

Lori
Soard



The
ELIXIR

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...Benjamin spotted his Ford Taurus and juggled the briefcase and his keys. A gentle click-clack-click reached his ears and trailed shivers down his spine. He stopped, spun around and searched the empty garage. It was late. He'd lost track of time again and the building was all but deserted. Yet, the presence of someone else—back there, somewhere in the shadows—caused him to pick up his pace yet again.

Click. Clack. Click.

Panting, Benjamin broke into a run.

Click. Clack. Click. Click. Click.

He wrestled with his keys, trying to find the right one and wondering why he hadn't invested in a keyless entry system.

Click. Clack. Clack.

Silence.

Benjamin didn't have to look behind him to know someone now stood in the weak light of the garage lamps. He could hear the breathing, smell the heavy sweat, and feel the presence of evil ripple across the fine hairs on the back of his neck. He turned.

"You," he said the moment before he spotted the flash of arcing silver and a heavy burning sensation struck him in the chest.

THE ELIXIR

BY

LORI SOARD

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THE ELIXIR
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It was only when I grew up and realized the world wasn't a perfect place that I began to appreciate my parents. Mom and Dad, you made my childhood magical and safe. You're terrific parents and I feel truly blessed to have been raised by you. Mom, you spent hours playing Barbies with me and making little Barbie beds out of tissue boxes and pillows from the tissues. You always allowed me to use my imagination and because of that, it still works today. Dad, from the time I was very small, you taught me new words every week through the Reader's Digest lists. You taught me to love words and knowledge and enabled me to have the vocabulary I need to be a writer. Others may have influenced me, but you both shaped me. This book is dedicated to you both.

PROLOGUE

Deep shadows lurked in unseen corners of the parking garage. An icy chill brushed past Benjamin Monroe's ankles, reminding him he'd forgotten to buy new socks. The ones he wore were threadbare and no protection against the coming winter.

He gripped the handle of his briefcase and walked faster. He didn't have time to worry about socks or anything else at the moment. It was more important he get his discovery to a secure location. A gentle click-clack-click reached his ears and trailed shivers down his spine.

He stopped, breathing heavily, very aware of the smell of spilled oil and musty corners. "Who's there?"

No answer. Benjamin laughed—the sound ricocheted off the concrete pillars. He was paranoid. Few knew of his secret, but soon his discovery would help millions.

It would earn millions in the right hands, a sinister voice whispered through his head. He'd spent the last thirty years working on this

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research, living off of the small salary Evan Van Ester and the E.V.E. Corporation paid. He wasn't about to sell out at this point. The discovery represented a legacy he could pass on to his daughter Celeste—and her children after her.

Benjamin spotted his Ford Taurus and juggled the briefcase and his keys. Click. Clack. Click. He stopped, spun around and searched the empty garage. It was late. He'd lost track of time again and the building was all but deserted. Yet, the presence of someone else—back there, somewhere in the shadows—caused him to pick up his pace yet again.

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CHAPTER 1

Weariness settled over Jake Walker like a familiar blanket as he walked down two flights of stairs and entered the dimly lit parking garage. The stale stench of old oil stains and damp concrete assaulted his nose. The loose change in his pocket rattled as he searched for his car keys, the sound echoing eerily in the deserted garage.

His “True Blue” Ford F150 stood proudly alone in the center of the fourth level. He hit the unlock button on the keyless entry remote, and the reassuring unclick of the locks greeted him.

Benjamin Monroe, his mentor and boss, had kept him working through dinner and on into the evening as they scrambled to find the final missing link in the genetic code. A link that could unlock a veritable fountain of youth. At eight p.m., Ben jumped to his feet, grabbed his briefcase and left the building without saying goodbye. Now Jake’s watch pointed to nine o’clock and all he wanted was food and his bed.

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As he got closer to the truck, he could see a dark blue sedan parked on the other side. Ben's car. Jake frowned. He thought Ben had left more than an hour ago. The man must have found another break in their research and backtracked to the lab.

How did we miss each other? Jake stood undecided for a moment, wondering if he should return to the lab and see if Ben needed his help. A faint gleam of gold caught his attention. He moved around the back end of his truck, his eyes trained on the gold band that grew clearer as he neared. His gaze followed the band of gold and saw that it encircled a wrist.

"Ben?" He ran the last few steps and fell to his knees by his mentor's side. Ben's lifeless gaze stared through him and Jake felt every hair on his neck stand on end.

He reached out and closed Ben's eyes, wishing he couldn't feel the coolness that had already ebbed across Ben's body. His hand brushed past something icy cold and hard.

"What the hell?" Jake grasped the object, and realized a split second later that what he felt was the handle of a large knife. The knife slid from Ben's blood-soaked chest.

"Hold it right there." Ned Tate, head of E.V.E. Corporation's security, held the bright beam of his flashlight on Jake's face. His usually holstered gun was drawn and trained somewhere in the vicinity of Jake's forehead.

"Ned, I didn't kill him." Jake stepped back from Ben's body, dropping the knife. How in the hell had his ordinary life suddenly turned upside down? Panic clawed at his throat as he remembered clasping the handle of the knife.

"Tell it to the police, Mr. Walker." Ned barely completed the sentence before the wail of sirens pealed out in the garage.

Jake narrowed his eyes. "You mind telling me how the police got here so fast?"

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“I ain’t the one who has to answer questions. You are.” Ned’s hand shook, but he kept the gun trained on Jake.

Shit. How the hell could he explain why he was standing over Ben’s body and his fingerprints were all over the murder weapon? Motive. He had no motive to kill Benjamin Monroe. But even as the thought entered his mind, he knew the research they’d been doing could be seen as motive. The ability to turn back the clock on aging could be worth millions upon millions and Ben had been moments from cracking the code. *Damn!*

* * *

“Walker, you’re outta here.” The police officer unlocked the cell door.

Jake rose slowly from the rock hard cot he’d slept on last night. His body felt as though he’d put it through a grueling workout. He stretched.

“Ya comin’ or not?” The officer put his hand on the cell door as though he’d just as soon slam it in Jake’s face.

“Who bailed me out? My lawyer?” His bail had been set at an amount beyond belief. Jake had instructed his lawyer to leave him in jail before he liquidated his assets to pay for bail. Jake refused to be left with nothing once he proved his innocence—*if* he could prove it.

“Some lady sprang you. Has legs that don’t stop.” The officer grinned, apparently remembering his own private dreams.

The only woman he knew who fit that description was Celeste Monroe. They’d been best friends from the day Benjamin had introduced them and working together had only strengthened their bond. If she’d bailed him out, she must believe him innocent. He released air from his lungs that he hadn’t even realized he’d been holding. He signed some paperwork and retrieved his wallet and watch. When the door buzzed, he walked through it and ran smack into Celeste.

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Her blue eyes glittered with fury mixed with tears. Curly, light brown hair fell in tousled waves as though she hadn't had time to worry about using a comb that day. Jake's stomach gave a flip, followed by his heart.

"Did you kill my father?" Her voice shook and she stared into his eyes as if she could somehow read his soul.

His throat ached. Would she even believe him if he denied it? He wasn't sure what he should do. What should he say so she would know he was telling the truth? Part of him wanted to take her into his arms and stroke away the pain he saw etched around her eyes and mouth. She held his gaze a moment longer and then gave a funny half-laugh that sounded more like a bark.

"I know you, Jake. I don't think you killed him." She lifted her chin and stared at him a moment longer. "You were the last one to see him. You could be the only one who can help me find my father's killer."

"No, Celeste. You have to leave that to the police. I won't have you in danger." Jake's throat went dry at the thought of finding Celeste's lifeless body the same way he'd found Ben's.

"News flash, Jake. They aren't looking for my father's murderer. As far as they're concerned, they've got their man."

And they had every reason to think so. How the hell had he gotten here? How could he prove his innocence?

"You look like hell." Celeste looked him over from head to toe. "Let's get you out of here and I'll drive you home. We can talk on the way."

Celeste believed in his innocence. Relief washed over Jake in a wave that threatened to knock him down. From the moment he'd walked into the nightmare of finding Ben, it had felt as though the world conspired against him. That Ben's own daughter believed him turned things right side up again.

CHAPTER 2

Jake's presence next to her in the cramped space of her Ford Mustang warmed Celeste. She'd been ice cold since the police had notified her of her father's death. It had taken nearly twenty-four hours for her to come out of her daze and start asking questions. It had taken her twenty minutes after that to realize she had to bail Jake out of jail.

"Who has a motive to kill my father, Jake?" She had to focus. If she stopped to think about her sweet, gentle father, she would lose herself to that coma-like pain again.

"The police say I did." Jake pinched the bridge of his nose between his forefinger and thumb. He looked as though he hadn't slept in days.

"We both know you didn't do this. You loved my father. He practically adopted you. So, who hated him enough to kill him?"

"It's not a matter of hate. It's a matter of greed," Jake said.

Celeste gasped and slammed her foot on the brakes, jerking them both forward. "He cracked the code." A car behind them blared its

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horn. She eased off the brake and hit the gas pedal with enough force to sling Jake back against his seat.

“My God, Jake.” Her hands trembled on the steering wheel. She clutched it tighter so Jake wouldn’t see.

“Ponce De Leon had it all wrong,” he said. “The fountain of youth wasn’t a place, it was a gene. And we’ve cracked it. We located the aging gene.”

“But haven’t other labs said the same thing?”

“Your father took it a step further, Celeste. Not only did he isolate the FoxM1B gene, but he created an elixir. The elixir didn’t just slow aging in the lab mice. It reversed it.”

“Oh, Daddy.” Tears welled up in Celeste’s eyes until the road became a blur of black pavement and white lines. She pulled over to the curb and put the car in park. Her father worked his entire life—her entire life—on finding a fountain of youth. “He finally realized his dream, only to lose his life.”

Jake turned sideways and pulled her into his arms. Celeste rested her head on his shoulder and let his shirt absorb the flood of tears. She was an orphan. No mother. No father. She was all alone in the world. The tears lasted ten minutes and then the anger started to seep in.

“Celeste? Are you okay?” Jake grabbed a handful of tissues from the holder on her dashboard and gently wiped the streaks of moisture off her cheeks.

“I’m going to find whoever did this to my father. And they are going to pay.” She pulled away so she could look at Jake’s face. Was he shocked?

“I’m going to help you.” His eyes reflected her anger. “Someone set me up. The police were there two seconds after Ned found me with your father.”

“Bastards.” Celeste wanted to punch something. “There’s more, Jake. My father’s notes are missing. I-I couldn’t find them in his house.

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Of course I don't have the entry key to his lab."

"No one does." Jake laughed and Celeste knew he remembered her father's fierce protectiveness over his little basement lab. "He guarded that lab like it was Fort Knox. But don't worry about someone getting his notes. They were in code."

Benjamin Monroe created a private code years ago. All his notes were written in that code. A code only Jake and Celeste knew now that Ben was gone.

"Of course." Celeste sent a silent thank you to her father for preventing whoever had killed him from success in stealing his discovery. A chill raced up her back. "Did he have a backup on his office hard drive?"

"Probably."

"We need to go copy it and erase it, Jake." She wouldn't let Evan Van Ester steal the credit for her father's discovery.

"Celeste, that's crazy. Even if they found the notes, they couldn't break his code."

"We don't know that one hundred percent. Look, for thirty years, Van Ester has taken credit for every medical discovery my father has worked on. E.V.E. Corporation is always the one featured in the headlines. And that's fine. My father simply wanted to create medicines that would help people live longer, healthier lives. But this was his pet project. He spent his entire life, both at home and in the office, studying this gene and how aging could be reversed."

In fact, he'd spent her entire childhood in his basement laboratory or visiting with his group of colleagues and friends in the Seeker's Club. Celeste felt her lips tug down at the corners and, for a moment, she felt like that frightened, lonely child again. The one who'd wanted Daddy to come read her a story. The one who'd read the story to herself because Daddy couldn't be bothered. He was too busy saving the world.

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“It was his passion.” Jake nodded his head.

“Van Ester can have the damn patent. I don’t care, but he won’t get the credit for another discovery by Benjamin Monroe. I’m going to make sure my father gets credit for discovering the Fountain of Youth.”

Jake sighed. “You’re right. Damn. Let’s go to E.V.E. Corporation. If we can’t get in on my employee pass, maybe we can get in on yours.”

* * *

Jake’s muscles tensed as they pulled into the parking garage. Someone had murdered Benjamin, and what frightened Jake more than being the number one suspect was that he had no clue where to look for Ben’s killer. He or Celeste could be next.

“Get down.” Celeste tried to push him down in the seat, but his long legs got in the way.

“Why?”

“The guard. I’m not sure if they’d let you in. I guess we’re going to find out because there isn’t any hiding you.

Ned Tate held his hand up, signaling they should stop the car. Celeste pushed a button and her window rolled down with a hiss.

“Afternoon, Ms. Monroe.” Ned’s smile faded as his gaze collided with Jake’s. “You are banned from the building, Mr. Walker.”

“Ned, surely you can make an exception?” Celeste batted her eyelashes in a flirty sweep Jake hadn’t been aware she was capable of. “For me.”

Ned hesitated for a moment and then shrugged. “I guess it can’t hurt. Just make it quick.”

“We’re just going to gather a few of my father’s personal belongings and I want to check in with our assistant.” She, Jake and her father shared an assistant. A young college student with a sweet smile.

Ned waved them on and Celeste pulled into the nearest parking spot. Jake stared at her for a moment. The warmth of her body reached

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out to his across the close confines of the car and it was all Jake could do to keep from hauling her into his arms and kissing away her hurt and confusion. He'd always resisted this sometimes-fierce attraction to her for fear of destroying their friendship. Working alongside her every day, smelling her sweet, earthy perfume, caused his libido enough problems. Some days he left the building just to keep his hands off her.

Kissing Celeste was a bad idea, no matter how much he might want to. His track record with women wasn't exactly untainted. His ex-wife, Deborah, taught him that love didn't last. He refused to risk a good friendship for something as fleeting as romantic love.

"Let's go. We have to find those notes." Celeste opened her door and swung her long legs out.

Jake bit back a groan of pure sexual frustration and followed the sound of their footsteps echoing across the concrete pillars and ceiling. Beads of perspiration covered his forehead and upper lip as he tried to erase the picture of Ben's lifeless body sprawled on the cold garage floor.

The hallway leading to the research lab bustled with activity. Jake recognized most of the faces from his five years working at E.V.E. Not one person would meet his gaze. They all glanced away or whispered among themselves, refusing to look at him. So much for professional respect. Apparently that had been wiped out with his arrest. Innocent or not, he'd already been tried and convicted.

"This was a bad idea," he said.

"Relax. They're idiots. He was my father and I don't believe you did it."

Jake felt some of the tension leave his shoulders. She was right. They were here for one thing—to find Ben's notes and remove any copies from his office and hard drive.

As they entered the lab, Celeste's assistant jumped in surprise and then pushed the papers she held back into the manila folder on her

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desk.

“Celeste. I-I didn’t think you’d be in for a while.” Rebecca peered at them over large, black-rimmed spectacles. Her eyes shone with sympathy. “Are you okay?”

“I’m just here to collect my father’s notes. What are you working on?” Celeste pointed at the folder on Rebecca’s desk.

“Research on human growth hormone. The company is discussing a new supplement and I thought I’d get a head start for when you feel like getting back to work.”

Celeste nodded. Jake shifted from one foot to the other. Normally, the lab felt like a second home to him. He spent most of his days and, just as often, his nights in this lab. But now he felt uncomfortable, as though he’d just been set down in the middle of a foreign land and he didn’t speak the language.

He made his way to Ben’s office. For the last five years, that office door had stood open. Ben could never bother with taking the time to open and close it. It was easier to just leave it ajar so he could run to the computer for Internet browsing or input his notes on a new formula. Today, the door was closed.

Jake tried the doorknob. Not only closed, but locked too.

“Celeste?” Jake said.

She stopped talking to Rebecca and moved to his side. She lowered her voice. “What’s wrong?”

“Your father’s office is locked.”

“Dad never locked his office.”

“He never even closed his door.” Fear, a sliver before, cracked wide open in his chest and he could barely breathe. He’d suspected someone in the company might be involved in Ben’s death, but now a locked door stared him in the face, screaming out the guilt.

“Rebecca,” Celeste called. “Do you have the key to Dad’s office?”

Rebecca’s hands rose to her glasses and she pushed them up her

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nose. “Yes, but you can’t have it.”

“Excuse me?”

Jake could feel the waves of anger pulsating off Celeste. Her emotions were barely held together anyway. He’d seen her push her pain down so she could focus on the task at hand, but it was right there, just below the surface, bubbling and waiting for a release.

“I’m sorry, Celeste.” Rebecca cleared her throat. “They told me the office had to stay locked.”

“Just tell me where the keys are and I’ll get them my damn self.” Celeste’s teeth clicked together.

Jake placed the palm of his hand in the middle of her back, trying to calm her. It wouldn’t do either of them any good if they were thrown out of the building for disorderly conduct.

“Celeste, you’re putting me in a difficult position.” Rebecca crossed her arms.

“Oh, for God’s sake.” Celeste stomped toward Rebecca’s desk and yanked a drawer until it fell out of its slot and the contents scattered.

Apparently his attempt to calm her hadn’t worked.

“Jake, don’t just stand there, help me.” Celeste searched the next drawer down and then straightened and glared at Rebecca. “Are you going to get out of my way?”

“You should probably try the second drawer down on the right.” Rebecca sighed and rolled her chair away from the desk.

Celeste opened the second drawer on the right and retrieved a set of keys. She tossed them to Jake and he nearly dropped them. The first key he tried didn’t work. The second key wouldn’t even fit in the lock. With the third key, the lock clicked out of the tumblers and the door swung inward.

Celeste gave a whoop and rushed past him into her father’s office. Jake followed at a slower pace and nearly bumped into her. She’d stopped halfway in and now stood with her arms clasped around her

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abdomen.

“Celeste?” He touched her on the shoulder.

She spun around and buried her face against his chest, but not before he saw the huge tears falling down her cheeks. They stood that way for several minutes before she pulled back a little and gave him a watery smile.

“It just hit me when I saw all his pictures and knick knacks.” She wiped the tears from her cheeks with her fingertips.

“I know.” He caressed her shoulder blades, wishing he could make her feel better, knowing he couldn’t.

“We have a job to do.” Celeste threw her shoulders back with steely determination.

She moved to the computer and turned it on.

“Celeste?” Those fine hairs were standing up on his neck again. “I think we’d better hurry.”

“You got it.” She moved the mouse across the screen and double clicked on a tiny icon in the lower right corner.

“Ben’s secret folder. He showed me this a few months ago.”

Jake watched the monitor from behind her.

“He trusted you, Jake. He taught you his code. Showed you how to find the secret files easily. We’re the only two.”

“Are you sure about that, Celeste? If there was someone else, that person might have motive to kill him. Take credit for his work.”

Celeste stared at him for a moment and then leaned against the back of the chair. “You might be right. My God, I hadn’t considered that my father might teach someone else. It would be just like him to trust the wrong person. His head was always so into his work.”

“Look at this.” Jake pointed to a file named Youth.

Celeste double clicked on the file and a computerized image popped up.

“Deoxyribonucleic acid.” Celeste pointed at the three dimensional,

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multi-colored shapes rotating on the computer monitor.

“Human DNA. This must be the map to the FoxM1B gene. There’s a second file here too.”

“What the hell is going on here?” Ethan Van Ester stood in the doorway of Benjamin’s office. “That computer is company property.”

Busted. Jake moved in front of Celeste to shield her from the fury spewing from Van Ester’s eyes.

“Is someone going to answer me?” A vein in Van Ester’s neck throbbed.

“I was looking for a poem my father wrote a few weeks ago.” Celeste moved the mouse across the screen.

Jake could hear the distinct sound of a click. Some quick typing. Another click and a ping.

“Here it is,” Celeste said.

“Let me see,” Van Ester crossed the room and swung the monitor around.

Jake grinned. A poem filled the screen...

*Roses are red.
Violets are blue.
I love science.
So do you.*

“Take some time off, Celeste.” Van Ester swung the screen back around. “You have vacation coming anyway.”

“Thanks, Evan. You’re too kind.” Celeste batted her lashes again.

Jake clenched his jaw. He didn’t like her flirting with Van Ester. Van Ester played the field and played it hard. The man might be rich, but he wasn’t anywhere good enough for Celeste.

And who would be good enough for her? You?

“Jake.” Evan nodded to Jake and left the room. He stopped to speak

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to Rebecca. Van Ester leaned over the desk and whispered something in her ear. The girl nodded and looked up at him with stars in her eyes. Another smitten young girl Van Ester could chase around the office.

“I e-mailed the files to myself and deleted them off the hard drive.” Celeste shut off the computer, snatched a picture of her mother off the shelf and left her father’s office.

Jake followed her, closing the office door behind him. “How did you get that poem typed in so fast?” he whispered.

“I didn’t. Daddy put it there. It’s a code.”

“What does it mean?”

“Not here. I’ll tell you when we get back to my apartment.” Celeste waved to Rebecca as they headed for the parking garage.

The smell of the musky garage threw Jake back to the night he’d found Ben’s body. He slowed his pace as they approached her Mustang.

The screech of tires echoed through the garage. Celeste unlocked her car and placed her hand on the door handle. A whimper escaped from her throat and Jake’s gaze flew to her face. Her skin paled and she took several steps back her mouth formed into an “O.”

He followed the direction of her stare to the man sitting slumped across her steering wheel. Sirens peeled through the garage. Not again.

Ned Tate’s eyes gazed unseeingly into the gray concrete of the wall just beyond the Mustang’s bumper. It looked as though something circled his neck.

“Celeste, we have to get out of here.” He rounded the back of the car and grasped her elbow.

“If we run, it’ll look like we did it.” Her teeth chattered together.

“It already looks like we did it.”

Sirens screeched through the garage, the echoes bouncing off the levels, making it impossible to tell how many cop cars there were.

“Too late,” Jake said. He shoved his hands into his pockets and

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rocked back on his heels.

Celeste swallowed. She had nothing to fear. She and Jake hadn't killed Ned Tate. The truth rested firmly on their side.

A white Crown Victoria turned the corner. If not for the flashing red light, it would have been unidentifiable as a police vehicle. Jake held up his hand and waved the car down.

"I must be out of my mind."

"Ned is in my car. They'd track us down anyway." Celeste grasped his arm. "Don't worry. We're innocent."

"I just spent time in jail after telling myself the same thing. Forgive me if my faith in our justice system is a little shaky."

Two uniformed street officers stepped out of the car. The first looked like he'd graduated from high school yesterday, and the second looked as though he'd spent a few too many years on the same beat. His forehead seemed creased in a perpetual frown and his eyes were glazed over with cynicism.

"Officers, we're glad to see you." Celeste made eye contact with the younger officer. He smiled at her.

