed.

"Look," she said. "I know you're not happy I'm here, and I promise I won't stick around. I'm just here to get my sister. As soon as that's done, I'm a memory."

He looked up from his whisking. "Cian does not want you to leave."

Her heart fluttered painfully. "He'll get over it."

“You underestimate him.” A long stare from that obsidian gaze. “You should not.”

Honor shook her head. “I’m not here for him.”

“But you will use him, just the same.”

“That’s not fair,” she said quietly. Even though it was. He was right. She was using Cian, and he knew it.

He was allowing it.

I’m doing this for you.

Goddamn it.

“I’m not....” She shook her head. “I wouldn’t be good for him. I’m not....her.”

Akachi put the pan on the stove and threw a pad of butter into it. “Her who?”

“*Her.*” Honor waved a hand. “Whoever. The *one.*”

Another arched brow. “Why not?”

A sharp, painful laugh escaped her. “So many reasons.” She shrugged. “I’m best alone.”

“No one is best alone.”

The words were sober, and they echoed with the same aching loneliness that often gripped her, as though her flame could flicker and die without notice. But she said nothing, because alone was all she knew. Alone was safe. And what Cian wanted...was she even capable of such a thing?

“And what of your sister?” Akachi asked. “What if she does not want to be found?”

“She does.”

That piercing black stare found her again. “You are certain of this?”

Yes, I damn well am. Unfortunately, something Cian had said continued to prod her: *I don’t know if she’s with him willingly or under duress.*

But Honor refused to accept that Hanna might be with Andrei Petrov willingly. The man was a gangster. A criminal; the same ilk as the men who’d taken her. She wouldn’t stay with a man like that of her own free will. Would she?

No.

That was insane. Surely Hanna was a prisoner—as she’d always been a prisoner—and there was no question she would welcome rescue. Especially when it was family who’d come for her.

Family she no doubt thought dead.

“I’m certain,” Honor said.

Akachi began to chop onion. “I was certain, as well. I was wrong.”

“It’s not the same.”

“For your sake, and for hers, I hope not.”

She watched him chop the onion, his movements precise, fluid, often practiced. The knife gleamed in the bright afternoon light. “He holds himself responsible, you know.”

“Yes.” Akachi moved onto the peppers. “But he is not.”

Honor propped her elbow on the island and put chin in hand. “No?”

“No.”

The butter sizzled. The peppers smelled fresh and sweet.

“Why not?” she asked.

“Because I asked of him the impossible.” Akachi’s gaze met hers. “Be careful you do not ask the same.”

A chill rippled across her skin. The warning wasn’t personal; it wasn’t a threat. No it was more of a *be careful what you wish for* kind of thing.

And far more effective for it.

“She’ll want to come with me,” Honor insisted. “I’m her family.”

“Perhaps.”

“They *stole* her.”

“Yes.”

Anger and fear mixed in her chest, a caustic brew that made her throat swell. “You don’t know anything.”

He didn’t respond, just poured the whisked egg into the pan, and then stood next to it, silently watching it cook. She stared at him, angry, and Cian’s words poured through her. *I found out that the men who took him—those he fought for—had killed his parents, his sisters, his entire village. They’d spared only the young men and boys, and they’d taken them into a camp and trained them to kill.*

They'd used the threat of further annihilation to ensure obedience—for Akachi, it was his younger brother—and they made them into an army.

Akachi *did* know, better than anyone. And even if he was wrong—because he *was* wrong—he was only trying to help.

“I’m sorry,” she said after a moment.

“You cannot make decisions for her,” he replied quietly. “No matter how responsible for her you feel.”

The swell spread to her chest, making her breath tight. “She’s my sister.”

“Yes. But she is other things, as well. Do not make her choose between them.”

Pain arrowed through her. She’d had *hope* goddamn it. *Fucking hope*. For the first time in...forever. And he was crushing it to dust right before her eyes.

“I do not say these things to harm you,” he continued. “But you must be prepared for the possibility that she is exactly where she wishes to be.”

No. No, she isn't. Fuck you!

But snarling at him didn’t make what he said any less true. And while Honor could accept that what he said had merit, she didn’t agree that Hanna would chose captivity over freedom. Her oppressor over her family.

No. That wouldn’t happen. Even if it had happened to him.

“I understand,” she replied finally, reluctantly, and his black gaze found hers, and he nodded. Then he added the vegetables to the egg and began to shred cheese over the mixture. The scent filled the air, and her mouth watered, and in spite of the heavy mass in her chest, her belly rumbled in excitement. “Thank you.”

“You are welcome,” he said.

Chapter 5

WE NEVER BEGAN

Cian adjusted the glinting platinum cufflink that adorned the sleeve of his tuxedo, Honor's words echoing in his head. He hadn't had time to refute them; no, he'd had to put out a fire, instead. Which was not atypical in his business, and such was life, that those interruptions were rarely well-timed. But he'd been forced to leave Honor not only before addressing that mistaken belief—that they *weren't*—but also after disclosing their shared history, one of which she'd been completely aware.

Vladimir Dragunov.

The irony was not lost on Cian—that the bastard who'd shot his mother full of cheap heroin and left her to die in a filthy, rat-infested alley in St. Petersburg, the same man who'd engineered the slaughter of Honor's family and the theft of her younger sister—had brought them together, united them long before they'd met, before they'd even known of each other's existence.

Cian hadn't lied; he *had* wanted to kill her. When she'd stolen from him the sole purpose for his existence, and his dreams of blood and torture and death were thrust forever out of reach. *Justice*—that's what he'd sought. Justice for his mother and for the boy who'd lost everything with her death. And with one well-aimed strike, Honor had taken that from him.

For a long time, he'd hated her. The rage and violence he felt toward Dragunov had shifted to her, and he'd hunted her relentlessly. But when he'd

discovered who she was, her reasons became clear, and for the first time, he'd been able to step back and understand that what she'd done was exactly what he'd been planning to do—she'd simply beaten him to it.

I began to respect you. Admire you. And when I finally managed to discover who you were, and why you'd gone after Vladimir Dragunov, I forgave you.

He'd frightened her, and Cian wasn't sure he'd had sufficient time—or words—to reassure her before he'd left her. And now they had to prepare for what they would find waiting at the estate of Andrei Petrov, something Cian knew Honor wasn't prepared for, no matter what she believed. Because he'd not disclosed everything he'd learned about Hannah. In spite of his promise not to lie to Honor, Cian *had* omitted the most important part of what he'd learned, and for that, he knew, there would be a price. But Honor was already perched on the edge; telling her would have only pushed her over, something which served no one. No, this was something she had to learn for herself, and no matter how angry with him she would be—and Cian knew she would be furious—he believed it to be the only choice.

No matter the fall out. Because he also knew better than anyone that not everyone wanted to be saved.

“You're trying to kill me, aren't you?”

He looked up to see Honor at the top of the stairs, glowering down at him, and every muscle lining his spine turn to steel. She wore a long, sleek, velvet wrap-dress in the deepest green; he'd had it delivered that morning. The material clung to her, caressing the opulent curves he'd felt but not seen, and in the deep vee of the dress's neckline, the lush arcs of her breasts and pale skin kissed by freckles beckoned. His fingers twitched as she began to descend the stairs, and he grew hard.

Christ.

Her hair was a wild cloud around her head; her eyes glittered, outlined in kohl. Her mouth was painted cherry red, and Cian wanted to lick every inch of her.

“Death by stiletto,” she muttered, moving slowly, carefully down toward him. The dress had a slit in it, and her thigh peeked through, a flash of slender

muscle wrapped in silken hose that made his hands tighten into fists and his heart beat hard in his throat.

He wanted to carry her back up those stairs.

“You’re beautiful,” he said, his voice rough.

Color flushed her cheeks, but she snorted. “It’s the dress.”

“It’s you.”

Her gaze met his, so green it was like falling into spring. “It’s too much.”

“Nay,” he denied softly. “You’re perfect.”

Her eyes skimmed over him and lingered. Her pulse was a wild flutter in her throat, and her flush deepened as she took him in, and satisfaction coursed through him. *She wanted him, too.* The air between them pulsed with current and possibility, and Cian wished they had a different mission on this night. *Time.* To spend learning each other, to strengthen the nascent bond blooming between them.

To prepare for what he feared lay ahead.

“So what’s the plan?” she asked as she halted before him.

“Reconnaissance,” he replied and pulled a small comm link from his pocket. Before she could move—or protest—he leaned over and gently inserted it into her right ear, his fingers stroking gently down her neck. “Tonight we assess the situation.”

He didn’t miss the tremor that moved through her, or the sharp intake of her breath, but she only tilted her head toward him, her eyes narrowing. “I’m going to bring her back.”

Cian said nothing, unwilling to argue. Just keeping Honor in hand when she realized what had become of Hannah—and what he’d kept from her—was going to be hard enough; stopping her if she decided to act might prove impossible. Better that she didn’t realize they weren’t going to storm the castle. Because removing Hannah from Andrei Petrov’s clutches was not simply a matter of righting a wrong.

Not by a long shot.

“I mean it,” Honor insisted. “I’m not going to leave without her.”

Cian only slid his hand into his pocket and removed the other accessory he’d

bought for her. He captured her left hand, and her eyes flew to his when he slid the slender platinum band with its large, square-cut emerald onto her ring finger. For a brief, intense moment, Cian wished it wasn't a pretense, even though he knew it was too much, too soon. Honor stared at him, her cheeks blooming, and the awareness between them vibrated almost painfully.

"What's this?" she whispered.

"Your engagement ring."

"No." She shook her head. "There's no need—"

"If you wear my ring, no one will question you." Cian's hand tightened on hers; skin like silk, such delicate, easily-broken bones. No matter her fierceness. So he would protect her, whether she liked it or not. "And we cannot afford any questions, *a rúnsearc*."

For a long moment, she only watched him, her hand warm in his. Finally, she nodded. "Okay."

A small victory and a good beginning. Cian took it as a sign of things to come.

Even though he knew better.

"What about my name?" she asked quietly.

"That proves a problem," Cian told her. "Seeing as how you're dead."

"We look alike," she replied, a faint frown appearing between her brows. "If Hannah and I stand next to each other, it will be obvious we're family."

Family. Cian didn't miss the faint yearning in her voice when she said the word; he knew the feeling too well. Being alone in the world was hard. He didn't blame her for wanting her sister back, especially considering the circumstances which had separated them. But reality rarely matched memory. Or hope.

His hand tightened on hers. "I created an identity in the name of Elena Morris."

Her glance flew to his. Elena was her middle name, Morris her mother's maiden name. "Who am I?"

"A librarian from Virginia. We met when I was researching a rare text of Thomas Jefferson's writings."

She eyed him dubiously. "That's not hokey at all."

“Nay, it’s quite plausible. It’s well known that I collect the musings of early American politicians. Franklin, Jefferson, Washington. No one who knows me would be surprised.”

But she clearly was. “Seriously?”

He arched a brow.

Color touched her cheeks. She tugged at her hand, and he reluctantly released it. “Sorry.”

“For what?”

She shrugged. “For making assumptions.”

Cian leaned toward her, and her scent filled his head. “What kind of assumptions, then?”

The flush spread from her cheeks down into the vee of pale skin revealed by her dress, and Cian told himself following that wave of color with his mouth would be inappropriate.

But so bloody enjoyable.

“It’s easy to assume you’re all...brawn.” Her gaze met his. “But you’re really quite intelligent.”

Something his adversaries never realized until it was too late. “And you don’t like that?”

“I don’t like that you found me,” she said bluntly.

That truth pierced him. “Nay?”

“I thought I was *safe*,” she muttered. “And now...you’ve made me question everything.”

He gave in to the need to touch her, rubbing his knuckles gently over the sharp edge of her cheekbone, and she let him. “Good.”

“No.” She pulled away. “Not good at all.”

“Because you’ve finally flown from your gilded cage?” he demanded softly. “Because now—in this moment—you must *live*?”

“I *like* my cage,” she snarled.

“Because you feel safe there.”

“Yes!”

“But you aren’t,” he pointed out. “You never were.”

She stared at him, her eyes glittering like sunlit stones. “I was. Until you.”

He shook his head, his voice hard. “An illusion.”

“No.”

“Aye. And well you know it.”

“No one came *close*,” she growled. “No one but you.”

“Another illusion. The price on your head is too high for that to be true.”

She jerked as if he’d slapped her, taking a step back, and Cian had to stop himself from wrapping his hands around her hips and halting her.

“No,” she whispered, the color leeching from her cheeks, but when she met his gaze again, it was clear she understood that he was right.

“Best that it was me,” he told her, and the shaken look on her face had his hands on her again before he could stop them, cupping the strong, stubborn line of her jaw, his calluses rasping her silken skin. “But have no doubt there are others.”

“Good to know,” she muttered.

His hold tightened. “I’ll not let you disappear again.”

She only watched him silently, her pulse a delicate, furious beat in the hollow of her throat.

“It’s time for you to fly, *a rúnsearc*,” he whispered, and because he couldn’t help himself, he pressed a sweet, gentle kiss to her mouth. She gasped, and those luscious lips brushed his, and he barely stopped himself from filling her mouth with his tongue. *Not fucking yet*. No. But he was hard and aching, and she’d lifted her hands to tangle them in the lapels of his tux, and her fingers were digging into him, and her body—those beautiful breasts—were a hairsbreadth from touching him.

“What if I fall?” she asked, her breath catching, and he kissed her again, unable to temper the need.

“Then I’ll catch you,” he promised, and in spite of his intentions, his tongue flickered out to lick delicately at her upper lip.

“You don’t fight fair,” she accused, but her hands tightened on his coat, and she leaned into him, as if seeking another kiss.

“Nay,” he agreed roughly and acquiesced, pressing his mouth to hers, his

tongue nudging her bottom lip. “I play to win.”

“Is that what this is?” she murmured. “A game?”

“No,” he growled and nipped her, and she gasped. Only the sharp clearing of a throat stopped Cian from taking her mouth as he wanted to.

“The car is waiting,” Akachi said from behind them, his tone deadpan.

Honor started and tried to pull away, but Cian only kissed her again, because he didn’t want to stop, a hard, possessive press of his mouth against hers. When her gaze met his, he let her see his desire, his need. His intent.

And then he took her hand in his and led her to the car.

IF CIAN LAZARUS’ ABILITY TO FIND HER NO MATTER WHERE SHE HID, AND HIS devastating, seductive kisses weren’t enough to scare the hell out of Honor, watching him work the glittering crowd of beautiful people that filled Andrei Petrov’s home was.

Cian was charismatic and self-deprecating, mysterious but charming, and while most seemed to view him with respect, Honor saw more than a little wariness. *Fear*. That he was a powerful man was obvious, no matter the edge of self-mockery that honed him; that people both revered and cowed from that power was abruptly and painfully sobering.

Because Honor had compartmentalized him. Even though she knew only someone truly extraordinary would have been able to find her; even though she knew through her own research that Cian Lazarus was a highly intelligent and dangerous man, one many underestimated—sometimes fatally. That she’d been so stupid as to think she could take what she wanted from him—and leave the rest—only spoke to her own desperation to find Hannah, no matter the cost.

Foolish. And far worse, because Cian had not pretended to be anything other than what he was: a predator. No, she was the one who’d chosen to overlook that truth. Who ignorantly believed she could somehow control this man who ran his own small empire.

A man who was brutally honest and spared her nothing.

Best that it was me. But have no doubt there are others.

He was right, of course. That knowledge had been eating at her ever since his words had first scrolled across her computer screen, intrusive and unwelcome. Because no matter how good Cian was, he wasn't alone. Her name had occupied the FBI's Most Wanted list for the past two years, and beyond that, she'd taken down more than one powerful crime syndicate. *Many, many enemies.* Any number of who were working—at this very moment—to unmask and destroy her. That Cian had found her meant she was discoverable—stupid to pretend different, when she knew better than anyone that nothing was fail-proof—and that was not something she could continue to ignore and survive.

“You're scowling, *a rúnsearc.*” Cian's mouth brushed her temple, his arm tight around her waist, his hand possessive on her hip. Since the moment they'd stepped foot into Petrov's elegant, understated home, he hadn't taken his hands off of her, his manner both protective and affectionate. *Loving.* He played the role of doting fiancé to such an extreme, Honor found herself torn between running for her life and racing him to an imaginary altar. She *knew* it was an act, and yet he appeared so...genuine that it made her heart hurt. What would it be like, she wondered, to truly be his?

To belong to someone.

Which he no doubt wanted her to think, since he'd made no bones about his own feelings on the subject.

I'll not let you disappear again.

But that was not his choice; it was hers. And up until that moment, she would have made it easily, without hesitation. But his kisses...her first...those had *changed* her. On some heretofore unknown fundamental level. They had awakened her. Not just sexually, but...to life itself.

To possibilities and hope.

Fucking hope.

“Honor,” Cian murmured, his lips moving to her ear, his warm breath washing over her skin, and she shivered. “You alright, lass?”

No, not at all.

To top it all off, she hadn't seen hide nor hair of Hannah. She'd met

aristocracy and military men and celebrities, CEOs and supermodels; politicians and their botoxed, perma-smiling wives. Men who were undoubtedly criminals and kingpins, and the sleek, subdued women who accompanied them. Everyone who was anyone in this part of the world surrounded her, but none of them were who she sought.

Which only fed the painful ache in her chest.

“I’m fine,” she muttered, her hands tightening on the delicate stem of the champagne glass she held.

“Patience,” Cian whispered and nuzzled her. “We’ve only been here an hour.”

An hour which she’d had to spend smiling pleasantly and making idiotic small talk. *Lying*. About her identity, her job, her relationship with the man whose hands never left her.

They hadn’t even seen Petrov yet.

Honor couldn’t help but wonder if he would recognize her. Because regardless of hair color, she and Hannah looked a lot alike; they shared their mother’s pale, freckled skin, full cheeks and slender nose. They had the same brilliant green gaze and wide, unsmiling mouth. The urge to get right into Andrei Petrov’s face—to the point where he couldn’t possibly miss the resemblance—gripped her with razor-sharp claws.

Stupid. Monumentally stupid.

But tempting. She was so *angry*. It didn’t matter that she didn’t know where Hannah had been for the last seven years, or how she’d gotten here, whether she cared for Petrov or even if she was happy. Honor didn’t care. She just wanted to snatch her sister and run. She was infuriated by all the time they’d lost; enraged that their childhood had drowned in a pool of bright red blood. And the closer to Hannah she got, the more furious she became.

“Come,” Cian said, and suddenly he was removing the champagne glass from her hand and tugging her toward the dance floor, a huge expanse of black and white marble tile where couples swung and swayed to music provided by the small, intimate orchestra that occupied one wall of the room.

Petrov’s home was enormous; it made Cian’s place look like a shack. Walls

papered in what looked like raw silk; floors of swirling, unspeakably beautiful granite and marble. Art that should have adorned the Louvre. Furniture dotted the space: sleek wooden tables and chairs, velvet-lined settees, leather ottomans and stools of twisted copper with bright blue cushions. The champagne tingled on her tongue, and the food smelled like heaven. Large black and white photographs dotted the room, pictures of the refugees for whom the nights benefit was being thrown: stark, haunting faces lined by exhaustion and hollow from starvation. Men, women, children. They were startling and effective, and Honor found her eyes wandering to them again and again. The cynical part of her wondered where any money donated tonight would actually go, because she had a hard time believing it would benefit any refugees.

“Smile, lass,” Cian murmured and gathered her into his arms to dance. His hands slid around her hips and hauled her toward him, and his big body surrounded her in his heat and scent. “You’re supposed to be having fun.”

“Where is she?” Honor replied, frustrated. Her hands curled around the lapels of his tux of their of volition. “Have you seen her?”

“Nay,” he said. “Perhaps she’ll not be in attendance tonight.”

Honor growled softly, unwilling to consider that possibility. She hadn’t squished herself into this dress and braved breaking her ass in these shoes to no avail. She hadn’t made inane small talk and allowed Cian free reign of her person and felt fucking *hope* for nothing.

Hannah had to show. She *had* to.

“You must be prepared for the worst,” Cian warned softly. “No matter how difficult.”

Those ominous words echoed Akachi’s sentiments, and Honor scowled and look away from him. They swayed silently to the music, and she resented how well they moved together, the almost painful awareness that hummed through her at Cian’s proximity. He smelled delicious; pressed against her, he felt even better. And his solicitous manner all evening had affected her, born a yearning she’d never before known. *She wanted that love to be real.*

Which was ludicrous and unacceptable and more than a little shocking. She was here because of *Hannah*. For no other reason. And even if she was tempted

by Cian—for which she could only be considered human—to pursue that temptation was out of the question, and was not something that should have ever crossed her mind.

Let alone occupied it every moment since she'd met the man. Before that, if she was honest. Since the day his words had shattered her carefully constructed isolation and ignited all of those embers she kept so carefully banked.

Damn him.

“Honor,” he murmured, his hands tightening on her hips, and she could feel that direct, intense gaze burning into the top of her head. But she was saved from having to respond when the music ended, and Andrei Petrov suddenly appeared atop a small raised platform that sat on the far end of the dance floor.

Beside him stood Hannah.