"What's going on here?" The older officer squinted and looked back and forth between Celeste and Jake.

"There's a dead man in my car." Damn! That came out sounding a bit too chipper. She didn't want to panic, but she also didn't want to appear cold and calculating, or guilty.

"What?" The older officer drew his gun, but seemed unsure where to point the muzzle.

"My guess is that whoever did it is long gone," Jake said.

"Check it out, Ernie." The older cop kept his gun trained just to the right of where Jake stood.

Ernie moved to the car and opened the passenger door. Ned stared with lifeless eyes. The young officer's hand shook as he took the end of a pen and pulled the cord around Ned's neck out just a tiny bit.

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“Appears to have been strangled, Frank.” Ernie stepped back and moved as far away from the car as he could.

“Shit. Two months until retirement and now this.” Frank turned his scowl on Jake and Celeste. “Okay, folks. What’s the story?”

Jake shrugged. “No story. We went inside to get a picture from her father’s office and when we came back we found old Ned.”

“So you knew the deceased?” Frank grabbed a small leather notepad from his front pocket and flipped it open, pen poised.

“Yes. He was the security guard here.” Celeste bit her tongue.

“Did you like him?” Frank asked, his beady brown eyes narrowing just a tiny bit.

“No, officer. I did not like him. He was a lurking, horrible, little man. He liked to wait around corners and listen to private conversations and I’ve no doubt his snide comments got him where he is now.”

Ernie gasped. Frank nodded.

“But I didn’t dislike him enough to kill him and I’d hardly be stupid enough to put him in my own car.”

“We’ll need the two of you to come downtown of course.”

The tension radiated off Jake in waves. She squeezed his forearm and spoke for them both. “Of course, officer. Any way we can be of help.”

“Ernie, get the forensics team out here. We need prints.” Frank snapped his heels together as though he’d spent more than a few years in the military. “You two, come with me. I’ll give you a ride to the station.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” Jake muttered.

“Yes, but this time you aren’t in cuffs.” Celeste had to stand on tiptoe to whisper in his ear and her breasts brushed against his arm. Fire licked down her body and made her knees weak. She slid into the police car before she wound up in a crumpled heap on the concrete floor. She couldn’t remember having that reaction to Jake before—then

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again, she'd always kept her distance. Getting close might be dangerous.

* * *

"I told you. I don't know who might have killed Ned Tate. Isn't it your job to figure this out?" Four hours of questioning and Celeste had run out of patience.

The minute they'd arrived at the police station, they'd escorted Jake into a different room. Instead of the cut and dried report they'd expected to file, questions were hurled at her from both sides of the room.

"The only prints on the car are yours and Jake Walker's. Care to explain that?" Frank leaned over the table, his nose almost touching hers.

"The killer wore gloves. Why the hell are you asking me? If you could do your job and find the man who murdered my father, you'd probably find Ned's killer too."

The metal door swung inward with a slight creak. A tall man with dark hair and bright blue eyes entered the small room. "Need some help, Frank?"

"Maybe you can get more out of her than I can." Frank kicked a chair and it fell over.

Celeste wanted to laugh at his temper tantrum, but figured it wouldn't help her get out of this hell hole any faster.

"Celeste? Hi. I'm Nick Rogers. Let's see if we can get these questions answered and get you out of here." He smiled and two deep grooves appeared in his cheeks.

Celeste stared at his perfect white teeth and the practiced grin. So they wanted to play good cop/bad cop? She'd had about all she planned to take of their games. She hadn't hurt anyone and she wanted to go home. The Keystone Cops could inflict their games on someone else.

"I get it. Good cop/bad cop. Well guess what? I'm not playing.

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Either release me or charge me.”

Nick’s smile disappeared faster than test tubes in a room full of scientists. He slammed his palms down on the table and leaned over her. “You’ll leave when we tell you to leave.”

“Then we insist on a lawyer.” Jake stood in the doorway, his eyes glinting ominously.

“Nick, we’ll have to release them for the moment,” Frank said.

“Don’t leave town.” Nick glared at Celeste. “You’re free to go...for now.”

But somehow she didn’t feel free. As a matter of fact, she felt like a specimen under a microscope. They’d be watching her every move. She’d gone from grieving daughter to murder suspect in one afternoon. “Let’s get out of here.” She headed from the police station, not sure where to find her car.

“They’re keeping your car to search for evidence. We’ll have to catch a cab.”

* * *

Don’t leave town. Things kept getting worse and worse. Now Celeste was involved and Jake couldn’t even protect her because he didn’t know the enemy’s face.

“How long do you think they’ll keep my car?”

Jake winced. She loved her zippy, little sports car. She wouldn’t like his answer. “The officer said it could be several weeks. Or longer.”

“Longer? What am I going to do for a car?”

“I’ll take you anywhere you want to go.”

“Jake?” Celeste stopped walking and bent over, hands on knees.

“Are you okay?” Fear shot a fiery path down his throat.

“Just...out...of...breath.” She panted for a minute. “Think we could slow down or are we in a race I didn’t sign up for?”

“Sorry.” Jake slammed his right fist into his left palm. “Those damn cops are so intent on proving I killed your father—and now Ned—

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they're letting the real killer get away.”

“You think Ned and my father were killed by the same person?” Celeste let out a loud whistle and waved at a passing cab.

“Don't you?”

The cab driver twisted the wheel and pulled up to the curb close enough that the rear tire touched the yellow painted surface. Jake opened the door and held it for Celeste.

As she passed, he caught the faint scent of baby powder mixed with roses. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. God, she smelled good. He followed her into the back seat. She shifted uncomfortably when he scooted closer than necessary. Jake barely hid his satisfied grin. She *was* affected by his nearness.

“Roosevelt Apartments.” Celeste gave the driver her address in downtown Indianapolis.

Jake hesitated for a moment, wondering if it would be smarter to go to a hotel. He wondered how she'd react to his suggestion to go to a hotel? Jake's gaze slid over her rounded curves under a tight red sweater and a black silk skirt. Even after fighting Rebecca for the keys to her father's office, finding a dead body, and being interrogated for four hours, she looked sexy as hell.

“I'm starving.” Hunger rumbled out of her stomach.

Jake laughed. “So I hear.”

“Between bailing you out and dealing with Officer Gotcha, I haven't eaten in over eight hours.” A bright flush stole into her cheeks.

“We'd better feed you then. Your favorite takeout?” Jake watched as she licked her lips at his suggestion. What would she do if he leaned over and kissed her? But he knew that wasn't a good idea. He turned away, focusing his attention on the thriving downtown area as they passed Circle Center and headed for White River State Park.

He wouldn't think about her soft, moist lips. He'd think about the clean city streets and Monument Circle, which would be lit tonight with

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thousands of strands of tiny lights. He wouldn't think about the way her breasts had felt as they'd brushed against him earlier. Instead, he'd think about the flashing sign in front of the Convention Center. No, he wouldn't think of her in a romantic way. Their friendship was more important than physical attraction.

CHAPTER 3

The cab driver pulled to a stop at the front door of Celeste's apartment building. Heavy stones stood proudly invincible to outside forces. Two gloomy gargoyles from a long-forgotten tradition protected the rooftop. The brass-knobbed, plate glass doors were sheltered by a green canopy which flapped gently in the breeze.

"Sixteen-fifty," the driver said.

Jake handed a twenty to him. "Thanks." He grabbed Celeste's hand and dragged her out of the cab.

The guard saluted as they walked past. In the five years he'd known Celeste, the same guard had worked the front desk. Jake wondered if the man ever took a vacation because every time he visited, the slightly graying, fiftyish man sat behind the desk. He never spoke, only saluted politely to indicate he knew they were allowed in the building. Still, his presence reassured Jake that someone looked after Celeste's safety.

After pushing the up button on the elevator and waiting a full ten

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seconds, Celeste jabbed the button a few more times.

“That doesn’t make it come down any faster you know.” Jake grinned, expecting an argument from her. He wasn’t disappointed.

“How do you know? Are you the elevator genie? If so, can I wish for it to be here already?” She hit the button a final time the moment before the bell dinged and the doors slid open. “See? It worked.”

Jake laughed and followed her into the elevator. He stood close to her. She moved to the side and frowned at him. *Jake, old boy, what is your problem?* He knew better than to play with fire, and getting too close to Celeste most definitely qualified as stepping into the hot zone.

“I want an order of General Tsao’s chicken, steamed dumplings, steamed rice, crab Rangoon, egg drop soup—”

“Don’t forget the fried wontons,” Jake said.

“I’m getting two orders of those because you never share.”

Celeste unlocked the door to her apartment and a black-and-white streak of fur darted out and wound itself around Jake’s ankles.

“Hi, Orange Slice.” He bent down and scratched the purring feline behind the ears.

The cat yawned and made a beeline for Celeste’s kitchen, mewing loudly.

“Are you hungry too, baby?” Celeste slung her keys onto the small cherry wood table next to the front door and headed for the kitchen. “Jake, will you call Yen’s?”

“You wanted five orders of wontons, right?” He grabbed her cordless phone.

“Better make it six.” He heard the sound of cabinet doors banging shut and the cat increased its plaintive cries for dinner. “Seriously, only get two orders, Jake. I’m hungry, not crazy.”

He placed the order and headed for the kitchen. Celeste’s top half lay inside the cabinet under her sink and her rear stuck up in the air. Jake leaned against the doorjamb and crossed his arms, enjoying the

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sight. He gave a low whistle. “Nice view.”

The clunk as she slammed her head into the top of the cabinet preceded a string of curses.

“Damn it, Jake. Don’t sneak up on me.” She scooted out of the cabinet and sat cross-legged on the floor. “I’m out of cat food.”

“Bad Mommy. Now your kitty will have to eat steamed dumplings.” Jake scratched the squalling cat behind the ears and his cries turned into purrs.

“He’s not getting my food. You can share yours with him. Today is my shopping day and I had to spend it bailing you out of jail.”

“So you’re saying it’s my fault the cat is out of food?”

“Something like that.”

“I don’t live here.” Orange Slice flipped onto his back for a tummy rub, so Jake obliged him.

“We could change that.” Celeste’s eyes grew round and she slapped her hand over her mouth.

Jake cleared his throat, trying to erase the sudden image of sharing a bed with the woman in front of him. “You wouldn’t like it. I snore.”

“So does Orange Slice.” She stood and brushed off her skirt. “Enough fantasizing. Let’s get serious. We need to figure out who killed my father.”

“And Ned.”

“I’m still not convinced it was the same person.” She led the way to the living room sofa and sat down on one corner, her legs curled under her.

The green leather recliner called to him and he collapsed into it, weariness catching him. He kicked the foot rest out and leaned back.

Orange Slice jumped onto his lap and walked in tight circles, kneading his thighs before settling down.

“I think my cat prefers you. Maybe you should take him home.”

“I refuse to own a pet named after candy.”

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“It’s my favorite and he’s my favorite...” She trailed off. “Oh, forget it.”

“I’ve been tossing around who knew about Ben’s formula. The formula is the only reason I can think that anyone would possibly have reason to harm him.”

“We’ll try to decode his notes later. I’m wiped out. I still have to go and plan my father’s funeral tomorrow.” She sighed so deeply Jake could feel her heartache reach across the room and grab him.

“I’ll go with you.” She shouldn’t have to deal with this alone. Her mother died when she was a very small child and now she’d lost her father.

The doorbell rang. Celeste started to rise, but Jake set the cat on her lap and rushed for the door. The delivery boy held two large paper bags. “Delivery.”

Jake hid a grin. The young man had a talent for stating the obvious. “How much?”

The Oriental man stared at him uncertainly. Celeste glanced up and frowned, not recognizing the man at the door. She set Orange Slice on the floor and moved to stand behind Jake.

“You’re new, aren’t you? Yen Lo usually delivers for us.” Yen Lo was the nephew of the owner and usually included a few extra sweets and sometimes spring rolls. He’d made it clear he “loved” her. Oh well, she’d just have to do without her admirer this time.

“No English.” The young man shrugged. For someone who didn’t speak English, his accent wasn’t thick at all. Yen’s accent dripped thick as molasses, but he spoke impeccable English.

Celeste frowned, something tugging at the back of her memory. Jake paid the delivery guy and grabbed the bags. Celeste smiled at him and waved goodbye. She’d figure out what bothered her later. They’d probably forgotten to order something.

Orange Slice cried and jumped from the floor to the low living

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room table where Jake set the bags of food. He swatted at one, raising up on his haunches and trying to climb into the sack.

“Okay, buddy, we get it. You’re hungry.” Jake pulled out a steamed dumpling, broke it in two and tossed it to the starving feline.

Orange Slice swallowed the first piece whole. Celeste laughed.

“I think we’ll use plates. Be right back.” She walked to the kitchen and grabbed two large plates and silverware. She’d never perfected the knack of using chopsticks.

“Celeste!” Jake’s voice cracked on the last syllable of her name.

She dropped the plates and ran into the living room, sensing his distress. Orange Slice lay on his side twitching. Jake knelt next to the cat.

“Call your vet now!” He grabbed a blanket off the back of the couch and wrapped the cat.

Celeste dialed the number to Dr. Hall’s office, her hand shaking. The doctor answered on the fourth ring.

“Dr. Hall, thank God you’re there. My cat. He ate a steamed dumpling and he’s convulsing...” She couldn’t lose her cat. It was true, he was just a pet, but she loved him as though he were part of her family. He loved her on bad hair days, bad mood days, and bad attitude days.

“How long after he ate until the convulsions started?”

“About two or three minutes after he ate it,” Celeste said.

“Strange.” Silence stretched on the other end of the line.

“What, Dr. Hall? Please help him.”

“Okay, it sounds like cyanide. He probably got into it around the apartment. I want you to induce vomiting. Peroxide or ipecac syrup will work. Then bring him straight to my office.”

“Right. Goodbye.” Celeste threw the phone onto the couch and raced for the door. “Be right back, Jake.”

She ran the length of the hallway and knocked on the door at the

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end. Samantha Parker opened the door, dark circles perched under her eyes from sleepless nights dealing with eighteen-month-old twin boys.

“Samantha, Orange Slice got hold of some poison. Do you have ipecac? It’s an emergency.”

“Of course, Celeste.” Samantha rushed for a kitchen drawer and brought back a tiny bottle of ipecac.

“Thank you.” Celeste grasped it tightly in her palm and ran back to her own apartment, unscrewing the lid as she raced back.

Jake stroked Orange Slice’s head. Celeste dropped to her knees on the other side of the cat and tilted his chin back, pouring the syrup into his open mouth. The cat fought, but she held his head back and rubbed his throat until he swallowed.

“My neighbor has twin boys.” She met Jake’s eyes, wanting to break down and weep, knowing she didn’t have time.

“This’ll work. He’ll be okay.”

Celeste nodded, not really believing it. She’d lived long enough to know that death always came in threes. Always. Her father. Ned Tate. And now Orange Slice. *Please, God, let my cat live. I need his comfort now.*

Orange Slice heaved a couple of times before throwing up. Celeste wrapped him tightly in the blanket and grabbed her keys off the table by the front door.

“Dr. Hall wants to see him.”

“I’ll get a cab. Sit down for a minute.”

She stopped. Damn it. She’d forgotten her car wasn’t here. If her cat died because the police wanted to play their game of make-believe that she or Jake was somehow guilty, she’d—she’d... There wasn’t much she could do.

* * *

It was close to two in the morning before they returned from the vet. Celeste circled her neck, trying to work out the kinks.

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“My neck feels like someone yanked it off and sewed it back on.” Her heart felt as though someone had ripped it out of her chest and tried to reattach it.

“Relax. Dr. Hall said Orange Slice is going to be fine. He just wants to observe him for a few days as a precaution.”

“I still can’t figure out where he’d have gotten rat poison.”

Jake’s warm fingers landed on her shoulders. “Maybe the landlord put some out on a previous tenant.” His caress did more than just work the stiff muscles. Moist heat slid down her body and gathered between her thighs. She moved away from him.

“Thanks.” She wanted to collapse on her sofa and sleep for three days. She stopped halfway to the couch.

“What is it?” Jake bumped into her, his hard body setting her back on fire.

“The food. It’s gone.” A chill slid down her spine, dousing the flames from Jake’s touch. The connection between Orange Slice eating the dumpling and the food suddenly disappearing was more than a coincidence.

“I think we’d better call the police.” Jake’s face turned gray.

Celeste dug through her shoulder bag for the card the detective who’d interrogated her had handed her. She gave it to Jake. Jake dialed the number and asked for Nick Rogers.

“Now what?” Celeste asked when he hung up the phone.

“Now we wait for the detective to arrive.” Jake headed for the kitchen. “I’ll make coffee.”

“Do you know where I keep the filters and—”

“Got it.” Jake knew Celeste’s kitchen almost as well as he knew his own, which told him just how much time he spent at her apartment. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d gone out on a date. Or the last time he’d felt a desire to spend time with anyone other than Celeste. Maybe that should tell him something, but he wasn’t willing to

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examine the facts too closely tonight.

“A quarter for your thoughts.” She stood in the kitchen doorway. The light from the living room fell behind her and brought out the golden highlights in her tawny hair.

“They aren’t worth that much.” He pulled two mugs from the cabinet over the sink and set them on the counter while he waited for the coffee maker to cycle.

“Inflation.” She shrugged. “Besides, they looked pretty deep. Share with me.”

“I was just thinking about how long it’s been since I had a date.” He kept his gaze on her face, trying to gauge her reaction.

“One year, three months, fourteen days.” The funny half-smile she gave him tugged at his heartstrings.

“And how could you possibly remember that?”

“Jake, it’s not as though you date that often.”

“With good reason. Look at how my relationships turn out.” This was the exact reason he should not even think about Celeste in any way other than as a friend.

“Look at the women you pick.” Celeste walked to the fridge and pulled out a half-gallon jug of milk. “For your coffee.”

“What’s wrong with the women I pick?” He reached for a mug. “Coffee’s done.”

“Don’t try to change the subject.” Celeste grabbed the cup he’d just poured and added a spoonful of artificial sweetener and some chocolate hazelnut flavoring.

“I’m not changing the subject.” Jake sighed. But he’d like to. “I’m going into the living room and sit down.”

“Chicken.” Celeste issued the soft challenge to his retreating back as she followed him into the living room.

He sat in the recliner. She on the sofa, feet tucked under her.

“You want to know what’s wrong with the women you date? I’ll be

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more than glad to tell you. Where do you want me to start?" She cupped the mug of coffee between her palms and raised it for a sip, wincing at the heat.

"Oh, I don't know. Why don't you start with the last one I dated?" He couldn't wait to hear the dating advice of Dr. Celeste. She hadn't been on a date herself in at least six months.

"Gladly. First of all her name was Tyffani." Celeste sat back and crossed her arms, a smug look on her face.

"And?"

"And? That's enough. Don't date women whose names weren't invented before 1980."

"Logical." He grinned. "What about Ann? Don't tell me you can find something wrong with her name."

"Ann is a fine name. Just make sure the next Ann you date has a sense of humor. I've never met a woman so serious about herself and everything around her. She couldn't take a joke to save her life. I really didn't like her."

"Susan?" Jake realized Celeste needed this release more than she needed to complain about his choice in women. She needed to take her mind off all the horrible, frightening events of the past week.

"Susan's IQ was the same size as her bra."

Jake chuckled. "Jealous?"

"Not a chance."

"Let's talk about the men you date. Or don't date," Jake said.

"What about the men I date?" She glanced away.

"Let's see. There was Mark. He would have been fine if he could've taken his face out of his bug book for half a second and paid some attention to you." Mark hadn't appreciated Celeste the least little bit and it irked Jake to no end.

"He was an entomologist. Of course he was interested in bugs."

"Yes, and if you'd grown antennae, he might have noticed when

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you dumped him.” Jake didn’t mention she kept picking men like her father. Men whose work meant everything and who put her on the back burner. Perhaps she had a need to work out childhood issues by attempting to gain these men’s approval, but ultimately she was disappointed.

“Okay.” Celeste held up her right hand. “Truce. We both have horrible taste in significant others.”

“So, have I ever dated anyone you liked?” Jake asked.

“Have *you* ever liked any of them? Or were they just convenient?”

Anger trickled slowly through his veins. *She sure doesn’t think much of you, buddy.* “End of discussion.”

“What about the bitch who stabbed you in the back? Did you like her? Do you still like her? Is she the real reason you aren’t dating?”

Sometimes he regretted telling her anything. “Drop it, Celeste.”

“What if I don’t want to drop it?” She lifted her chin at that angle that said she wasn’t backing down. Just what he needed. Why had he started this conversation?

Three loud bangs slammed into the front door. Celeste’s face paled.

“It’s the police.” Jake walked to the door and glanced out the peephole to be certain. Detective Rogers stood on the other side, an irritated frown engraved between his brows. Jake let him wait another few seconds before he opened the door.

“Don’t think you’re getting off that easy,” Celeste said softly.

“Detective Roberts, thank you for coming so quickly.” Jake held out his hand. The detective ignored Jake’s outstretched arm and sniffed the air.

“This better be good. I was ready to get the best night’s sleep I’ve had in months.” Nick Roberts walked over to the recliner and sank into it.

“Have a seat, Detective.” Celeste’s voice rang with sarcasm.

Jake could almost touch the anger pulsing off her. He moved behind

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the couch and placed his hands on her shoulders, kneading gently, trying to calm her. He felt her take a shaky breath.

“So, where’s this supposedly poisoned food?” Nick leaned forward, his elbows on his knees.

“Gone,” Celeste said.

“Gone?” A vein started a slow throb in Nick’s temple. His dimples were nowhere in sight.

“When we returned, someone had removed every last container and sweet and sour packet in the apartment. Don’t you find that suspicious?” Jake crossed his arms and waited for the detective to come to the same conclusion he had. Someone had intentionally poisoned their food and then removed the evidence.

“I’ll tell you what I find suspicious.” The detective stood. “You two are in deep shit and you concoct a ridiculous story to try to throw the attention off yourselves. Bravo. You two are smarter than I gave you credit for.”

“Then why did my cat nearly die?” Celeste jumped to her feet and poked a finger at Nick, almost hitting his chest.

“You probably poisoned him yourself.” He glared at them both.

“You can’t smell the truth for the nose on your face, detective. First you accuse Jake of killing my father and now you accuse me of poisoning my own cat. A pet that I love. Get out of my apartment.” Celeste stalked to the door and slung it open. She motioned the detective out.

“Don’t leave town.” He glanced back at Jake as he walked through the door. “Either of you.”

“You know, if you’d bothered to ask, I could’ve told you the delivery boy wasn’t the regular on this route. And then maybe you could do your job and investigate. We ordered from Yen’s on Pennsylvania Street, if you care.” Celeste slammed the door behind him.

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“Damn them.” Jake moved in front of Celeste and held his arms open.

She laid her head on his chest as though preparing for a good cry, but no tears fell. He rubbed her back. It was dangerous to get this close. Holding her in his arms felt good. Too good.

“We have to check it out ourselves.” Celeste lifted her face to look in his eyes and Jake barely kept from kissing her.

“Not tonight. We both need sleep.”

“Okay. But first thing tomorrow, I expect you here so we can go to Yen’s.” She stepped back. “No, I have to go plan my father’s funeral and then we’ll go to Yen’s.”

She spoke quickly past the word funeral as though she couldn’t bring herself to think about what the statement meant. He hoped she wasn’t repressing too much grief. It could turn into an explosion of emotion he wasn’t sure either of them could handle.

“What time will you be here?” Celeste glanced at her small, gold wristwatch with the abalone face.

“Celeste, I’m not sure it’s a good idea to stay in this apartment. After what happened earlier—”

“I will *not* be chased out of my own apartment. Now, what time will you be here?” There was no point in arguing with her. For one thing, he was too tired.

“I’ll be ready to leave whenever you are.” Jake walked over to the couch and lay down.

“What are you doing?”

“Going to sleep.” He closed his eyes.

“Here?” Celeste’s voice sounded three octaves higher than normal.

“Yep.”

“I don’t need a knight in shining armor, Jake. I learned to take care of myself a long time ago.”

He sighed and sat up. Yeah, when she was about six-years-old and

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she'd never forgiven the world for that. "Nothing is ever just easy with you, is it?"

"Wouldn't you be bored if it was?" She grinned.

"Probably. Look, someone is trying to kill one or both of us. If you won't leave, then it makes sense for me to stay here. Safety in numbers."

"Fine. At least let me get you some blankets and a pillow." Celeste disappeared into her bedroom.

If he were braver or perhaps less jaded, he'd follow her and to hell with the couch. When she came back, she held a stack of blankets and a thick, fluffy pillow. Jake stuffed the pillow behind his head, closed his eyes and settled back with a sigh of utter weariness. Celeste dropped a blanket over him and tucked it around his shoulders. Her soft lips landed on his forehead.

"Goodnight, Jake," she whispered.

Rather than making him sleepy, the kiss sent his hormones into overdrive. Jake flipped onto his side. It was going to be a long night and the only thing that separated him from her bed was one thin door.

CHAPTER 4

Breakfast was long past by the time Celeste got out of bed. She opened her bedroom door slowly and peaked out into the living room. Jake sat in his favorite chair, a cup of coffee in his hand, hair still ruffled from sleep. A dark shadow lay across his jaw. Celeste tried to find enough saliva to swallow, but her mouth felt as dry as her throat.

“Morning.” She headed for the kitchen.

“Coffee is already made.”

“Bless you.” Celeste grabbed a mug and poured herself a cup. She yawned, unable to shake the remnants of deep sleep.

“Mind if I borrow your shower?” Jake stood in the kitchen doorway, looking like a ruffled Mel Gibson.

Mind if I join you? Her eyes slid over his body, slowing as they crossed his broad shoulders and narrow hips.

“See anything you like?” His smile set off the deep grooves in his cheeks.

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Celeste felt the flush crawl up her neck and onto her cheekbones. “Towels are under the bathroom sink. Help yourself.”

Jake left the room whistling. Celeste shivered. As much as she might want Jake, she wasn’t willing to risk a relationship with him. She’d lost enough people lately. She couldn’t bear it if she lost him too. She’d ridiculed his relationships, but she didn’t have much of a track record herself.

“Hard to have a relationship when you’re married to your career.” Her words bounced off the cool tiles on the floor. But the truth resembled Jake’s words more closely than they resembled hers. Her career didn’t get in the way of relationships...her choice in boyfriends did. She picked men exactly like her father, so wrapped up in their work they forgot she existed. She’d run around in circles trying to get their attention until she finally realized it was futile.

The roll top desk in the alcove off the living room called to her. Celeste pushed the lid up and hit the power button to turn on her laptop. Hooking the chair with one foot, she rolled it out and sank onto it.

“Okay, Dad, let’s see what you hid for us.” She hit the keyboard with swift strokes, connecting to the Internet via her phone line. Hopefully no one would try to phone her while she downloaded the files she’d e-mailed herself.

Her e-mail program opened with a double click and she selected the zipped file she’d mailed herself. The file began to download.

“Did the files come through?” Jake’s voice slid over her like smooth whiskey.

“Looks like.”

She spun her chair around and sucked in her breath at the site of him. Droplets of water clung to his chest, visible beneath his still unbuttoned shirt. Celeste swallowed.

“Why don’t you watch the download while I go jump in the shower?” She had to get away from him before she climbed on top of

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him.

Celeste took a quick shower and hurried back to the living room. Jake sat at the desk, the chair tipped back on two wheels.

“Is it finished downloading?” She resisted the urge to hold the back of the chair to keep him from falling. He was a big boy. If he wanted to tip himself backwards, she’d have a good laugh.

“Almost.”

A gray box flashed up on the screen and Jake quickly navigated to a decompressing program to separate the files.

“Let me grab a chair from the kitchen.” Celeste jogged to the kitchen and returned with a straight back chair.

“I’ll take that one.” Jake stood. “You open the file.”

“I’m nervous.” Celeste sat in his vacated seat. She rubbed her palms together and then placed her fingers over the keyboard. “Here goes.”

The first file opened in a word processing program. It was the poem she’d shown Van Ester in her father’s office...

*Roses are red
Violets are blue
I love science
So do you.*

“You said this was a code?” Jake pointed at the screen. “What does it mean?”

“It’s a poem Dad made up when I was little. When I got older, he told me if I ever saw the poem, I’d know he’d written the formulas in the folder it would be in. It’s his signature.”

“You okay?” Jake rubbed her shoulders.

“Fine.” Celeste sniffed, but refused to let the tears fall. There’d be time later for tears. Time for rage over lost opportunities to connect more closely with her father. Time for vengeance. Right now she had to

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focus on finding her father's killer and making sure her father got credit for the formula he'd spent his entire life creating.

"Second file." She closed the poem and opened the second file. "This one is in code."

"I recognize it. Wow. These are his notes from the last few months. Celeste, we need to save these to a DVD and then destroy them from your computer. It's dangerous to leave them here after someone got into your apartment last night."

"You're right." Celeste grabbed a blank DVD-RW from the bottom drawer of the desk and inserted it into the left side of her laptop. The computer whizzed and clicked and she copied the files onto it.

"It's lunch time. Care for Chinese? We'll stop by the funeral home after lunch." Jake glanced at his wristwatch.

"Just what I was thinking." Celeste placed the disc in a hard plastic case and handed it to Jake. "We need to hide this first. Then I want to call and check on Orange Slice."

"How well do you know your neighbors?"

"Mrs. Edwards dated my dad a couple of times, but I think she's on a cruise this week. Samantha down the hall is a pretty good friend. She's the one who gave us the ipecac last night."

"Let's pay Samantha a quick visit." Jake opened her front door and they walked to Samantha's apartment.

She opened after their first knock.

"Celeste, how's your cat?" Samantha's honey-blond hair hung in perfect ringlets around her oval face. Her blue eyes were as bright as a Caribbean sea, and when they landed on Jake, they took on a primitive glint. Celeste wondered where the woman's dark circles had gone.

"He spent the night at the vet, but he's alive. Thanks for the ipecac."

"Glad I could help." She leaned against the door. "Introduce me to your friend."

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“This is Jake Walker. Jake, Samantha Parker.”

“I didn’t know you had a boyfriend, Celeste.”

“I’m not her boyfriend.” Jake seemed more than happy to speak up.

Celeste resisted the urge to elbow him in the ribs. “Jake is a good friend. Samantha, can you hold onto this for me? I can’t answer any questions, but I need to keep it somewhere safe. I’ll understand if you say no.”

“I’ll be glad to.” Samantha took the DVD and immediately turned her attention back to Jake. “Jake, do you like pasta?”

“It’s my favorite.” Jake’s white teeth gleamed against his tanned skin.

“It is not.” Celeste liked Samantha, but at the moment she had a hard time remembering why. She wanted to rip the woman’s perfect blonde curls out until her bald head gleamed in the fluorescent hallway lights. “You like Chinese.”

“No. You’re the one who loves Chinese. I simply tolerate it. I definitely like pasta.”

“Perhaps you’ve eaten too much pasta in the past and have just forgotten you actually like Chinese.” And suddenly they were no longer referring to food.

“I eat pasta because I like pasta.” Jake leaned closer to her and she could smell the soap which still clung to his skin from his morning shower.

“Pasta is okay, but it’s not a dish people truly love and can’t live without. You need something richer to hold your interest.”

“Okay, it was nice meeting you, Jake.” Samantha’s grin spread from ear to ear. “Celeste, when you get a chance, we should chat about your food preferences.”

Jake laughed as Samantha closed the door. Celeste turned on her heel and stomped back to the apartment. Her anger lived and breathed. The waves of it pulsed back engulfing Jake. He whistled as he followed

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her down the hallway. If she didn't want him dating her friends, she could simply have asked him to not see Samantha. But her reaction smacked of more than just discomfort. Pure green jealousy seemed a better description of her insane ramblings about Chinese food versus pasta. Jake grinned again. He couldn't help it.

"I'm checking on my cat and then I'm going to Yen's. You can go home." Celeste picked up the phone and jabbed in the vet's number.

"Not gonna happen." Jake sat down in his recliner and crossed his arms. Just when had he started to think of this recliner as his? If he were to be honest with himself, he'd have to admit he'd claimed it from the first moment he'd come to her apartment five years ago. How would he feel if she moved in another man? Would his territory be threatened? *Hell, yes.*

He'd kept the idea of moving their relationship to an intimate one far out of his mind. But now he wondered if that had been a mistake. What if Celeste found someone else to love? How would he handle being the second most important man in her life? The idea didn't sit well.

"Dr. Hall? This is Celeste Monroe. How is my cat?"

Jake watched her expressive face as her forehead creased with worry and then smoothed with relief.

Celeste hung up the phone. "Orange Slice is fine. We can pick him up later this afternoon."

"Let's go to lunch."

She frowned. "I thought you were going home."

"C'mon, Celeste. There is no reason for you to be jealous of Samantha. It was just pasta, not Chinese."

"I'm not jealous." She laughed. "Okay, maybe I was a little, but only because it hit too close to home. I don't want you dating my neighbor."

"She's not my type anyway."

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“She’s *just* your type.”

“No. She’s the type I’ve dated. But she’s not my type.”

“And what is your type, Jake?”

“Not pasta.”

Celeste smiled. “I’ll take you to lunch.”

“Tell them to go light on the poison this time.”

* * *

Yen Ching, the owner of Yen’s welcomed Celeste and Jake when they walked through the front door.

“Miss Monroe and Mr. Walker, it is wonderful to see you.” He took Celeste’s hands.

“Yes, it’s been nearly two weeks.” Celeste squeezed his hands. Not only did Yen’s have the best Chinese cuisine in town, but the owner made her feel like royalty every time she ate here.

“Come. I give you my very best table.” Yen grabbed two menus and led them to a secluded table in the back corner. A lantern with red panes of glass lit the table with a rosy glow.

“Yen Ching, is Yen Lo working?”

“He is out making the deliveries.”

Celeste scooted into her side of the booth. Jake took the opposite side.

“Have you hired a new delivery boy recently?” Jake asked.

“New? No. Yen Lo is our only delivery boy.”

Celeste’s eyes collided with Jake’s. Then their delivery boy *had* been an impostor.

“When he gets back, do you think we could speak with him?” Celeste smiled, hoping Yen Ching wouldn’t find her request unusual. She didn’t want to upset the man. She was fairly certain the boy’s intent hadn’t been malicious.

“Is everything okay, Miss Monroe?” Yen Ching frowned.

“Fine.” She waved her hand. “I just have a question for him about

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my delivery last night.”

“I hope the food was okay.”

Celeste didn't see any use in alarming the poor man standing in front of her. She would stake her life that he'd had nothing to do with the food being poisoned. “Delicious as always.”

“Good. Good. Good. I will go get your server.” He bowed slightly and walked away.

“Don't you think he has a right to know Yen Lo delivered poisoned food to us?” Wrinkles of worry lined Jake's forehead.

“Yen Lo didn't deliver it. But I think he knows who did. And I'm certain Yen Ching had nothing to do with the tainted food. So, until we speak to Yen Lo, I'm not going to say anything.”

Jake nodded. “Fried wontons to start.”

“Don't forget my steamed dumplings.”

“I won't. I love Chinese you know. It's my favorite.”

Celeste laid the menu on the table. “I thought pasta was your favorite.”

“Definitely not. Too bland. I like something with spice.” He smiled, showing off the sexy grooves in his cheeks.

“Stop flirting with me. I'm too much for you to handle.” *And my heart breaks too easily.* She'd be a fool to get involved with Jake. They were completely wrong for one another. Okay, well maybe they did have a lot in common, but that was no reason to risk a beautiful friendship.

“That's what I've been afraid of, but I grow braver every day.” Jake leaned back in the booth, his intense brown gaze sending heat through her body.

What exactly did he mean by that? Celeste opened her mouth to ask him, but at that moment, their server arrived, followed by Yen Lo.

“Show time.” She nodded toward Yen Lo. The boy walked with his toes pointed outward and a lock of black hair flopped onto his forehead

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no matter how many times he pushed it back into place.

Jake gave the waitress their order and motioned for Yen Lo to join them at the table. The young man grabbed a chair and pulled it up to their booth.

“Uncle said you wanted to see me.” He pushed the lock of hair into place with his fingers, but it flopped right back onto his forehead.

“Yen Lo, the food that was delivered to my apartment last night was poisoned. My cat nearly died, as we could have.”

Yen Lo dropped his head into his hands, elbows on table. He shook it slowly from side to side. “I didn’t know. I didn’t know,” he said.

“What happened, Yen Lo? We have to know.” Celeste placed her hand on his arm and he looked up.

“The man offered me a thousand dollars to let him deliver your food. A thousand dollars is a lot of money to my family over in Vietnam.”

“I understand. I know you wouldn’t hurt me. But the young man who delivered my food was trying to hurt me. Do you know him?”

“Young? He was old man. Very old man.”

“Very old?” Celeste frowned. “No. It was a boy about your age. Looked a lot like you.”

“He was Oriental?” Yen asked.

“Yes.” Celeste nodded.

Yen shook his head. “No, Miss Monroe. The man who paid me was old and white. A rich man. I could tell from his shoes. You can always tell how much money someone has from the shoes they wear. His were real leather, black and shiny.”

“Van Ester?” Jake guessed.

“Maybe.”

“Do you remember what kind of car he was driving?”

“No. He was standing outside your building. Approached me there. I thought it was a prank. I thought he was a friend of yours and wanted

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to play a joke by delivering your food. I didn't know."

"It's okay. You've helped a lot," Jake said.

Yen bowed as he left their table, his face lined with misery. Celeste sat back and crossed her arms.

"Sounds like Van Ester. He always wears those shiny, black patent leather shoes. He's the only man I know who wears shiny shoes."

"Why would he try to kill us, Celeste? It doesn't make sense. If he knows about the formula, he also knows only you or I know the code. To kill us would be to lose the formula."

"I just don't know. Should we tell Detective Roberts?"

"What's the point?" Jake took the plate the waitress handed him and added some sweet and sour sauce. "He wouldn't believe us."

"True. But maybe if we keep handing him evidence, eventually he will."

"Maybe. Or maybe it'll just convince him even more that we're guilty. It's his job to gather the evidence. Not ours."

"Let's finish eating, go to the funeral home, and go pick up my cat. Then we'll focus on proving you didn't kill my father."

And she would just keep busy and try not to focus on the fact her father was gone forever. But it kept getting harder and harder to push the thought out of her mind.

* * *

The funeral parlor nestled on Old National Road, as much a part of the town of Greenfield as its courthouse with the clock tower. Celeste stared at the two-story with white pillars in front, her throat aching with unspent emotions. She still remembered her mother's funeral. Bringing her father here had been a bad idea. It made her feel like a little girl again. Lost, and utterly alone.

She straightened her shoulders and bit back the tears. There were no brothers and sisters or any other family who could handle the details of the funeral. The responsibility of choosing a casket fell to her.

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“You okay?” Jake stood behind her, his hands on her shoulders.

Celeste nodded once and walked along the red carpeting into the interior decorated with a mix of authentic and reproduction antiques. The smell of floral potpourri tried, but failed, to cover the scent of salty tears and grieving. She rubbed her arms with her hands, feeling very much a child.

“Miss Monroe?” The funeral director greeted her with an outstretched hand. His eyes shone with gentle kindness that almost put her at ease, if she could forget why she she’d come.

“Y-Yes. I’m here about my father’s funeral.”

“I reserved tomorrow for the showing and Thursday for the funeral as we discussed.”

Celeste nodded and followed him into his office.

“The announcements went to the papers already?” Details. If she could just focus on the details, the ramifications of what they were planning would fade away.

“Yes. The notices came out today and will appear again tomorrow. We just need to go over a few things.” He folded his hands and laid them on his desk. “I know how hard this can be. It’s good you brought your boyfriend with you.”

“Oh, he’s not—”

“I’m happy to be here for her,” Jake interjected.

Celeste gave a mental shrug. What did it matter if the man thought Jake was her boyfriend? He was a friend. That’s all that mattered at the moment.

“If you’d like to follow me, I’ll take you down to our showroom.”

Showroom? Celeste mouthed the words as she got up to follow the man down the hall and into the basement of the building. The showroom consisted of row upon row of coffins in every color and material imaginable. She placed her hand on the wall for support because her legs didn’t feel as though they were doing a very good job.

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“Celeste, if you need a minute before doing this, I’m sure the director would understand.” Jake’s warm brown eyes filled with concern.

She pushed away from the wall and forced herself to move toward the coffins. “Let’s just get this over with.”

The charcoal coffin with brass accents suited her father’s utilitarian personality, so she settled on that one. They’d use one of her father’s own suits for clothing.

“The only thing left to worry about is flowers.” The funeral director held two fingers up. “I recommend either a bouquet of roses for the lid or a single rose in a bouquet of flowers.”

“Let’s do the bouquet. White roses.” Her father hadn’t been big on flowers. He wouldn’t have cared what she chose. She remembered her mother having a large bouquet of white flowers at her funeral. Her father should have the same.

As they left the funeral home, waves of exhaustion engulfed her. All she wanted at the moment was to collect Orange Slice from the vet and snuggle the cat close. She didn’t want to think about her father being gone. It seemed like any moment the phone would ring and she’d hear his jolly voice.

* * *

“Poor kitty.” Celeste scratched Orange Slice under the chin, but he didn’t answer with his normal purr.

Jake wouldn’t mind that type of attention from Celeste. In fact, he could probably be convinced to purr. The back seat of the cab suddenly felt very warm.

The cab stopped in front of the ornate entrance to her apartment building. When they entered, the guard saluted them.

“How’s he doing?” Jake asked as he stroked the cat on top of the head.

“He really isn’t himself.” Her voice broke.

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“Maybe he just needs to get home. I’m going to drop you off and then I’ll go pick up my car and come back.”

Celeste jabbed the elevator button several times until the bell chimed and the doors slid open.

“You really don’t have to babysit me, Jake. I’m a big girl.”

“A big girl someone tried to poison. Since you won’t leave, at least let me stay with you.”

“Jake.” Celeste stopped a few feet from her apartment.

The door stood slightly open. She started forward, but Jake stopped her. “Wait. Let me check it out first.”

“No way. I’m right behind you.”

Celeste followed him. Jake reached out and pushed the door open the rest of the way. Cushions and drawers were scattered. Celeste gasped.

“Someone trashed my apartment.”

“They ripped up my recliner.”

“Your recliner?” Celeste closed the door behind them and set Orange Slice down.

“The one I always sit in.”

“Why would someone do this, Jake?”

“I’d say they were looking for something.”

“The DVD. Maybe I should check with Samantha.”

“I’m going to phone the front desk and find out if anyone suspicious was in the building.”

Celeste hurried to Samantha’s apartment. If the people who’d trashed her apartment had bothered the young woman, she’d never forgive herself.

“Hi,” Samantha said as she opened the door.

“Samantha, are you okay?”

“Fine. What’s wrong?”

“Someone trashed my apartment.” Celeste rubbed her arms, trying

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to get warm. “I think they were looking for the DVD.”

“The one you gave me?” Samantha’s face paled.

“Yes, and I’m taking it back. It isn’t fair to put you or the boys at risk.”

“Celeste—”

“Don’t argue with me. You have to think about the twins. If I’d ever dreamed they would do something like this, I’d never have asked you to hold it.”

“I’ll get it.” Samantha disappeared for a minute and then returned with the plastic case. “Maybe it’s a good thing you did give it to me. I’m glad they didn’t find it. Do you know who’s doing this to you?”

“I have my suspicions.” Celeste put the DVD into her jacket pocket. “I’ll fill you in later.”

“Take care.”

Samantha closed the door and Celeste hurried back to her own apartment. She waited while Jake finished his call to the police department. He hung up a moment later.

“Tell me you didn’t call Detective Roberts.”

“No. I asked for Frank.”

“That crusty old cop?”

“He might be crusty, but I have a feeling he’s a bulldog when it comes to catching the guilty party.”

“I got the DVD back from Samantha.” She held the case up.

“Probably for the best. We don’t want to put her into any danger.”

“We need to find a new hiding place.”

Jake grinned. “They probably won’t search here again.”

“Good point. And I have the perfect spot.” She entered the kitchen and grabbed a zippered-lock plastic baggie. The DVD holder went inside. Then she pulled a gallon container of ice cream out of the freezer and popped it into the microwave for a minute to soften it. The baggie went into the soft ice-cream and the entire container went back into the

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freezer.

“Sweet,” Jake said.

“Think that’ll work?” Celeste wasn’t sure. What if whoever trashed her apartment came back again?

“Yes. Even if they pull everything out, I don’t think they’ll look there. And the disk should be airtight enough to be safe.”

Bang. Bang. Bang. She recognized that knock. It was Nick Roger’s calling card. Just great.

She moved to the front door and swung it open. “Mr. Rogers. We phoned for the officer from the parking garage.”

“This is my case, Ms. Monroe. I came along to see what you two were up to now.”

Frank stood beside the detective. A low whistle escaped his lips when he saw the damage in her living room.

“What happened?”

“I’ll tell you what happened.” Nick Rogers moved into the living room. “They didn’t get a response over the poisoned food story, so they cooked up a break-in. How long did it take you to trash this place? Bet it was fun, wasn’t it?”

“You jerk.” Celeste glared at Nick. Arrogant didn’t begin to describe him.

“Nick, we should probably get an official statement from them anyway.” Frank motioned to the couch. Celeste grabbed the cushions and placed them back on the frame. Stuffing hung out where they’d been slashed.

“We were at Yen’s for lunch,” Celeste told Frank. “He’ll vouch for when we left. We eat there so often that we are on a first-name basis with him.”