Shock jolted through Honor, and she took an instinctive step toward her sister, but Cian caught her and hauled her back against him, wrapping his arms around her in a heated human cage. To anyone watching, his embrace appeared possessive, loving, but Honor knew—if she wanted release—she would have to fight for it. And part of her desperately wanted to fight, even though she knew he was right, that this moment was not the time or place. Still...*Hannah.*

Too slender and pale in a shimmering dark blue evening gown, the cap of her ebony hair tousled, her mouth painted pale pink. Tiny sapphires winked in her earlobes; a matching choker encircled her neck. She struck a model's pose at Petrov's side, her arms akimbo, one hip jutted forward, and she looked nothing like the sister Honor had once known.

She looked like a stranger.

The ache in Honor's chest swelled, and for a moment she leaned back into Cian's embrace and let him hold her. His arms tightened, and they watched as Andrei Petrov removed the microphone from the stand before him and laughed into it.

“Welcome, my friends,” he said and smiled broadly, lifting a hand to acknowledge the crowd. He looked as unremarkable in his sleek tux as he had in the photo Honor had seen, an average man with minimal stage presence and little charisma. “Welcome to my home.”

Several people called out greetings. A small, cool curve turned Hannah's mouth.

"Thank you for coming," Petrov continued. "As you know, we are gathered here tonight to honor my daughter, Anna's, charity: Helping Hands."

Applause burst around them, and when Hannah nodded—as if in acknowledgment—Honor could only stare at the stage, more than a little dumbfounded.

"My Anna has traveled the world and witnessed the tragedies born of war," Petrov announced soberly. "The hunger, the devastation, the chaos. She has spent time among the refugees, she has visited the camps and documented the horrors." A hand swept toward the photographs that dotted the room. "And she has finally returned to me, determined to change what she saw. There could be no father prouder of his daughter than I."

More applause. For a moment, Honor thought she might be sick.

My daughter, Anna...

"I will allow her to tell you of her charity, and what it will do to help those in need. But I urge you to consider making a generous donation. I, myself, will match the dollar amount of any donation made this evening. And, of course, we will auction off Anna's photographs, with all of the profits going to Helping Hands." Petrov handed Hannah the microphone; she leaned forward to accept the kiss he pressed to her cheek. He said something to her which made that chilly smile falter, but Honor couldn't tell what. And then Hannah was taking center stage and speaking.

"Thank you, father," she said, her voice touched by an odd accent. Honor stared at her, suddenly afraid that this woman *wasn't* her sister, but was someone else entirely. Because how could someone change so much? Become someone wholly foreign and unknown? A shadow of the person they'd once been, an identity rewritten. Even her words had changed, reshaped by this place and these people.

A fine, furious tremor moved through Honor, and Cian squeezed her gently. *Cian*. Who had to have known. Who'd let her walk into this wholly unprepared. *The son of a bitch*.

She yanked violently against his hold.

“Easy, *a rúnsearc*,” he murmured in her ear. “I ken you’re angry, but now is not the time.”

She shook in his hold, her nerves so taut, she feared they might snap.

“Thank you for joining us tonight,” Hannah continued with a nod. “Helping Hands thanks you, as do the people of Syria. People I hope to improve the lives of, with your help and generosity. People who are desperate and in need. People who have grown quite close to my heart.” Her voice thickened, and she blinked, and the cool smile faded. “When I arrived in Damascus, my only goal was to document the refugees. I had been hired to photograph them as they made their way to the border of Jordan. But what I found...what I found made it impossible to stop with only photos. No picture can convey the horror and terror I witnessed, nor the stubborn hope and unbending fortitude of the people. I am not sure there are words for such a thing. As you can see, I captured but pieces.” She nodded at the photographs on display. “They are only small snapshots, fragments of what was once a strong and vibrant people; one of the oldest civilizations on earth. The experience changed my life, and I knew I must do more to help. Thus, I created Helping Hands. We are a small charity which will focus our aid on women and children; they are by far the majority of refugees seeking asylum. Because so few countries are willing to give them refuge, they need all manner of aid: food, clothing, medical care. Education and shelter. We will focus on those things in the immediacy, with the hope that we can secure a better future long term. It will not be easy, but it is necessary. We are all responsible to each other; we all belong to each other. It is up to those of us who have the means to act, and I hope you will join me tonight in doing so. Thank you.”

Honor swallowed once, twice, her chest aching, her heart beating with painful intensity. She pulled against Cian’s hold, but his arms only tightened.

“You had to see this for yourself, lass,” he murmured in her ear, his tone quiet with apology.

“Says you,” she replied bitterly. “Thanks for the head’s up.”

“Honor.”

“So much for never lying to me.” She jerked in his arms. “Asshole. Let me

go. *Right fucking now.*”

But his grip didn't falter, his breath warm against her cheek. “I'm sorry.”

“Bullshit,” she snarled. She felt...shattered. Angry. *Betrayed*. Which was useless and stupid and only proved that she'd allowed herself to believe in something that had never been real to begin with.

Fool.

“If I'd told you, you'd have come in guns blazing,” he growled, and she stiffened, because hell yes, she would have. So what? “And what do you think *her* reaction to that would have been?”

The question made Honor go still, in spite of the anger spilling from her like molten lava. She looked at Hannah—this unknown woman who'd become Anna Petrov, who was self-possessed, genuine, and articulate—and was astounded all over again by not only the disclosure that Petrov had claimed her as his, but by Anna herself. A woman with a good heart—courageous and brave and kind—and a woman who traveled the world into ridiculously dangerous places and photographed its people, risking herself to share their stories. This woman...she was no victim. Captured, held against her will. Controlled or manipulated. No, she was...strong. Willful and resolute, her spirit and determination an unwavering light within her.

Honor recognized that light, because she carried it herself.

“Shit,” she muttered, and a sharp sigh escaped her.

Hannah stepped from the podium and begin to circulate the room, stopping and talking to anyone who reached out. Honor watched her, nearly vibrating in Cian's hold.

“Patience, lass,” he murmured. “You'll get your chance.”

But Honor wasn't sure what she would do with it. Everything she'd expected to find had been upended, and she wasn't certain where that left her. And the one she'd relied on to be beside her, to help her, had *lied* to her, and no matter his intentions, it wasn't something she would forget.

“She's been brainwashed,” Honor muttered, her eyes glued to her sister's back as she worked the large room. “It's the only answer.”

“Look at her photos,” Cian chided. “Really look, *a rúnsearc*.”

Honor didn't want to. She had no desire to acknowledge those powerful, piercing photographs, to face the obvious reality that Hannah was a woman with purpose. However she'd come to be here, whatever her identity now, she'd clearly found her calling. And like Honor, she acted upon that objective, no matter the difficulty or danger.

"Shit," Honor said again, her hands clenched into tight fists, her body rigid. She turned in Cian's hold and glared up at him. "Let me go."

"I'm sorry," he said again, his gaze intent, and the emotion glittering in his eyes—whatever it was—made the ache in her chest sharper, tighter, until her breath was like a dagger beneath her breastbone. "I promised I'd not lie to you, and I failed you in that. It'll not happen again."

"Promise?" she asked sarcastically.

"Aye," he replied seriously.

She snorted. "It doesn't matter. I always knew better."

Cian stared at her, his arms turning to iron bands around her. "What does that mean?"

"Everyone's an asshole, that's what it means." She bristled in his arms. "Let go, goddamn it. I need to go de-program her."

Cian shook his head sharply. "No. You need to think about this."

"It's all I think about," she told him, grief and fury thick in her throat.

"Aye, I ken that." His hand swept a stray tendril of her hair behind her ear, his fingertips brushing its delicate shell, and Honor shivered unwillingly, suddenly remembering their kiss. His lips on hers, his breath filling her mouth. The sweet, tempting hunger to which he'd given life. *Asshole*. "But you'll not get this opportunity again, Honor. This reunion will happen only once; one chance is all you will get. You must tread carefully here, *a rúnsearc*."

Everything within her rejected his words, no matter their truth. She'd been waiting years for this moment; Hannah was all she had left. The thought of walking away—even only temporarily—was abhorrent, and not something she was capable of doing. No matter what she'd discovered.

No, it was too late. There was only one direction to go.

"I have to do this," she whispered. "Here, now. I can't walk away. I won't."

“Are you sure?”

Cian’s words were gentle, careful, and part of her hated him for it. *He’d lied to her.* Which meant that there was no room for the bright, seductive flare of hunger between them, no place for his concern or compassion or—God help her—his kisses. There was only Hannah.

Only Hannah.

“Yes,” she said.

“Then get ready,” he replied grimly. “She’s just stepped into the ladies, and it’s likely going to be the only chance you get.”

Chapter 6

DEATH BY STILETTO.

As Honor slid across the marble floor in pursuit of Hannah, she thought such a demise was a distinct possibility. She had no tread and all the balance of an inebriated elephant; imagining herself doing a face-plant into the stone tile and cracking open her skull was not a stretch.

And considering her luck tonight, it would only be par for the course.

Somehow she made it, sliding over the threshold just behind her sister, turning, shutting and locking the door behind them before anyone else could enter. Because the small room contained only a sink and toilet, Hannah turned to look at her in confusion.

“Surprise,” Honor muttered and sagged back against the door. She stared at her sister in expectation, her heart beating so hard she felt sick. Nerves twisted in her belly, and in her ear, where the comm link nestled, she heard Cian’s rough voice say, “Good luck, *a rúnsearc*. I’ll be here if you need me.”

Which shouldn’t have made her feel any better, damn him. But did.

The woman who stood across from her—who smelled like roses and bore a presence and charisma her “father” did not—only stared at Honor, a nonplussed expression on her face.

“Seriously,” Honor growled. “*Hannah*.”

A violent jerk and a step back. “I’m sorry, I don’t—”

“Bullshit,” Honor cut in. Her throat swelled so suddenly and so painfully, she

could barely speak. “Don’t lie. I know you know who I am. *I know it.*”

But Hannah only stared at her, no flicker of recognition, no reaction whatsoever. Nothing.

“No,” Honor whispered. “You have to remember.”

“I—”

“Mama looked like us.” Desperation gripped Honor, and the words simply fell out, like coins spilling from a slot. “She had red hair and soft hands, and she always smelled like honeysuckle. When she died, you cried for three days. Daddy was tall and handsome and always laughing. He took us to the drive-in and let us eat ice cream in bed. Jonas was tall like daddy, and he would carry you on his shoulders and pretend to be a T-Rex, and you would scream with laughter. When you were eleven, we got into a fight over Malibu Barbie, and I pushed you down, and you cut your lip on the bed. That’s where you got that scar on your lip. From me.”

Tears burned in her eyes, but Hannah only stared at her, cold. Nothing—no outrage or fear or denial or distrust. Just...empty.

Honor grabbed her arms and shook her. “Don’t you recognize me? *How can you not remember?*”

She didn’t expect Hannah to step closer, to lean toward her and say coldly, “Why should I wish to remember?”

Honor’s breath caught sharply. “You do.”

“That is another life. That girl is dead.”

So cold, a breath of frost between them. Honor stared at her sister, unable to digest that chilling remoteness, the sheer lack of reaction. Adrenaline was surging through her like water from a burst dam; her skin was flushed, her heart beat like a hammer in her chest.

“Hannah—”

“No,” the woman who towered over her hissed. “My name is Anna. Anna Maria Petrov, daughter to Andrei. He is my family. My only family.”

“*I am your only family.*”

“You are nothing.”

Honor jerked beneath that blow, felt it acutely. In her ear, Cian murmured,

“Steady, lass.”

Tears clogged her throat, stung her eyes. Her hands tightened; her nails dug into Hannah’s cool skin. “Why are you doing this? What happened to you? Why does he call you his daughter? What—”

“You have no right,” Hannah grated harshly, her tone jagged, broken. “You left me to *die*. My father, he *saved* me. You are not fit to speak his name.”

“We didn’t leave you to die!” Honor cried, unable to temper the emotion churning within her, a feral and terrified creature. “We didn’t do that. They all died, Hannah. Daddy and Jonas, and almost me. We didn’t leave you by choice. We wouldn’t have done that. We wouldn’t have!”

“You did.”

The words pelted her like sharp stones. “No.”

“You are nothing,” Hannah said again, her eyes hard.

A piercing, mournful cry ripped from Honor’s throat. Cian said, “I’m coming to you,” and Hannah wrenched from her hold.

“I’m your sister,” Honor insisted, her heart shattering. “I looked for you. I always looked for you. And when I finally found you, I came to...”

“To what?” Hannah mocked. “To save me?”

Honor flinched.

“How dare you assume the need,” Hannah said, her voice so cutting fear turned Honor’s blood to ice. “You know nothing.”

Honor stared at her helplessly. “Hannah-banana...”

Hannah flinched, a small crack in her icy reserve. “No.”

“But we’re family,” Honor said desperately. “We’re—”

“Do you know what they did to me? They *sold* me.” Hannah bared her teeth, her expression dark. Hateful. “I was thrown into a shipping crate filled with other children, and it stank of shit and piss and vomit. We spent three weeks at sea, and in that time almost half of us died from disease and dehydration. When we arrived in Bangkok, they unloaded us like cattle and sold us on an auction block. Andrei saw me, and he *saved* me. If it was not for him, I would be dead. You stupid fool. He saved my life.”

“Why?” Honor demanded, aware of her voice rising, but unable to stop.

“What kind of man buys a child?”

“You know nothing,” Hannah said again, stepping back. “Go home. You should not have come here.”

Honor shook her head; tears slid down her cheeks. *Burning, it was all burning.* Her dreams, her expectations. *Fucking hope.*

“But we’re family,” she whispered helplessly, unable to let go.

“She is dead,” Hannah repeated. “I buried her long ago. There is nothing here for you.”

“You don’t even want...to know me?”

“No.”

Honor began to shake. She tried to stem the tears, but there was no stopping them. She stared at Hannah through their blur; she felt...*undone.* “Please.”

“No.”

“*Please!*”

Hannah pushed her aside and reached for the door handle. Honor grabbed her arm, ready to beg, furious and terrified and heartbroken. “I came here for you!”

Hannah halted. Her bright green eyes were flat. “That was your mistake.”

And then she tore from Honor’s grip and walked through the door. Cian stood there, his expression so dark, Hannah faltered before sweeping past him.

Honor met his gaze, and pain sheared through her like a red-hot blade.

“I’m sorry, *a rúnsearc.*” he said softly.

She shook her head sharply, battling to control the violent sobs welling in her chest.

“What do you want to do?” he asked, and his hand caught hers, holding tight when she tried to pull away.

Die. That’s what she wanted to do.

“Home,” she said, her voice raw. “I want to go home.”

PLEASE. PLEASE!

Cian could not get those words out of his head. Simple words and yet... everything.

All of Honor's hope. Her fear, her desperation. Her pain.

Pain he felt acutely, as if it were his own. Standing in his room, his jacket and tie discarded, his house chillingly silent around him, Honor's words continued to haunt him.

It doesn't matter. I always knew better.

Christ, she might as well have gutted him. Not that he didn't deserve it, but fuck.

Fuck.

The worst part, he'd foreseen it. *All of it.* Honor's heart-wrenching response to the realization that Petrov had claimed Hannah as his child; her reaction to being lied to by *him*. Hannah's brutal rejection of her. He'd tried to warn her. His omission had been designed to save her pain, but it'd had the opposite effect, and Cian wasn't certain she would ever forgive him for it.

He understood now that he should have told her. Better she'd been prepared, than to walk into that room, heart in hand, hope her only defense.

Stupid, selfish bastard.

Because he hadn't wanted to be the one to hurt her. To bear the brunt of the reality he foresaw, and what that reality might do to them. To her. And now, when they were only just beginning, this...this could end them.

And it would be his fault.

Honor's withdrawal as they'd returned from Petrov's estate had been palpable, as if she'd donned impenetrable armor while he sat beside her, watching helplessly. Cold to his touch, deaf to his words, her pain and fury an impermeable veil between them.

He hadn't pushed, unwilling to shove her further into the void. She was already angry with him, but perhaps he should have.

"How did it go?"

He turned to see Akachi in the doorway of his room, tray in hand. On the tray sat a bottle of Irish whiskey and two decanters.

"Badly," Cian muttered.

Akachi nodded and offered the tray. "You should go to her."

Cian stared at his friend, his heart a heavy, painful thud in his chest. He wanted nothing more...but Honor wouldn't want the same. She felt betrayed—by Hannah, and by him. As far as she was concerned, she'd lost everything tonight.

And Cian didn't know how to change that. Yet the urge to seek her out clawed at him. Instinct told him to forge ahead, not retreat. And he trusted his instincts. But—

"She has need of you," Akachi said, his black eyes glittering, challenge and rebuke in one. "If you fail her now, you will lose her."

"Damn it, man," Cian snarled. "I ken that."

"Then go."

For a heartbeat, Cian only glared at him. Then, with a soft curse, he took the tray and swept past him. Honor's room was next to his, and he didn't bother to knock, but simply walked in, unwilling to allow her the opportunity to deny him.

Her shoes sat inside the door, followed by her discarded stockings. She stood barefoot before the windows, still in her dress. She didn't turn to look at him.

Cian set the tray down on the bedside table and poured a healthy amount of whiskey into one of the glasses. Then he took it to her.

"Drink this," he ordered and thrust it at her.

She said nothing, staring out into the darkness.

"Please," he added.

"Go away," she muttered. "Benedict Arnold."

"I didn't betray you," he growled. "Admittedly, I should have told you that Petrov had claimed her as his child, but I didn't sell you out. I'd not do that."

"Yeah," she said with a sigh. "Just like you'd not lie to me."

"I was wrong," he said baldly. "But I expect you to understand why I did it."

She turned and glared at him. Tears stained her cheeks, which were pale but for two angry spots of color. "I do. But it was still wrong!"

"Aye," he agreed. Nothing more. His only defense was that he cared for her, and that was not something she would want to hear.

Not yet.

“Goddamn you,” she whispered. “I trusted you.”

“I know,” he told her, meeting that dark, bruised gaze, remorse a painful throb within him. “I’m sorry.”

Honor only shook her head and turned to look back out into the dark of night. “You were right. She didn’t want saving.”

“Aye.” His heart constricted. “I heard.”

“She thinks I abandoned her.” Honor’s tone was bitter with disbelief. “But they tried to take me, too, that night. I fought, so they shot me instead. If I’d known what would happen to her...I would’ve let them take me.”

“It’s not your fault,” Cian said softly. “Not any of it.”

“It feels like my fault.”

He lifted the whiskey toward her. “Just a sip,” he ordered.

“It won’t help.”

“It will. A little.”

She scowled, but took the glass and tossed back its entire contents. Shuddered. “Nope. No better.”

Cian accepted the empty glass. “I didn’t mean all of it.”

“It’s over now,” she said. “Finally.”

“Nay,” he replied instantly. “You’re family. It will never be over.”

Honor growled at him. “She doesn’t want to know me.”

“That will change.”

She turned on him then, her hands fisted, tension a fine vibration moving through her. “Don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t pretend. I’ve done enough of that already. She hates me.”

Cian set the glass aside. “She doesn’t.”

“You didn’t see how she looked at me.”

No, he hadn’t. But he didn’t need to. “Do you think she expected her long-lost sister to reappear tonight?” he asked quietly. “That she was in any way prepared to have her beliefs shattered by your truth?”

“She didn’t believe a word I said,” Honor argued. A strand of hair stuck to

her cheek, where her tears had left a salty trail. Cian stepped closer, and his hands flexed as he fought the need to touch her. “She thinks we just...left her. But we didn’t. *We wouldn’t have done that.*”

Her voice was raw, her eyes dark with pain, and Cian couldn’t help himself. He cupped her face; her skin was hot against his palms. “I ken that, *a rúnsearc*. And so does she. You must give her time to digest this. To think on it. You expect too much.”

“That’s not fair.”

“But it’s true. You want to go back, but all you can do is go forward.”

She stared at him, and a tear slid down her cheek. “It fucking hurts.”

“Aye,” he said. Then he sat down in the large upholstered chair they stood beside and dragged her into his lap, easily subduing the growled protest she made. “I know.”

“Let go,” she rasped as tears spilled from her eyes. “I don’t want your comfort.”

“Perhaps I want yours,” he murmured, wiping away those tears with his thumbs.

“Liar,” she whispered.

“Once,” he acceded. “But never again.”

“Don’t,” she said sharply, and a sob broke from her. “Just don’t.”

“I promise,” he added solemnly.

“Stop it,” she hissed, crying now, squirming in his hold. “Let me go!”

“I canna.” He gathered her to him, cradled her in his arms. “I won’t.”

She trembled violently, so obviously fighting her tears that Cian pressed a hard, possessive kiss to her lips, making her start. “Let it out, *a rúnsearc*. Or it will poison you.”

For a moment, she just shook, so tense he was afraid she might snap. And then, like a dam bursting, she began to sob, great, shuddering cries that made his throat fill. He held her tight, stroking her back, murmuring into her hair. His shirt grew damp, and the sound of her heartbreak filled the room until he could hardly bear to listen. But he didn’t move, and when she finally quieted, she was limp in his arms, her face nestled against his heart, her hands clenched in his shirt.