Frank sat in the slashed recliner and pulled out his notepad. He jotted a few notes as Celeste spoke. “Anyone else who can back you up?”

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“The front desk guard didn’t see anyone unusual come up, but he did see us return,” Jake said. “And we took a cab from Yen’s to the vet and back here.”

“The vet?”

“Detective Rogers didn’t fill you in? My cat ate some of our takeout last night and went into seizures. Poison.”

“They did it themselves, Frank.” Nick stopped behind the recliner and crossed his arms. “Just like they planned and plotted to kill Benjamin Monroe.”

CHAPTER 5

“What?” Celeste jumped to her feet. “You bastard.”

Jake pulled her back down before she punched the detective and wound up in jail for assaulting an officer.

“What possible reason would I have to murder my own father?” Celeste’s voice cracked, betraying how upset she felt at Nick’s accusation.

“Greed. Who stood to inherit?”

“That’s ridiculous. Celeste is a respected scientist. She makes enough money on her own.”

“Mr. Monroe carried a life insurance policy worth more than half a million dollars. That’s motive enough.”

Celeste collapsed against the back of the sofa. “Half a million? I didn’t know.”

“Tell it to the jury.”

“Nick.” Frank shook his head. “We’re here to take their statement.

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Which cab company did you use?"

"City Cabs." Celeste's heart thumped against her ribcage. Why on earth had her father taken out such a large insurance policy? "Who was my father's insurance through?"

"Excuse me?" Nick glared at her.

"Who was the insurance through?"

"But surely you know that, Ms. Monroe."

"Humor me."

"Pharmaceutical Research Corporations of America. What is that?" Nick asked.

"It's a consortium of drug companies. Makes sense E.V.E. employees might purchase life insurance through them. They are a powerful group because of their size, and they have big money behind them from the various drug companies," Jake said. But why had Ben taken out such a large policy?

Frank jotted a few more notes in his journal. Then he snapped it closed and slipped it back into his front pocket.

"I think that's all we need."

"Don't leave—" Nick Rogers shook his finger at them.

Jake interrupted him. "We know. Don't leave town."

He closed the door behind the two men and leaned against it.

"Can you believe that man?" Celeste's voice still sounded unsteady.

"Pack a bag," Jake told her. "You're staying at my place tonight."

"I don't know..."

"You can bring your cat."

"Orange Slice? In your house?" She glanced at the feline. He sat in the corner licking his paw and wiping it over the top of his head. Then he blinked at her as though he knew just how cute he appeared.

"And your ice cream."

What if someone came back to her apartment and tried to get the disk? After coming home to a vandalized apartment, her sense of safety

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was shot all to hell. No longer was this a safe haven where she could escape the perils of the world. Evil had followed her into her private domain. She'd feel safer at Jake's.

"Okay. I'll go pack a bag."

Another knock sounded on the door behind Jake's back.

"Detective Rogers must have some more accusations to hurl," she said.

Jake swung the door open. Evan Van Ester wore his trademark shiny black shoes and a suit that fit as only a tailored suit could.

"Jake...I'm surprised to find you here." Gray sprinkled the man's brown hair, creating a salt and pepper effect.

Why would the man act surprised to find Jake here? Jake felt that stirring of irritation again. Van Ester didn't bother to hide the fact he was interested in Celeste. But he'd always told himself the *only* reason he hated the man's obvious attention was because he wasn't good enough for Celeste. And quite possibly he'd tried to poison them both.

"Evan, what are you doing here?" Celeste asked.

"I wanted to talk to you about—" Evan stopped midsentence and whistled. "What happened here?"

"Don't you know?" Jake crossed his arms and glared at the man.

"Jake." Celeste shot him a warning look.

She was right. They had no proof Van Ester was involved in the break-in or the attempted poisoning. But Jake had his suspicions.

"Someone broke in and trashed the place," Jake said. He watched Van Ester's face for a reaction, but his chiseled features remained neutral.

"They were probably looking for the formula."

"What formula?" Celeste's eyes narrowed.

"Didn't your father tell you?" Van Ester frowned. "I was certain he would have. He discovered an elixir that activated the youth gene. It was very exciting."

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“He told you?” Jake found that hard to believe. Ben hadn’t trusted Van Ester.

“Of course. I’m his boss.” Van Ester frowned. “*Was* his boss.”

“Why are you here?” Jake didn’t like working for Van Ester, and he didn’t like him as a person. The man cared only about how much money he could make. Period. The only reason Jake’d stayed at E.V.E. this long was to work with Ben.

“I came to make sure Celeste was okay. She *did* just lose her father.”

“Yes.” Thanks to Van Ester.

“Thank you, Evan.” Celeste smiled.

“If you need anything, please call me.” He took her hand and tugged it up to his lips.

Jake wanted to punch him.

“I will.” Celeste pulled away her hand.

“I mean it, Celeste. Even if you just need someone to talk to or a strong shoulder to cry on.” Van Ester’s gaze flitted to Nick. “Well, maybe you already have the shoulder, but the offer still stands.”

“Thanks for stopping by, Evan. I’ll keep that in mind.” Celeste opened the front door.

“One more thing...” Evan turned halfway out the door. “You haven’t found the notes to your father’s formula have you?”

“No.” Celeste lied without batting an eyelash. “But if I do, you’ll be the first to know.”

Van Ester frowned, but left without further comment. Celeste closed the door and let out a heavy breath.

“Do you think he believed me?” She bit her bottom lip. “I’m so bad at lying.”

“You seemed pretty good at it to me.”

“I hate it.” She moved toward her bedroom. “Now to pack that bag.”

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“Don’t try seducing me with any of those sexy nighties of yours.” Jake trailed after her.

“Jake, I wear flannel half the time.”

“I know.” He sighed. “But a man can dream, can’t he?”

“Go dig the disk out of the ice cream and let’s go.” She pushed him toward the kitchen. Jake dream about her? She hoped so.

* * *

Orange Slice settled into a corner of Jake’s vaulted-ceiling living room. Jake heard his rumbles of pleasure from several feet away. “I think the milk convinced him this place isn’t so bad.”

Celeste yawned. “I’m so tired. I feel like I’ve been awake for weeks instead of a day.”

“A lot has happened. It can make time almost stand still.”

“Jake, thanks for being there for me. I don’t know how I’d have gotten through today without you.”

“That’s what friends are for.”

But it didn’t feel like they were just friends anymore. Their relationship was evolving into something new and frightening.

“Tomorrow, before the showing, I think I should go get legal representation.” Celeste settled into the corner of his sofa and curled her feet under her.

Jake collapsed into his recliner and smiled as he realized his living room looked like a mirror image of hers. He hadn’t intentionally arranged his furniture this way, but it reflected how close the two of them had become.

“Not a bad idea. Do you want to see my lawyer or did you have another attorney in mind?” Jake couldn’t believe she hadn’t broken down. Maybe her father’s death still seemed surreal. He wasn’t sure he’d handle the murder of one of his parents with such bravery. She even had enough wits to inquire about a lawyer.

“Is your lawyer any good?” She yawned again and curled deeper

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into the sofa.

“As good as any.” Jake shrugged. He’d find out just how good a lawyer if the police officially charged him with Ben’s murder.

“Let’s go see him.” She ran her hands through her tousled hair.

“He’s out of town until Thursday.”

“Well, I can’t wait. I am terrified Detective Roberts is going to charge me with my own father’s murder. Or worse.”

“We’ll call his office. Maybe they can set up a conference call.”

* * *

Celeste nodded, but her mind clicked at a pace that didn’t allow her to fully focus on Jake’s words. If someone had murdered her father for his formula, why kill Ned Tate? What could a security guard possibly have to do with gene research? Nothing. His death didn’t make sense. There was no pattern to follow. Unless Ned knew something about her father’s death? That might get him killed.

“We should probably try to decipher your father’s notes.” Jake’s voice felt as familiar as well-worn corduroy.

“Why?” *Why the sudden rush?* Celeste tried to keep the frown from wrinkling her forehead. She trusted Jake. He was her best friend. Or was he? How well did she really know him? How well did she know anyone?

“Because your father was a kind, trusting man and I’m not one hundred percent certain he didn’t share his discovery with a colleague or two or three. He may have told Van Ester.”

“Even if he did, they don’t have his notes.”

“We don’t know that, Celeste. He worked for Van Ester for years. He may have copied the notes and taken them to the man.”

Celeste rubbed the back of her neck. Who could she trust? A part of her wanted to believe Evan wouldn’t go as far as murder for money, but another part of her believed him more than capable of killing her father. The man had stolen time and again from his employees. The

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researchers did the work. Evan seized the glory.

“If Van Ester takes credit for one more discovery, I think I’ll kill him,” she said.

Jake moved to the couch and placed his arm around her shoulders. Instant heat started in the pit of her belly. Celeste drew in a jagged breath, her senses filled with lime cologne mixed with the soap he’d used in her shower this morning.

“Don’t worry.” He ran his free hand over her hair, smoothing it back from her face. “Even if your dad was gullible enough to share his notes, hopefully they don’t have his secret code.”

“My father told me I was the only one he’d taught the code to.” She leveled a look at Jake because they both knew she wasn’t the only one. Jake also possessed the code. Who else?

“And he told me I was the only one.” Jake sat back and rubbed his hands over his eyes. “Geez, could this get any more complicated?”

“How many others know, Jake?” Hysteria gurgled up bit by bit, like tiny, fine bubbles cruising through a glass of champagne. “How many people out there might try to take credit for something my father spent his entire life pursuing? For something he neglected school plays and birthday parties and everything else for? For the last thing he’ll ever create?”

“Celeste—”

“No! I want to know.” She would not cry. There wasn’t time to cry. There wasn’t time to sit here and whine. Celeste jumped to her feet.

“We’re both tired. Let’s sleep on it and we’ll decide what to do about your father’s formula in the morning when we’re fresh.”

“Tomorrow might be too late.” When this type of mercurial anxiety rippled through her veins, it became impossible to stand still, so she paced. She wanted out of the confines of Jake’s house. She turned toward the front door, the cool night air calling her.

“Celeste? Where are you going?” Jake’s voice demonstrated his

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frustration.

“I need to go for a walk.”

“It’s dark.”

“Jake, I have to think and I can’t think in here.” Couldn’t think with him hovering.

“I’m going with you.”

Celeste almost screamed. She didn’t want him with her—didn’t want anyone with her—but she knew arguing with him would only delay her walk. She’d just ignore him.

Ten minutes later, she realized she’d been insane to think she could ignore the man walking next to her. Every movement sent pulses of electric energy her way. His sexy saunter cluttered her head instead of clearing it. He wasn’t going away, so she began to think out loud. Maybe something she said would bounce around in his brain and they’d find a solution.

“My father trusted you. He taught you the code. Showed you his secret file.” Jake had been her father’s understudy. Her father had mentored him. It made sense he would pass his secrets on to Jake.

“He didn’t trust Van Ester. I could tell from comments he made.”

They turned a corner and started around the block a third time, passing Jake’s house. A small dog yipped from the front window of a neighbor’s house. The December breeze whispered through the bare branches of the maples. She wasn’t ready to go inside.

Something clawed at the edge of her consciousness, trying to break free and climb to the surface. It hid just behind an invisible wall, if she could only grasp it. She walked faster. “Who did my father trust?”

“Rebecca.”

“I don’t think she’s a threat, but I’ll add her to my list of suspects anyway.”

Rebecca had often watched Ben with an adoring gaze. Celeste suddenly realized Rebecca had loved Ben Monroe. Rebecca hadn’t

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murdered her father, but for the first time Celeste wondered if the killer would be at the funeral. Could it be someone she trusted?

“Addison,” Jake offered.

Celeste stopped walking. Jake walked on a few paces before he stopped and moved back to where she stood.

“Albert and Dad were college roommates. They were good friends. I’d say my father would have trusted him with his very life.” A chill crept past the warmth of the day and hit her with bone-chilling force. She pulled the edges of her jacket around her neck.

“Ben may have shared his code and his discovery with Addison. They spent many hours discussing theories,” Jake said.

“It’s just too horrible to think he’d have killed Dad.” The chill refused to leave her. “But I think he did.”

“I plan to find out.” An angry glitter lit Jake’s eyes.

“I think we need to pay Albert Addison a little visit tomorrow.”

“There’s just one problem,” Jake said. “How are we going to get into E.V.E?”

* * *

“I can’t believe you talked me into this.” Jake waited until the security camera turned away from the shadowed corner where they hid, then he ran and placed electrical tape over the lens before it could swing back around.

“Rebecca told me they haven’t hired another security guard for the evening shift. Everyone else will be gone. It’s a weekend. This may be our only chance to find out what’s going on.”

“We could go to jail for breaking and entering.” This was idiotic. He wasn’t sure why he’d gone along with her suggestion that they investigate Addison’s office.

“Would that be worse than going to jail for murder?”

She had a point. Celeste pulled out a black leather wallet and unzipped it. Inside were professional locksmith tools. She removed a

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pointed object that looked like an extremely skinny pen and inserted it into the lock.

“I’m not even going to ask where you learned to pick a lock.” The less he knew, the better.

“I dated a locksmith my senior year of undergraduate school.” She shrugged. “He taught me a few tricks, but I can’t break in without this handy dandy kit. Otherwise I wouldn’t have ripped Rebecca’s desk apart the other day. It’s a talent I keep hidden.”

Her smile hinted of danger. Jake wondered for a moment if Celeste possessed more than a few secret talents, all of which she apparently kept well hidden from the world. Did she hide a dark side under that spunky exterior?

“Eureka. It’s open.” She swung the door inward.

“Some security.” Jake shook his head. “You’d think a research lab would have higher tech—”

A piercing siren blasted through his head. Damn it! They’d set off some sort of defense system. Just great.

“Let’s get out of here,” he shouted, wondering if she could hear him over the wail of the alarm.

“Follow me.” She glanced at her wristwatch. “We have exactly eight minutes to get in and out before the squad car on patrol arrives. That’s how long it takes to get here from the local all night café where that particular car hangs out.”

Jake whistled and followed her down the hall. Did the woman live some sort of secret criminal life? How the hell did she know where the police hung out, or how long it would take them to get here?

“We’d better run. If we’re lucky, my estimate is fast. They may want to finish what they’re eating before responding, or they may have to stop and pay the bill.”

“Who *are* you?” Jake jogged down the hall after her.

She stopped in front of Addison’s door and tried the handle. It

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swung inward with a creak. A triumphant grin lit her face and, without hesitation, she stepped inside.

“I’ll take his computer, and you search his desk and files.” She moved quickly past the lab equipment to the interior office that resembled her father’s, except for the difference in family photographs.

Celeste glanced at the photo of Albert Addison’s son and daughter with their arms intertwined, and shook her head. She’d thought he’d truly cared about her father. But his involvement in her father’s death made perfect sense.

She booted up his computer, glancing at her watch. Seven minutes remaining. The computer whirred to life instantly. Thank God E.V.E. had invested in state-of-the-art everything. She glanced at the desktop folders. Everything looked normal.

A file drawer slammed. Jake rolled out a second one and leafed through the folders. Celeste glanced at her watch again.

“Four minutes.” She executed a quick search on the computer for any files named “Ben,” “Youth,” “Fountain of Youth,” “FoxM1B,” or “Gene.” The only thing that popped up contained a file on genetic birth defects.

“Nothing.” Jake moved to the desk, close enough she could feel the heat from his body. She sucked in her breath and tried to focus.

“Nothing here either.” She tapped her finger against her lips. A tiny star almost the color of the desktop pattern sat in the lower right corner of the computer screen. Celeste grinned. “Except a secret folder. Guess my father did teach him a trick or two.”

Jake stopped his search and stared at the computer screen. When she double clicked the tiny icon, a compressed file popped up. They glanced at one another. Celeste quickly sent an e-mail they could retrieve later and closed the computer down.

“Let’s get out of here.” Jake glanced nervously toward the lab door.

“We’re fine. Two minutes. But maybe we should run.” Celeste

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rushed into the lab.

About four steps from the door, she tripped and fell.

“Celeste?” Jake whispered. “Are you okay?”

“Fine. We’ve got to get out of here.” The dark lab made it difficult to see. “What did I trip on?”

She reached over and grabbed a heavy cloth-covered object. The coldness enveloped her, reaching to her bones and causing her to feel nauseous. *Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God.*

“J-j-Jake.” Her vocal cords refused to work. “Turn on the light.”

“Are you crazy? Let’s get out of here.”

The blare of multiple sirens reached their ears and grew steadily louder with each passing second.

“Jake. Turn on the light.”

He rushed to the door and flipped on the overhead light. Celeste’s eyes fell to the object she’d grabbed. A pant leg. Her eyes traveled upward to the white lab coat, the name tag that read “A. Addison,” and the blank, open-eyed stare of the man her father had once called friend.

Bile rose in her throat and she heaved once, trying to keep from throwing up. Jake switched the light off. The sirens grew eerily silent.

“Celeste,” Jake whispered. “We have to hide. The police are here. We can’t get out without being discovered. We’re standing over a dead body. We’re already suspects in two murders. We have to hide.”

Celeste nodded. She pushed herself to her feet and reached for Jake in the darkened room. The smell of formaldehyde filled her nose and coated her tongue with a slick, greasy residue. His hand felt warm and solid and chased away some of the chill of Addison’s lifeless body.

“Not in here. They’ll search this room first.” Her teeth chattered together.

“C’mon, I have an idea.” He grabbed her hand and they left the lab, running for the stairs. They couldn’t risk taking the elevator. The police might see the floor panel light up and follow their movements.

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The door to the stairwell clanged behind them. Jake winced. They needed to be quiet and hurry at the same time. Not an easy combination to master. Their shoes echoed down the stairwell. It was impossible to tell if the pounding reverberated as loudly as it sounded to them or if it was the effect of the acoustics in the enclosed space.

They reached the top floor and Jake pushed the door open, closing it softly behind them. Celeste followed on his heels as he made a dash for the far end of the building, weaving in and out of cubicles, down hallways and around corners.

“Where are we going?” Celeste panted.

“Shh.” Jake stopped in front of the heavy oak door with the tiny brass plate. Evan Van Ester, President and CEO.

“Are you crazy? What if they call him down here?”

“Last year, Evan demanded the security cameras be linked to both his office and the guard desk. He wanted to monitor which employees were chronically late and catch them in the act. We’ll be able to see when the police leave, along with who is coming and going.”

“Brilliant.” Celeste pulled out her black leather kit. “We need this.”

She opened the door in less than a minute. Jake smiled. “You have a real talent. Ever think about a life of crime?”

“I think I’m already living it.”

They quickly entered the office and shut the door behind them, engaging the lock. Evan’s office took up the space of six normal size offices. The front room served as a reception area where his personal secretary screened all calls and visitors. They moved across the first room and through a second, unlocked door.

“You don’t know where he keeps the cameras, do you?”

“No. I only heard about it from Mitch Saxton—the guy who made junior VP last year. Van Ester busted him for being late five days in a row. Saxton tried to lie his way out of the accusation and Van Ester informed him he’d seen it himself from his office monitors.”

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“I’ll bet Mitch was furious. He’s highstrung anyway.” Celeste opened a cabinet door on the far wall, searching for the monitors.

“That’s an understatement.” Jake searched the desk.

“Nothing.” Celeste’s eyes flew to an interior door. “His apartment?”

“More than likely. I don’t remember ever being allowed into this room, much less any further into Van Ester’s sanctum. Let’s check it out.”

Celeste turned the knob and came up against unbudging wood. “Locked.”

“Not for long,” Jake said.

Celeste made quick work of the lock. They went inside and re-locked the door behind them. The apartment held a small bathroom, couch and low tables, and a tiny kitchenette. On the wall facing the sofa were a row of televisions.

“Bingo.” Celeste flipped the three televisions on. The front of the building, the garage entrance, and the service entrance all came on line.

Jake strode to the sofa and sat down. Celeste joined him, propping her feet up on the coffee table. Jake wondered if she weren’t a little too comfortable at breaking and entering and speculated on what else her locksmith boyfriend had taught her.

The police entered through the front of the building. Celeste chewed her thumbnail.

“I wish we could see where they are in the building,” she said softly.

“Me, too, but I think we’re pretty safe unless Van Ester shows up. They have no reason to search his office and I doubt they’d break the door down.”

“Jake, what’s going on? I don’t get the connection among the murders. My father, Ned Tate, and now Albert Addison. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“I see the connection between your father and Addison, if Addison

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knew about the formula. I don't understand where Tate comes in."

"Why kill them? If Van Ester is behind this, wouldn't he have a legal right to the formulas since they were created in his lab?"

"Probably, but it would take years to fight it out in the courts. Years of waiting for a formula another drug company could perfect while he's fighting for the right to use it. It would be easier to just off your father."

"And then Tate? And then Addison?" Celeste shook her head. "That doesn't add up. One person, sure. But to kill three seems a little insane to me. Even for Evan."

"I don't understand why he killed Tate either. Unless the man saw something on the security tape the night your father was killed? Something that could prove Van Ester is guilty?" Or perhaps Van Ester tasted blood once and realized he enjoyed the kill.

"Jake! You're a genius. That's it. The security tapes will show who was here the night Dad was killed." She jumped up and hurried to an enclosed bookcase under the television screens. When she opened the doors, she found neatly labeled and dated video tapes.

"Thank you, Evan," she said.

"Did you find something?" Jake joined her. "You know, those tapes might not show much. What if the person who killed him didn't enter the building, but just waited in the garage?"

"December fourth. December fifth. December seventh." Celeste frowned. "The sixth is missing. The day my father died is missing, Jake. This proves Van Ester was involved."

"It doesn't prove anything except we broke into his office and looked through his personal things."

"I'm going to prove Van Ester killed my father."

"First, you might have to prove we didn't kill Addison." Jake nodded toward the television screen.

CHAPTER 6

Evan Van Ester stalked through the front door of E.V.E. Corporation, an intent look on his face. He twisted at his tie as he passed the security camera. Who took the time to put a tie on at eleven at night?

“Now what?” Celeste asked.

“Now, we turn the televisions off and find a new place to hide out.”

“Quick. The janitor’s closet...it’s close, and I’d bet my life Van Ester doesn’t have a key. It might buy us some time.”

“Let’s go.”

They made sure doors previously locked remained locked behind them and moved swiftly to the utility closet. Celeste pulled the kit out as they walked. When they stopped in front of the janitor’s closet, she reached for the long, thin tool she’d used to enter the building the first time. Some locks were easier than others. The janitor apparently valued his supplies as the lock on his door was every bit as secure as the door

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locks on the entrance to the company. She gasped.

“What’s wrong?” Jake glanced behind them.

“One of my tools is missing.” She grabbed another and began to work on the lock. It would take longer, but she had little choice. The sound of the stairwell door slamming closed caused her to jump.

“Hurry.” Jake’s breath traveled down her neck.

She nodded. Years had passed since Mark trained her in the skills of locksmithing. Rusty and out of practice didn’t begin to describe her talent. The sound of hurried footsteps almost covered the distinct click of the lock. She opened the door and hurried inside, Jake behind her. As she turned to close the door, she spotted Van Ester with two uniformed police officers beside him. Their heads were bent as they looked at the object one of the officers held.

Silver glinted off the object the moment before Celeste closed the door. Her missing tool from the kit. Where had they found it? Her fingerprints were all over it. *Damn.* Jake locked the door and Celeste wondered if the three men, now only a few feet away, heard the click.

“Any idea who might want to kill him?” As the men passed the door, their voices were muffled.

Celeste hardly dared to blink. Jake stood close in the small space and she moved the tiniest bit to try to escape the tingling awareness she always felt when near to him. His arms came around her and she glanced up.

“Sorry.” He mouthed the words without actually saying them.

She stared at his lips, wondering just once what it would feel like to kiss him full out. Just really plaster a passionate kiss on him and see how he reacted. She grinned and stood on tiptoe, her lips gently brushing his. Okay, so she wasn’t brave enough to actually attack him.

Jake’s arms tightened around her and he pulled her closer. She could feel the strength of his thighs against hers. Her breasts pushed against the muscled hardness of his chest until she wondered if he

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could hear the frantic beat of her heart.

His mouth teased hers, applying pressure and then retreating, returning for more. Celeste groaned low in her throat, wishing they were anywhere but in a utility closet hiding from the police. Of course, the circumstances had allowed her enough courage to kiss him in the first place.

“Celeste.” He lifted his head and took a deep breath. “This is a danger response.”

He spoke so low she could barely hear him. *Danger response?* They’d shared the most passionate, tender kiss she’d ever experienced and he called it a danger response. She should kick him in the shins, except in the tight space she couldn’t move back far enough to make it worth her while. Besides, he might cry out and give their location away.

“Danger response?” She glared at him, hoping the fury in her eyes would be as painful as a well-aimed kick. “You’re full of it, Walker.”

“Shhh.”

Fury pumped through her, but she knew she had to remain silent. More time needed to pass before they’d be free to leave the closet and, hopefully, the building. She pushed him away a little. A large dust mop with a heavy metal tip on the handle tilted precariously. Jake grabbed for it at the same moment she did. Their fingertips brushed together and the mop fell through both of their grips. It clattered to the tile floor with a loud clang.

* * *

Jake winced. Then their eyes met and found panic. Jake glanced around the room. No escape. A loose panel in the ceiling caught his gaze. He pointed and held his hands out to boost Celeste up. One thing he loved about her—she caught on quickly. She put her sneaker clad foot into his hand and climbed upward, pushing the Styrofoam board to the side and pulling herself awkwardly into the space above the ceiling

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tiles.

Jake worried that the metal beams holding the tiles in place wouldn't be strong enough to support them, but there wasn't time to speculate. He placed one foot onto the mop bucket, the other moved upward to the trash can and he followed Celeste into the space, praying he wasn't breathing as loudly as it sounded to his ears.

The tile slid smoothly back into place, enclosing them in darkness. The sound of their heartbeats filled the cramped space, but reassured him of her presence without his actually having to reach out and touch her. Touching Celeste proved to be dangerous. If he possessed even a dash of sense, he'd avoid contact like the plague.

The sound of the door opening below them drifted up. Jake held his breath, then breathed out slowly through his nose. They couldn't afford the slightest mistake. If they were discovered hiding in the ceiling there would be no explanation that might make them look innocent of Addison's murder.

"What the hell was that?" *Clink*. Jake didn't recognize the voice. Must be one of the cops.

"Looks like this fell over." The second voice sounded like Van Ester's.

"Why?"

"Who knows? The janitor probably wanted to get home quickly. Probably why he left his keys back on the desk."

"I don't like it. What if someone overheard us?"

Jake frowned. Why would an officer care if anyone overheard a conversation between him and Van Ester? Was it even an officer? He wished he could see the men below them.

"I'm hiring a new security guard Monday. I may install better security alarms too." Van Ester's drawl had an unmistakable nasal twang. "You worry too much."

"I got rid of the cops before they discovered Addison, didn't I?"

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So it wasn't a police officer. Jake relaxed a little knowing the cops were gone, but his back remained stiff at the knowledge that two murderers plotted below them.

"How are we going to explain Addison?"

"What's to explain?" The voices faded as the men closed the utility door. "Just let someone find him tomorrow. They'll think he had a heart attack or something."

Long minutes passed before either Celeste or Jake moved a muscle.

"That was close," Celeste whispered.

"Too close."

"Jake?" Her fingers made contact with his arm.

"Yes?" God, she felt good. But they were friends. Becoming lovers would be the worst mistake they could make. They were both feeling vulnerable and needy. He had to resist.

"You know how I really don't like spiders? One has been crawling on my arms and hands for the past five minutes."

"Let's wait ten more minutes and we'll get down from here." He reached over and brushed his hand over her hands and arms, trying to knock any spiders off. Once, she'd jumped onto a chair and up on her kitchen table to escape a spider the size of a dime.

"Thanks." He could feel her words on his ear. Had she moved closer?

"That was Van Ester talking."

"I know. I couldn't figure out who was with him."

"Do you think it was the cop?"

"No. He said he got rid of the cops, remember?" Her hand moved slowly up and down Jake's arm.

What was she doing to him? He took her hand in his to prevent her from caressing him. He couldn't take much more without making love to her right there in the ceiling of the utility closet.

"Let's get down from here."

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“Has it been ten minutes?” She sounded surprised.

“No. I can’t take the close confines anymore.”

He heard her laugh softly. Then again, maybe the vixen knew exactly how he reacted to her touch. He gritted his teeth and slowly moved a ceiling panel away. The utility closet below held only mops and buckets. He listened for a moment before swinging his body through the opening and dropping to the floor.

He looked up and saw Celeste’s face peaking through the opening in the ceiling. “Stay there a minute.”

“No.”

“Celeste, don’t argue with me. Stay.” He opened the door of the closet and glanced out into the hall. The lights were dimmed, and quiet lay over the area like a heavy blanket.

He heard the sound of her feet hitting the floor behind him. He turned. “I told you to stay.”

“I’m not a dog.” She shrugged. “Besides, if you get in trouble, I’m in this with you.”

“And what good would it do to have both of us in jail? It’d be pretty hard to find your father’s killer and prove my innocence from a jail cell, wouldn’t it?”

Celeste hated to admit it but he had a point. If they were both charged with murder, they could hardly investigate and find the real killer.

“Let’s just go. Before they come back or another dead body shows up,” she said.

“Wouldn’t surprise me a bit.”

“Me either.” She’d seen enough dead bodies to last her two lifetimes. She couldn’t help but wonder who was next?

* * *

The hood of Jake’s car still remained warm to the touch when a navy blue Crown Victoria pulled into the driveway. Celeste ran for the

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bedroom, throwing on the pajamas they'd discussed she should get into. Jake took a deep breath, praying the police wouldn't touch his car. The heat from the still cooling engine would give them away.

Even though he expected the doorbell chime, the sound still made him jump. Celeste tore back into the room and flopped herself onto the sofa. Jake took his time walking to the door, giving her a chance to catch her breath. He threw her a reassuring smile and opened the door.

"Detective Roberts, what brings you here?"

"I hope you have an alibi for tonight." The detective's upper lip curled away from his gums, making him look like a feral animal.

"I have a guest." He opened the door wider so the detective could see Celeste sprawled on his sofa in Jake's pajamas.

"Mind if we come in?" Frank stood behind the detective. His hair stood up on the sides, as though he'd been wakened from a deep sleep.

"That depends," Jake said. "Why would I need an alibi?"

"A man was murdered at E.V.E. Corporation this evening." Frank's tone wasn't accusatory, just matter of fact. "An alarm was set off, and an hour later we received an anonymous call that a man had been murdered.

"As if you don't know," Nick Roberts snarled.

Actually, he did know. He and Celeste had made the call so Van Ester wouldn't get away with murder. Hopefully his little plan to pull it off as a heart attack wouldn't work if the police looked closely enough. Now he had to convince the detective they had no clue about Addison, though, or they'd be prime suspects—again.

"Who? If it was Van Ester, there are a million people who hate him and wanted to see him dead," Jake said.

"Not Van Ester." Frank took a step forward. "May we come in?"

Jake stared at Nick Roberts for a moment. The malicious gleam in the man's eyes made him wonder if this was the person Van Ester had been speaking with while he and Celeste hid in the ceiling of the utility

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closet. Then he grinned at Frank.

“*You* may come inside. He’ll need a search warrant.”

Nick Roberts’s eyes narrowed into furious slits. “You’re pushing your luck, Walker. You’re already in deep shit. I’d be a bit more cooperative if I were you.”

“Why? So you can try to find a way to pin a phony murder charge on me? I don’t think so.”

“Nick, perhaps you should wait in the car. I can take their statements.” Frank’s voice seemed to settle Roberts down, but only the tiniest bit.

Detective Roberts grunted and stomped back to the unmarked car, slamming the door behind him. A moment later the flare of fire from a lighter or match appeared behind the steering wheel, followed by the glow of a cigarette as the man drew a deep puff.

Jake hoped the cop smoked himself into an early grave. He motioned the other detective inside and offered him a seat.

“Mind telling me what you did this evening?” Frank pulled out the small leather journal that seemed to be his constant companion and flipped it open.

Jake glanced at Celeste. He hoped she’d forgive him for what he was about to say. But it was their best cover. If he said they’d been watching television, the detective would want to know what, and he had no clue of the evening’s programming. If he said they’d eaten, again the detective would ask what or where and it could be proven he lied. What he was about to offer as an alibi was irrefutable.

“It’s rather private.” He cleared his throat for effect.

“Mr. Walker, I’m afraid I have to insist. We have yet another dead body on our hands.”

“Very well. Celeste and I were making love all evening.”

The detective glanced quickly toward Celeste. Jake almost grinned as a dull flush stained the man’s cheeks. Celeste held her cool by

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glancing at her hands, which rested in her lap.

“I see.” Frank pursed his lips and stared straight ahead for a moment. “I guess there isn’t much else I need to know about that.”

Jake noticed Frank’s gaze slid over the excessively large men’s pajamas Celeste wore and her tousled hair. A faint grin touched the officer’s lips.

“That’s all I’ll need for now.” He flipped his notepad closed.

“Who was killed, officer?” Celeste’s voice slid over Jake like warm satin sheets.

“Albert Addison.”

Celeste met his stare head on. Jake applauded her bravery, but then again they really didn’t have anything to hide. They hadn’t killed him.

“He was a dear friend of my father’s. I don’t know why someone would want to kill him, unless he knew something of my father’s research.”

“Perhaps. I’ll let you two get back to your evening. Thank you for your time.” Frank stood and moved toward the door. He turned back a moment before exiting. “You might want to park your car in the garage. It isn’t good for the engine to cool off too fast in this weather.”

He walked out and closed the door behind him. Jake slammed his fist into his palm and paced the length of the room.

“Damn. He felt the hood of the car. I was afraid of that.”

“Then why didn’t he arrest us?” Celeste pushed her hair out of her eyes.

“Maybe because there’s no evidence.” Jake shrugged.

“Why did you tell him we’d been making love? I’m wondering if we should’ve talked to him at all.”

“It was the only excuse I could think of that didn’t require additional explanation.” His gaze ran over her. The sight of her snuggled up in his pajamas set his blood boiling. “I thought it was rather believable.”

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Celeste snorted with scorn that would have crushed the ego of a less confident man. Jake just smiled. Perhaps they'd both chosen not to take the next step that would move them out of the realm of friends to lovers, but it didn't mean they hadn't both thought about it. He'd seen the sideways glances she'd shot him recently.

"Tomorrow, we need to download Albert's files and compare them to my father's."

"Yes. I think the clue to their murders is in the notes somewhere." Jake just hoped they could decipher it in time.

"Jake, oh, my God." Celeste jumped to her feet and grabbed his arm.

He stared at where her skin touched his, wondering if she had any idea the effect she had on him. He clenched his hands and resisted the urge to haul her into his arms and make love to her.

"If my father told Albert Addison, I know he told George Voscaz. George and he were friends from grade school. Closer than he and Albert ever were."

"How many others did he tell?"

"I don't know, but tomorrow we'll set up a meeting with George. He's working at the university now."

"You really think your father would've told him?"

"I'd stake my life on it."

Jake hoped she didn't have to.

* * *

The next morning, Celeste phoned the number the university gave her as Voscaz's direct line.

"George? It's Celeste Monroe." She tried to keep her voice even, but hearing the voice of her father's oldest and dearest friend brought back enough memories to choke her. Countless fishing trips, weekend camping and holiday meals rushed through her with emotional force.

"Celeste, honey, how are you doing? I plan to be at the funeral

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tomorrow.”

George reminded her of a kind uncle. They type who bought you a pretty doll for Christmas, even though you were thirty.

“I need your help, George.” Maybe it wasn’t right to involve George in this mess. Everyone else involved had been murdered. But if her suspicions were right, her father’d already involved him, so he was already in danger.

“Anything, Celeste. What can I do for you?”

“Did my father tell you anything about his formula he was working on?”

The silence on the other end of the line stretched and then crackled. Celeste held the phone away from her ear for a moment, wondering if they’d been disconnected. *Damn cordless phones.*

“What formula?” George’s voice sounded tight, strained.

Celeste frowned. How unlike him. He normally laughed at the end of each sentence and viewed the world as a half-full glass. A dark suspicion began to grow roots deep in her consciousness.

“The formula my father was working on that was like a fountain of youth. I know he spoke with Albert Addison about it and now Albert’s dead. Did he speak with you? Surely he did, if he told Albert.”

“Albert’s dead? My God.” George’s voice cracked on the last word.

Silence again for long moments. Celeste glanced at the clock on Jake’s kitchen wall, counting the seconds as they ticked off. Twenty-one. Twenty-two. Twenty-three. George cleared his throat. Twenty-five. Twenty-six. Twenty-seven.

“Celeste, this isn’t something you want to mess with. Leave it alone.”

“Leave it alone? My father is dead. One of his closest friends was murdered. My best friend is the prime suspect in at least one of those murders and you’re telling me to leave it alone? What’s going on, George?” How was he involved in this?

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Fear clawed through her. The embryonic idea that had begun sprouted into a full blown thought. Had George killed her father? Her dad had trusted him. It would have been easy for George to sneak up on him or even walk right up to his face and then stab him in the heart.

“Celeste, this is bigger than you realize. Bigger than your father realized. I’m telling you as a friend to leave it alone.” George’s voice broke.

“I can’t do that.”

“Then God help you.”

“George?”

No answer.

“George?”

Still no answer.

“George!” Celeste heard the panic echo over the silent phone line and bounce back to her.

“Celeste, I’m begging you to drop this.”

“Do you know something about my father’s murder?”

Jake walked into the kitchen and glanced at her curiously. Celeste held her finger up to signal she would tell him everything in a minute. Jake poured two cups of coffee and set one in front of her. He then sat down across the table from her and watched the expressions on her face.

“I know everything about your father’s murder.” George sighed. “I’m sorry, Celeste. I don’t even know how I got caught up in this. Please listen to me. Get out of the country. Get away from Van Ester and—”

“George, I need to see you. You have to tell me what’s going on and this phone is making strange noises.”

“That’s not a good idea, hon. Just go. Get out of town. Take Jake with you. Stay gone until this all blows over.”

“I refuse to miss my own father’s funeral. Besides, I’m not a runner,

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George.” Celeste met Jake’s worried frown.

“No. Neither was your father.” George sighed. “Okay, meet me after the showing at four o’clock in my classroom here at the university. It’ll be quiet then and I’ll explain everything.”

“I’ll be there.” Celeste jabbed the off button and lay the headset down on the kitchen table.

“Drink your coffee.” Jake seemed to understand her need to gather her thoughts before telling him what had happened.

She sipped the steaming coffee slowly, its warmth trickling into her system. She took a deep breath, smelling the sharp, bitter scent of coffee beans.

“George knows who killed my father. Actually, I think maybe he was in on it.” She held the warm coffee mug between her palms, wishing she could lose herself in its black depths. “It feels like I can’t trust anyone.”

“You can trust me.” Jake reached out and wrapped both his hands over hers.

The mug warming her palms and his hands cradling the backs of her hands helped calm her.

“I think we should phone Officer Frank and tell him about this conversation with George. They need to know he might be involved. It may help the investigation.”

“Maybe we should hear what George has to say first?”

“I’m scared, Jake. What if he tries to kill us? If I have to die, I want my murderer to pay for killing me. That won’t happen if I just disappear.”

“Okay, we’ll phone as soon as we get some breakfast into you. How does scrambled eggs with tomatoes and green peppers sound?” Jake pushed his chair back and stood.

“With Colby cheese?”

“Sure.” Jake poked his head into the refrigerator and came out with

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a carton of eggs and the other ingredients.

“You spoil me.”

“Wait until you sleep with me. I’ll fix you breakfast in bed.” Jake whistled as he broke eggs into a large bowl.

CHAPTER 7

Celeste swallowed. He'd just propositioned her as though he were discussing the weather. Was he even aware of what he'd said? Not *if* you ever spend the night in my bed but *wait until*. The image his words evoked made her squirm in her chair as warmth settled between her thighs.

"Jake?"

"Hmmm?" He grabbed a fork from one of the top drawers and began to scramble the eggs.

"Did you just proposition me?"

"Was it a proposition? It was more a statement of fact." He threw the fork into the sink and turned to face her.

"Are you serious?" Butterflies must have been in her coffee because now they danced around her stomach.

"Look, Celeste, I want you. You want me. Don't pretend otherwise."

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“Well, yes. But I—you—I—” She stopped midsentence, unsure what to say.

“You don’t want to spoil our friendship.”

“Exactly.” She pointed at the air as though to punctuate his words.

“I felt the same way, but I’ve decided not sleeping together is spoiling our friendship.”

“How does that make any sense?”

“Because I spend every minute with you trying to keep my hands off you. What kind of friend is that?”

Celeste felt the heat working its way up her neck and onto her face. “I feel the same way.”

“See?” Jake stalked toward her.

Celeste glanced over her shoulder, considering running. “Just slow down. I need to think.”

Jake stopped walking. “Take your time.” He moved back to the stove and his eggs.

Swift irritation stabbed through her heart. Well, he didn’t have to act quite so unaffected by her caution. *What did you want? For him to fall to his knees and beg you to sleep with him?* Now that might be interesting.

“I’ll call Frank.” She grabbed the officer’s business card off the refrigerator and returned to the table where she jabbed in the numbers. “Officer Frank O’Malley, please.”

The station operator connected her. His voice mail kicked on. She held the phone away before hitting the off button. “Shoot,” she said.

“What’s wrong?”

“I got his voice mail. Think I should try again?”

“Tell them you need to speak to him and ask if he’s even at the station.”

She dialed the number again, explaining the importance of speaking directly to Frank when the operator answered.

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“I’m sorry. He has the day off. He’ll be in tomorrow.”

“Is Detective Roberts there?” Damn. He was the last person she wanted to talk to, but this couldn’t wait until tomorrow.

Jake whipped around and shook his head. “I don’t trust that guy, Celeste.”

“I don’t either, but Frank is out for the day.”

“If we didn’t have bad luck...”

“I know.”

The detective picked up the other line.

“Roberts.” His voice held the curt tones of a drill sergeant.

“Detective Roberts, this is Celeste Monroe.”

“Ms. Monroe, calling to make a confession?” His words dripped sarcasm.

“Hardly. The last time I checked, you were still the person in charge of investigating my father’s murder, so I’m passing on information I know you won’t bother to check out.” Today, she would see her father lying in a casket. She hoped that image wouldn’t wipe out the one of him alive and excited about his work. And on top of that, she had to deal with Nick Roberts’s sarcasm.

“Go ahead. What’s your current red herring?”

Celeste wished she could reach through the phone and slap him. *What a jerk.* Did the man treat everyone this way or was it just her he didn’t care for? She suspected he viewed the entire world with suspicion.

“George Voscaz. Indiana University Medical Center downtown. My father’s friend from grade school. My father shared info on his elixir—”

“He did?” The detective’s interest level went from zero to sixty in a millisecond. “How do you know this?”

“I had a strange conversation with him this morning. He all but admitted to being involved in my father’s murder. Either warned or

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threatened me to get out of the country. I'm still not sure which."

"You can't leave town."

"I know. I'm telling you what he said." *Geez*. The man needed to pull the cotton out of his ears.

"So, you think he killed your father. But that doesn't make sense if he already had the formula."

Celeste frowned. The detective had a point, but she couldn't shake her suspicion that George had something to do with her father and Addison's deaths.

"Look, I am meeting George Voscaz this afternoon in his classroom after my father's showing. I just thought you should know in case anything happens to me." The words sounded foreboding, even to her own ears.

"I wouldn't advise such a meeting," Roberts said.

"No. I can't imagine you would. But I want to know who killed my father."

"You know the murderer quite well, I believe."

"You're wrong." She'd trust Jake with her life.

"I'll be at the showing."

Celeste digested his words for a moment. She considered telling him he wasn't welcome, but what if the murderer attended? Perhaps it would be good to have law enforcement there as an extra set of eyes.

"Goodbye, Detective Roberts." *You bastard*, she added as she hung up the phone.

Jake set a plate of scrambled eggs in front of her. Not too runny. Not too dry. Perfect. His hip brushed her arm as he moved away. Her mouth went dry with desire. Celeste sprinkled salt over the yellow, fluffy dish and took a bite.

"Yum." She closed her eyes.

"I take it Roberts wasn't interested in our theories?"

"You're correct, sir." She laid her fork down and rubbed her

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temples. “And he’s coming to the showing this afternoon. I don’t know why I can’t get him to at least consider someone else might be involved. It’s so...”

“Frustrating?”

“Exactly.”

They finished breakfast, each lost in personal thoughts. Celeste carried her plate to the sink and filled it with soap suds. Jake came up behind her and reached around her to put his plate in the sink.

Celeste stiffened. “You’re doing that on purpose.”

Jake took her by the shoulders and gently turned her to face him. “Damn right I am.” His lips lowered to hers.

All thought fled as she rose on tiptoe to return his kiss. He felt warm and solid and trustworthy. She’d been alone for too long. Oh, she’d dated, but her work kept her too busy to have anything more than a superficial relationship. At this moment, she wanted to erase all the pain filling her heart and replace it with anything. Passion seemed like an excellent alternative.

“Celeste, tell me to stop or I won’t be able to.” Jake paused.

She didn’t want to tell him to stop. It would be easier to get lost in his arms, his lips, his touch, and forget all the horrible events of the past week. Her father’s murder, finding Ned Tate’s body, stumbling over Addison. Each event flashed before her eyes. *Take them away, Jake.*

“Don’t stop,” she whispered as she pulled him closer.