“I hate you,” she whispered thickly.

Cian’s heart fell. “There’s no guarantees, lass. Only risk.”

“Fucking pain.”

“Aye, sometimes. But other times, there is the most glorious of pleasure.”

She was round and lush against him, and beneath her weight, his body was stirring. It had no mind for her fury or her pain, or his own self-determination to be a gentleman. The press of her hip against his cock became a silent, powerful drumbeat in his blood.

One he tried valiantly to ignore.

“Pleasure,” she repeatedly bitterly. “What’s that?”

“Is that a challenge?” he murmured, knowing better. He swept her hair back from her cheeks, his thumb swiping the lush curve of her bottom lip before she could stop him.

“An impossibility,” she whispered.

“Now that was definitely a challenge,” he said and stroked the strong line of her jaw, the delicate arch of her throat, ignoring the growl she gave him.

“Dream on,” she told him. She pinned him with her dark gaze. “Why did you do this?”

“Do what?”

“Help me. Why did you help me?”

“Because you asked,” he told her honestly.

“That’s not all,” she said, watching him closely. “You wanted me.”

“Aye,” he said. “But that’s only part of it.”

Her hand lifted and tentatively cupped his jaw, and Cian closed his eyes at the feel of her soft palm against his skin.

“What’s all of it?” Her fingers found his lips, traced their shape. “Tell me. *And don’t lie.*”

Cian shuddered. He wanted to take her to the floor and *show* her.

But he was not an animal. And she was not prepared for what he wanted from her.

“Because we’re the same,” he told her roughly, his eyes opening to capture hers. “It’s more than want, lass. It’s nothing so tame as sex. Nothing that easy.”

“Then what?” Her hand stilled against him. “Love?”

The fear that flickered through her was at odds with what he heard in her voice, something trembling and uncertain and...hopeful. He stared down at her, the rush of his blood a low roar, his heart a jackhammer in his chest. Beneath her, he was hard as granite.

“Aye,” he replied with a sharp nod. “And all that comes with it.”

She froze in his arms, staring up at him. “What does that mean?”

In for a penny, in for a pound. He steeled himself. “Love, marriage, babies. ‘Til death do us part.”

She blinked. “Babies?”

His hands tightened on her. “Aye.”

“Plural?”

He laughed shortly. “Whatever we’re blessed with, lass. I’ll take what I can get.”

“You’re crazy,” she murmured. “We’re strangers.”

“Nay,” he denied. “We’re the same.”

“You keep saying that, but...” She shook her head. “I’m not like anyone.”

“Nay, you’re special. Like me.” He lifted a hand and trailed a finger down her cheek, through the damp path left by her tears. “We’ve the same heart, *a rúnsearc*. I’ve known that from the start. We’re kindred spirits, you and I.”

“That’s stupid,” she said, but she stared at him and her fingers slid up into his hair and rubbed his scalp in a manner that made his cock throb. “Romantic claptrap.”

He laughed again. “Perhaps. But no less true.”

“Do you really believe that?” she asked.

He met her gaze. “Aye, I do.”

“Crazy,” she repeated, but she sat up in his lap, making him hiss, and tugged his head down toward her.

It was all Cian could to resist.

“Nay,” he whispered. “Forgive me, first.”

Her gaze met his, glittering in the light. “But I don’t.”

“You will,” he told her, his voice harsh; the ache in his chest was enough to

cleave him in two.

“Maybe,” she said. And then she took his mouth.

Cian froze as she pressed her lips carefully against his. A tentative, exploring touch, untutored and hesitant.

“Kiss me back,” she demanded against his mouth, and her tongue probed his upper lip. A deep, grating rasp rumbled in his chest.

“You’re hurting,” he muttered, unmoving. “I won’t take advantage.”

“Pollyanna,” she murmured and tugged at his bottom lip with her teeth. Her breath flowed into his mouth, heavy with whiskey, so tempting his resolve wavered.

“Nay, lass,” he said, the words like crushed glass in his throat. “You’ll regret this, and I want you to regret nothing. Not with me.”

“You shouldn’t say things like that,” she said and kissed him again, her mouth sliding persuasively against his, her tongue teasing. “It just makes me want to prove you wrong.”

He shuddered violently. “Stop, Honor.”

She pulled back and blinked at him. “You don’t...you don’t want me?”

The look on her face shattered him. “Christ,” he muttered. And then, unable to resist, he kissed her.

Her mouth opened beneath his; when his tongue stroked into her mouth, she moaned, a low, heady sound that made him feel drunk. Her hands slid into his hair and clenched there, and she rose against him, her mouth hungry and demanding, and he was lost.

He took control of the kiss and plundered, kissing her the way he’d dreamt of: wet, wild, a mating of mouths so intimate, he might as well have been inside her.

Inside her.

The thought made him dizzy. He stood, lifting her with him, and stumbled toward the bed, coming down on top of her, pushing his way between her legs until she cradled his cock in the vee of her thighs. She made a startled sound that he swallowed, and his hands clenched into the bedcovers as he told himself to stop.

Stop.

Her legs lifted and wrapped his hips, and she ground herself against him.

Just fucking stop.

Her heat seared him; her mouth ate at his. She moaned again, and as the sound slid down his throat, his hand found the arch of her neck and wrapped her there, a dark, possessive hold.

Jesus Christ, you have to stop.

Her hands slid to his shoulders, and she tugged at his shirt.

“Off,” she demanded, panting as she broke their kiss. “Take this off.”

Cian stilled, fighting for control. She was an inferno against him, burning his resolve to ash.

“You’re not ready for this,” he grated.

Her fingers found the buttons, tore at them. “Please.”

“Nay,” he denied, ragged. “I won’t be a distraction.”

She stilled, her fingers clenching into his shirt. Her gaze met his, her pupils wide, her eyes wild with grief and need and pain. “*Please.*”

He flinched.

“Please,” she repeated. She ground herself into his cock again, and Cian couldn’t stop himself from thrusting against her—*all that heat, burning him up*—and ecstasy was like a live wire, twisting down his spine. “Pleasure—” Her breath caught sharply, and she arched against him. “You say it exists. Pleasure instead of pain. Show me, Cian. Please.”

He stilled; the beat of his heart was deafening. “Just a little.”

“Yes.” She nodded and licked her lips. “Just a little.”

A low groan rumbled in his chest. “Put your hands above your head.”

Honor blinked at him. “I want to touch you.”

“No,” he said.

“But...”

“If you touch me, I’ll take you,” he told her bluntly. Tension gripped him; he didn’t move. When she released his shirt and reached above her head, clasping her hands together there, he let his gaze slide down, to where his hand wrapped her throat, his skin dark against hers. He stroked her with his fingertips, and she

made a soft, mewling sound that made his cock jerk in response.

“Do you want my hands on you?” he asked, his voice low.

“Aye,” she said, and when his gaze flickered to hers, she smiled hesitantly at him.

Smiled. For the first time in his bed.

She was beautiful.

He looked away; his hand trembled against her as he slid it down to where her pulse beat like a bird’s wings in the hollow of her throat. Further, sliding down into the vee of her dress, to where the plump mounds of her breasts beckoned, pale ivory kissed by golden flecks. His finger found the curve of her left breast, traced its shape, and she squirmed beneath him.

“Be still,” he murmured, and slid his finger toward the nipple that pouted in yearning, outlined in velvet. He circled it once, twice.

“Please,” she said again, her voice ragged.

His gaze lifted to hers, but she was watching his finger. Hunger surged through him, and he removed his hand, ignoring her protest. He wanted to see her.

He leaned back onto his knees, holding her still with a hard hand on her hips, disconnecting her legs from around him. Her thighs fell open, and he couldn’t stop from pushing beneath her dress to run one hand up their silken inner surface. Her scent filled his head; his mouth watered. She trembled as he climbed higher, as he reached the delicate silk that covered the notch at the top of her legs, as he ran a heavy hand over that silk, pressing his palm against her, her delicate flesh parting beneath his insistence. She moaned and lifted herself to the touch, but he kept going, up until he reached the narrow band of velvet that held her dress closed. He tore that band free, and then he unwrapped her like a present.

She wore the delicate black demi-bra and lace edged panties he’d bought to go with the dress. Pleasure lashed him at the sight. Her nipples pressed against the lace nap of the bra, and she was pale and round and so lush, his cock pulsed.

“Don’t tease,” she whispered.

But he didn’t listen. He was savoring her; no one would hurry him. Not even

her.

He stared at her for a long moment, taking in the width of her hips, the indent of her waist. The ripe mounds of her breasts; the delicate line of her collarbone. She had a beauty mark just below her bellybutton. A small scar on her left hip. Her skin was like polished ivory.

“Cian,” she snarled, and the sound of his name made another jolt of ecstasy shoot down his vertebra.

He reached up to the clasp nestled between her breasts and released it. Then he peeled away the scrap of silk and looked his fill.

“Goddamn you—”

Her nipples were pale, a rose so delicate it was barely discernable. Hard, jutting into the air, quivering faintly. He reached out and rubbed one with his thumb, and Honor’s hips surged beneath him.

“More,” she demanded huskily.

“Aye,” he murmured and leaned down to suckle her.

She cried out, twisting beneath him as he pulled at her, strong, hungry tugs that weren’t enough.

Not nearly enough.

He pulled back and blew gently across her flesh. Then he moved to her other breast and bit down gently as he tongued her. Her legs twined with his, and her moans filled the air.

“More,” she said again, panting, and when he looked up, his mouth filled with her, she shuddered. “I need...”

“Aye, lass, I ken what you need,” he rasped. His hand slid to the vee of her thighs, his skin snagging the delicate silk that covered her. He cupped her boldly. “This is what you need.”

She made an incoherent sound, hot and damp beneath his hand. He tore away the silk and sank his fingers into her flesh, circling the tender bud of her clitoris, rubbing the entrance to her body.

“Oh!” She whimpered and thrust against him. “That’s...”

“Aye,” he grated and pushed one finger into her.

She arched again, a choked cry echoing between them.

“Sweet Honor,” he crooned. “So brilliant and beautiful and bloodthirsty. So tight and wet. I canna get enough of you.”

She trembled violently, so close to climax he could taste it. He teased another finger into her, rubbed that tender bud with his thumb. Then he curled his fingers up, found the spot he was looking for, and stroked hard.

“My bonny lass.” He met her gaze, daring her to look away, beyond pleased when she held his gaze and let him see her pleasure. “I want everything.”

He saw a flare of fear—her recognition that this would bind them, no matter what she told herself—but the pleasure was stronger, and when he leaned down and drew her nipple into his mouth, he grazed her with the edge of his teeth and demanded of her harshly, “Come.”

She did.

Chapter 7

PLEASURE INSTEAD OF PAIN.

Perhaps, Honor thought, they were one and the same.

Because she'd not expected what she'd found in Cian's arms. Not the earthshattering pleasure—so *that* was an orgasm—and not the exquisite pain of his betrayal. Although she didn't want to forgive him, somehow between the pleasure and the pain, it had happened.

Not that she trusted him...entirely. But the sting of his duplicity had faded. She understood why he hadn't told her, but she didn't appreciate it. And if it ever happened again, they were done.

For good.

You'll regret this, and I want you to regret nothing. Not with me.

She *should* regret it—unplanned, ill-considered, a complication of epic proportions—but she didn't. Not for a minute. In point of fact, she'd spent most of the day wrestling with herself and considering a repeat performance.

"Insanity," she muttered, but it was a token protest.

After Cian's deliberate manipulation and Hannah's brutal rejection, Honor had wanted only to run back to her sanctuary and lick her wounds. She'd been ready to pack her bags when Cian walked in. *Asshole*. With his stupid, heartfelt apology and fine Irish whiskey. He was right—it *had* helped. Not that she was proud of her storm of tears—long past due—or the fact that she'd stuck her tongue down his throat in effort to feel something other than the wrenching pain

that lived like a second self within her. But she wasn't sorry.

And that was a problem. Because that made it far more likely, she *would* conduct a repeat performance. Which was just stupid, considering. And that she wasn't certain he wouldn't make the mistake of lying to her again—no matter what he said—especially if he thought it was best.

Like Sam.

A trait she'd never cared for. What was she even thinking, getting involved with a man like Cian?

Not that she'd been thinking. Not once he'd kissed her.

Really kissed her.

She'd awoken this morning naked and alone, tucked deep under the covers, Cian's scent lingering in the air. She'd slept deeply, dreamlessly in his arms, safe in a way she'd never known. Another problem, because that was something she could get very, very used to.

So stupid. Someone should give her a prize.

And Cian was wrong: the saga of the search for Hannah *was* over. Her sister didn't want anything to do with her; she'd made that crystal clear. He might believe Hannah would change her mind, but Honor wasn't willing to wager her heart on wishful thinking. *Family*, he'd called Hannah, but Honor knew better. It was a stranger she'd faced last night, not the sister she remembered. And she couldn't afford any more stupid fantasies. They hurt too much.

No. It was time to face the music. To accept that Hannah was *gone*. To figure out how she was now going to move forward—because there was that not inconsequential matter of being hunted, and as Cian had pointed out, the fact that he'd found her meant others were right behind him. She was going to have to make some changes.

Big ones.

'Till death do us part.

Crazy claptrap. Damn him. Even now, seated before her laptop, trying to dig up something useable on Andrei Petrov, she was staring into space like a lovesick loon, remembering those silly words. Butterflies in her belly, nerves in her throat, her heart battering her ribs like an angry ram.

And some insane part of her thought: *Why the hell not?*

Because there were a million reasons. Because she didn't know him, not truly. Because he'd lied to her and would probably do it again. Because they were strangers, no matter Cian's fanciful belief. *Kindred spirits*. Jesus. What was the man smoking?

She took risks all the time; one could not hunt the men she did without putting her life on the line. But those were easy, done from within the walls of her tower; they were intangible and moot. But this...

This could destroy her. This was a chance unlike any she'd ever contemplated, and that scared the shit out of her. It was something she really, really didn't want to think about.

"Andrei Petrov," she reminded herself and glared at the screen of her laptop.

Because Hannah might be beyond reach, but the man who claimed to be her father was not. And no matter what Hannah chose to believe—or what she now called herself—he was *not* her father. The distinction was impossible to dismiss, and it incensed Honor that she was simply expected to *accept* such an atrocity. That Hannah could believe her family would abandon her, that she would allow another to take the place of the man who'd taken care of her for the first twelve years of her life...Honor wanted to dig up every skeleton Petrov had and hang them out to dry. She wanted Hannah to know exactly who the man who'd "saved" her was.

Unfortunately, she hadn't found squat. In point of fact, the only thing she could find was further evidence that Andrei Petrov operated on the right side of the law. He sold his weapons only to legitimate buyers; his company had signed several agreements with NATO, the UN and countless world governments agreeing not to arm despots and terrorists. He was generous with his money, he provided military-grade body armor to civilian armies free of charge, and he went out of his way to make certain the arms deals he took part in were wholly above-board.

"Wanker," she muttered.

Even the dark web was silent. So either Petrov had a reach she'd never before seen, or he truly was exactly what he seemed.

Which was impossible. Because no one was what they seemed.

It only made her more determined to find something.

“What war are you waging today, *a rúnsearc*?”

She started and looked up to see Cian standing in the doorway, sleek and elegant in a tailor-made suit the color of charcoal. He lounged in the doorway, his hands thrust into his pockets, a small, warm smile tugging at his mouth as he watched her. And because it was the first time Honor had seen him all day, she blushed. Hot, fiery red from head to toe. The rush of pleasure from the night before washed over her, and her breath caught tightly in her lungs.

“Petrov,” she replied huskily. “He’s going down.”

Cian frowned and walked into the room. “Because?”

“Because he stole my sister.”

“According to Hannah, he saved her.”

Honor waved that away. “Stockholm syndrome.”

“Lass,” he said sternly.

“It’s not right.” She shook her head. “Not any of it. I’m going to fix it.”

Cian halted next to the narrow wooden desk where she sat. She’d gone out onto the balcony earlier, but there were too many distractions. Not that she was having any more success at focusing while sitting at the desk—especially now that he’d appeared—but she was trying.

“You can’t hurt him,” Cian said and sat on the edge of the desk. His bright hazel gaze flitted over her, and heat instantly followed the path of his eyes until the blood in her veins simmered, and she looked away, back at the cursor blinking on her screen.

Focus.

“She’ll never forgive you,” Cian continued, his tone patient. “You’ll destroy any chance left that exists.”

“No chance exists at all,” Honor told him, ignoring the ache that gripped her. “If I can’t have her, neither will he.”

“Lass,” Cian said again.

“No,” Honor said. “Him claiming to be her *father*. Buying her like cattle and brainwashing her. I won’t just let it be. *It’s not right.*”

“You’re making a lot of assumptions,” Cian told her. “She said nothing about him purchasing her. She said only that he’d saved her. And the woman I saw last night was no victim. Her photographs alone spoke of strength and compassion and a profound awareness of the world around her. I know you’re hurting, *a rúnsearc*. But this is not the answer.”

Honor looked up at him. “You disapprove?”

Her tone was sharp, but Cian only nodded and said mildly, “Aye. I do.”

Stung, Honor slapped her laptop shut. “Then I’ll do it alone.”

“Honor.”

She picked up her laptop and strode past him, jerking from reach when he tried to stop her. Her pack sat on the floor and she tossed it onto the bed, unaccountably angry with him. “Thanks for everything, Cian. I appreciate your help with this. Really. But I think it’s time for me to go.”

“Honor,” he said again, and something in his tone made the ache in her chest swell to unbearable proportions.

“I can’t let you do something you would regret,” he said quietly. “And if you do this, you will regret it.”

He had the right to his opinion, and part of her knew he was trying to be the voice of reason, but she wasn’t feeling at all reasonable. First he lied to her, then he told her she was wrong.

“I thought you would be on my side,” she said, the words unwilling.

“Always,” he said.

She turned to glare at him. “Then why are you arguing with me?”

“Because you’re wrong.”

She flinched. “You would do it.”

“Nay, I wouldn’t. You weren’t alone in that room with her last night, lass. I was there. I heard what she said—and what she didn’t. This is not about Andrei Petrov. This is about *Anna*.”

Pain lanced through Honor, as hot and bright as a brand. “That’s not her goddamn name.”

“Aye, it is.” Cian took a step toward her, his features hard in a way that she’d not seen before, the mercenary he’d once been bleeding through. “You’ve no

right to appear from thin air and discredit who she is. To tell her she's wrong; to doubt her. You've no grounds to destroy her father—a man she loves and with whom she credits her very survival—simply because you expected to be her savior. I ken your heart is broken, *a rúnsearc*. But you've no right to break hers in return.”

Honor stared at him. Something within her was shriveling, *dying*, and he thought she was being...selfish?

Maybe you are.

She damn well didn't care. “Her entire life is a *lie*. You think I'm supposed to be okay with that?”

“Nay.” Cian shook his head. “But if you want to be part of her life, you have to accept it.”

“The hell I do.” Honor turned to fling her clothes inside her pack. She zipped up her laptop and tossed it in. Adrenaline was spearing through her like an illicit drug; the roar of her blood was deafening. *'Till death do us part*. Right. “You're so full of shit.”

“What did you just say?” Cian asked softly, and although his tone sent a sudden chill spearing through her, she only laughed, a harsh, jagged sound that hurt.

“You! You're full of shit. Love and marriage and *babies*.” She mocked him, her tone cutting, tears burning in her throat. “What a line.”

“Honor.”

Again, she ignored what she heard—whatever it was. “I'm leaving.”

Hard hands gripped her shoulders and swung her around to face him. She didn't want to look into his glittering eyes; inhale the scent of him. Stand in his shadow and watch the pulse tick in his jaw.

You're such a fool. Fucking fucked. No doubt about it.

“You can be angry with me for telling you what I think,” he said, so quietly the hair at her nape bristled. “But have no doubt I meant every word I said last night.”

Honor stared up at him, tears turning him into a water blur. “Let me go.”

His hands tightened. “So you can run? Because that's what you do when it

gets hard—you run.”

She stiffened. “Let. Go.”

But his hold only became something to break. “Back to your cold, empty tower where you will hide in the darkness and carve men into pieces.”

“Fuck you and your judgment,” she grated. “Let me go. *Now.*”

“I’m not judging you, *a rúnsearc.*” Cian’s hands flexed on her. His jaw was like granite. “I’m trying to stop you from doing something you will bitterly regret for the rest of your life. Because I bloody-well care about you, Honor.”

She shook her head, and a tear slid down her cheek. *So stupid.* “Let go.”

“Lass—”

“No,” she said again. “Take your hands off me. I’m leaving.”

“Just like that?”

“Exactly like that.”

His hands tightened, and his mouth hardened. For a long, painful moment, he didn’t move, and a sob caught in her chest. *Too good to be true.* Everything always was.

“Fine,” he said, his tone clipped. He let her go and stepped back. “I thought you were braver, *a rúnsearc.* Clearly, I was mistaken.”

“Clearly,” she said. She turned and grabbed her pack, brutally aware that her heart was shattering, deep, jagged fissures that left nothing whole.