The second kiss overpowered the first. This one reached deep into the recesses of her soul and pulled out a longing she’d felt for five years, fulfilling a promise she wasn’t even aware of ever making.

The warm, sudsy dishwater soaked her back. Celeste gasped and pulled away. Jake groaned and rested his forehead against hers.

“Sweetheart, do you know what you’re doing to me?”

“Jake, the water is flowing over.”

It took him a minute to comprehend what she’d said. He pulled her

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away from the sink, shut off the water and pulled the plug from the drain.

Celeste laughed, focusing his attention on the long line of her neck. He stroked his hand down the length, ending at her collar bone. Her laughter stopped and a smoldering passion awakened in her eyes. His lips followed the path his fingers had taken.

Celeste responded by grasping his face between her palms and placing a kiss on each corner of his mouth.

* * *

His blood boiled and he felt as though he could barely catch his breath. *To hell with any consequences.* They could worry later about how to mesh their friendship and love affair.

The phone rang and Celeste pulled away a little. “Maybe we should—”

“Forget it.” He scooped her into his arms and headed for the bedroom. “Whoever it is can wait.”

“What if it’s George? Or Detective Roberts? Or—”

He kissed her, sucking on her lower lip.

“Whoever it is can call back,” she said.

The interior of the bedroom lay in shadows from the closed blinds. Jake laid her on the handmade quilt his grandmother had given his parents for their wedding. Her golden hair spread out behind her head reminded him of a wild lion.

“Don’t even think about not calling me tomorrow. I know where you live.” She laughed, but it sounded strained.

He lay next to her on the bed and stroked her hair.

“Celeste, we’ll always be friends. I promise you we’ll never lose that. We’re just adding another element.”

“A scary one.” Her voice cracked this time.

Jake frowned. Maybe he shouldn’t rush her. He didn’t want to risk losing her. She was too important to him.

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“If you aren’t sure.” He started to move away from her, but Celeste reached up and pulled him close.

“I’m sure. Make love to me, Jake.”

Her eyes glowed with smoldering passion and Jake lost himself in the sensations. For these moments, he wouldn’t worry about the future or the present. He’d forget the police suspected him of murdering one of his dearest friends and a man he admired. All those worries would come rushing back later. For now, they faded.

* * *

She shouldn’t have slept with Jake. Not that she hadn’t enjoyed it...her skin still tingled from his touch. But the entire dynamic of their relationship had changed since this morning’s lovemaking.

“I don’t know what to say.” She sighed. There. Now it was out in the open.

“Thank you?” Jake grinned his endearing, boyish smirk she imagined he’d used effectively to get out of trouble in his younger years.

“Very funny. It feels awkward.”

Jake pulled her into his arms. “It’s just new.”

“I think we made a mistake—”

“Shhh.” He placed his fingers against her lips. “Now, if you don’t get out of bed and stop tempting me, we’re never going to get dressed.”

“I get the shower first.” She hopped out of bed. Perhaps their entire relationship hadn’t changed. They both felt a bit awkward. That was to be expected.

“First? Didn’t your mother teach you to share?” Jake grinned lecherously.

“Insatiable pig.” She punched him and raced for the bathroom. She wasn’t quick enough to close the door. So, she settled for wagging her finger at him. “You behave yourself, Jake Walker. We have an appointment to keep.”

“Damn, I wish you weren’t right.” He shook his head. “Although,

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your father would be thrilled we've finally gotten together. I'll go use the guest bathroom."

"How gallant of you, kind sir."

"This time." He whistled as he stalked out of the room.

Celeste noticed he didn't bother to try to cover himself with a towel or clothes. The view from the doorway of his bathroom allowed her to watch him until he passed through the door and down the hallway. She gave a low whistle herself. She'd better get her mind on what she was doing or she would follow him into the guest shower.

Thirty minutes later, Celeste left the warm coziness of the steamed bathroom. Jake sat in a wing chair in the corner of his bedroom. Unfortunately, he'd dressed. It did little to detract from his sexy shape, but she preferred an unobstructed view.

"Ready to go?" he asked.

"I guess." She adjusted the black skirt, unsure what to do with her hands. How did a grieving daughter act? She still couldn't believe her father was really gone. Perhaps the last few days were a bad dream, and she'd wake up and her father would be alive.

"I'm nervous about this afternoon too," she said. "I'm not sure what to expect from George. He all but told me he'd been involved in my father's murder. But maybe that wasn't what he meant."

Jake pulled a sleek black pistol from his night stand drawer, took the safety lock off and loaded the chamber. Each bullet clinked into place with sharp clacks of force.

"Jake? What are you doing?" Celeste's mouth dried up like the Mojave Desert.

"It occurred to me that we could be walking into a trap. Or that the killer might come to the funeral parlor."

"So you're going to shoot your way out?" Celeste crossed her arms. "Jake, I don't like this at all."

"I don't like it either, but there's a murderer on the loose. He's

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already killed three people. I don't want one of us to be next."

"I guess you have a point." She hated to concede, but he was right.

"Maybe we won't have to use it." He tucked the gun into the back of his waistband.

A sharp harbinger of dread skittled through her veins. Life never ran on a straight track. They probably *were* walking into a trap, but there was little either of them could do about it.

* * *

Jake's gaze flicked from Celeste to the door back to Celeste. A heavy hush filled the funeral parlor. A few E.V.E. employees stood in the corner, whispering in hushed tones. His nerves were on edge. Not only did he have to try to comfort Celeste as she dealt with her father's death, but he needed to be aware of what went on around them, who walked through the door and what danger they might represent.

"Jake." Celeste poked him in the ribs. "Evan is here."

Van Ester's tailored suit fit him perfectly. He stopped as he entered the room and took a moment to look around. When his gaze fell on Celeste, he didn't hesitate and moved directly toward her.

"Celeste, dear, how are you doing?" He gave her a hug.

Jake clenched his fists. He didn't like Evan's slimy hands on Celeste, not even for a second.

"I'm fine." Celeste's jaw muscles worked and he knew she'd clenched her teeth.

What a stupid question. Jake wondered why people always knew how to say the exact wrong thing when someone died. So far today he'd heard, "It's for the best," "It was meant to be," and "At least he died healthy." Each time Celeste had smiled softly, but her eyes held a suppressed fury over losing her father.

"I must go pay my respects to your father." Van Ester pecked her on the cheek and made his way to the casket where Ben lay with hands folded on his chest.

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Celeste's gaze followed him as he leaned over the coffin. His shoulders heaved as though he might be sobbing. She turned and pressed her face against Jake's chest; not out of misery, but with fury.

"Hypocrite. Keep me from hitting him, Jake, because I really want to."

He rubbed her back. "I know, sweetheart. He's a jerk."

Van Ester glanced over his shoulder as though trying to see who might be watching him. At that moment, Nick Roberts walked into the parlor, a smug expression on his face. Great. Just what Celeste needed. They'd expected the detective, but Jake had hoped he'd stay out of sight. He did slip quietly to a corner of the room, where he sat in an upholstered armchair.

"I'll be so glad when this is over. I loved my father, but even he wouldn't have wanted me to deal with this torture."

"Maybe we should've had the visitation and the funeral on the same day." He worried over the dark circles under her eyes. She wasn't sleeping and the stress of the situation couldn't be helping.

"Celeste?" Rebecca stood at Jake's elbow.

"Rebecca." Celeste hugged the girl. "I'm glad you're here."

"Ben meant a lot to me." Rebecca grabbed a tissue and wiped away tears that brightened her eyes but didn't fall. "Oh, look at me. I'm so selfish. He was your father and I'm the one crying."

"It's okay, Rebecca. I'm glad you cared about him this much. It's comforting."

"Just let me know if you need anything." Rebecca patted Celeste on the arm and moved toward the coffin with halting steps.

Van Ester still stood in front of the coffin, and Jake wondered if he intended to stay there all day putting on a show. The man turned to greet Rebecca. The girl looked up at him with adoring eyes, and Jake wondered if she might have a crush on him, but then Van Ester moved away and Rebecca's gaze didn't follow him.

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In the meantime, he had more important things to worry about. How was he going to convince Celeste to rest? She looked ready to collapse.

“Celeste, maybe we should postpone the meeting with George Voscaz for another day? This is too draining.” But even as the words left his mouth, he knew she’d never agree.

“No.” She shook her head. “I want to find out what he knows.”

Jake wanted to find out who’d killed Ben, too. Weariness seeped into his bones from the pressure of having his every move watched as Nick Roberts stared at them from his corner of the room. Jake would have given his own freedom to bring Celeste’s father back for her and get her out of this impossible situation.

CHAPTER 8

Celeste growled and steered Jake's pickup around another row of cars. The parking situation at the university apparently hadn't changed since she'd graduated.

"I want my car back. Parking here is impossible with a *car*. We'll never find a spot in this oversized hunk of metal." What she really wanted was her father back. Hot anger burned in her gut.

"Hey, don't talk about Isabelle like that."

"I thought the last truck was Isabelle."

"It was. This is Isabelle II."

"We're not going to make it." She glanced at the digital clock on his dash. Ten minutes until four o'clock. They still needed to park and dash across campus and up to the fourth floor of the medical sciences building.

"There's a spot." Jake pointed.

Celeste closed her eyes then opened them wide and whipped into

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the parking space. She'd done it. Why on earth had she taken Jake up on his offer to let her drive? Next time, she'd just say no.

"Let's go." Celeste grabbed her handbag, hit the lock button on the door and scrambled across the parking lot.

With his long legs, Jake barely had to jog to keep up. He grinned.

"Show off," she muttered.

"You're cute when you get angry."

They slowed to a respectful fast walk when they entered the medical building. Their footsteps echoed on the polished tiles and the faint smell of antiseptic followed them down the hallway.

"Do you think George really knows something about my father's death?"

"More than likely. They were best friends for years. Let's just hope he isn't the one who killed Ben."

Celeste jabbed the elevator button a few more times. Jake took her hand and held it at his side. "George doesn't seem capable of murder."

"You know, I read somewhere that Hitler's friends said the same thing about him."

"I guess you're right. It's scary what people are capable of when it comes to money." The elevator doors slid open and Celeste and Jake stepped inside.

"Fourth floor," Celeste said.

The doors stood open for several long seconds. Her fingers reached for the round button that would slide the doors closed. Jake grabbed her hand and stopped her.

"Just once. Let it close on its own."

"I drive you crazy, don't I?" Her lips turned down slightly at the corners.

Jake backed her up against the side wall of the elevator. "Oh, yes. You definitely drive me crazy. Crazy with wanting to do this." He pressed his lips next to her temple. "And this." His hands ran down her

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arms and over her hips.

“Oh.” Celeste sighed and moved closer to him. “Crazy good.”

“Definitely good.”

The doors slid open without Celeste ever having realized they’d shut or that the elevator had traveled upward. Jake’s touch invaded her senses and the rest of the world faded away.

“Here we go.” Jake hadn’t dropped her hand and continued to hold it as they stepped out of the elevator. “Ready?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be.” The warmth of his skin sent waves of courage and a feeling of safety coursing through her. Together, they’d face George and any betrayal he might represent.

She felt as though everything she’d ever known, everyone she’d trusted, had turned on its axis. Up was down. Black was white. And loyal friend was betrayer. What could she could trust? Who could she trust? Except for Jake—he was real.

The metal plate next to the plain metal door read G. Voscaz. Good thing she wasn’t a coward. A coward would turn and run back into the elevator. A coward would avoid the truth for fear of the pain it might cause. A coward leaned on others instead of herself.

Her gaze dropped to their entwined hands. She dropped Jake’s hand and straightened her shoulders. She’d learned a long time ago to count only on herself. Her father, while a lovable person, had spent most of his life lost in a formula or a new theory. Their roles had reversed, until she became the parent and he the child needing to be taken care of.

“Jake.” She stopped. Every muscle in her body screamed out against turning the door knob and entering the room in front of them. “I have a really bad feeling about this entire situation.”

“I’ll be right here with you. I won’t let anything happen to you.” His warm brown eyes met hers and Celeste knew at that moment she’d gladly hand her life over to him.

The knob felt as though it was packed in ice. Celeste’s palm itched.

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She pushed the door open and stopped on the threshold.

“Something isn’t right.” She’d had a bad feeling about this meeting. One of these days she’d learn to trust her instincts. She sniffed the air.

The heavy scent of sulfur hung like a curtain. But underneath that overwhelming, pungent aroma of rotten eggs rested an elemental aroma. Tangy, metallic.

“George?” She took a step into the room. George never arrived late for an appointment. She and Jake were ten minutes late.

No sound came from the warm room. She rubbed her arms, wondering why she felt a chill when the room had to be at least eighty degrees.

“Maybe we should just go.” Jake sounded unsure now.

Celeste moved to the lab table and that’s when she saw George. He sat at his desk, his head lying on top of the padded calendar he used as a bible of sorts. Every time she’d seen George, he’d either scribble in his planner or jot something on his calendar. Often he’d cross she or her father off once they’d had their meeting. Organization was another virtue in George’s mind.

“Oh, no.” She threw her hand over her mouth, trying to hold back the urge to throw up.

George’s glazed eyes stared at them. A single bullet hole had pierced the skin between his eyes. There wasn’t as much blood as Celeste would have guessed. Only a small pool rested under his head, creating a macabre halo of blood around his face.

“Celeste,” Jake took her arm. “I know I’ve said this before, but I think we need to get out of here.”

“No. The detective knew we were coming here. I think we’re better off phoning them ourselves. Or better yet, calling campus security.”

“You’re forgetting I have a gun on me.”

“But it isn’t the gun, Jake. And we can prove it.”

“Yes, but only after they’ve hauled us away. You go. I’ll call the

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police.”

“What? No way.” She moved back toward the door, no longer able to stand George’s silent stare.

“Listen, Celeste. I don’t want you spending one minute in that jail. It isn’t pleasant and that’s under the best circumstances.” He pointed to the door. “Leave now and I’ll tell them I came alone. They’ll have to release me when they discover my gun wasn’t used to kill him. Eventually.”

“Forget it, Jake.” She crossed her arms. “That will only look more suspicious. They’ll say I stashed the gun or something. I’m calling a guard.”

Jake sighed. When Celeste set her mind to something, there was little point in arguing with her. She stepped out into the hall and started screaming. “Help. We need help.”

A few passing students looked at her as though she were crazy.

“Hello? Can you please go get a security guard or someone?”

“Sure,” a boy with messy brown hair and worn sneakers said.

Students gathered by the door, sensing something major.

“Is Dr. Voscaz okay?” A girl with pale blonde hair and glasses poked her head in the door. Fortunately, George wasn’t visible from the doorway or she may have seen more than she cared to.

“No. And we need help.” Celeste shooed the students back. “You don’t want to go in there. And I don’t think any of us should. Please, just stay in the hall.”

A uniformed security guard approached, walking slowly and swaying from side to side. Jake wondered if perhaps the man had taken a liquid lunch.

“Whas’s the problem?” He slurred his words.

God help them. Of all the screw-ups they could have encountered, it had to be this man.

“Are you the security guard?”

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“Yesssss.”

The last time Jake had checked, the word “yes” only held one “s” not five. Celeste rolled her gaze and stared at the ceiling for a full minute.

“George is dead.”

“Dr. Voscaz?” The guard’s face paled. “Should I call a doctor?”

“I don’t think a doctor can help him at this point.” Jake’s voice sounded dry even to his own ears. “We need the police. While you’re at it, you might as well tell them to inform Detective Roberts that Miss Monroe’s four o’clock appointment was dead.”

“Detective Roberts?” As if the man weren’t already confused enough, his brow knit with additional lines.

“Just do it. There’s an ongoing investigation.”

The guard shrugged. Celeste watched him for a moment then turned to Jake. “I’d better go with him. He’s going to screw it up.”

“More than likely.”

He watched as she jogged down the hall and caught up with the guard. When they turned the corner, he allowed his back to rest against the door frame. Whatever George had planned to tell them about Ben’s murder had cost the man his life. What the hell was going on? *Sure the formula’s worth a lot of money, but enough that someone would risk murdering four different people?* Highly talented, skilled professionals—with the exception of Ned—whose future ideas might be worth more than a single formula? And what did the Seeker’s Club have to do with their deaths. Three of them had been members.

A piece of the puzzle was not in place. If he could just find that missing piece, he was certain he could answer the questions rolling around in his brain.

* * *

An hour later, the police secured the murder scene and were now questioning Celeste and Jake in an empty classroom they’d converted

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into their headquarters at the university.

“You spoke with George Voscaz prior to his murder?” Nick Roberts leaned forward and stared intently at Celeste’s face.

“I already told you fifteen times, Detective Roberts. I spoke with him on the telephone and we set up this meeting. And I told you when I called you to tell you I was coming to the meeting. Remember?”

“I remember, Ms. Monroe.”

“Then why ask me again and again?”

Nick shrugged. “Maybe because everywhere you turn up, so do dead bodies. I find that very suspicious.”

“What I find suspicious is that you can’t or won’t find the person who is doing this.” Celeste slammed the top of the table with her palms.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” The detective stiffened in his chair.

“That means this is something bigger than we first thought,” Jake said. He pointed his finger at Nick’s chest, wishing he could touch the man hard enough to make his point clear. “Who knows how many people are involved in the cover up? You could be involved for all we know.”

“You’re accusing me of a cover-up? *Me?*”

“He’s just stating a fact.” Celeste wanted to swipe that superior look off Nick’s face.

“Nice tactic. Change the focus. Interrogate the interrogator.” Nick’s cocky smile earned him a frown from Celeste.

“We’re being interrogated?” Jake grabbed Celeste’s hand and pulled her to her feet. “I thought this was a friendly interview.”

“It’s just a phrase. I worded it incorrectly.” Nick didn’t quite meet their eyes.

“I think the next time you want to conduct a ‘friendly interview,’ maybe you should contact our attorney,” Celeste said.

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“You have an attorney, Ms. Monroe?” Nick stood as well. “Why am I not surprised? Of course you’d hire an attorney to protect you.”

“I’ve about had it with you.” Jake could feel the anger rising. The man was worse than a Pit Bull. Once he got a grip on the victim’s throat—in this case Jake and Celeste—he didn’t let go.

“Detective Roberts, you are vile.” Celeste took a step toward him and the man actually backed up.

Jake grinned. He’d forgotten Celeste didn’t need him to take care of her. She was more than capable of standing up for herself—one of the things he truly loved about her.

“I suggest you get your head out of your ass and take a look around. If we’d killed poor George, we’d hardly have phoned you—”

“Oh, but—”

Celeste held up her hand to show him she was not going to be interrupted.

“And we’d hardly have told you beforehand that we were coming here if we were planning on killing George.”

“Maybe you didn’t plan on it.”

“Just for your information, and because I’m not the type of person who goes behind people’s backs, I’ll be formally requesting that you be removed from the case. The request will be made through my lawyer. And if I find out the police aren’t pursuing other leads in this case and simply running around harassing myself and Jake, then I will file a law suit.”

“Go ahead, lady.” Nick’s eyes sparkled with suppressed fury. “I’m good at my job. You won’t deter me.”

“Oh, I’m not finished. After I file the lawsuit, I’m going to go on television with every news agency that’ll have me. I’m going to cry huge tears of grief and tell them how I lost my father, and all you can do is harass me and my best friend instead of looking for the killer. How you even came to my father’s showing and I couldn’t grieve for

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him because you breathed down my neck the entire time. Let's go, Jake." She turned her back on the detective and walked out the door.

Jake held in the laughter until they reached the parking lot.

"What's so funny?" Celeste said.

"You should've seen the look on old Nick Roberts's face when you walked out that door. You could've cooked bacon and eggs on it. He was red hot."

Celeste let out the breath she'd been holding and laughed. "I'm certain I didn't convince him to leave us alone, but I'd just had all I was going to take from that bastard."

"It needed to be said. I was getting ready to myself, but you did such a good job, I figured I'd save mine for someone else."

"Now what? Do you think they'll try to arrest us for George's murder?"

"How? They don't have any proof, Celeste."

He unlocked his truck and held the door open for her. She slid in and he closed her door and moved to the driver's side.

"What if they find the proof? Manufacture it?" She chewed her lower lip. Jake placed his hand on hers, where they rested on her lap.

"There *is* no proof. If they plant something, it'll come out later."

"Maybe. Maybe not. I'm scared." She moved closer and rested her head on his shoulder. "Hold me for just a second."

* * *

She felt good in his arms and he wondered if this closeness they were feeling could last. He'd felt this way once before with Deborah. That feeling hadn't lasted long. Once his wedding ring had gone on her finger, she'd quickly found someone else to sleep with. His best friend at that time. At least Celeste couldn't sleep with his best friend; she *was* his best friend. But if he let her too close, she could definitely hurt him.

"Better?" He pulled away a little. It was best to take this new phase of their relationship really slow. He suddenly doubted the wisdom of

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their making love. He'd thought they were ready, but now, he wasn't so sure. In a few weeks, he could wind up court. He wasn't even sure if he'd be free to pursue a relationship.

"Let's go back to your place and decode those files. Maybe there are some clues that can help us figure out who did this to George. Who did this to my father."

Jake hoped they figured it out soon. He felt as though an invisible noose kept tightening, and they couldn't see who was on the other end pulling on the rope.

An orange glow lit the sky as they turned the corner and headed down Jake's street. Sirens blared in the distance, growing closer with each passing second.

"Jake, look." Celeste pointed, her hand shook.

Jake pulled to the side of the road just as a fire truck zoomed past them, sirens clamoring. Flames licked from the top of Jake's roof toward the sky.

"What happened?" Celeste had a blank look on her face. She shook her head. "Did we leave something on?"

"No." They hadn't left anything on. This was a message plain and simple.

"Orange Slice." Celeste grabbed the handle of the passenger door and tumbled out of the truck before Jake could stop her.

She broke into a run, headed straight for the crackling fire that was now his house. He reached for his own door handle. He had to stop her. She was crazy about that cat. What if she ran right into the flames before he could get to her? The door handle stuck the first time and he had to try again.

Finally, it opened. He jumped from the cab of the truck and ran toward his front yard.

"Celeste?" He couldn't see for the billows of grayish, cloudy smoke that stung his eyes and filled his lungs. He coughed. "Celeste!"

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Where the hell was she? He moved toward the house, intent on stopping her from entering the inferno. If her cat was in the house, there wasn't any point in trying to save him now. Damn.

"Over here, Jake." Celeste sat on her knees in the front yard. "I think Orangie is gone. Poor baby."

He dropped to his knees beside her.

"You scared the hell out of me." He'd thought she'd rushed into the fire after her cat.

"I'm sorry. I thought he might be outside. You know how he slips out sometimes. Or I thought..." A sob caught in her throat. "I hoped."

"I'm sorry." What else could he say? It seemed as though everyone and everything around her was being snatched away. There weren't words of comfort strong enough to take away the pain, so he pulled her into his arms and rocked her gently, trying to take some of the despair onto his own shoulders.

"Isn't this a pretty picture?" The voice of Detective Roberts floated down from the smoky cloud billowing out over their heads.

"Roberts?" Jake's eyes narrowed. Would anyone fault him for beating the man to a pulp?

"Interesting that your house of all people's houses would catch on fire." The detective leaned over, his smirk coming into view.

Ten shades of red from fire engine to burnt umber flashed before Jake's eyes. That sneaky, greasy smile made him want to punch the bastard's face in.

"Interesting you'd be here when my house catches on fire."

The smoke started to clear a bit as the firemen got the blaze under control and the wind shifted the tiniest bit. Roberts straightened, but was still in full view. Celeste stared toward the dying fire, rocking slightly backward and forward.

"That's a good one, Walker." Nick Roberts threw his head back and laughed. "Now you're going to try to blame me for this apparent arson."

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You two are incorrigible.”

“Get off my property, Roberts.” Jake clenched his teeth, wanting with every fiber of his being to punch the detective’s teeth through the back of his head.

* * *

“They did this,” Celeste whispered.

“Who?” Jake asked at the same time Nick Roberts did.

“The people who killed my father. And Addison. And George. Now they want me dead or maybe Jake. Or both.”

“You know what I think?” Roberts asked.

“I’m sure you’re going to tell us.” Jake glared at him.

“I think you set the fire to draw attention away from yourself. It’s definitely arson. Who else has reason to set fire to your house? Have good insurance?”

“Who else has reason?” Celeste asked. “Only the people who are going around killing everyone associated with my father’s discovery.”

“Oh, yes—for the mysterious formula no one seems to be able to prove your father invented. That story is almost as farfetched as your alibi.”

“Why are you here, Detective Roberts?” Celeste pushed herself to her feet and stood to face him. “I believe Jake asked you and you didn’t have an answer.”

“I followed you.”

“Then you know we didn’t set the fire.”

The detective appeared speechless for a moment and Celeste took advantage to press forward with her line of questioning. “Why would you follow me anyway? I made it abundantly clear I’d be filing a complaint against you.”

“I wanted to explain what we’re doing on the investigation, but I can see now that I’ve been right all along in my suspicions, so I think I’ll just leave. Don’t leave town.”

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Celeste stuck her tongue out at his back. She knew it was childish but she couldn't help it. The detective got into his car and drove away, saluting to them as he passed. Celeste watched his taillights as they disappeared around the corner.

"I think he set the fire." The detective acted strangely every time she saw him.

"Awful suspicious that he was here."

A long, scared mew came from the low bushes to their left.

"Kitty?" Celeste moved toward the bushes.

"Meow." Orange Slice came out of the bushes, stretched and blinked at her.

Celeste scooped him into her arms and kissed him. The cat struggled a bit, trying to get away from her affection, but she held on tight.

"Amazing." Jake scratched him beneath the chin, starting a deep rumble in the cat's throat.

"He must've been outside when the fire started."

"I'm positive he was in the house when we left," he said.

"That means whoever set the fire let him out. He's a witness." Celeste rubbed his ears. "Too bad he can't talk."

Jake stared toward the burnt-out rubble that had once been his home. The fire hadn't just destroyed a portion or the inside. The site looked as though it had been flattened by a bomb. Ash covered the ground and bits of rubble and broken glass stuck up here and there. Nothing recognizable remained of his home, save the cat.

"Guess I have some shopping to do."

"You can stay at my place until the insurance gets settled and you find somewhere else." Celeste hugged her cat. "I'm sorry this happened, Jake. I should've left you out of my little investigation. It's causing too much trouble."

"Are you forgetting I've been accused of your father's murder? I

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don't have any choice but to help you. But I will take you up on your offer of a place to stay."

"Wouldn't be the first time." She smiled at him.

"Yes, but this time I'm not sleeping on the couch."

"Oh, you aren't?"

"Am I?"

Celeste laughed and stood on tiptoe to place a gentle kiss on his lips. "We'll see." Orange Slice grunted a protest as they squished him between their bodies.

"We can take the disk back to your house." Jake held out his hand. "Maybe you'd better give it to me for safekeeping."

"I don't have the disk." Celeste swallowed. "I thought you had it."

"No. I thought you got it."

They glanced toward the ash and debris.

"The disk is toast," Jake said.

"Then so is my father's formula because I destroyed the e-mail I sent myself to keep anyone else from getting it."

"I have an idea." He grabbed her elbow and shuffled her and the cat to the truck. "Let's drop your cat off at your apartment."

"Are you going to share what's going on?"

"We're going to pay a visit to the E.V.E. corporation."

"Are you insane? I think we're in enough danger. I was thinking we should escape to a tropical island for a few weeks."

"You don't mean that," Jake said.

"Not really, but the thought is tempting."

He helped her into the truck and tucked a strand of honey brown hair behind her ear. "We're going to find the people responsible, Celeste. I promise you."

But it might be a promise he couldn't live up to. Four people had already been murdered, and they didn't have any clue of who was doing this or why.

CHAPTER 9

The parking garage at E.V.E. sent chills down Jake's spine, bringing back memories of finding Ben's still form there. The root of everything that had happened during the last week all traced back to this building.

"What was my father involved in, Jake?"

"I don't know, but I think it may have been something big. Bigger than a youth formula."

Celeste nodded and they made their way into the building. Rebecca sat at her desk, her eyes rimmed in red from an apparent crying jag. When they entered the lab, she looked around the room as though trying to find an escape route and then smiled. "What are you two doing here?"

"I need to print that poem off my father's computer. I want to frame it and keep it."

"Sure, Celeste." Rebecca dangled the key. "I know better than to try

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to hide this from you.” The girl laughed.

“Sorry about that.” Celeste’s face flushed. “I was a bit emotional.”

“It’s understandable. We all miss Ben.”

“Thanks.” Celeste took the key and entered her father’s office.

Once again it looked as if Ben was down the hall discussing a theory, or perhaps out to lunch, and he’d come back at any moment.

“Now what?” Celeste whispered.

“Outgoing mail and sent mail. Quickly.”

Celeste paled. “Jake, I deleted it so they couldn’t track it back to us. It’s gone.”

“No it isn’t. You just have to know where to look.”

Celeste turned on the computer. It whirred softly as it booted. She placed her fingers over the keyboard. “How do I find it?”

“Click on the folder called Family Photos.”

Celeste placed the arrow over that folder and clicked.

“Now the one that says Baby.” Jake pointed.

“Cute.” A photo of a baby with a sunflower hat surrounding her face filled the screen.

“Now click on the stem of the flower.”

Celeste clicked and a small window popped up asking for a password. “Wow.”

“Ben was tricky.” Jake’s voice filled with an admiration she’d seen often when he was in her father’s presence.

“I’ll really be impressed if you know the password.”

“Of course I know it. Young at Heart. All one word. Lower case.”

Celeste typed in youngatheart and hit enter. A third screen popped up—the formula.

“Bingo. Why didn’t you tell me about this last time?” She mailed the file to her e-mail address.

“I forgot it, until I realized we had an emergency and remembered Ben’s instructions about an emergency backup file.”

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“Okay, this is it. I have to delete the sent mail or they’ll track it.”

“Delete it.”

Celeste hit delete and sat back. “I hope to God that went through okay. My father’s entire life was devoted to his work. I hate to think it may all have been for nothing.”

“Can I get you two anything?” Rebecca stood in the doorway, looking uncertain of herself.

Celeste remembered the first day Rebecca had come to E.V.E. Corp. Uncertain and shy. The girl’d certainly come a long way in the last few years. Even her choice of clothing, a bright red flirty dress, screamed confidence.

“No thanks, Rebecca.” *Damn.* She’d forgotten to print off the poem. She pulled it up on the screen and hit Control P. The poem quickly printed out.

Rebecca didn’t even glance at it so Celeste may as well have saved her time and the paper, but it could still be used as a cover if Van Ester or anyone else showed up.

“Let’s roll,” Jake said.

They called goodbye to Rebecca and headed back to the parking garage. The sooner they got to a computer and translated her father’s files, the better she would feel.

The police left her apartment in worse shambles than they’d found it. Somehow Celeste wasn’t surprised, especially with Nick Roberts in charge of the investigation. She picked up an overturned planter. The Boston fern tilted to the side a bit, looking parched and weary.

“Let’s clean up.” Jake rolled his sleeves up and picked up some magazines, putting them back into the magazine rack next to her couch.

“No. Let’s check out the files first. I’m tired of waiting.”

“Why don’t you go pull them up and I’ll at least pick the living room up?” Jake kept straightening.

“Okay, Felix.” Celeste turned her back on the mess. It didn’t really

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bother her. Something more pressing lay in front of her. The mess would still be there. The files might not.

“Hungry?” Jake righted her overturned coffee table.

“A little. I’m scared to order takeout.” Celeste signed online and opened her e-mail.

“Pizza? I’ll go pick it up.”

“Sounds good.”

A chill ran through Celeste as the e-mail program started. No cutesy little You’ve Got Mail messages greeted her.

“Jake?”

“What’s wrong?” He strode to her side and glanced over her shoulder.

“The files aren’t here.” Celeste checked her old mail and her new mail. She double checked her sent mail.

“Are you sure they went through?” He placed his palm in between her shoulder blades.

Celeste calmed a bit at the touch. She took a deep breath. Panic wasn’t going to help anything.

“I’m positive. But they aren’t here now.”

“You sent them to your e-mail and not mine?”

“We can check, but I’m certain.” She frowned. But how had they disappeared? Did someone have her AOL password?

“Scoot over.” Jake pulled up a chair and rolled hers to the side a bit so he could use the keyboard of her laptop.

“You’ve got mail.” A deep voice greeted them.

“There’s something in my mailbox.” Jake pulled it up.

“Is it the files?” But Celeste knew it wasn’t. She’d sent the files to her own e-mail. She’d been very deliberate because she’d known they were coming back here.

“It’s an advertisement to come lick Jennifer—whoever she might be.” Jake deleted the message. “Porn spam.”

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“Someone has access to my e-mail. They’ve had access to my apartment. My food.” The panic rose in her throat and made its way into her voice. She couldn’t help it. “What else do they have access to?”

“I think maybe we’d better consider moving to a hotel for a few days, Celeste. It could be dangerous to stay here. We’re easy targets. Four people are already dead.”

“I’ll go pack a bag.” What should she do with her cat? She couldn’t leave him here when strangers might come back and destroy the apartment again. “I have to ask Samantha to watch Orange Slice for me.”

“I’ll go ask her,” Jake offered.

Celeste barely stopped the protest that came to her lips. Samantha was young and pretty and single. Part of her wanted to tell Jake not to go near the woman. To screech out like some demented sea witch from a cartoon. But she didn’t own him. He could make his own decisions about who to date. They weren’t committed. *No, you’re only sleeping together.*

She crammed clothes into a small suitcase. To be driven out of her home and sent running like a frightened animal infuriated her. Every cell in her body screamed out to stay and fight, but she knew that would be insane.

“Okay. Samantha will keep him for as long as we want.” Jake stood in the doorway to her bedroom. The top two buttons of his shirt were undone.

“How is old Samantha?” Celeste shoved a pair of tennis shoes into the bag.

“She asked me to dinner again.” Jake strolled into the room and flopped himself onto her bed. “Pasta.”

“Maybe you like pasta better than you thought you did.” Celeste yanked the zipper closed and slung the suitcase to the floor.

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“Would you cook me pasta, Celeste?” Jake placed his hands behind his head and stared up at the ceiling.

“No. And I won’t unbutton your shirt either.” She clicked the handle of the suitcase into place and rolled it out the bedroom door.

Jake followed. “It was one button, not the entire shirt.”

Celeste turned and gave him her tell-me-another-tall-tale look.

“Okay, two buttons. She has fast hands. But I told her that you and I, that we—” Jake stopped midsentence.

“That we what, Jake? Slept together one time? Big deal.” Her insides screamed from a tight ball that sat in the pit of her stomach. She wanted to break something but it would show her true emotions and she didn’t want Jake to know he had that much power over her. If she did and he decided to take Samantha up on her offer, she’d lose the friendship she had with him. If she had to lose him as a lover, she could deal with it. Couldn’t she? But she couldn’t bear to lose him as a best friend.

“You’re jealous.” He stepped in front of her.

“I am not. I don’t get jealous. It’s a waste of time.”

“You’re so jealous you’re seeing green spots in front of your eyes. Admit it.”

“Never.” Celeste moved around him and opened the front door. “Can we go or do you have to go share pasta with Samantha first?”

Jake whistled as they left. Celeste wondered how they were going to figure out her father’s formula now that the notes had disappeared once again. She’d deleted the final copy for safety reasons. They were at a dead end.

* * *

Executive Suites offered some advantages for two people trying to disappear. A built-in kitchen and living area. It was also on the opposite side of town, so they’d be harder to track down.

“Should we register under a fake name?” Celeste said.

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“The Smiths?”

Damn it. She wanted to stay mad at him, but she never could. The girl at the front desk looked very young and very pregnant. She flipped through a glossy magazine, and every few minutes she blew a huge bubble with her gum, which then popped back into her mouth.

“Can I help ya?” She threw the magazine under the counter, but blew another bubble.

“We need two rooms, please.”

“For how long?” The girl moved to the computer and typed a few keystrokes.

“A week?” Jake shrugged.

“Oh, that’s going to be a problem. We have a convention of businessmen coming in tonight. We only have one suite left.”

Why wasn’t she surprised? Celeste glanced at Jake. They could go to another hotel or just deal with it.

“How many bedrooms are in a suite?” *Please let her say two.*

“One.”

“Of course.”

“I can have a cot sent up.” The girl blew another bubble. This one popped on her, so she busied herself removing the sticky goo.

“Yes,” Celeste said.

“No,” Jake said at the same time.

Celeste glared at him. “We’ll talk about this later.”

“Whatever you say.” He just grinned.

Smug. Sometimes she wondered why she wanted him as a friend. It had been a huge mistake to take their relationship over the threshold and sleep with Jake. Not that it hadn’t been wonderful...she shifted her mind in a different direction before she told the girl to forget the cot and dragged Jake up to their suite.

The room reminded her of a quiet country pond. Muted green, textured wallpaper covered the walls. An armchair with rounded curves

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and business suit pinstripes in green and deep burgundy sat against the wall, a green leaf design covered the couch, heavy walnut tables rested on either side of the sofa, and a walnut desk with brass knobs nestled on the opposite wall.

“Home sweet home.” Jake took her suitcase into the bedroom and then came back.

“Cozy.” Celeste sat on the sofa, bouncing up and down to test its comfort level.

Jake took the armchair, his long legs twisting awkwardly.

“You don’t look very comfortable, Jake.” Celeste grinned.

“I miss my armchair.”

“Do you think we should let the detective know where we are? He did tell us not to leave town. He may think we skipped the country.”

“I don’t trust him.” Jake twisted his body to the other side of the chair, trying to get comfortable.

“Me either, but I haven’t had time to file the complaint and who knows if it would make any difference.”

“It’s strange how he always shows up so quickly after each incident.”

“Yes, especially the fire at your house. Do you think he really set it?”

“The thought crossed my mind,” Jake admitted. “But what motive could he have?”

“If I could figure out motives, I’d be able to figure out who killed my father and why.” Celeste sat up. “Oh my gosh! The main computer at E.V.E.”

Jake frowned, trying to keep up with her rapid shift in thoughts. “Yes, everything is networked.”

“They store backup tapes. Let’s go.” She jumped to her feet.

“Celeste, whoa.” He grabbed her arm.

Rushing forward at full speed and being brought to an abrupt halt

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was a recipe for disaster. She tumbled onto his lap. Jake's arms came around her. He couldn't have planned this better.

"Jake!" She pushed at his chest but he held her tight. "Let go."

"Nope. I like you here." He buried his face against her neck.

"We have to get to E.V.E. They have backup tapes."

Her words finally registered in his desire fogged brain. He jumped to his feet, almost knocking her to the floor. "Backup tapes. The formula will be on them."

Celeste giggled as his brain caught up with her words. If they could recover her father's notes, there could be more than just his formula there. There could be a clue as to who might have had a motive to murder him.

"We'll go tomorrow after the funeral. It wouldn't be safe right now. Too many people will be in the offices." He tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear.

Celeste pushed thoughts of the funeral away. A tiny part of her still believed this was all a bad dream and she'd wake up any moment.

* * *

Rain mixing with ice clattered against the windows as the funeral started. Celeste gripped Jake's hand, her other hand filled with tissues. She held back the sobs of pain. The pain wasn't only because she'd never see her father again. It went deeper. What really cut was that she'd never have a chance to really get to know her father. Sure, they'd worked together, but they hadn't shared many moments of family life. She couldn't remember a single Christmas dinner. He'd holed up in his lab every holiday.

Van Ester sat in the row behind them. Celeste wished she could throw him out of the funeral. How dare he come sit in the private family area without an invitation?

"Jake Walker will now say a few words." The minister turned to Jake.

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Celeste squeezed his hand. Her father would have wanted Jake to speak about his life and his work. Jake had worked alongside him every day. Sometimes she believed he'd loved Jake more than his own daughter.

"Benjamin Monroe was my mentor and dear friend." Jake cleared his throat and pulled a sheet of paper out of his pocket. Celeste knew him well enough to notice the clenched jaw that showed his emotions were barely held in check.

She couldn't break down. Jake's words would make it hard to hold her emotions in check. But her father hated emotional displays and she would not dishonor his memory by bawling like a baby in public. She bit her lower lip as Jake started to speak.

"Ben was the very definition of an absentminded, klutzy professor. He focused one hundred percent on his work, sometimes to the exclusion of everything else." Jake's eyes met Celeste's. She smiled gently to encourage him to continue.

"He loved his daughter. He had a wide group of scientist friends and colleagues he'd collected over the years—The Seeker's Club with whom he met every month without fail—except when he forgot."

A ripple of muted laughter swept through the room. Celeste knew several of the Seekers were in attendance.

"But while Ben might be likely to forget a birthday or a dinner engagement, he also had a big heart. His heart was so big he wanted to save the world with his formulas. And many would say he was successful because he's helped thousands with medicine for everything from asthma to arthritis."

Celeste bit her lip, fighting the tears, and Jake folded the sheet and sat back down next to her. She'd made it through the funeral without breaking down. The funeral director asked the guests to pay their last respects. As person after person shuffled by and said their private good-byes to her father, a numbness settled over Celeste. This couldn't be

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real. She wanted to scream and stomp her feet.

“Any idea who did it?” Martin Bailey, one of the Seekers and a friend of Ben’s since third grade, took Celeste’s hand and patted it.

“N-no.” She could hardly tell him that she suspected Van Ester of killing her father. Van Ester was part of their little club. And the members of the Seeker’s Club were disgustingly loyal to one another. Sometimes too much so.

“Don’t worry. We’ll find out who did it and that person will pay.” Martin’s normally gentle green eyes glittered, and she wondered if he intended to personally seek retribution. She shivered as the man moved toward and leant over her father’s casket in a silent farewell.

Mitch Saxton, a co-worker and most recent addition to the Seeker group, stopped in front of Celeste. He cleared his throat. “We loved your father. It’s just a shame that—”

“Mitch!” Van Ester took the other man’s arm in a tight grip. “Let’s pay our last respects.”

Mitch didn’t argue, but followed Evan like a docile puppy.

Weird. I wonder what Mitch was going to say? It wasn’t possible the Seekers were behind her father’s death. Was it?

“Celeste?” Jake’s arm felt heavy on her shoulders. “It’s time to say good-by.”

She rose unsteadily to her feet. She wasn’t ready to say good-by. Her father couldn’t be gone. He couldn’t. Panic that she’d held at bay since his death welled up inside her. Jake supported her as she stumbled to the coffin.

They’d put his spectacles on. Celeste almost laughed hysterically. He wouldn’t need them. His eyes were closed. He could no longer see, or feel or hear.

“Daddy.” Her knees gave away, and Jake held her to his side. He kissed her temple.

“Just let it out, Celeste.”

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“Oh, God.” Sobs wracked her body. Her emotions spun in fifty different directions until she had zero control over them. She needed to be strong, but she couldn’t.

She glanced one final time at her father. She’d never see his precious face again. He hadn’t been the best father in the world. He should have spent more time with her when she was little. But he’d never been intentionally cruel. He’d loved her in his own way. Now she was all alone in the world. There was only her to count on. The thought terrified her.

* * *

By the time they’d put Ben in the ground and Celeste had regained her composure, the evening shadows fell over the city. E.V.E. Corporation lay in darkness, except for a few twinkling lights of life here and there.

“We can use the excuse we want some pictures from Ben’s office, but I’m not sure how we’re going to hack into the main terminal. There are security features, aren’t there?”

“There are. We need access to a computer that’s directly connected. Like Evan’s.”

“Let’s just ask him, Celeste.”

“Are you serious? He could be my father’s murderer.”

“I don’t think so. Why would he kill Ben? Your father was a genius. He had more than this one formula in him. He consistently created drugs that earned money for this company.”

“You have a point.” She shifted from foot to foot, undecided.

“What do we have to lose at this point?”

“Okay. Let’s go. Maybe we can still catch him. Rebecca said he was going back to work after the funeral and he usually works late.”

The building lay in darkness. The upstairs executive offices were quiet as a graveyard at midnight. Most of the workers had gone home hours ago, and only the gentle hum of activity in odd spots of the

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building could be heard.

Mitch Saxton approached from the opposite end of the hall.

“Hi, Mitch.”

“Celeste. What are you two doing here?” Mitch adjusted the stack of file folders he held to keep from dropping them.

“Here to see Evan. Is he still around?”

“Yeah, the prick is still here. Has all of us suits working late on another of his “secret” projects. My wife is gonna freakin’ kill me if I don’t start making it home for dinner once a week.” He juggled the folders. “I’d better go. I’m about to lose these, and Evan is chomping at the bit to finish the meeting. See you later.”

The main door to Evan’s suite of offices stood open. Dark shadows spread like talons across the first office, but the light in Evan’s inner suite shone under the door, casting a low halo across the threshold.

“Evan?” Celeste knocked on the door.

Evan sat at his desk, his head in his hands. When she entered, he straightened quickly, but a blank terror filled his eyes.

“Celeste, what can I help you with?” He motioned for her to take a seat, then noticed Jake behind her. “I didn’t see you there, Walker. Sit. Sit.”

“We’re here to ask your help.” Celeste stared into his eyes, hoping she could trust him, but more than unsure. Could she trust anyone?

“Help how?” Evan glanced toward his apartment door.

“Are we keeping you from something?” Jake followed Evan’s stare.

“I have a date.” He shifted uncomfortably and Celeste assumed the date wasn’t with his wife.

She wondered momentarily who he dated, but it really didn’t matter. All that mattered was that he give them access to the main computer terminal.