When she turned back around, Cian stood staring at her, his eyes glinting, his hands fisted at his sides. His face was cold, the face of the stranger she’d always know he was. Regret and anger churned in her chest; words welled in her throat.

But she didn’t speak them. Instead, she swung her pack over her shoulder and did what she did best.

She ran.

Chapter 8

“HE’S RIGHT, YOU KNOW.”

Honor didn’t turn and look at Sam, even though she could feel his gaze—patient and steady and without censure. Part of it was because she didn’t want to start bawling again—which was about all she’d done since flying away from Cian two days ago—but mostly it was just shame.

Because Sam wasn’t telling her anything she hadn’t already figured out for herself. That her inclination to destroy Hannah’s self-appointed father was selfish and misguided and would only burn what little remained between her and Hannah to ash.

If anything remained at all.

Because that’s what you do when it gets hard—you run.

She flinched. The truth *did* hurt, she thought.

Like a bitch.

“Honor,” Sam said, his tone gentle but stern.

Sam. Who’d taken one look at her standing in his doorway and demanded, “Whose ass am I kicking?” Who’d pulled her into his arms and his home and told her how glad he was to see her.

And meant it.

Family. All that she had; the sole living person who’d ever given a damn about her.

Then. But not now. And her stupid heart wouldn’t let her forget it.

I bloody-well care about you, Honor.

For years the only thing she'd wanted was Hannah, and that want, it had hurt. Every day. But not like this... Hannah had been taken, but Cian...

Cian she'd run from. And the regret was bitter and sour, and it threatened to choke her with every breath.

"Maybe he shouldn't have lied to you," Sam conceded. "But people fuck up. Hell, if it was me, I wouldn't have told you the truth. You like to think you're calm and logical and reasonable. Truth is, you're reactionary and hot-headed and you'd have burned the whole damn place down to the ground without thinking twice."

She flinched again. "Not helping."

"Honey, pride is expensive," he replied softly. "I'm trying to save you some change."

The porch swing beneath them creaked as he moved it back and forth. Sam's log home sat nestled in the Cascade foothills, just outside of Silver Bend, Washington, surrounded by a pine forest and thick stands of fluttering aspen. A quiet, peaceful place filled with wild lupine and sleek, caramel-colored elk; the sound of the nearby stream was like a balm to the soul.

She should have visited earlier, and being here now only made her realize what she'd missed. Inside, she could hear Sam's fiancé Lucia talking to Ben, their youngest ward, who chattered nonstop, like an excited bird. Lucia, too, had welcomed Honor with open arms, her smile so warm and beautiful, Honor had immediately understood why Sam had fallen head over heels in love.

She couldn't hear Ben's brother Alexander, but she'd seen him last night at dinner, his face drawn as he studied her with eyes that saw far too much.

A tragically old soul. And he knew. He knew that three months ago—while Sam and Lucia were on the run, fighting to save the boys from the monster who was their father—that Honor had been the one to share with the world the truth about Donovan Cruz—that it was her who'd shown the world what he'd done—and in doing so, she'd changed Alexander's life, for both the better and the worse. It had been unavoidable, and something she would do again, but having to answer for it...that was new.

And unwelcome. Another bitter lesson being served up.

On the flight from Tallinn, somewhere over the Atlantic, Honor had realized that perhaps it was time for Aequitas to fade quietly away. Not that she was done with her work—not by a long shot—but the identity had become a liability and was no longer safe to utilize. A huge undertaking—because it meant reworking her entire life—but to continue was simply foolish. Aequitas had served its purpose.

It was time to move on.

“Pride can take everything,” Sam added. “If we let it.”

Honor stiffened, staring out into the thick green stand of pine trees. Far off in the distance, Mount Rainier shimmered, veiled by wispy clouds and fresh snowfall. The scent of something spicy and delicious floated through the open window behind them, and her stomach murmured in interest.

“I can’t,” she said shortly. The ache in her chest grew painfully sharp, as if someone had pushed a spike through her heart.

“Being wrong is hard,” Sam replied, “but not insurmountable.”

Honor scowled. “It isn’t just pride.”

“Isn’t it?” Sam arched a brow, the one which bore a long, ugly scar. From his father, Honor knew, but the details of that incident were something he’d never shared. And she hadn’t pushed, she realized suddenly, because she’d been wholly wrapped up in her own painful scars.

Selfish and stupid. You’re an asshole.

She couldn’t seem to shake the searing wave of regret and shame that lashed through her when she remembered the look on Cian’s face when he’d realized she was running from him, the flicker in his rich hazel eyes when she’d mocked him.

Cold, she’d told herself. A stranger. But she’d seen his pain, and when her own had finally stopped blinding her, his had stabbed through her like the sharpest blade. The memory of it played through her head in an endless loop; there was no escape.

She’d come here, thinking it would diminish. That focusing on Sam and his wedding would somehow make everything that had happened in the last week

fade, like bright paint exposed to harsh sunlight.

Another selfish act. Because her being here wasn't about Sam or his happiness. It was about running.

Because that's what you do.

"I'm a shitty person," she confessed. "And I deserve what I'm getting."

"You're not a shitty person," Sam argued mildly. "You just made some shitty choices. We're all guilty of that, kid."

Honor only shook her head.

"The question is what you're gonna do *now*." Sam nudged her shoulder with his. "Life is fluid, honey. Always changing. Nothing says you can't pick up a phone and say you're sorry."

Something she'd thought about over and over but it seemed...impossible. Not only would that mean accepting responsibility for the disaster she'd created—it would mean making a choice to move forward. To put herself out there—*and risk*.

No matter the repercussions.

Computer keys, she understood too late, were easy to push. One stroke of her fingers and any stratagem she'd conjured simply *was*. But to have to act—to accept blame, to *trust*, to bare her deepest self on the altar of admission—that took true courage.

I thought you were braver, a rúnsearc.

You and me both, Honor thought.

"If Hannah decides she wants to see you, he's the one she's going to go to," Sam pointed out quietly. "Do you really want to close that door?"

"No," Honor admitted, her voice low. But Hannah wasn't the only reason she didn't want that door closed.

No, she wanted Cian. All of that crazy stuff about marriage and babies and 'til death do them part...

Crazy claptrap. But she wanted to at least *try*.

She just had to be brave enough to reach out.

"Then you know what you need to do," Sam said. He slid an arm around her shoulders and hugged her to his side, and tears suddenly welled in her chest.

“I’m glad you’re here.”

“Me, too,” she whispered.

“And I’m glad your mystery man pried you out of your hole,” he added.

“That’s no way to live.”

“I know,” she said. *Her dark, safe cave.*

She would miss it...but she wanted to walk in the light.

Sam leaned over and pressed a kiss to her head. “You’re one of the bravest people I know,” he told her softly. “You can do this.”

His faith made her throat swell. “You think so?”

“Honey, you can do anything.”

“SO THAT IS IT. YOU ARE JUST GOING TO LET HER GO?”

Cian didn’t bother to respond. Akachi had been asking him that same question non-stop for the last twenty-four hours, and Cian had no more an answer now than he had when his friend had begun asking.

“Cian.”

“Let it go,” he growled. “She’s gone.”

He ignored the whip of anger and pain that snapped through him. Honor had made her choice; they would both live with it. Perhaps her ire would cool, and in time, she would return to him.

But Cian wasn’t holding his breath.

“You must follow her,” Akachi said, and his tone made Cian look up sharply.

“Must I?” he demanded.

Akachi stared at him, unblinking. “Yes.”

“Butt out,” Cian told him.

“I cannot.”

“You will not,” Cian corrected, annoyed.

“She ran because it is all she knows,” Akachi said simply. “But you know better.”

“Fuck off,” Cian snarled. “I’ve some bloody pride, you asshole.”

“Pride will not keep you warm at night.”

Cian’s hands clenched around the papers he held. The file Honor had assembled on Andrei Petrov, which Cian had perused again and again and found *nothing*. He hadn’t been wrong; there was no legitimate reason to go after the man, and if he’d let Honor do so, she would’ve ruined any chance she and Hannah had, and she would have bitterly regretted it.

The right thing. For all the good it had done him.

And it might well have been for naught; Honor could be constructing a conspiracy even now, some ruse that would destroy Petrov—and Hanna’s—life.

Cian wouldn’t put it past her. He only hoped her head kicked in before her heart took her over the edge. Because while she was hot blooded and willful, she was also incredibly intelligent, and that heart was good. So long as smarts won the race, no one would get hurt.

“Cian,” Akachi repeated in a tone so patient and patronizing Cian wanted to punch him in the face, “you must go after her.”

Cian said nothing. He’d been battling with himself for hours; it was everything he could do to *not* to go after her. Because he knew where she was. Tracking her back to the US—to Washington State—had been child’s play.

Sam. That’s who she’d run to. The man who’d saved her all those years ago, the sole person she considered family.

Cian didn’t want to be jealous, but he fucking was.

And he did have some goddamn pride. If Honor wasn’t willing to fight for them, what was left to him? If she would run every time they disagreed or she grew frightened, they were doomed before they even began.

The lie didn’t help.

No. But he’d apologized; other than that, there wasn’t much left to him. If she couldn’t find it within her to forgive him, nothing he said or did would matter.

No matter that he could still taste her. That her soft cries haunted him when he closed his eyes; that her hunger and need and the incendiary heat between them had sunk into his bones and taken root.

He wanted her to come to him. *To come back.*

Pride. To chase her like some lovesick fool was not on his to-do list. Fuck that.

“What is there to lose?” Akachi asked softly. “Not your life.”

“My bloody self-respect,” Cian muttered.

“And the regret you will carry if you do not go after her?” his friend continued soberly. “Some things are unalterable after they occur, and we can never make up their difference.”

Cian looked up and met that black gaze, so deep and layered it was like looking into the depths of the deepest well. “It’s not the same.”

“Yes, it is,” Akachi said easily. “It is exactly the same.”

Cian stared at his friend, and for a moment he was back in Sudan, struggling to tear a screaming Akachi from the side of his dead brother. Gunfire spat in Cian’s ears; Akachi’s piercing cries. Bile in his throat; grief in his heart. If he had it to do over...

“Goddamn you,” Cian told him. “Goddamn you to hell.”

Akachi only stared at him.

“Call Montenegro. Tell him to get the plane ready.”

Akachi eyed him. “And what should I tell him is your destination?”

“Seattle.”

“Very good.” Akachi turned and headed toward the door, but as he reached it, he paused and looked back. “By the way, Anna Petrov is waiting for you in the solarium.”

Cian started. His gaze narrowed. “You couldn’t open with that?”

“No,” Akachi said. “You had to decide for yourself. She could not be your excuse.”

Then he turned and walked away.

Chapter 9

SQUEAK. SQUEAK. SQUEAK.

Honor sighed. The sun was just cresting the horizon, spilling light across the earth toward her as she sipped her coffee and rocked back and forth on the noisy porch swing. The air was crisp and clean from the recent rain, verdant with pine sap, and the birds were celebrating the dawn with piercing songs and sharp, high-pitched cries.

It was Sam and Lucia's wedding day, and all hell had begun to break loose.

First, tiny red handprints had suddenly and mysteriously appeared all over Lucia's dress—handprints which smelled suspiciously like cherry Jell-O—and Sam's tux had somehow ended up in the dryer. The tent—which was supposed to arrive yesterday—had yet to appear (and get set up), and the woman who'd baked the wedding cake had called to say she'd accidentally made a lemon cake instead of a chocolate one—which made Ben cry out in horror—and the frosting had, for some unknown reason, turned from pale yellow to bright, neon orange. Because that wasn't enough, the band was going to be late, Sam's best man was still two hundred miles away due to a wicked summer storm, and the local Judge who was going to marry them had managed to misplace their vows.

"*Ay, yai, yai,*" Lucia had proclaimed. "If it was not for bad luck, we would have no luck at all!"

At which point, Sam had laid a kiss on her that made Honor blush and Ben crow.

“Married,” he’d said when they surfaced. “Wife. Nothing else matters.”

And Lucia had flushed and kissed him back, and the hooting and hollering had started all over again.

Sam was happy—wondrously, deliriously happy. Honor hadn’t known it was even possible to be that happy. To see Sam find that...she was so glad for him.

And so jealous.

“Loser,” she muttered and sipped her coffee.

The front door opened, and Ben peeked out at her. All round, dimpled cheeks and gregarious nature, the five-year-old was incredibly extroverted. He was also an incorrigible flirt.

Honor loved him.

“Hi, Auntie Honor,” he said, grinning broadly.

“Hi, Ben.”

He looked around. “I’m s’posed to find Daisy. Did you see her out here?”

“Nope,” she told him. “Sorry.”

“That’s okay.” He gave her a thumb’s up. “Thanks a bunch.”

The door banged against the frame when he ducked back into the house. When it opened immediately again, Honor smiled and shook her head, but it wasn’t Ben who appeared. It was his brother Alexander.

“Hey,” she said, startled.

He only stared at her—a protracted, heavy stare that made her shift in discomfort. Alexander, she’d discovered, was the polar opposite of his brother Ben—somber, unsmiling and withdrawn. His pale green eyes were touched by a hint of frost, and his composure was absolute. In no way, shape or form did he resemble the ten year old boy he was.

Honor knew why; at this point—thanks to her—the whole world knew why. But that didn’t make it any easier to stomach. It just made her angry.

So goddamn unfair.

She hadn’t seen him smile or laugh; he displayed none of Ben’s easy joy. Instead, he watched everyone around him with an odd, chilling intensity, as if waiting for a shoe she couldn’t see to drop. He was protective of his younger brother, and he stuck to Sam like glue.

“It was you,” he said abruptly, his gaze skewering into her. “Wasn’t it?”

She couldn’t pretend not to understand; she owed him more than that. *Full circle*. Whether she liked it or not. “How did you know?”

“TV,” he said and stared at her. “And you hacked our car.”

Ah, yes, she’d forgotten about that. That Aequitas had been the one to unmask Donovan Cruz by releasing the video footage of him basely abusing his young son was international news, but hacking into a rental Jeep to provide Sam and Lucia with a getaway vehicle had been all her. That the boy had made the connection between the two shouldn’t have surprised her. Alexander Cruz was no dummy.

“I’m sorry,” she told him quietly. Because she’d made a deliberate choice in releasing that video—which exposed Alexander’s horrific tale to the world—and she knew he’d paid as steep a price as Donavan Cruz with its release.

It was something that would follow him always, inescapable and eternal. And for that, she couldn’t apologize enough.

“I thought it was the only way,” she added, a sharp ache piercing her chest. *Repercussions*. Just an abstract, something that had never penetrated the barriers she dwelled within. But this boy...this afternoon he would become, for all intents and purposes, her nephew. *Her nephew*. And he might well spend the rest of his life hating her.

Honor couldn’t blame him. But it hurt. Jesus, how it hurt.

“I’m sorry,” she said again.

Alexander only blinked at her, his light, jade green eyes glittering in the sunlight. “Did you kill him?”

Honor swallowed. She looked down at her hands, which were tangled into a cold knot in her lap, and felt the ache bleed into her bones.

Donavon Cruz was not the only death she was responsible for, and she didn’t regret what she’d done, because she knew—*she knew*—it wasn’t only his sons she’d saved. Cruz had been a predator; in quietly ending his life, she’d saved countless others.

So she couldn’t say she was sorry. But she *had* turned off the man’s life support. She *had* killed him. And there were days when that fact clobbered her

over the head like a sledgehammer and she felt—if not regret—then certainly the weight of that soul. And then there were days she wished she could do it all over again.

“Sam said he died of his injuries,” Alexander continued, watching her closely. “But I heard the nurse say someone turned him off. Was that you?”

Honor clenched her hands together, lifted her chin and met that pale gaze. “Yes.”

For a long moment, he only stared at her. Then, to her surprise, he moved to sit on the swing beside her. Not touching, but close enough that she took a quiet, gulping breath and tried to not start bawling. *Again.*

“Is that what you do?” he asked softly. “Kill the monsters?”

“Some of them,” she admitted.

“And what about...their victims? Do you help them?”

“That’s...harder,” she said lamely. “Finding them and freeing them...” That required fieldwork, people and resources she’d never had. “It’s very difficult.”

He frowned, but didn’t argue. “I guess.”

“They’re very well hidden,” she continued, uncertain why she felt the need to defend herself. Actually physically finding the lost children who were the victims of sex and human trafficking was not something she’d ever focused on because she didn’t have the resources.

And because it would have required her to leave behind her bolt holes. To take a risk beyond that which involved a wireless connection and well-hidden server.

Jesus, you are an asshole.

“I’m sorry,” she repeated again.

“Couldn’t you...could you find them?” Alexander watched her without blinking. “I mean, if you wanted to?”

Yes.

A tremor moved through her. Goosebumps washed across her skin, and in her lap, her hands clenched.

Aequitas would ride off into the sunset, nothing more than a digital urban legend. But another could be born. One who went beyond the electronic world.

Into the real one.

Cian would help. Maybe. If she was brave enough to ask him.

To reach out. *To try.*

“Yes,” she said and turned to look at Alexander. “I think I could.”

He nodded and looked out at the sunrise. “That would be cool.”

Tears massed without warning in her throat, and Honor swallowed hard. She stared at the glowing golden ball of the sun, her heart beating hard in her chest. The thought of doing *more* was like electricity suddenly discharging inside her, and her brain fired with breathtaking speed, filtering through the logistics and challenges and obstacles. Excitement welled within her, followed by something she’d thought lost only a day ago: *hope*.

“Just so you know,” Alexander said. “I’m glad he’s dead.”

A tear escaped and rolled down her cheek.

“Ay, yai, yai!” Lucia’s sudden cry through the open window behind them made Honor start. “The flowers—they are all dead!” An avalanche of furious Spanish followed, interspersed by Sam’s quiet murmur. “We are doomed!”

“I can go get flowers,” Honor offered through the window screen.

Sam appeared behind the mesh. “You sure?”

“Of course,” she replied, eager to be given something to do.

“Honor is our guest,” Lucia protested from behind Sam. “She should not have to run our errands.”

“She’s not a guest.” Sam snorted. “She’s family.”

Family. Honor swiped at another tear before it could fall. After she’d left Cian, she’d never felt more alone. But she wasn’t alone. She had Sam...and now she had Lucia and Ben and even Alexander, too.

Maybe more. If she could figure out her way forward with Hannah. If there was a way forward with Hannah—

Anna.

“How do you feel about baking a large cake?” Sam asked, blinking at her through the screen.

“Sam!” Lucia hissed.

Behind her, Ben began to jump up and down. “Chocolate! Chocolate!

Chocolate!”

Honor thought about her profound lack of culinary skills. Still, it was *cake*. How hard could it be?

“It comes in a box, right?”

THE TOWN OF SILVER BEND, WASHINGTON, WAS NESTLED INTO THE EASTERN edge of the Cascade Mountain Range. It was a small town, its main street lined with brick-faced buildings and shaped by undeniably western architecture. Broad wooden boardwalks had replaced sidewalks, and bronze statues of cowboys and bucking broncos dotted the town square, where a Veteran’s memorial sat beside a round, blue-green fountain.

Barbara’s Blooms sat just off the town square in a small, squat wooden building with bright blue shutters and a flat roof. The red Jeep Cherokee Honor had rented two days ago sat parked out front, and currently Cian stood leaning against it.

Waiting.

The letter Hannah—*Anna*—had given to him was in his right hand pocket. He hadn’t read it, although he was tempted. When Anna had come looking for Honor, she’d been more than a little disappointed to discover Honor had so quickly disappeared—she had, in fact, glowered at Cian as if it was *his* fault—and the letter she’d scrawled and handed to him before leaving was something he’d promised to deliver, seal intact.

Which he would do. *Come hell or high water*.

He had no idea what awaited him. He’d considered—briefly—calling or texting Honor, to tell her he was coming, but he hadn’t wanted to be told, “don’t,” so he simply hadn’t given her the opportunity.

Besides, this should be done in person.

He wished they had a more private venue to conduct their reunion, but he knew it was better than having it happen at the home of Sam Steele, who would likely try to kick his ass, which would just end badly for everyone. But his

nerves were vibrating, and tension made his muscles as hard and tight as steel wire. In his chest, his heart was a heavy, painful thud.

Christ, he hadn't been this nervous since he'd landed in Ireland all those years ago, hoping desperately for a future and terrified that only death waited.

"You survived that, boyo," he told himself. "You'll survive this, too."

But at what expense?

Still, no matter what he'd told Akachi, or what he'd told himself for that matter, he'd known since Honor walked away from him that he would end up here. It simply wasn't in him to let her go, not without trying. He'd lost too much in his life not to hold on with both hands. And no matter Honor's fury or fears, her obstinacy or her not inconsequential will, Cian continued to believe they were meant to be.

Kindred spirits. No matter how ludicrous it sounded.

The door to Barbara's Blooms opened, and the small cowbell wrapped around the front handle clanged. Honor stepped out a moment later, her arms overflowing with Stargazer lilies and bright pink carnations wrapped in deep green paper. She wore black yoga pants and a United States Marshal Service sweatshirt; her hair was a wild, untamed cloud around her head.

The sight of her made Cian's heart stop. When she saw him leaning against the Jeep, she faltered.

And everything within him went tight.

Then she continued toward him, and when she stepped out of the shadow cast by the building, the sun turned her hair to fire. Her cheeks were flushed as she halted before him, her eyes dark and mysterious.

"You found me," she said.

"Aye," Cian replied. "It wasn't hard."

He pulled open the back passenger door of the Jeep, which she'd left unlocked, and watched as she set the flowers gently on the seat.

"Thank you," she said.

"You're welcome." He closed the door. They stared at one another. "I've something for you." He reached into his pocket, grabbed the letter, and thrust it at her. "Here. From Anna."

Honor stared at the envelope, unmoving. “Really?”

“I’d not lie about that,” he said mildly.

“I know,” she said, her voice hushed, her gaze unreadable from beneath the thick web of her lashes.

“Take it,” he said.

But she didn’t move. Instead, she stared up at him. “Is that why you came?”

“Nay,” he said. “But it was a good excuse.”

She searched his face, but Cian only stared back, uncertain what it was she sought. When she took a step closer, then another, until the scent of her filled his head and she was close enough to touch, he had to clench his hands into fists to stop from reaching for her.

So close. And yet...

“I’m sorry,” she burst. “I was angry that you were right. That nothing had turned out the way I’d imagined. I didn’t mean to...to ruin it. To ruin us. And I’m sorry I ran. I don’t want to run. Not anymore, and not from you. But I can’t...I can’t be the person I was. I have to change now, and I...I want you to be part of that change.”

Cian could only blink at her, his heart like a drum in his throat. He remembered her taste and her cries and the soft weight of her breasts filling his hands. The sharpness of her tongue and the intelligence gleaming in her eyes; that sweet, beguiling smile she’d given him in his bed.

“Say something,” she demanded.

“Not yet,” he rasped and unable to help himself, he reached out and tucked a strand of her wild, wayward hair behind her ear. “I’m liking this apology too much.”

Color rushed into her cheeks. “I was going to call you after the wedding.”

“Wedding?”

“Sam and Lucia are getting married today.” She watched him uncertainly. “Do you...would you like to come with me?”

Cian stared down at her. “Aye, I would.”

“Okay.” She smiled, and his heart kicked into overdrive. “You want to follow me?”

He caught her arm as she turned away. “Wait.”

She stilled; her smile faded. “What?”

“I need to know you’re all-in, lass.” Cian’s hand tightened—*wait, just wait*—but then he felt her pulse kick beneath his touch, and he hauled her into his arms, pulling her tight against him, until her thighs met his and her beautiful breasts pooled against his chest. *So round and warm and perfect.* She fit him perfectly, like a fucking glove. “That no matter the argument, or how badly I screw up, you’ll be there beside me. Fighting or no. I want it all, the good and the bad, because there’ll be plenty of both in this life, and if you can’t give me that...this won’t work. No matter how much we want it.”

Honor stared up at him. Her hands clenched in his shirt. “All or nothing?”

“Aye,” he told her roughly.

For a long, painful moment, she didn’t speak. And then, “Okay.”

Cian blinked at her. “That’s it, then? Okay?”

“What do you want me to say?” she asked, her brows arching, her hand flattening to smooth out the wrinkles she’d made in his shirt. But a smile flirted with her mouth, and her weight leaned into him, and Cian suddenly knew if he kissed her, she’d kiss him back.

“Yes,” he told her and leaned down to nip at her luscious mouth. “I want you to tell me yes.”

“If I do, will you kiss me properly?” she asked, her breath feathering against him, her eyes gleaming like emeralds in the sunlight.

“Aye,” he murmured, his tongue flickering out to tease the corner of her mouth. “I’m easy that way.”

A soft laugh broke from her.

“Tell me,” he demanded.

“Yes,” she replied simply. “Or should I say aye?”

Cian wanted to thrust his tongue deep into her mouth and ravage her; to draw from her the same vicious, piercing need she stirred within him. Instead, he leaned down and kissed her softly, a sweet, tender rasp of his mouth against hers; an apology of his own. Honor made that same soft moan that had been haunting him since they’d parted and lifted her body against his. Her arms slid around his

neck; her hands thrust into his hair.

“More,” she demanded, pressing against him, and Cian clamped down on her, painfully aware of their public location.

“Easy,” he murmured, but unable to deny her, rubbed his mouth wetly over hers, his tongue stroking her upper lip. “We’ve all the time in the world, lass.”

She broke away abruptly and reared back. “No, we don’t!”

She tried to step away, but Cian’s hold on her tightened.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going?” he growled.

“The *wedding!*” She gripped his shirt and shook him. A small laugh escaped her. “So far, it’s a *disaster*. We have to go help.”

“Do we now?” he asked, relaxing. “I’ve many skills. What’s necessary?”

Honor eyed him with a calculation that made the hair at his nape suddenly bristle in warning.

“How are you at baking?” she asked.

Epilogue

DEAR HONOR—

I have thought about what you said. And I remember the fight over the doll. But the rest...perhaps someday. I do not know.

My father says I must try. Even though you would make him a monster, he tells me you are family, and it is wrong of me to blame you for what happened that night. You were a child. You had no choice.

Neither of us did. So I am willing to try.

But I warn you, if you attack or harm my father in any way, you will learn the worst of me quickly. I will not tolerate any interference in that relationship, and that is something you must accept if this is to work.

I leave for Damascus tomorrow. Perhaps, if you come to Tallinn, we can meet when I return.

I have given this note to your fiancé, who has promised to deliver it. I can only hope he has done so. I wonder if you can see the irony of your concern over my father, when your man is so very dangerous himself.

Be careful with him. I hope to see you soon.

Your sister, Anna

Honor swallowed hard against the emotion that sat in her throat like a thick, sodden lump. She couldn't seem to swallow it down, even though it had been over an hour since she'd read Hannah—Anna's—letter. Even though Cian sat beside her, his hand warm and strong and possessive around hers. Even though

—so far—Sam and Lucia’s wedding was coming off without a hitch.

They sat outside Sam’s cabin, the sun shining down brightly from above, the faint breeze scented by carnations and lilies. The crowd had finally sat down in the rows of metal folding chairs, and Sam and Ben and Alexander stood at the makeshift altar in freshly pressed pale blue shirts and black pants. Ben was shimmying—*dancing*—and Alexander watched the crowd tensely, stiff beneath the hand Sam had on his shoulder. And Sam...

Sam looked ecstatic.

Honor was so happy for him, she was nearly bursting.

Cian slid her a sideways look, his brows arched. He wore a sleek steel-gray suit and dark, blood red silk shirt. He was beautiful.

“Happy?” he murmured and lifted her hand to press a gentle kiss against it.

“Aye,” she whispered. *Happy*. Something that, before today, had only occurred in her fantasies.

And reality had blown them to dust.

“Good,” Cian said. “I plan on keeping you that way.”

He smiled that roguish smile, and her heart leapt. She hadn’t told him of Aequitas’ demise, or the plan currently percolating in her brain. That could wait. Today was about Sam and Lucia, about moving forward and *leaping*.

Because Honor had finally realized that was what everything was about. Rolling the dice, to hell with the consequences. *Living*. Instead of just existing.

No matter her fears.

There were no guarantees Sam and Lucia would live happily ever after, and Honor was a realist. She understood there was no “ever after” for anyone. There was only here and now, this moment, and it was meant to be sipped from and savored. *Faith*, she thought, a concept she’d only ever attributed to a God she didn’t worship. But faith was about trust, not idolatry, about belief, not ritual.

And in the end, it simply didn’t matter what became of anything. Worrying about tomorrow only sullied today, and today...

Today was a wonderful day.

THE END

THANK YOU FOR READING.

If you enjoyed *Aequitas*, please consider leaving a review. Reviews are critical to the exposure and success of independently published works. Thank you!

If you would like to sign up for my newsletter, you can do so at my website here: www.hopeanika.com.

For a sneak peek at Sam and Lucia's story, [The Getaway](#), keep reading...

The Getaway

Lucia Sanchez has stolen two children. Two children who don't belong to her; two children she will do anything to save. Driven by a bloody past and determined to change an ignoble future, Lucia will make any sacrifice necessary to be certain history doesn't repeat itself. She has given everything she ever was, everything she would ever become, and nothing will stop her from completing her mission.

U.S. Deputy Marshal Sam Steele is tired. Tired of chasing fugitives and protecting turncoats. Tired of breathing. When he's drawn into the kidnapping plot of a woman he has no desire to help, it's just one more nail in his coffin. But duty calls, and Sam knows his duty. When the plea of a close friend makes it impossible to walk away, Sam must make a choice—to follow the rules and play it safe, or to follow his heart and risk everything.

She will give everything to win; he wants only to keep them alive. Thrust together in a deadly game of cat and mouse, Sam and Lucia must set aside the desire and distrust that flares between them and work together if they want to free two children from a sickening legacy and out-maneuver a man who will hunt them to the ends of the earth...

The Getaway

PROLOGUE

“He’s going to kill you.”

Lucia Sanchez said nothing.

“Did you hear me? You’re *dead*.”

Her gaze flickered to the rearview mirror. The boy sat in the middle of the Nova’s sagging back seat, his features schooled into the remote mask she’d come to expect. Pale green eyes stabbed into hers, as hard and opaque as the jade they resembled.

“I am not afraid to die,” she told him softly.

“Everyone is afraid to die.”

How dismissive he sounded. How callous. It never failed to appall her.

“Even the ones who pull the trigger themselves,” he added cruelly, purely for spite.

A direct, piercing hit, but Lucia didn’t flinch. The boy was like a shark in bloody waters; any weakness would be devoured. No matter the chaos that churned within her, she must be unwavering. *Steadfast*. And so she only turned her gaze back to the hypnotic, dotted line of freeway. The vibration of the uneven pavement made the steering wheel shudder in her hands, an echo of her fiercely pounding, terrified and angry heart.

Thud-thud. Thud-thud. Thud-thud.

Be calm, she told herself. *Destiny is not for the weak*. But deep within, she knew better. Deep within—*ay, yai, yai, chica, what have you done? Muy*

*estupido! You should have waited, should have planned, you will pay—they will pay—and now there is no going back—*because four hours and three hundred miles lay behind them, and the lights of the city had faded long ago. To the east, the first rays of sunlight were creeping across the desert scrub brush, and the wheels she'd set in motion were spinning far beyond her control. But the panic that sat in her chest like a lead weight was nothing compared to the fury that burned in her veins, so hot and caustic and volatile she knew she could not allow it escape. *Enough damage has already been done.* She had jumped; it was too late to worry about landing now. No matter the furious, frantic beat of her heart.

“You know he’ll come,” the boy continued, and his tone might have been flat with resignation, but his eyes...they glittered at her in the mirror, a bright, dizzy sheen of fear he couldn’t hide.

She had pushed him with this action, right to the edge. He stood beside her now.

“Sí,” she acknowledged.

He growled, a low, rumbling sound few would believe him capable of. “Then why are you doing this?”

Lucia took him in: chiseled bones, hinting at the man he would become, a strong jaw and stubborn chin. Pale, jade green eyes lashed with thick ebony crescents; a tiny beauty mark kissing his right cheek. Only ten years old, but already so beautiful that sometimes just looking at him hurt. “Because someone must, *mijo.*”

“Not you,” the boy said, and there was something in his voice that made her squeeze the steering wheel until the worn plastic abraded her skin. He looked down at the small form sprawled across his lap. “You aren’t...*enough.*”

An infuriating—if accurate—assessment. But it changed nothing. She would have to be enough. A grim reality, and not something she could change. She’d tried.

“You can’t win,” he added, as though it were fact. *What goes up must come down.*

Which only fed the fury that threatened to blind her, so toxic and unstable, something she *must not* allow to control her. But Lucia was sick to death of

being told her limits, her place, of being relegated to someone else's definition of her existence. It had taken years to carve a path out of the madness of her childhood; blood, sweat and tears to travel that path. No one would tell her what she must accept, what she must *allow*. Not any longer. Because the monstrous present had raised the equally grisly past, and she would not stand idly by as it repeated itself before her.

No.

Perhaps this rash, dangerous act would change nothing; perhaps the evil men did was already written, something no one—her least of all—could change. But she refused to be complacent, to be silent. *To watch it happen again.* Others might turn away, but she would not. Because for her, evil was not merely an idea. A stranger she had never met. No, malevolence was an old enemy, one with whom she had been long acquainted. One she was introduced to in childhood, whose shape and form and scent she knew intimately.

One she recognized as if it were family. *Family.* Something she had not had in over a decade. Something that same evil had taken from her.

And now it will take even more! Your future, your dreams, your life—

But that would not stop her. She would not run and hide, not again. Not ever again.

No matter the specter of death Alexander spoke of.

“You underestimate me, *mijo*,” she replied finally, darkly. “You should never underestimate anyone.”

“You’re nothing,” the boy said, certain.

A roar filled her throat, begging for escape. She wanted to pound her fists against the ancient dash and make him understand. But that would only egg him on and—probably—crack the dash in half.

“Everyone is someone,” she told him, calm, hard, equally as certain. “And anyone can change the world.”

“Is that what you’re doing?” he derided, his mockery honed to knifelike precision. “Changing the world?”

She met the sharp glitter of his eyes. “Your world,” she said.

His gaze dropped. He looked out the window, to where the sun was steadily

rising in a fiery arc of orange and pink. Fingers of light speared across the road before them, highlighting the tar lines that held the pavement together.

Thud-thud. Thud-thud. Thud-thud.

The old Nova sliced through the cold morning air at eighty miles an hour, shuddering in effort to meet the demands of her lead foot. The car smelled of aged vinyl and cigarettes, and a long crack arced along the windshield, shearing the pane in two. Traffic was light, the road littered with garbage and the occasional animal carcass.

But no police. *No Ivan the Terrible.* Not yet.

“When he catches us...” The boy shook his head. “Do you know what he’ll do?”

Lucia knew; she didn’t care. Not anymore. That fear was useless, a waste of time she no longer had. “*Sí.*”

“No, you don’t.”

But she did. She knew exactly. And even if the knowing woke terror in her heart—because the man who would come, he would want blood, he would *enjoy* her pain—such a thing would not stop her.

Nothing would stop her.

“Some things,” she told him, “are worth the risk.”

“Not this. Not to me.”

Her heart fluttered painfully in her chest, like a panicked bird fighting its cage. She only ignored it and watched the boy in the mirror, her resolve like steel, no matter his doubt. Her own. “No?” Her eyes fell to the child he held. “What about to him?”

The boy wanted to hit her. She could see it flaring in his eyes, the suppressed violence that always simmered there, just below the surface. The hate and rage that lived within him like a second self.

It had taken her eight months to understand. Eight months too long.

“You can make choices for yourself,” she said. “But not for him.”

“I can’t, but you can?”

Such fury, like a whip snapping through the air, but she said only, “*Sí, I can, mijo. I am.*”

The boy looked away. The stoic line of his profile and the hard, unforgiving line of his jaw where a muscle ticked uncontrollably made Lucia want to do violence. She'd known horror and pain and devastating loss; blood so thick it would not run, the sickening stench of death. The dreams still *were*, as they had always been, and she would not have believed it would become something she would embrace.

Something she would use.

She'd been wrong.

A child should not know this pain.

But Alexander wasn't a child. He hadn't been for a long time, certainly longer than she'd known him. His decade might as well have been a century. There was nothing at all child-like about him.

That had been her first clue.

"You don't understand," he muttered, a small crack in his cold reserve.

"What don't I understand, *mijo*?" Lucia asked. "What he will do to me? Or what he will do to you?"

The weight of her question filled the car like a thick, sulfurous cloud. But she knew he wouldn't respond.

He never did.

She had only her own conviction, the proof evidenced by her own eyes. The sickening truth she could not—*would not*—deny. Not even for him. She'd been too young the first time, too weak. Too ignorant and naïve and *stupid*. Not so now. And while she understood the boy's silence, it wouldn't stop her. Nothing was going to stop her—nothing but the death of which he spoke. No matter her mistakes, her panic, the regret eating at her, berating her for allowing her fury to control her, she would stop at nothing.

She would save him. Save them both. No matter the odds against her, the men who would come, the army that would hunt them. Because the alternative was unthinkable, and not something she could live with. Not again.

Never again.

She'd abandoned all that she was, all that she could ever hope to become for this mission. The phoenix that had risen from the ashes of her childhood would

die a sudden and brutal death, buried as effectively as any corpse, its grave barren and unmarked. All she'd fought for would be anted up on the alter of this sacrifice: every precious, hard-won day of survival, the life she'd built brick by painful brick, the education she'd worked nearly into the grave for, the future of which she'd dreamed. *Gone*. All gone. And part of her screamed at the injustice, mourned profoundly the loss, but what drove her was unconcerned with that loss. Life was loss. Sacrifice and pain were nothing new. If the tradeoff was their future, she would happily make it. Because it was not death she feared, it was failure.

"*You'll just make it worse,*" Alexander hissed, another fissure forming in his diffidence.

"No," Lucia disagreed quietly. "There is no shame in truth; there is only strength."

"Truth." The boy's mouth twisted. "Yours or his?"

"There is only one truth, *mijo*."

He shook his head again. The muscle in his jaw quivered. He wanted so badly to deny it. Lucia could see the words trembling on his lips, the cry welling in his thin chest.

But he wouldn't. He couldn't. They both knew the truth intimately, even if they did not speak of it. She had tried, more than once, but he would not be swayed. He was too ashamed—the burden of which no victim should carry—and no matter what she said, he wouldn't accept that he wasn't responsible, that he'd never been in control. A victim, not a participant.

He couldn't seem to tell the difference, which only enraged her more.

So many casualties. She hadn't expected it to find her again. More fool her.

"What will we do?" Alexander demanded tightly. "Run forever?"

A valid question.

Lucia's gaze flickered to Benjamin, who slept fitfully in his brother's arms, his ruddy cheeks flushed. She wanted so many things for them both, so many wonderful things...things she would never be able to give them. These children, who had come so unexpectedly into her life, whom she hadn't expected to change her. *To love*. And Alexander was right: they deserved more than the

nomadic existence she was damning them to, more than a life driven by uncertainty and a constant fear of discovery. A life spent running instead of living.

Because the one who would come for them—*for her*—would not stop. Not until she was dead. But the alternative was worse, and one she could not allow. No matter the price.

Destiny is not for the weak.

“He’s going to find us,” Alexander said coldly, his belief absolute. “And then he’s going to kill you.”

Lucia’s hands tightened on the steering wheel until her knuckles ached. “He is going to have to.”

For a sneak peek at Hope Anika’s novel, *The Bequest*, keep reading...

The Bequest

Cheyenne Elias has inherited a child. A boy she doesn't know and doesn't particularly want; a boy whose mother was once Cheyenne's most hated person in the world. There are a million reasons to walk away: her anger, her past, her certainty that there is nothing benevolent in this act by a woman who almost killed her. But abandoning the boy to a system she barely survived is not an option...

Will Blackheart has lost everything. His SEAL team, his country, and—upon occasion—his mind. Worse, he's lost something that has the capacity to kill thousands. Left for dead in the Afghan desert, Will has risen solely for the purpose of regaining that which was taken...and to punish those who dared take it.

His only lead is the son of a dead woman. Her only goal is to save a child. As they come together in a clash of anger, mistrust and potent, unwanted desire, Will and Cheyenne must put aside their differences and navigate the endgame of a woman for whom nothing was taboo...

The Bequest

CHAPTER ONE

“Dead?”

“Dead.”

“As in...kicked the bucket? Bought the farm? Sleeping with the fishies?”

“Er...yes.”

“Huh,” Cheyenne Elias said. “Well. Better late than never.”

The punctuated silence on the other end of her cell phone spoke for itself—silencing people was something at which Cheyenne was proficient. The sad fact of it was, shutting people up was ludicrously easy, because they were usually so full of foolish expectation.

Death brought the expectation of grief. But grief was a product of loss. And this was...

Plus column all the way, baby.

“I contacted you because you are named in Ms. Humboldt’s will,” the voice on the other end continued, rather doggedly. “To inform you that you have been designated as guardian to her minor son.”

Shock jolted through Cheyenne.

Shoe meet other foot.

“Huh,” she said again. Which was better than *Have you lost your goddamn mind? Or Ha ha ha! Suck it.*

Grossly inappropriate, even for her.

“I quote: ‘In the event that my son, Rafferty Humboldt, is a minor at the time

of my death, I hereby appoint Cheyenne Elias to be the Guardian of his person. My Guardian shall be held solely to the standard of good faith in the performance of her duties, and shall exercise her authority without the necessity of obtaining the consent of any court.’ ”

Cheyenne filed through the words and tried to think of something to say. A toxic, jumbled mix filled her throat, unfit to speak. Her cell crackled, static filling the silence she couldn't.

Georgia Humboldt, dead. Six feet under and pushing up daisies...

Try hemlock.

“I realize this is probably a shock. I'm sorry. I urged Miss Humboldt to contact you, to send you a copy of these documents, but she was insistent that you not be notified unless she...”

Died. Unless she died.

“...well, only if it became necessary. I'm afraid her reluctance has left her son a temporary ward of the State of Wisconsin, and if you decline to act as his guardian, he will remain so until his eighteenth birthday.”

Too bad, so sad.

“Balls,” Cheyenne said. Because she wasn't really that callous. She *wasn't*. No matter how easy it would be.

“You can decline, of course. But Miss Humboldt had been confident you would take the boy in.”

Had she now? Well, wasn't that special?

“Hardy-har-har,” Cheyenne said.

“I'm sorry?”

Talking to herself—while simultaneously talking to someone else—was one of her worst tendencies. And old, bad habit of simply thinking out loud, born when there was no one listening. But sometimes people thought she was nuts, and according to Phil—her anger management counselor—that was the idea.

You deliberately put people off, Cheyenne. Why do you think you do that?

Because people are assholes, Phil.

“Georgia's idea of a joke,” she clarified. “*Hysterical.*”

The voice (whose name she couldn't remember—Smith? Jones?—attorney at

law) replied, but it was inaudible, courtesy of the fact that she was halfway up Sleeping Indian mountain, and backcountry trails were generally not good cell receptors. She smacked her phone once, twice, knowing it wouldn't help, but it felt good. Then a handful of words materialized. “..afraid...don't follow... meaning?”

“You wouldn't be the first,” she said and sighed.

Chuck, her three-legged blue heeler, stood a few feet ahead at the crest of the trailhead. He cocked his head at her as she muttered to herself, painfully aware that her peaceful existence had just been blown to smithereens. *Again*.

“Shouldn't have answered the damn phone,” she told him.

What had possessed her? Answering an unknown number was a no-no—and something she *never* did. Because she hated dealing with people. Any kind of people, but especially strangers. *You have the social skills of a leper*, her publicist, Whitney, had once observed. *It's like you were raised by hyenas*.

Not exactly. But close.

“Look,” Cheyenne said, trying her best to sound reasonable. *Human*. “Georgia and I—we weren't...anything. You need to call someone else.”

“There isn't anyone else,” came the reply, oddly clear. “You are the sole guardian she named. If you won't take the boy, he will go to the State.”

“Not my problem,” Cheyenne retorted bluntly. But she felt something—a ping? a pang?—that might have—*maybe*—been shame. Dismissing Georgia was nothing, like throwing out holey underwear. But the kid... The Kid. She'd been The Kid, once.

“You won't reconsider?”

“Ha,” she said, but then—*ping!* Damn it. “Where's his father?”

“I don't know. Miss Humboldt didn't see fit to share his identity with me.” The voice was faintly disapproving and touched by a Midwestern accent Cheyenne knew intimately: the diction of a Cheesehead. One too many lagers, and she'd sound just like him. “Miss Elias, you are this child's only hope.”

Well, that was just profoundly stupid. Who would make *her* anyone's only hope?

Ah, Georgia. The hate that had once lived in Cheyenne's heart had long since

faded to indolence—or perhaps apathy, because really, why expend the energy?—but this...*this* was almost funny. Almost. Except for the whole kid thing. And the whole “ward of the State” thing. And the whole “you are this child’s only hope” thing.

Fuck a duck.

“Son of a nutcracker,” she said.

“I take it you and Miss Humboldt were no longer...close?”

Cheyenne could only laugh, a harsh, bitter bark that hurt her throat. She had no words. What she’d once been—what *they’d* once been—bore no relation to what they’d become.

“No,” she said, so cold an unknown part of her shivered. Chuck growled softly in response. And then—*ping*.

“I’m afraid I don’t know what to say,” said Smith/Jones.

Which made two of them.

Georgia had given birth?

Cheyenne could not even begin to comprehend it.

“To what?” she wondered. “Rosemary’s Baby?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Nothing,” she said.

“I am sorry to be the bearer of such unexpected news, Miss Elias. I was under the impression that you and Ms. Humboldt were...friends.”

“Not in this universe.” Then, in spite of herself, “Where’s the kid now?”

“At the DHS temporary placement center, Haven House.”

Bile surged with sudden, violent force. The response was wholly visceral; she stumbled back a step, lost her footing, and fell ass-deep into the sagebrush, her heart thumping wildly in her chest. Chuck wandered over to sit beside her, his body warm against her thigh. In the distance, the Grand Teton Mountain Range rose from the valley floor like a row of stalwart, granite infantry lined up for battle, and high above them, the sky was pure, azure blue.

She saw none of it.

Haven House.

The crumbling red brick building bled into her brain in rivulets, streams that

ebbed and flowed until the image coalesced into the hellish homestead of her childhood, shockingly familiar in all of its dilapidated glory.

White walls and scarred wooden floors and windows barred by steel. Sirens and screams and cold, angry hands. Blurred faces, hollow words, pain, pain, pain—

Cheyenne shook herself. Struggled to breath. Put her hand over her heart in futile effort to ease its breakneck pace. Chuck put his paw in her lap.

“Fuck me,” she said.

“Miss Elias?”

Another bark broke from her.

A kid and a mental breakdown. The gift that keeps on giving.

“Cheyenne?”

“Haven House,” she croaked. The scent of urine and Lysol spray flooded her nostrils; mildew tickled the back of her throat. Her stomach clenched in rebellion. “Shit-boy-howdy.”

“Er...do you know it?”

Like the back of her scarred hand. *Tied to a truck and dragged down memory lane.* What had she done to deserve this?

Try being born.

“Not funny,” she whispered, her knuckles aching where she gripped the phone.

That it had such power—that all she’d become could dissolve so quickly into what she’d once been...she never would have guessed. Everything she’d considered conquered merely lay dormant, existing in stasis, mute until its reawakening.

Like the plague.

“I am sorry, Miss Elias. Clearly this is an unwelcome surprise.”

Unwelcome. What a pale, weak word for Georgia’s last hurrah. So mild and understated, the antithesis of who she’d been. Like declaring the sun lukewarm. Or the ocean a bit briny.

“Perhaps you should take some time and think it over?”

“Negative.” *Over and out.* But—“How old is he?”

Stupid, Cheyenne thought. She didn't want to know. She didn't care. The entire conversation was like rolling naked in poison oak. But her mind's eye—insolent and defiant and gleefully giving her the finger—drew him in startling, painful clarity: *thin, like Georgia had been; all angles and sharp edges. Narrow and slight in his mother's shadow, a whisper to her scream. Hushed and anxious in a prison of rusting iron bars and inhuman chill.*

Yeah, sure, why not?

“Just make it up as you go,” she told herself.

“I'm sorry?”

“Nothing.”

Smith/Jones sighed. “Rafferty is currently ten years old.”

“Ten,” Cheyenne echoed tonelessly. At ten, she'd been shooting craps and sneaking into R rated movies. Vandalizing freeway underpasses and drinking stolen beer—with this kid's mother.

Goddamn irony. Someday she would figure that shite out. But not today.

“Miss Elias, even with the best of foster families Rafferty's existence will be...difficult. Children are all too often lost within the system and left to fend for themselves. I would urge you to take some time and consider this. A decision need not be made immediately.”

You must learn to control your impulses, Cheyenne. They do you more harm than good.

Bite me, Phil.

“I don't want him.” The words were harsh, stark, unflinching. *Truth.* Next to her, Chuck whined softly. “Not today or tomorrow.”

“I see.” Smith/Jones went cold. “Well, I apologize for bothering you. I will let family services know you have no wish to serve as Rafferty's guardian, and they will act accordingly. Good day, Miss Elias.”

And then he was gone.

Cheyenne stared down at her phone. Then she turned and threw it into the sagebrush.

For a sneak peek of Hope Anika's novel, In Plain Sight, keep reading...

In Plain Sight

Once a carny, always a carny...

When Fiona's estranged stepbrother calls asking for help, she's pretty sure the apocalypse has arrived. Because Max walked away from her—and the carnival they called home—years ago, and only silence has filled the long decade between them.

But Special Agent Max's precious FBI has suddenly been infiltrated, and he's desperate for a safe place to stash his young murder witness. Fi is tempted to show him the door—since he's so good at walking through them—but said witness is just an innocent kid, and no matter the tangled, painful mess between them, Fiona can't bring herself to abandon a child.

Not when the midway really is the perfect hiding place.

Unlike Fiona, Former Army Ranger Rye Wilder has no problem coming to the rescue when Max calls, especially when it means finally laying eyes on Max's mysterious stepsister, a woman whose image has haunted Rye since the first time he laid eyes on the worn, creased photo in Max's wallet. A man with no one to call his own, Rye has never understood Max's desertion of his only family, and the opportunity to witness the reunion is too much temptation to resist. Because family is precious and rare and a gift to be protected—something Rye is damned well going to make them both understand.

But first Max has to unmask a mole. Fiona has to safeguard an innocent girl against the man hunting her.

And Rye...Rye has to keep everyone alive.

In Plain Sight

CHAPTER ONE

“I need your help.”

Someone call Scientific American.

Because those four small words were unequivocal proof of a parallel universe. Or maybe the world really was ending, just like *Athena the All Knowing* insisted.

“Fiona? Are you there?”

In spite of the desperation she heard—or perhaps because of it—Fiona Dresden didn’t immediately respond. As far as she was concerned, Maxwell Morrison Prescott the III could *stick it where the sun don’t shine*.

Never mind that he was her brother—or step-brother, if you wanted to get technical, which she did—or that a decade had passed since their last brief conversation, which had taken place at the foot of their collective parents’ freshly dug graves. In her lifetime, there were only two things Fi had ever gotten from Max: a missing front tooth (care of a Tonka truck he’d beamed her with when she was ten) and a broken heart.

Neither of which she cared to revisit.

And yet, here he is.

“Fiona.”

She should hang up, because he deserved nothing.

Nothing.

And no doubt he wanted something. *Something*. Because why else would he

reach out? After all this time—

“Goddamn it, Fi!”

“Cool your tits,” she retorted. “What do you want?”

“I told you.” Impatience crackled like dry wood catching flame. Some things never changed. “I need your help.”

She snorted. “This number is no longer in service.”

“Don’t make this harder than it already is.”

“Because you deserve easy?” Her tone sharpened. “How long has it been, big brother? A decade? More?”

Silence greeted that observation.

Hang up, she thought again. Because it had taken years to heal the wounds he’d inflicted; she had no intention of ripping them open again.

But she didn’t toss her phone to the ground and stomp on it. *Like she should have*. No, instead she waited, her heart a painful drum in her chest. Frozen and furious and damning herself for trying.

Again.

“I need you, Fi.”

The quiet intensity in those words chilled her. Because Max was—and always had been—omnipotent; he didn’t need anyone. Certainly not her. His last words to her on that dreary day over a decade ago were a brand that forever marked her.

Grow up, Fiona. We aren’t family. We never were.

He should have just kicked her in the face with one of his steel-toed boots. It would’ve hurt less.

“Moi?” she mocked, but a tremor moved through her, and anger simmered in her chest, and every twisted thing she’d ever felt for him thickened in her throat.

Max said nothing. And for a second, she thought the connection had been lost.

Which made her want to laugh. And cry.

Because, *life*.

But the child she’d once been, the one who’d so naively believed that they *were* family—and who, even now, stubbornly refused to accept that they never

would be—waited, breathless with hope.

Stupid, fruitless, infuriating hope.

“I was a dickhead,” he said abruptly, his tone grim. “I’m sorry.”

The words slapped her, and for a moment, she couldn’t speak.

Because the world really was ending.

It must be.

“Who are you and what have you done with Max?” she demanded.

“I’m not a kid anymore. Cut me some fucking slack.”

“You threw me away,” she retorted flatly, and the memory of his desertion stabbed through her like a hot blade. “I owe you less than nothing.”

Hang up, you idiot.

“I can’t change the past,” he muttered, and he sounded...weary. As if all of the arrogance and angst he’d always worn like a shield had drained away, leaving only fatigue behind.

Not that she cared. *Dickhead*. On that, they could agree.

Still, how curious that he should...*need* her. “What do you want, Max?”

“Are you alone?”

The question made her look around. Nothing had changed since the last time she’d looked: the rain was still a cold, steady deluge that left her standing in half an inch of water.

The carnival midway was waterlogged; the ride jocks were covered in mud and grass as they struggled to set up the tilt-a-whirl in what was quickly becoming swampland, and the games weren’t faring much better, the trailers sinking into the ruts formed when they’d pulled in. Even her balloon game, built of wood and lightweight PVC pipe, was settling into the wet ground. And just across the midway, the popcorn wagon sat slowly sinking in a deep, muddy puddle.

Thunder rolled overhead; someone was listening to Tom Petty. People were hard at work, rides and fencing going up, stands being flashed, and food wagons getting prepped, because tomorrow was opening day, and there was no “called on account of rain” when three days was all you had to make bank.

“Sure am,” she said.

“And you’re in Cedar Hills? At Our Lady of Hope?”

She stilled. “How do you know that?”

“Hatchet. Until Sunday?”

“Hatchet?”

“Stay with me here, Fi. Cedar Hills is only a three day run, right?”

She scowled. “What does that have to do with—”

“I have a witness.”

“A what?”

“A witness. I need somewhere to stash her.”

Fiona blinked. Opened her mouth, closed it.

“Somewhere no one will think to look,” Max added tightly. “Somewhere safe.”

She blinked, once again silenced. And then, “Have you lost your mind?” Because clearly he had. “You’re not getting me involved in your FBI gobbledygook. *No. Frigging. Way.*”

“Fiona.”

“No! I’m not Witness Protection—I’m a *carny*. Everything you despise. Remember?”

“I don’t despise you,” he said evenly. “I never despised you.”

“Did you get hit in the head?” she wanted to know. “Are you concussed?”

“Jesus Christ, Fiona. Was I really such a prick?”

“The king of all pricks on a big old dickhead throne!” *Was he serious?* “You abandoned me, Max. I was *fifteen*, and you were all I had, and you *left*.”

Static filled the silence that followed, and Fiona wanted to hurl her cell phone across the midway—or, better, at Max’s big, fat, stupid head—but the foolish child who lived in quiet, stubborn determination within her wanted desperately to believe.

So sad and pathetic. Hang up!

“Please,” he said raggedly.

A word he’d never before spoken. At least, not to her.

Her eyes burned. “We aren’t family. We never were. Remember?”

“Of course we’re fucking family,” he snarled.

The words that filled her throat were ugly and jagged and unfit to speak. *She couldn't do this.* To believe again, to trust, *to want*, only to have him grind her beneath his heel.

He would betray her, just like before. Some things were already written.

"I'm sorry," he said again. "I fucked up."

Damn him.

Was he manipulating her? Because he was not above that. But neither was he a man to sacrifice his pride—not for any reason. So if he was saying it, he probably meant it. And he sounded...desperate.

As if, for once, she held all the cards.

Had she somehow tripped over the extension cord and knocked herself unconscious?

"Fi...I know there's shit we need to hash out, but there's no time. Not right now. Right now, I need your help. I've got a kid in trouble, and if I don't get her somewhere safe, she's dead."

Dead. A kid.

A frigging kid.

Shit!

Because Max...he deserved her hate. Her derision and disappointment and disgust.

But a kid... A kid didn't. A kid was innocent.

And if Max was calling *her* for help after a decade of radio silence...in deep trouble.

Something to which Fiona could relate.

"This is crazy stupid," she told him. "You know that, right?"

"It's perfect."

"Only for you."

"I can compensate you," he said, his voice hard. "If that—"

"You're being a prick again," she told him. "There's an entire midway full of people here, Max. Innocent people. Your witness will endanger every one of them."

"I've got it covered."

“You can’t possibly—”

“I can.” He paused. “You’re going to have to trust me.”

Ha! “You burned that bridge a long time ago, big brother.”

“Then give me a chance to rebuild it.”

More words that shut her up. And the silly, irrational muscle in her chest leapt, and she reached up to rub the back of her neck, wholly unnerved. The angst churning within her didn’t know what to do: attack or retreat?

Because this was certifiable.

“The show is an ideal hiding place,” Max insisted. “People rarely look too close. It will work.”

For crying out loud. She wasn’t really considering this, was she? “What’s going on that you can’t keep her in a safe house? Has your precious Bureau turned rotten?”

His silence was answer enough, and the chill within her spread like an ugly stain.

“Seriously,” she said sarcastically.

“It’s just for a few weeks,” he promised quietly.

But it was one thing to knowingly endanger herself; it was quite another to knowingly endanger her help and everyone else on the show.

Son of a biscuit!

“She’s only fourteen years old, Fi, and two nights ago she watched her entire family get capped. It’s my job to keep her safe. I’m all she has.”

You were all I had, too. And he’d walked away without a backward glance.

But this wasn’t about her.

Even if he knew better than anyone that she was hard only on the outside; even if he wasn’t above using that knowledge. Because this wasn’t about Max, either. It was about a kid who—even faceless—Fiona could relate to.

She knew exactly what it was to be utterly alone in the world.

So what are you going to do? Who are you going to be?

Who you want to be, or who you should be?

Shit!

“Three weeks, no more,” she said shortly. “And I’m putting her to work.”

“Deal,” Max said quickly. “We’ll be there tomorrow, before noon.”

He ended the call with an abrupt disconnect, and thunder rumbled overhead, a sudden, violent drumbeat that resonated through Fiona’s bones. She squinted up at the darkening sky, her head spinning.

Lost your damn mind, she thought. Because to trust Max, when she knew intimately how unworthy he was of that trust...and to bring the kind of danger that came with him here was...

Insanity.

No matter what he said about having things covered.

No one would be safe.

Which was on her. Because this choice, it was pure selfish. That she was cursed with a soft heart was moot; the fact of it was, no matter how much she hated Max, she loved him, too.

Always had, always would.

In her hand, her cell vibrated. “Yeah?”

“Thank you,” he said into her ear and hung up.

“Shit,” she said. Because...*thank you.*

Another thing he’d never said to her.

“Shit!” she said again, angry.

And deeply uneasy.

Because what could have happened to change him so drastically?

She didn’t know. Not a single, solitary thing.

The last time she’d seen him, he’d been on leave from Afghanistan. She had no clue where he’d been in the decade that followed, not who he’d been, not what he’d been doing. She only knew he was FBI because Hatchet mentioned it once in passing.

Hatchet. Who was the closest thing to family she had left, and who’d obviously kept in much closer contact with Max than she’d ever realized.

The sneaky old fart.

She looked around and wondered how much more was going on around her about which she was utterly clueless.

It was not a nice feeling. And it made her even angrier.

But worse, it made her suspicious.

Because a federal agent turning to his carny stepsister to keep his murder witness safe?

In what frigging universe?

That's what the U.S. Marshals were for—no? Men with badges and guns; trained men, armed men. Men with license to do whatever was necessary to protect those they served. Was it not their very job to babysit federal witnesses?

Yes. Yes, it was.

So why would Max turn to her for help—instead of them?

Thunder boomed down again, startling her. The sky had grown dark, and rain was falling in earnest now, heavy sheets that washed down the midway toward the unlit Ferris wheel. Giant, dark, and foreboding, the ride loomed over the bright array of games and concession trailers like a grim headstone.

Nice. Way to be optimistic.

With any luck, it wasn't prophecy.

Evolution: Awakening

When Ash Kyndal inherits her Uncle Charlie's Private Investigation firm, she wants nothing more than an out. Because how could anyone think putting her in charge of anything is a good idea?

But Charlie saved her once, and Ash owes him. Big time. So in spite of her reluctance—and the mysterious, taciturn Russian who's abruptly materialized on her doorstep, intent on repaying a debt to a dead man—Ash dives in.

Because seriously. How hard can it be?

Two missing clients, half a dozen men in black, and one crazy, utopian conspiracy designed to alter the very fabric of humanity later, Ash has her answer: crazy hard. And now that she's found herself on the front lines of an unexpected, vicious battle over the fate of the human race, she has a choice to make: stay and fight, or run like hell.

Because the clock is ticking.

And war is coming.

Evolution: Awakening

CHAPTER ONE

“You tell me what I want to know...or she’s *dead*.”

The breath accompanying those words exuded an aroma of red onion, spicy brown mustard and pastrami on rye, which somewhat diminished their menace.

Still, Ruslan thought the Glock 45 pressed against his lapel looked serviceable enough. And the woman whose image was reflected on the laptop across from him—a woman who’d been tied to a wooden chair with coarse, cheap rope—also had a 9mm SIG Sauer pointed at her head, so the threat, while rather pungent, was quite real.

“You hear me?”

The short, stocky bald man whose Glock was creasing Ruslan’s suit stood less than three inches away, so Ruslan assumed the answer was obvious. He was not, after all, deaf, something he also presumed the man would know.

Should know. If he was competent.

But competence was a rare and vanishing skill. The ability and willingness to pull a trigger had somehow eclipsed intelligence, ingenuity and dedicated expertise. No one took pride anymore.

“I *mean* it, man. Dead!”

A gloved hand shot out and backhanded the woman on the screen; her head snapped back, and the chair she sat on slid across the floor. Ruslan watched dispassionately, noting the blood that trickled from the corner of her mouth, the swelling that had begun to bloat the line of her cheekbone.

The murder that glinted in her eye.

Competence. Theirs was about to be tested.

“You tell me where the kid is,” the bald man snarled, “and we’ll let your girl go.”

An empty promise. In addition to the bald man, there were two others, men with faces of stone and weapons beneath their coats. Any talk of walking away was fantasy. But no matter. There would be no “telling.” No letting anyone go. The Firm had been hired to protect “the kid,” and that’s what Ruslan would do.

No matter the threat. Or the cost.

“You tell me.”

“You’re a frickin’ moron!” Butch heckled from where he sat beside Ruslan, his body slumped against the plastic ties that secured him to a metal chair. The scent of day-old vodka oozed from his pores. “Ash ain’t nobody’s *girl!*”

“Shut it,” ordered the bald man. “Worthless piece of drunk shit.”

Butch only chortled. He was not, Ruslan suspected, as drunk as he appeared. But in the few weeks he’d known Butch Masters, the man had been inebriated at least sixty percent of the time, so it was difficult to be certain. That Butch was part of this at all only highlighted the fact that the men they faced hadn’t done their homework.

“You need more incentive?” The bald man glared at Ruslan; Ruslan stared impassively back. “We can do that.”

A fist slammed into the woman’s face; this time the front legs of the chair lifted into the air before slamming back down. She shook her head; blood poured from her nose. She turned and spat at someone Ruslan couldn’t see.

“How many of those you think she can take?” The Glock dug into Ruslan’s suit. “Should we find out?”

The bald man was looking for a visceral response, but Ruslan was unable to oblige him. He rarely felt fear or anger; he rarely felt anything at all. And he never responded to threats. That he sat tied to a chair, watching his current employer get the hell beat out of her did not change that unalterable fact.

You are broken. He knew; he’d been told. The emotion that contaminated the world around him left him wholly untouched. A slab of stone without fault; no

pores, no cracks, no crevices. There had been nothing in his life to fracture the stone—not torture, not death, not even the gore and devastation of war. And so this—while unexpected and tiresome—had little chance of doing anything more than throwing a monkey wrench into his day.

Incompetent idiots.

They had chosen Butch, who wasn't trusted. And they'd chosen him, who was capable of anything.

They deserved what they were going to get.

"You're a cold bastard," the bald man muttered, eyeing him with the same dawning frustration people inevitably fell into when they realized he wasn't human. At least, not human like they were. "You don't give a shit about her, do you?"

Another ignorant assumption, that because he didn't feel, he didn't care. Most days, Ruslan was glad he wasn't like the rest of them.

"You're just gonna sit there and watch them beat her to death, aren't you?"

Butch was side-eyeing him, as if wondering the same thing, but Ruslan only arched a brow. "What makes you think I know where the child is?"

The bald man shot a look at Butch, who shifted in his seat, his cheeks filling with color.

"Ah," Ruslan said. "I see."

When he'd swum to consciousness and found himself tied to a chair in a vacant warehouse, his head throbbing, he wondered how he'd been so easily retrieved. He was a very careful man.

Apparently Butch wasn't as ineffectual as he appeared. At least, not when it came to saving his own skin.

"You know exactly where she is," the bald man insisted. "And you're gonna tell us—or your girl can die one blow at a time."

An ugly death, and one Ruslan didn't care to witness. Contrary to the ignorance of the man before him—and the one beside him—he did happen to care whether Ashling Kyndal lived or died. Very much.

First, she was the niece of a man who'd once done him a life-altering kindness, the kind of favor one couldn't possibly repay; a man Ruslan had

crossed three continents to help, only to arrive too late. That regrettable fact only served to make walking away from her—and his unpaid debt—an impossibility. Which meant that Ashling was, for the present time, Ruslan’s responsibility. And Ruslan took his responsibilities very seriously.

Second, quite inexplicably, he’d grown to like her. She was...unique. Not like he was unique, but her differences intrigued him. Which was rare enough, and extraordinary enough, that he would do whatever necessary to protect it.

To protect her.

So he flexed his hands, which were banded together behind his back with thick plastic ties, and dislocated both of his thumbs.

“Fuck you!” Butch made a sad show of struggling against his restraints. “Asshole!”

“I can make them stop,” the bald man offered in a reasonable tone. “All you gotta do is tell me where the kid is. Simple. Otherwise...”

“I do not know where the girl is being kept,” Ruslan told him. “But I can convince Ashling to disclose the child’s location.”

His hands were almost free, and anticipation licked through him, a finite thread of adrenaline that wove through his nerve endings like the finest of live wires. A small thing; one of the few he ever felt.

Hungry. For blood, for violence. And only partially because a woman he’d come to know and appreciate was battered and bleeding and beyond his immediate reach. The darkness that lived within him needed little to whet its appetite. It was a feral, self-serving and pitiless thing. Always yearning for more.

Keeping it leashed took constant vigilance. But sometimes, Ruslan set it free. Sometimes he let it feed.

Today would be such a day.

It was fortunate that the large, empty warehouse they sat in appeared to be abandoned. Graffiti covered the walls; broken pallets lay scattered atop a badly crackled and crumbling concrete floor. The windows were cloudy. Most were broken, revealing slender beams of sunlight that speared higher as the sun began to sink into the western sky. Occasionally the sound of sirens serenaded them.

Somewhere that was nowhere, and death would go unnoticed.

“Why would you do that?” the bald man wanted to know, clearly skeptical.

“I value my life,” Ruslan replied flatly. “It is worth more to me than a child I do not know.”

Butch made a sound of protest, but the bald man narrowed his gaze in consideration. “What makes you think she’ll listen?”

“She trusts me.”

Which was not entirely true. But the man he faced didn’t know that. Butch, however, eyed him again. Dubiously.

“You’re making this harder than it has to be.” The Glock tapped his shoulder. “Just give up the kid, and this all ends.”

Ruslan only waited. People, as a rule, lacked patience; he, however, had an infinite supply. It took approximately seven seconds for the bald man to swear, pull a smart phone from his pocket, and dial.

“It’s me,” he snarled into the expensive technology. He engaged the speakerphone and thrust it toward Ruslan. “Put her on.”

The laptop reflected a gloved hand shoving a matching smart phone beneath Ash’s nose. She bared her teeth and looked into the camera of the laptop, meeting Ruslan’s gaze.

“You are being difficult,” he said before she could speak.

“It’s a special skill,” she retorted. “What about you?”

“Indeed,” he confirmed.

“Good.” Her gaze touched Butch, who squirmed and blushed and fought his plastic ties. “And him?”

“I didn’t tell them shit!” he yelled.

Ruslan only arched a brow.

“Do you have this?” Ash asked him.

Her tone was calm, but where her hands were tied to the chair, they gripped the seat with knuckles pressed white against her skin. She wore only a thin black tank top and boy shorts; her white-blond hair hung in choppy waves just past her chin and was streaked crimson with blood. She wasn’t in the warehouse that he and Butch occupied. A white couch sat behind her, a small wooden end table and lamp on one end, a tall, blooming begonia on the other. Behind her, a large

framed print hung against a pale blue wall, and in its reflection Ruslan could see three distinct shapes.

Men.

“Yes,” he said.

“You’re sure?” she pressed, and he watched as she tensed, which delineated the long, slender rope of muscle that lined her shoulders and arms. Her feet were planted against the floor, her thighs sleek and still. She was strong, he suddenly realized. Physically. Mentally. More so than he’d understood.

And she was preparing to act.

Another lash of adrenaline whipped through him. Her eyes were a startling, brilliant shade of bright blue-green, reminiscent of the Caribbean Sea; they held his, unwavering and hard.

“Yes,” he repeated. “You?”

“What the hell is this?” the bald man interjected furiously. “You said—”

“I’m fucking furious,” she replied.

“You’re gonna tell us where that goddamn kid is right now!” the bald man gritted. “Or we’re gonna—”

He didn’t get the chance to finish.

Ash leapt straight up, flipped sideways, and slammed into the floor, smashing the chair she’d been tied to into pieces.

She rolled, swept out her legs, and a large form crashed to the floor next to her. Then she jack-knifed to her feet and kicked the man squarely in the solar plexus; the sound of bone cracking over the speakerphone was like a bat knocking one out of the park.

Another dark shape swarmed toward her, and she slid out of reach, the movement so fluid, she almost blurred. Her heel shot out and connected with the side of his knee. He screamed and fell. A third man closed in, gun in hand.

Instead of running, she grinned, a gruesome, bloody slash, and rushed toward him. Ruslan absorbed her ferocity, impressed. And oddly aroused.

“Bitch!” the man swore, but before he could fire his weapon, she leapt nimbly up his leg and smashed her forehead into his face. He stumbled back and hit the table that held the laptop, which tumbled sideways to the floor. Ruslan

craned his head, but he couldn't see, and there was another shout and then—*boom!*—the gun firing—and then—

Darkness.

He stared at the screen; adrenaline fountained in his veins.

“Shit,” Butch cried. “Shit!”

“Goddamn it,” hissed the bald man.

And Ruslan erupted from his seat.

Boom!

The sound was like a cannon shot.

Having been raised by one of the world's foremost sharpshooters—and having grown up firing weapons and having them fired at her—had never seemed a particular boon to Ash Kyndal.

Until today. Today, it was going to save her ass.

Because guns were Ash's friend. There had been a time—a long time—when they'd been her *only* friend. And the sound of them firing was almost comforting.

Like coming home.

So there was no panic. No startling, no crying out, no losing of her shit. There was only reaction: grabbing the large, gloved hand that held the sleek black 9mm and slamming it into the floor, once, twice, three times.

It was unfortunate that the murderous bastard who held the weapon wouldn't let go. He rolled over on top of her, and the air in her lungs wheezed out. His knee thrust between her legs, and his other hand found her throat and squeezed. Hard.

“Bitch,” he growled again.

“I *hate* that goddamn word,” she hissed and shoved her thumbs into his eye sockets.

He squealed and reared up, releasing her; she tore the gun from his grip, and before he could react, turned it on him and fired twice: one bullet for each

shoulder. He jerked beneath the impact and fell back to the hard wooden floor. Blood bloomed beneath him in a thick, dark pool.

Ash wiggled out from beneath him and scrambled to her feet, gun in hand. Her face throbbed. Blood filled her mouth and dripped from her nose; her entire right side ached from its impact with the floor. But she was standing.

And the three men who'd broken into her home, tied her to a chair and threatened to beat the hell out of her were down. A cracked sternum, a dislocated knee, a broken nose, and two non-fatal gunshot wounds.

You're welcome, dicks.

Because she wanted carnage.

She turned and looked at the laptop. It lay on its side, the screen shattered, and she wondered if Ruslan and Butch were still alive. Because Butch was half in the bag—Butch was always half in the bag—and she didn't know Ruslan from a hole in the ground.

The Russian with one name; like a cheesy spy novel, the sum total of his known parts. And although he was hard as granite and cold as ice, Ash had never seen him in action. Which made her worry. Even though there was nothing soft or the least bit untried about the man, nothing that anyone would ever mistake as benign.

Ash knew an apex predator when she saw one. Ruslan watched everything and everyone; he observed and absorbed, as motionless and still as any wild creature. Her primal hindbrain—primitive, visceral, exquisitely attuned to potential threats due to a childhood spent with a sociopathic father—screeched like an air horn whenever he was near.

Ruuuuuuun! Something she'd moved instinctively to do, more than once.

No, Ruslan would be fine...

Wouldn't he?

"Shit," she said.

Because she didn't know. The man had appeared out of nowhere in the wake of her Uncle Charlie's sudden death, like an apparition solidifying from mist. A friend of Charlie's, he'd said. *I owe him*, he'd said, and planted himself in her life like a tree.

But that didn't change the fact that he was a stranger. That his motives were murky as hell, and she didn't trust him any further than she could throw him. He was taciturn and intractable and even more socially inept than she was; she'd never met anyone like him. And Ash had met a lot of people. The only thing she knew for sure about Ruslan was that he was Russian, dangerous, and...*other*.

Other. Like her.

She'd grown up on the periphery of society; carnival midways and circus tents and endless miles of pavement. Her existence had only occasionally crossed paths with the "civilized" world, and faking her way through its twisted realities and conforming to its rigid definitions did not come naturally or easily. The necessity of *bending* made her angry, and as some part of her always seemed to be angry—courtesy of that aforementioned sociopathic father—she knew and understood how inherently difficult it was to be a part of the world.

So she didn't hold Ruslan's otherness against him. But that commonality didn't connect them. Nor did his purported connection to Charlie. No, Ruslan was an unknown. Unpredictable and untested. A wild card, at best. And one she wasn't certain could be counted upon.

Goddamn it.

Just another massive pain in the ass to go along with inheriting Charlie's PI business, the Firm. A business she didn't want and didn't need and didn't know what the hell to do with. *Goddamn it!*

"They're fine," she told herself. "Ruslan's a survivor."

Something else she recognized. *Takes one to know one*.

But these men...they were heavily armed. They'd come in numbers, with unflinching violence. And Butch wouldn't have been any help at all.

"Shit on a stick," she muttered.

They have to be okay.

Because Charlie would roll over in his grave if she managed to kill the one person he'd left behind who didn't need saving. Not to mention—

Boom!

“Get me outta this chair!”

Ruslan’s fingers tightened around the neck of the man he held; muscle shivered and veins compressed beneath his grip. The man struggled like a hooked fish; his hands clawed at Ruslan’s arm. But resistance was futile.

Ruslan was everything his prey was not: disciplined, experienced, and very, very strong.

“Who hired you?” he asked.

The man shook his head and gasped. He kicked and bucked and struggled desperately for freedom; Ruslan merely lifted him higher into the air.

“Tell me,” Ruslan told him patiently, “and you won’t end up like your colleague.”

The man looked down at his counterpart, who lay at Ruslan’s feet, arms and legs broken, his face bloated and bleeding. A rib stuck out from his chest like an errant tree branch.

“Ruslan!” Butch snarled, still fighting the ties that held him to the metal chair. “Goddamn it!”

Ruslan ignored him and shook the man, a sharp jerk that nearly snapped the fragile bones in hand. “Decide.”

“I hope they fuck her before they kill her,” the man hissed.

Ruslan’s hand tightened involuntarily; the dark, hungry entity that lived within him licked its lips. *Feed.*

But killing this man was not an option. They needed answers.

There are two more. Feed.

“You would die for this?” he asked, ignoring that feral voice.

“Gladly,” the man choked. He bared his teeth and snapped them together. A heartbeat later, convulsions shook him. His eyes rolled back into his head. White foam bubbled from his lips and slid down his chin.

Movement ceased, and he died there, hanging from Ruslan’s hand.

Wasted.

The darkness snarled.

Ruslan dropped the man and turned to look at the figure lying at his feet. Before he could move, seizures gripped the man; a scream escaped him as his

broken limbs shook. White foam burst from his mouth, and he went still.

Eyes open, mouth gaping.

Cyanide.

Ruslan stared down at him, disturbed.

“Jesus Christ, they’re going Kamikaze,” Butch cried, “get me the hell out of here!”

Ruslan looked over at the bald man. He lay slumped and dazed against the concrete wall where Ruslan had kicked him, blood an ugly river down the side of his face. Ruslan turned and strode toward him.

“Ruslan!” Butch again. “Fuck!”

“In a moment,” Ruslan told him.

“Son of a bitch!”

Perhaps. Ruslan didn’t know. He’d never met his mother.

The bald man was trying to stand, but something had broken when he hit the wall. He groaned and rolled onto his back as Ruslan halted above him.

“Will you die for your cause today as well?” Ruslan lifted his foot and placed it on the man’s chest.

“Bastard,” the man choked out. “More will come for her. We’re just the beginning.”

Ruslan pressed his foot down and something crunched. “Why?”

A harsh gurgle escaped the man. He moaned. Ruslan leaned down and gripped his jaw hard. Squeezed. Tears welled in the man’s eyes. He whimpered.

“Not today,” Ruslan said.

Not without answers.

He reached into his suit pocket and pulled out the small, all-in-one tool he carried. He flipped it open, and the man whimpered again.

“What the hell are you doing?” Butch demanded.

Ruslan didn’t bother to explain. He merely thrust his tool into the bald man’s mouth and began to remove teeth. The molars would likely be the location of any cyanide capsule, so he started with those. It wasn’t hard; he’d done it before. But he had to be careful not to break the cyanide capsule, which would be embedded within—

“Good God, man. That’s...you’re...” Butch fell abruptly silent.

The bald man wept openly. Blood and spittle streamed down his chin. His fingers dug into Ruslan’s forearm; he clawed and pulled and punched. Desperate sounds escaped him.

“It did not have to come to this,” Ruslan told him.

“Christ,” Butch muttered.

The bald man shrieked, a loud, piercing, agonized cry, like a rabbit caught in a trap. Before Ruslan could stop him, he lifted his head and slammed it back into the concrete, hard. Hard enough to crack his skull like an egg, which Ruslan felt a moment before a flood of blood washed across the concrete. Death followed instantly.

He pushed to his feet and stared down at the man.

“Kamikaze,” Butch said again. “Shit.”

Indeed.

“Ashling,” Ruslan murmured, and the darkness swelled within him.

“Is tougher than she looks,” Butch retorted. “Now get me the hell out of this chair so we can save her.”

Boom! Boom! Boom!

The asshole whose knee she’d shattered was shooting at her.

Ash dropped to a crouch, turned and fired. Blood sprayed like a cloud burst as she shot the gun from his hand.

Boom!

Another bullet plowed past her and shattered the lamp; she dove behind the small bar that separated her kitchen and living room.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Bullets thunked into the plywood; one passed straight through and shattered her oven door. She shimmied to the edge of the bar, pulled open the cabinet door underneath and grabbed the lid to her biggest stew pot—nice, shiny stainless steel—and held it carefully out, using the reflective surface to try and get a lock

on her next target.

There you are, you ungrateful dick.

The one she'd kicked, staggering toward the bar—

She sent the lid flying toward him like a giant silver Frisbee and then fired twice—one for each knee. The lid *clanged* as it smacked him in the forehead; the bullets tore into his knees and he did a brutal face-plant into the oak floor.

“Fucker,” she told him and moved out from behind the bar to kick both his SIG Sauer and the mangled Glock down the hallway.

Her heart beat like a jackhammer; her blood roared in her ears as she surveyed them. She'd never shot anyone before—well, except her father, and he hardly counted—but any regret she might have felt was drowned out by the rage licking through her like the hottest flame.

They'd come into her home. Threatened her. Hurt her.

And they were still breathing. Lucky them.

The man whose hand was now less a thumb and forefinger was bleeding profusely. They all wore black suits—much like Ruslan—but these were flat black, not like his tailored and elegant apparel; narrow ties and shiny shoes. Shaved heads and expensive weapons. Hard faces, familiar with violence and death.

Not your average assholes.

Men who'd threatened torture to get answers. Who'd grabbed Ruslan—something she was mildly astounded was even possible—and Butch, who a blindfolded bunny rabbit could have taken down.

Had they gotten to Wylie? What about Wanda and Eva? Were they still safe in the Vault?

What the hell was going on?

She marched over and climbed on top of the man whose knees she'd blown apart and sat down hard on his chest, wedging his shoulders beneath her thighs. Then she bared her teeth at him.

“Let's talk,” she told him, and shoved the 9mm into the hollow just beneath his chin. Blood dripped from her nose and slapped his chest. “I want to know who you are, who you work for, and what the hell you want with Eva Pierce.”

Because none of this made any sense. The kid who the Firm had been hired less than four hours ago to protect—Eva Pierce—was only twelve, the daughter of a man on the run from a local loan shark, and said loan shark, while dangerous and persistent, was just a little fish, and these men...these men were sharks. This—whatever it was—went far beyond the collection of a marker.

“You should have given her up,” the man snarled. His gaze was wild. “You should have let us have her.”

Ash shifted her weight, pressing hard against his cracked sternum. “She’s just a kid!”

“*She’s a goddamn abomination!* You have no idea what she is. You protect her, you’ll kill us all.”

Ash stared at him, both furious and confused. “What the hell are you talking about?”

A harsh, ugly laugh rasped from him. “You’ll see. When it’s too late, then you’ll see.”

“See what?”

“The future.”

He lifted his head and snapped at her like an angry dog; his body arched violently beneath her, and she almost fell off. He began to shake uncontrollably; his eyes rolled back into his skull. White foam spilled from his mouth, bubbled past his lips, and slid down the barrel of the 9mm.

Then he went still. Fatally still.

“Goddamn it,” she whispered, her heart beating with painful force.

Because he couldn’t be dead. He hadn’t lost enough blood; she knew where to shoot to inflict maximum damage without causing a bleed out. And she hadn’t hit him hard enough in the chest to perforate an artery. *He couldn’t be dead.*

She made herself reach out and check his pulse.

Yep. Dead.

She scrambled off him, turned and found the rest of his team in varying degrees of the same state. Twitching uncontrollably, eyes rolled back, white foam trickling from the corners of their mouths. And then—

Dead. All of them.

What fresh hell—

A fist slammed against her front door like a battering ram. “*Las Vegas PD! Put your weapons down, and come out with your hands up!*”

Hail Mary

When a local bank robbery brings the newly elected Sheriff Beau Greystone to Wynn Owens' front door, she has only two things to give him: the endless bounty of her caustic wit and a one-finger salute. Wynn has history with the law, none of it good. And the notion that one of her elderly tenants might have something to do with the robbery is just plain crazy.

A former DEA agent, Beau owes his newly minted badge solely to his meddling aunt and his own foolish indifference. Recovering from the murder of his wife—and the debilitating injury caused by the explosion that killed her—Beau has been happily checked out for some time. But the people of Blossom Hills are counting on him to do his job, and bringing a bank robber to justice is a fine place to start...until the killer that's haunted the town for the last decade abruptly returns.

Wynn has a tenant to exonerate; Beau, a killer to catch. Neither is prepared for the compelling but unwelcome current between them, or the unexpected circumstances that will force them to reassess the rules by which they live. But the clock is ticking, and they must decide: adapt and evolve, or surrender to the past and the dark malevolence that has risen within it...

HAIL MARY

SNEAK PEAK

“Winifred, dear? There’s a man on the front porch. Perhaps you should comb your hair.”

Since she needed a man like she needed a hole in the head, Wynn ignored that rather pointed observation. Never mind that she was trapped beneath the kitchen sink, wrestling with a crescent wrench, which made grooming impossible—and completely useless.

Stupid crescent wrench.

What she needed was a proper pipe wrench. But she didn’t have a proper pipe wrench, and she didn’t have the money to purchase a proper pipe wrench.

The crescent should work. *Please?*

“Wynn?”

Crap!

“I’m in the kitchen,” she yelled. “Deal with it.”

“Should I let him in?”

“I don’t care!”

“Are you sure? He appears quite...potent.”

Wynn fought with the wrench.

“I really think you should—”

“Esmeralda!” *For the love of Pete.* “He’s probably here for the room.” She braced herself against the interior wall of the cabinet and cranked on the wrench. “Just let him in.”

“If you say so, dear. I daresay you’ll be sorry.”

The wrench moved—a quarter of an inch. The musty scent of mildew filled Wynn’s senses and tickled her throat; sweat poured down her back. The tight space made it impossible to get any leverage, and the sad truth of it was, she was getting nowhere fast.

Pipe 1, Wynn 0.

So it was only fitting that her new tenant would show up a day early. Before the room was ready. While she was ankle-deep in a DIY plumbing project at which she was failing miserably. When she looked like she’d just crawled out of a city sewer.

Which, really, was just par for the course.

Welcome! Are you comfortable with disaster and chaos? Can you deal with nosy, forgetful, meddling housemates who rarely turn off lights and sometimes set fires?

She pulled desperately on the wrench. *Please come off, you stinking thing.*

Because she couldn’t afford to hire someone to take it off. Even with a new tenant and the extra cash the farm was producing, it was going to be tight this month. Scraping by...*also par for the course.*

But it wasn’t anyone’s fault. Certainly not poor Mr. Sanders, who obviously hadn’t meant to die. He’d passed peacefully in his sleep over a month ago, and she could hardly blame him for having done so, no matter the financial hole it left her in. That his death made her sad, and she mourned him, wasn’t something she much focused on.

There was always too much else to do.

She sighed and swiped her hand across her brow, leaving a streak of grime and several strands of sherry colored hair plastered to her forehead. Beowulf the Runt watched curiously from where he sat beside her, his head tilted in question.

“I’ve got this,” she told him. “Really.”

She knew what she was doing; she had a plan. She just needed to get the dumb thing apart—

“...a beautiful day, don’t you think? Winifred is just through here...I’m afraid we’re having some trouble with the pipes. But Winifred is very handy...

and really, quite lovely. Don't let those manly overalls fool you.”

Wynn gripped the wrench, gritted her teeth and pulled.

“Winifred?”

Her hands slipped off the wrench and it gave, releasing from the pipe. It bounced off her ribcage and slid down to clatter against the floor of the cabinet.

“*Aw, crap!*”

Beowulf barked in agreement.

“He's...it's the Sheriff, dear.”

Wynn sat up automatically; her head slammed into the bottom of the porcelain sink, and she snarled.

“Winifred?”

The Sheriff!

The beer-bellied, tin-star wearing, evil incarnate bastard who'd killed her mother over a decade ago.

Here, now.

Her heart stopped, and for a long, motionless moment, she didn't move.

Couldn't move.

“Did you hear me, dear?”

“I heard,” she whispered.

She picked up the crescent wrench and stared at it. Her heart burst to life and began a too-fast, too-hard tattoo; blood roared in her skull. She felt sick.

“Are you coming out, dear?”

It wasn't a good idea.

Because what was to stop her from beating the Sheriff to death with a crescent wrench?

Nothing. Nothing at all.

She fought the surge of adrenaline that poured through her.

No. It's over.

Done.

You need to let it go.

But she never had and never would, no matter the futility of holding on.

Justice, Wynn had learned, was for the wealthy. Not for people like her, or

her mother, who's life had been erased with the stroke of an official pen.

Seeking it now would only destroy all that she'd built. All that she'd sacrificed for.

All that Fran had sacrificed for.

So she counted slowly to ten. And prayed a little.

Beowulf whined softly, as if sensing her chaos.

You're grown now. He can't hurt you anymore.

But it wasn't herself with which she was concerned.

"Winifred?" Esme sounded worried. "Are you alright?"

No. But she had responsibilities. People who relied on her not to murder the local sheriff and end up on death row.

So she would have to deal.

Forward, not back.

"Stupid," she muttered and forced herself to wiggle out of the cabinet, wrench in hand. She told herself to put it down, but the child who'd watched her mother die refused to let go.

"Ms. Owens?"

The unknown voice made her blink, and she looked up, startled to find a stranger standing next to Esme.

This was not the Sheriff.

The man who towered over her bore no resemblance whatsoever to Jasper Hatfield. He wore no uniform, carried no obvious weapon and sported no tin star. Just worn jeans, cowboy boots, and an obnoxiously bright Hawaiian print shirt that was so busy, she felt dizzy looking at it.

So she just sat there for a minute, staring at him.

"Are you Winifred Owens?" he demanded and stared back at her.

He looked...angry. Dark and stormy and dangerous; the walking antithesis of his cheesy, cheerful shirt.

"Who wants to know?" she retorted, eyeballing him.

Her hand flexed around the wrench, and his gaze—which was startling, brilliant lime green—caught the movement and narrowed.

"Beau Greystone," he replied, his voice rough and deep and unmistakably

grim. “Sheriff of Superior County.”

Wynn could only arch a brow. “Congratulations?”

He frowned, and it made him look even more sinister. Which was kind of a shame. Because he was beautiful in a rough, scary kind of way. Like a mountain was beautiful. Or a storm.

Or a lightning bolt that shot from the sky and cooked you to a crisp.

Beowulf growled softly, his amber gaze narrow on the giant who hovered over them. Wynn stroked a hand over his bony back.

Good boy.

“Winifred,” Esme admonished, her Mississippi accent gently scolding and ice sharp in a manner only Southerners ever accomplished. “Don’t be rude, dear.”

“Where’s Hatfield?” Wynn demanded, ignoring her.

The new Sheriff of Superior County had cold eyes, a hard mouth, and lines etched deep into the carved planes of his face. He shifted as he stood there, the muscle that lined his jaw taut, and she realized abruptly that he was in pain. Oh, you couldn’t see it, not unless you knew what it looked like. But Wynn knew. She’d lived with people in some form of pain her whole life.

Sympathy should have stirred, but didn’t. Probably because he was looking at her like she’d crawled out from under a rock.

“Jasper Hatfield is dead,” the new Sheriff said.

Again, Wynn blinked. A wild, chaotic mass of emotion burst within her, and she laughed.

“Oh, dear,” Esme said and shook her head.

“Dead,” Wynn repeated, smiling broadly. She couldn’t help it. *Hatfield was dead and gone. RIP—not.* “Hot damn!”

Beowulf’s odd little tail thumped against the linoleum.

The new Sheriff leaned down over her. He looked like he ate nails for breakfast. “Sheriff Hatfield died in the line of duty.”

Good.

It almost escaped. But a set of dog tags suddenly tumbled from the neckline of the new Sheriff’s horrific day wear and prevented the word. The tags were

dented and scarred, and he looked annoyed as he tucked them back into his shirt.

A *soldier*—then or now, didn't much matter. Wynn had been around veterans her whole life, too, and she respected them. Hatfield's death in the line of duty would mean something far different to him than it did to her. And he clearly had no clue about her history with the former Sheriff—which was how it would stay.

So she stuffed her euphoria and rage and grief away, and said only, "What can I do for you, new Sheriff?"

He stared down at her. So she stared back. Tension rose and crackled between them. Heat flared through her—anger, annoyance, what the *hell* was he wearing?—and she did her best to ignore how directly he looked at her.

As if none of her barriers would stop him.

Esme cleared her throat delicately. "Well." She moved toward the coffee pot with purpose. "You're Velma Greystone's nephew, aren't you?"

The new Sheriff scowled faintly. "Yes, Ma'am."

"You knew about him?" Wynn cut in, annoyed.

"Of course, dear," Esme replied. "I am an unashamed connoisseur of local gossip."

"And you said nothing?"

Esme shrugged. "I saw no need to upset you. After all, I didn't expect him to show up on our doorstep." She turned and looked at the new Sheriff. "You came from Milwaukee, didn't you?"

He spared her a brief glance. "Miami."

Well, that explained the shirt.

"What brought you to Wisconsin?"

The new Sheriff said nothing.

Esme only eyed him speculatively, unfazed by his rudeness. She filled the coffee maker with water and coffee and turned it on. "Are you married, Sheriff?"

If he'd been grave before, now he turned to stone. "No, ma'am."

"I have pipes to wrestle," Wynn told them impatiently. "What do you want, new Sheriff?"

Esme made a sound of censure, but again, Wynn ignored her.

"I need to speak with Winifred alone," the new Sheriff said.

An order, not a request. A ripple of unease whispered down Wynn's spine. She held that brilliant, lime green gaze and tried to pretend dread wasn't spilling through her chest.

What could he possibly want? She hadn't broken any laws—at least, not lately—and she went out of her way to stay under the radar.

So what was going on?

Esme's silver brows rose. Her gaze moved between them. "I don't imagine I'd win an argument to stay?"

"No," said the new Sheriff coldly, "I don't imagine you would."

Wynn considered smacking him with the wrench.

"Well, it's been a pleasure." Esme smiled, the picture of southern graciousness. "I must say I've heard quite a lot about you."

"I'm sure." A small, dark, and wholly unexpected smile touched his mouth. "Please don't believe any of it."

"You have a nice smile, Sheriff," Esme told him. "You should share it more often."

Red flushed his cheeks, and Wynn bit back a snicker.

"Ma'am," he said and nodded.

Definitely a soldier.

Esme sent Wynn a sharp look—*behave yourself, young lady*—and sauntered out.

"Now that you've run her off, can we cut to the chase?" Wynn asked him.

For a long moment, the new Sheriff was silent. Studying her with that intent, probing gaze she didn't at all appreciate.

"What?" she demanded, exasperated.

He looked at the wrench she held. "That's the wrong tool for the job."

A fact to which my ribs can attest. Thanks for nothing.

"What do you want?" she asked flatly.

He looked at Beowulf. "Who's this?"

Beowulf growled at him.

Good boy.

"Beowulf the Runt." She ran another hand down his back. "Future sheep

herder.”

The new Sheriff eyed him dubiously. His gaze moved to her and for a long moment, he simply studied her. But then he straightened, took a small step back and grimaced. “We can do this at the table.”

He offered her his hand. A strong, scarred hand, tanned and capable.

One she wasn’t touching with a ten-foot pole.

“I’m good,” she said and ignored the offering. “But you’re welcome to sit.”

The scowl returned. “Ms. Owens—”

“Wynn,” she corrected.

“We need to talk, Wynn.”

His face was dark, his expression grim, but beyond that she couldn’t read him worth a damn.

He’d come here, looking for her. Demanding to speak with her *alone*.

Nothing good was going to come of this.

Wynn sighed and pushed herself to her feet. She set aside the wrench—but kept it within reach, just in case—and pulled two old coffee mugs from the cupboard. Beowulf accompanied her, making sure he kept his scrawny little form between her and the new Sheriff.

Really, really good boy.

“Do you take milk or sugar, new Sheriff?” she asked.

“Black,” he replied tersely.

“Shocking,” she muttered. She poured him a cup and made herself one as well—with plenty of milk and sugar—and set his down on the kitchen table.

He hadn’t moved; he still stood in front of the sink, watching her.

“Sit.” She waved a hand at him. “Let’s get this show on the road. I’ve got stuff.”

He went to the table where she’d set his coffee and slowly lowered himself into one of the old wooden chairs.

Definitely in pain. Had he been to war? He had the look. Or was there an accident? Maybe—

Shut it down, woman. Who cares? Not your problem.

But he was her problem. Clearly. *Crap.*

She leaned back against the counter and sighed.

The chair that sat across from the one he occupied was suddenly pushed out from beneath the table by his booted foot. It slid smoothly across the worn linoleum floor in front of her. "Sit with me."

That bright green gaze double-dog-dared her.

"I'm good," she made herself say again.

"Sit," he said softly.

She looked at the wrench.

"Don't," he warned.

"Stand down," she told him. "I'm just fantasizing."

One of his brows rose and something sparked in his brilliant gaze and then was gone. "Sit down, Wynn."

She didn't want to. But the longer she argued, the longer he would remain. So she sat down in the chair and drank her coffee and waited.

Beowulf took up residence beside her, his gaze alert on the new Sheriff.

Suspicious, she thought.

Smart dog.

"What happened between you and Hatfield?" the new Sheriff asked.

"Ancient history." She waved a hand. "Why are you here?"

He reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a small notepad and slender silver pen. "This is your residence?"

"Do I look like I fix other people's pipes for fun?"

That earned her a dark look. "This is a boarding house?"

"That's what the sign says."

His jaw hardened. "How many residents?"

Wynn leaned toward him and said nothing until his gaze met hers. "What do you want, new Sheriff?"

He surveyed her, silent. Her unruly hair and filthy face; her stained overalls and worn t-shirt. She felt like showing him her battered combat boots but the temptation to kick him might prove too much.

So she just let him look.

"There's a vacancy sign in your window," he said.

“Looking for a room?” She arched a disbelieving brow. “A man of your overwhelming charm and sweet disposition?”

That spark lit his eyes again and was gone. “How many tenants do you currently have?”

She said nothing, watching him. Alarm was worming its way through her.

What was he getting at?

“I can always talk to them instead,” he said.

“You leave them alone,” she warned. “They’ve been through enough.”

“The woman who answered the door—Esme—said you’d lost one recently?”

A sudden, unexpected swell of emotion thickened her throat. *Damn it, Esme.* Always gossiping. The woman simply couldn’t help herself. “Mr. Sanders.”

In the hallway, the clock began to chime.

“I’m sorry,” the new Sheriff said quietly.

Wynn only blinked at him.

He folded his arms on the table. The muscle that roped his forearms shifted and flexed, and an awareness she didn’t at all appreciate flared deep within her. *Stupid man.* Like a mountain, alright. Dwarfing her kitchen and sucking out all of the oxygen.

“How many tenants, Wynn?”

She regretted telling him to call her that. She should have left it at Ms. Owens. Because who was Ms. Owens? No one she knew. “Five.”

“And Esme mentioned your sister, Jenna?”

The dread turned to sharp, piercing fear. “Spit it out, new Sheriff.”

“It seems like a lot of responsibility,” he continued. “A younger sister, half a dozen elderly tenants. Leaking pipes. Livestock. A farm is a lot of work. Running this place can’t be easy.”

Again, Wynn said nothing and stared at him.

He looked around the kitchen, taking in its battered white cupboards and scarred linoleum floor, the ancient appliances and ugly florescent lights. He lingered on the cheerful, sunflower-strewn curtains—courtesy of seamstress Esme—and the pot of stew simmering on the stove before moving his gaze to the small disaster under the sink. “Money must be tight.”

She didn't like the opaque surface of his gaze; the cold expression on his face; the indecipherable, unspoken question he was asking.

"You have a tenant named Earl Barry," he said. "Is Earl here?"

She sipped her coffee with false calm. "Why? Did he hit the Post Office sign again?"

"No." The new Sheriff scrawled something unknown into his notebook, his mouth a hard line, and she wanted to grab him by his ugly shirt and shake the stiff out of him.

What the hell was going on?

"You're certain you don't know where Mr. Barry is?" he asked again, that brilliant gaze clashing with hers.

Wynn said nothing. Of course she knew where Earl was; her boarders weren't just tenants, they were family. They didn't go anywhere without telling her. But she would eat her left boot before she spilled those beans.

The back door suddenly flew open and smacked the wall. Jenna breezed into the kitchen, clad in her soccer gear. She stopped short when she caught sight of the new Sheriff.

"Holy shiny shirt," she said. "Who are you?"

He pushed himself to his feet, shifting his weight carefully, and Wynn found herself watching him closely. Wondering what had happened. How.

Silly goose; he's the enemy.

"This is the new Sheriff," she told her sister. "He was just leaving."

"The new Sheriff?" Jenna eyed his shirt dubiously. "Are you sure?"

Wynn only arched a brow. The new Sheriff gave her a dark look and lifted the tail of his shirt; a shiny silver badge and a large black Glock decorated the belt he wore.

"I'm looking for Earl," he told Jenna shortly.

"Earl's gone," she replied. She bent down and rubbed Beowulf's head; his tail wiggled in delight. *Thump, thump, thump.* "He went fishing up in Canada."

Wynn was surprised by the sardonic look the new Sheriff shot her. *So a human being lurked in there, after all.*

"Canada," she said. "Huh. Who knew?"

“When did he leave?” the new Sheriff wanted to know.

Jenna shrugged. “Monday, I think. He said he’d be back Thursday. Griff went with him.”

“You’re not respecting our tenant’s privacy,” Wynn chided.

Another dark look.

“Did he hit the Post Office sign again?” Jenna demanded. “Why do you want to talk to him?”

“Yes, new Sheriff,” Wynn added. “Why *do* you want to talk to him?”

“That’s Earl’s business,” was the new Sheriff’s brusque reply.

Jenna frowned. With her sleek, corn silk blonde hair, slender build and refined features she was the mirror image of their mother. Sometimes the resemblance was so close it hurt to look at her. “Did you tell him?”

Wynn blinked. “Tell who what?”

Jenna rolled her eyes toward the new Sheriff. “You know what.”

Uncertainty flickered across her face, and Wynn realized abruptly what she was talking about.

“No,” Wynn said.

The new Sheriff looked up to pin her with that glinting green gaze. “Tell me what?”

“Nothing you need to worry your big surly self about, new Sheriff.” She gave him a wide, phony, prom queen smile. “I’ll tell Earl you came by.”

“You’re sure?” Jenna asked doubtfully.

Wynn shot her sister a quelling glance. “Tell the new Sheriff goodbye, Jen.”

He turned and set his gaze on Jenna. “Tell me what?”

But Jenna just sighed. “Nothing.”

“Buh-bye, new Sheriff,” Wynn said. “It’s been real.”

Real crappy.

He made a sound like a growl. Then he turned and looked at her.

She only lifted a hand and waved. “Thanks for coming by.”

He leaned toward her, and her kitchen table suddenly felt like a school desk. He was far too big. Far too intense. And he smelled like...fresh cut cedar?

His gaze crashed into hers. For a long moment, they just stared at each other.

Then he leaned closer and snarled, “Wynn.”

Beowulf made a surprisingly sinister sound in response, and something foreign and thrilling and terrifying rippled down Wynn’s spine.

This man was dangerous.

In more ways than one. She wanted him out of her house.

Now.

Jenna’s phone rang; she pulled it from her pocket and answered it. A moment later, she was gone.

But the new Sheriff didn’t move.

“You need to tell me what that was about,” he ordered softly, his gaze like green fire.

Wynn had assumed it was anger that he stirred; annoyance, fear, the history she couldn’t seem to bury. But something deep within her shivered beneath that look, and it had nothing to do with anything other than the agitated, electric current that crackled between them. Which was a shocking and unnerving revelation; one she didn’t at all welcome.

It just a made her want him even more gone.

“I need a lot of things,” she told him. “An oil change. A pipe wrench. But the new Sheriff sticking his big, fat nose into my business isn’t one of them.”

For an intractable moment, they stared at one another. And then, abruptly, he straightened. He shoved his notebook into his pocket, and pulled out a business card, which he held out to her.

“For Earl,” he said.

“I’ll pass it along.” Wynn reached out and took the card. But as she moved to pull it away, he held on, until her gaze lifted to meet his.

“You do that,” he said.

Something unspoken smashed into the space between them, and awareness licked through her, as hot and searing as any flame.

His lashes flickered, as if he felt it, too.

“I’ll be back,” he warned.

Wynn pulled the card from him and crushed it in her palm. “I’ll be waiting.”

About the Author

Hope Anika is an indie author who lives in the Greater Yellowstone area. Her books have been finalists in the *Daphne du Maurier Award for Excellence in Mystery and Suspense* and *The Fool for Love Contest* sponsored by Virginia Romance Writers, Chapter 19 of Romance Writers of America. She can be reached via her website at www.hopeanika.com.



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