“I think we can pull out my father’s formula and break the code.” Celeste laid it on the line. “All I want is my father’s name on it. I want

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him to have credit for the discovery.”

Evan leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers under his chin. “You think you can break the formula?”

“I know Jake can. He was my father’s understudy after all.”

“Yes. I hadn’t thought of that.” Evan glanced toward the door again and shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

“The formula could be worth millions.”

“Actually, it could be worth billions,” Evan offered, but he didn’t look happy at the prospect. “But it would also cost billions.”

“What do you mean?” Celeste leaned forward, sensing a sudden urgency in Evan’s expression.

He glanced toward his apartment again. Cleared his throat. Glanced again. Then shook his head slightly. “Look, I’m in a pretty big hurry, but it could cost more to develop than it would be worth. Who knows if it would work?”

“If my father invented it, it’ll work.” Celeste crossed her arms. It was strange Evan would doubt the formula when her father had created so many successful drugs and remedies for this company. “Can we at least use one of the main computers to pull his files up?”

Evan jumped from his chair and slammed his palms down on the top of his desk. A file tipped off the edge of the desk and papers fluttered down like wounded birds. “No. It would be best if you’d drop it all together.”

“Are you threatening us?” Jake asked.

“I’m warning you. Drop your quest to translate this formula and get it into production. Focus on something else. Now, I’m going to have to ask you both to leave because I have a meeting to wrap up and a date who’s growing very impatient.”

How could he know his date grew impatient? Celeste doubted he even had a date. It was probably just an excuse to get rid of them. “But—”

THE ELIXIR

“Leave, or I’ll have security escort you out.” Evan turned his back on them and went into his apartment. The distinct sound of a bolt clicking home echoed through the office.

“Not very friendly.” Jake picked up the folder that had fallen to the floor and glanced at the papers as he put them back.

“Pretty edgy, wasn’t he? Wonder what he’s hiding?” Celeste stood and glanced over his shoulder. “Anything interesting?”

“Nothing.” Jake laid the folder on the mahogany desktop. “We’ll have to try to figure something else out. Maybe we can hack in from the outside.”

“Do you know how hard it is to hack into a computer? I have some skills, but not that many.” Celeste bit her lip. “What if we slid into one of the other offices and just logged onto a computer? The executives are supposedly busy with a meeting, so they’re unlikely to notice.”

Jake stared at her a moment as though he might pronounce her insane. Then a wide grin broke out across his face. “What if the offices are locked? How would we get in, Madame Locksmith?”

“I have my ways.” She led the way to a vice president’s office next door.

She didn’t have to pick the lock after all because the door knob twisted easily and they were able to enter the unlocked office.

“Lock the door behind us.” Celeste twisted the rod that would pull the slats of the blinds closed.

The computer hummed softly in the corner. She quickly began searching for her father’s files. The backups on the system were stored on a tape. It was easy to navigate to where they were stored, but difficult to search through the many files.

“Maybe the easiest thing to do would be to find the e-mail I mailed myself earlier and pull it up.”

“Let’s do that then.” His warm breath on the back of her neck made her want to turn her head and kiss him.

THE ELIXIR

It took several minutes to locate the file. She'd just found it and was opening the file, when a loud thump hit the wall next to them.

Celeste rolled the chair back. Jake hissed his breath in when she caught his toes. Another thump hit the wall. They'd been discovered. Evan knew they were in this office.

"Hurry." Jake rolled her back to the keyboard.

She quickly sent herself another file, changed the password to her e-mail, and then grabbed a blank disk from the pile next to the computer and inserted it into the hard drive. She wasn't taking any chances this time.

"Done." Task completed, she grabbed the disk and they quickly left the office.

"Help." A weak groan trailed after them. Celeste turned.

"Did you hear that?" She took a step back the way they'd come. A darkened meeting room lay in deep shadows.

"Yes." Jake pushed her behind him and went first. "Evan? Who's there?"

"Jake? Celeste? Hurry." The man's voice sounded weak and slightly panicked.

Celeste flipped on the overhead light and they raced into the room. Mitch lay in the far corner, half under the long, sleek black table. Blood covered his once-white shirt and a huge knife stuck out of his chest.

"Get it out. I'm dying." His words rasped like fingernails on a chalkboard.

"I'll call 9-1-1." Jake grabbed the phone.

"Celeste," Mitch whispered.

"Mitch, who did this to you?"

"Evan—" A fit of coughing hit him and he couldn't finish.

"We're getting help. Hang in there." The blood now stained the carpet.

"Please. Get it out." He pointed weakly to the knife.

THE ELIXIR

“I’m scared to, Mitch. I might do more damage.”

“No. It hurts. Please.” He leaned up a little, but fell right back to the floor.

“I’ll try.” Celeste grasped the knife and pulled it out of his chest.

“Thank you.” Every breath he took rattled as though he had pneumonia. “Your father didn’t deserve what he got. I tried to talk them out of it. I tried.”

“Who? Why would someone do this to you, Mitch? Who are you talking about?”

“The Corps.”

“E.V.E. Corporation?” What the hell was he talking about? Did he mean Van Ester?

He shook his head slightly.

“Mitch, who hurt you?”

“The Corps—watch out for them. Dangerous. Their leader—dangerous. Sorry. So sorry.” He gasped, clutched his chest and stopped breathing.

“No.” Celeste hadn’t known Mitch Saxton well, but her tears fell just as freely as though he’d been a good friend. No one deserved to die this way.

“Celeste?” Jake touched her shoulder. “We did everything we could.”

“He tried to tell me who did this, but he died.” She propelled herself to a standing position. “Who would do this? Who? It makes no sense.”

“He was married. I don’t know if they had children.” Jake’s face furrowed and he stared at Mitch Saxton’s motionless form. “Celeste? What happened to the knife in his chest?”

“I took it out. He begged me to.” Realization dawned on her through her dazed brain. “My fingerprints will be all over it.”

“And my voice will be on the 9-1-1 call.” Jake glanced at Mitch then turned and grasped Celeste by her upper arms. “We have to run,

THE ELIXIR

Celeste. We look more than guilty, and they'll have evidence of another crime we both know we didn't commit. We've got to go. Now."

Celeste nodded and followed him out the door. She glanced back one last time at Mitch Saxton, once a dynamic man climbing the ladder at E.V.E. quickly, now replaced by an empty, murdered shell.

CHAPTER 10

Jake's heart pounded with every footstep away from the meeting room. The killer could still be in the building. Not only did they have to get as far away as possible before the police arrived, but a crazed serial killer could be stalking them at this moment, waiting to jump out from behind a cubicle wall.

"We can't take my car. The police might look for it." Jake's brain raced for a solution. Hailing a cab would be too risky. The police could track down a cab ride and he didn't have enough cash on him, so he'd have to charge it. The bus route was over for the day. "Let's try to slip out through the garage. We can duck into a stairwell if someone comes up."

They entered the garage at a run, but Celeste stopped. "We have to get out of this parking garage, Jake. It's like a cage. There's no way out but past the guard shack and it would be easy for the police to spot us."

"We'll have to go down to the second level and jump."

THE ELIXIR

“Are you insane?” Celeste glanced over the low wall and looked at the ground far below.

“Probably, but it won’t seem so far once we’re on the second level.” Jake dashed back to the stairwell.

The second floor was swathed in long, dark shadows, broken only by the dim lights along the sides of the concrete ceiling rafters. Most of E.V.E’s employees had already driven their SUVs and sporty compacts home. The rest of the world ate dinner, gathered around cozy fireplaces and was surrounded by family. There would be no snug family setting for him tonight.

“The ground is only eight or nine feet. It isn’t far.” Jake glanced over the wall. If he went first, would Celeste follow him? Should he go second? What if she fell and got hurt?

“Oh, for God’s sake, let’s just get it over with.” Celeste climbed onto the low wall and took the decision out of his hands by jumping without hesitation.

Jake followed her. The exhilaration of the wind whipping his hair, and the pit of his stomach dropping, only lasted a moment before he hit hard ground. The breath deserted his body.

“Ouch.” He grabbed his side.

“Come on.” Celeste tugged his arm. “I see the perfect getaway car.”

“Where?” Jake frowned. She moved too fast. He needed to think about their best plan of action.

“Over there. See the refrigerated truck? It only delivers vaccines on Fridays. No one will miss it until Monday. It’s perfect.”

Without waiting for an answer, she raced for the truck.

“Do you know where they keep the keys?” Jake tried the driver’s door, but the locked handle snapped back and pinched his fingers.

“Don’t need them.” Celeste shrugged out of her light jacket, wrapped it around her arm and hand and smashed the window of the truck.

THE ELIXIR

“I don’t even want to know where you learned to do that, but I’m guessing it wasn’t the locksmith.”

“Remington Steele.” She grinned.

“Excuse me?”

“It was a television show that was on when I was a kid. I was in love with Pierce Brosnan. Never missed an episode. They often found themselves in pinches. I learned to be resourceful.”

Jake rolled his gaze heavenward, pleading for the patience to deal with this situation and Celeste’s penchant for actually enjoying this type of adventure. He wouldn’t call it an adventure himself. More like a disaster.

“Well, Miss Resourceful, how are you going to get it started without the key?”

“I had a boyfriend in high school who loved fast cars.”

“This is hardly a fast car.” Jake got a nice view of her rear end as she climbed into the driver’s seat.

“No, but they’re all similar.” She reached under the dashboard and pulled loose some wires.

“Hot-wiring? He taught you how to hot-wire a car? And I thought you’d lived a pretty tame life.”

“I have. My boyfriends haven’t. I haven’t always done a good job picking the men in my life, but I’m very good at cutting them loose.”

“Thanks for the warning.” Is that what she wanted to do with him? Cut him loose?

The engine thrummed to life. A second later, the wail of sirens filled the night. Celeste shut the driver’s door and grabbed the Pacers hat on the seat next to her. Twisting her hair up on top of her head, she jammed the cap over it.

“Get in and get down.” Celeste shifted into drive. “I’m going to calmly drive away well under the speed limit. Let’s hope it works.”

“Let’s *pray* it works. Before we were only suspected of a crime.

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Now, we've actually committed one."

The rear of the building lay in quiet silhouettes. No sound escaped the E.V.E. Corporation. The building seemed as dead as its VP. Celeste's fingers tightened on the steering wheel until her knuckles showed white. They would have to pass the front of the building to make it to the main street and away from the scene of the crime.

Three squad cars rested at the curb, doors open. No police were in sight. Celeste and Jake exchanged a glance before she chuckled slightly.

"We should've taken one of those. We wouldn't have had to break the window."

"They'd miss their squad car, I'm pretty sure." Jake ran his fingers through his hair. "How can you be so damn chipper? Let's get the hell out of here."

Celeste shrugged and gave the truck a bit more gas. The top floor of the E.V.E Corporation shone with bright fluorescent lights. Celeste watched the white squares fade slowly in the rearview mirror until they were tiny pinpoints.

"Where to?" she asked.

"My college roommate has a place in Connecticut. An old farmhouse in the woods."

Celeste whistled. "That's a long drive."

"About thirteen hours. The place has quite a history. There is even an old bomb shelter."

"And they'll never think to look for us there?"

"Eventually, but it'll take them quite a while to track us down."

"Road trip then." Celeste flipped on the radio. "You rest. I'll drive. Then we'll switch."

"Good idea." Jake laid his head back against the seat and closed his eyes.

* * *

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Light traffic allowed Celeste to glance at him every few minutes. His dark lashes rested on his tanned cheeks like tiny black fans. Her fingers itched to reach over and touch his lips.

“I can’t sleep with you staring at me,” Jake said, his eyes still closed.

“If you’re asleep, how did you know I’m staring?”

“I can sense it.”

There was no point in denying it. She had been staring, trying to figure him out. For the past six years Jake had fit neatly into a slot in her mind. Friend. Best friend. That image had slowly changed over recent months. She’d always been attracted to him, but the attraction had grown stronger. She’d acted on her attraction to men before and proven to herself that she had extraordinarily bad taste in men.

“What thoughts are running through that brilliant mind of yours, Celeste?”

“Just thinking about what bad taste I have in men.”

“Thanks.” His voice sounded dry.

“I didn’t mean you.” Celeste laughed. “Thinking about old hurts is all.”

“Well, no offense, but if you’re going to pick men who like to hot wire cars, you probably aren’t going to have the best luck.”

“Your taste isn’t much better.” She refrained from mentioning Deborah’s name.

“Good point.”

“Do you ever think about getting married, Jake? Having children?”

“Sometimes.” He squirmed in his seat.

Celeste blew a strand of hair off her forehead and tamped down her irritation. *Men. The second you mentioned the “M” word, they thought you were proposing.*

“I didn’t mean with me, you dolt.” Although she’d like nothing better than to have his baby. The image of a dark-haired infant flickered

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to life. She shook her head to rid herself of the impossible fantasy.

“Why not? I’m not good enough for you because I can’t break and enter with ease?” Jake looked slightly irritated.

He didn’t like to talk about marriage, but he also didn’t like the fact she wasn’t considering marriage with him. *Interesting*. She filed the fact away for future reference.

“You’d definitely have to brush up on your criminal skills.”

“Is that so?” He crossed his arms. “I think I’m doing pretty well in that area.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes, really.” He ticked off points on his fingers. “I was arrested for murder. Suspected of several others. And now I’m on the run in a stolen vehicle. If that isn’t bad boy material, I don’t know what is.”

Celeste laughed. She loved the way Jake could take a serious moment and bring out the humor in it, keeping the tension clawing its way through her at bay.

“And maybe I want a bad girl,” he added.

“Oh, I can be bad.” Her voice had a definite feline purr to it.

“You can break and enter pretty damn well, I’ll give you that.”

“Don’t forget my fingerprints are all over the murder weapon we just left behind too.”

“Okay, you’re hired.”

“Hired for what?”

“To be my future wife and mother of my children.”

Was he joking or serious? Celeste coughed. She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. A wide grin showed the humor he found in the situation. She wanted to kick him. Marriage wasn’t funny. Not really. Damn him for confusing her.

“That’s not funny, Jake.” She smacked him with her right hand. The truck swerved, so she grasped the steering wheel with both hands. “What if I’d thought that was a real proposal? What would you have

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done?"

"Maybe it was a real proposal."

"The day a man proposes to me, Jake Walker, he'd better line the room with rose petals, champagne and a big diamond ring. And he'd better get down on one knee and ask. Otherwise, the answer is no."

"Yes, Princess Celeste."

"I deserve to be treated like a princess." Well, maybe not really, but it sounded good at the moment. The thought pushed away the reality that they were racing down the highway, police hot on their heels, in a stolen refrigerator truck.

"Yes, you do," Jake agreed.

Celeste wondered what his slight nod meant. She wasn't sure she liked the expression on his face, but traffic picked up as she neared Cincinnati and she didn't have time to think about anything but avoiding a fender bender.

* * *

The tall, spindly trees were bare of leaves at this time of year, denying them the cover a spring or summer foliage might have provided. The white, colonial style farmhouse came into view after a series of twists and turns down winding back roads. A low, multi-colored rock wall lay at the front of the yard.

"Beautiful house."

"Dennis bought it last year as a summer house. In medical school, he decided he wanted to make money, so he went into plastic surgery."

"Obviously he met his goal. How do we get in?" Celeste asked.

"I'm sure you could think of a way."

"If I had to."

"No need. I have a key. Dennis gave me one last fall when I spent some vacation time here."

The front hall curved invitingly, the walls painted with burgundy hues. A circular staircase led to a landing and the second floor.

THE ELIXIR

“We’ll go into town tomorrow and grab some groceries.” Jake threw his jacket onto the brass coat rack next to the front door.

“Does Dennis have a computer?” Celeste’s hand tightened around the disk in her pocket with her father’s formula.

“Does he have a *computer*...” Jake chuckled and led the way down a long hall to a back office.

The office occupied as much space as her entire apartment. Along the back wall were built-in redwood bookshelves filled with volumes of reading material.

A low couch and scattered chairs made comfortable reading areas. On the back wall rested a bank of computers and hard drives.

“Wow.” Celeste gravitated toward the computers.

“Quite a setup. His hobby is playing on the computer, and he insists on having the latest everything. He ran a miniature server from this house for a while, but his practice called him back and he couldn’t find anyone to take it over.”

She turned on the closest computer and it hummed to life. She popped the disk in, and Celeste pulled up her father’s formula. “Nothing is going to distract me from translating his notes this time.”

“I’ll go see if Dennis has a supply of coffee.”

Celeste began translating her father’s complicated coding, seeing instantly many ingredients in the formula that seemed wrong. She frowned.

Why would her father put antifreeze into a formula? Wouldn’t that kill someone? Fish oil? Bovine dried liver? She continued translating and then moved to his notes.

“How’s it going?” Jake placed a mug of coffee close to her elbow.

Celeste started. She’d been lost in her own confused thoughts. “Jake, my father said the formula worked? It was a fountain of youth?”

“Yes. The formula activated the FoxM1B gene and reversed aging.”

“And what was his proof of this?”

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“He said he ran some secret experiments. I never saw them.” Jake sipped his coffee.

“This formula is bogus.”

“Then it isn’t your father’s.”

“I thought so too—at first.” She rubbed her temples, trying to ease the ache behind them. “But it’s his wording, his pattern of syntax. It’s his code, which is pretty complicated and hard to replicate.”

“Why would he leave behind a counterfeit formula?” Jake looked at the formula on the screen. “Dried bovine?”

“I know. It’s just liver. It doesn’t do anything. Not one thing.”

“Antifreeze? No way.” Jake scrolled down further and shook his head in confusion.

“So, if the formula wasn’t actually a formula, why was my father working on it? Why waste your entire life working on a formula that doesn’t exist?”

Jake collapsed into the chair next to hers. “I don’t get it. He was so passionate about finding the fountain of youth. He did tests daily. Read everything he could get his hands on.”

“Or did he?” Celeste frowned. “Somehow I’m starting to wonder if I knew my father at all. When I was a little girl, my father had a lab in the basement. One time we had to leave our house for months and months while it was disinfected. He told my mother and I that lab rats had gotten loose and multiplied and were being exterminated.”

“That wouldn’t take months.”

“I know. I’d forgotten that incident until just now. And it isn’t the only one. But if they weren’t disinfecting for rats, what were they disinfecting for?”

“What did his notes say?” Jake nodded toward the screen.

“Nothing really. A bunch of mumbo jumbo about researching youth in rats. The thing is, it’s not scientific mumbo jumbo. It’s like he’s just written down anything quickly to make people think that’s what he’s

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working on. He doesn't support his facts or his hypothesis at all."

"Strange."

"My father said nothing to you about this?" What had her seemingly sweet, somewhat dingy father been up to?

"No." Jake glanced away, looking uncomfortable.

"Jake? You aren't telling me something." Celeste jumped to her feet, fury pumping through her. "I can't believe this. You're actually hiding something from me."

"Not exactly." He stood and pulled her close.

She struggled, not wanting him to touch her at that moment. Ben had been *her* father, damn it. She had a right to know what he'd been involved with. It could point to the reason he was murdered.

"Look, your father gave me some journals a couple of years ago and asked me to hang onto them."

"A couple of years ago? Are you sure you didn't get them recently?" Like when he'd murdered her father. She took a step away. Hadn't the police said they believed some of her father's journals were missing?

"No. It was definitely a couple of years ago. I put them in a safe place."

"Really? And where is this place?"

Jake's eyes widened. "I have to make a phone call."

What was wrong with him? The clue to her father's entire life and death could be contained in those journals and he wanted to make a phone call. Celeste barely resisted the urge to jump on his back and demand he take her to the diaries. But she couldn't resist the urge to follow him to the telephone.

He dialed the number from memory. "Mom? Remember that box I gave you?" Jake's frown deepened. "Send it to me at Dennis's place in Connecticut. Listen. Don't go to the post office. I want you to box it up and go to one of those commercial office centers and address it to

THE ELIXIR

Dennis instead of me.”

He listened for a moment. Celeste frowned too. He was obviously concerned the journals might put his mother at risk from those who had killed her father.

“Yes. I’ll expect it tomorrow.”

“What the hell is going on Jake? You have journals you don’t tell me about? You leave them with your mother?” She began speaking before the phone landed back in the cradle.

“I thought they were personal journals, Celeste. Ben asked me not to look at them. He said if anything happened to him to give them to you.”

“Well, something happened to him, so why don’t I have them?” She wanted to pound him. She wanted to spit nails.

“Because I thought they were personal and I didn’t think you were ready to read them. I thought I’d let you heal a bit before I gave them to you. Besides, we’ve been pretty busy.”

“Stay away from me, Jake Walker. I’m going to go find a room to sleep in and I don’t want to hear from you again tonight. I thought you were my friend, but all you do is lie to me. Just like every other man I’ve known. Including my father.”

“Okay, but don’t be scared of Millicent.”

“Millicent?”

“Millie. The ghost.”

Celeste snorted. “I don’t believe in ghosts.”

“Uh-huh.” Jake whistled as she left the room and headed upstairs.

* * *

The wind howled with the force of a thousand lost souls. Each soul brushed against the wooden slats covering the outside of the house, and rattled skeletal fingers. Celeste snuggled into the heavy quilt covering the huge four-poster bed.

It took her back to her childhood. Funny how those things stayed

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with you. She could remember long nights with her father working in the basement of their home while she fought imaginary monsters before falling into an exhausted sleep.

“You’re a big girl now, Celeste,” she told herself. There was no reason to be afraid. But the tentacles of terror wrapped around her, and even the heavy quilt couldn’t keep them away.

When a light knock sounded on her bedroom door, she jumped as though gunfire had rippled through the room.

“Who is it?” Her voice sounded irritated, but she was terrified. *God, please let it be Jake.*

“Who else is in this house?” Jake opened the door and poked his head inside. “I didn’t want to go to bed mad.”

“You weren’t mad. I was.” She sat up and crossed her legs Indian style. “You can come in if you want.”

Jake sat on the edge of the bed, his finger running over the triangular star pattern on top of the quilt.

“I’ve been thinking about your father’s formula.”

“His phony elixir you mean?” A surge of disappointment rose into her throat.

She’d raised herself. Her father had loved her in his own way, but every waking hour had been spent in either his lab at home or at E.V.E. There hadn’t been any father at her school plays or parent nights. He’d never tucked her in or read her bedtime stories. It was only when she’d gotten old enough to actually take an interest in science that he’d paid her any attention at all.

“I think it was a cover,” Jake said.

“A cover for what?”

“That, I’m not sure of. But I believe the youth serum was a cover for what he was really working on. It would explain why he could never provide me with the results I asked him for, and why he was always so secretive with the codes.”

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“It would also clarify the unexplained trips he took every year.”

“Yes. But who was he taking the trips for and what type of research was he doing? If it was for Van Ester, we may have lost our chance of ever knowing what your father was up to.”

“It goes deeper than Evan.” She’d talk about this all night if it meant Jake would stay and keep the monsters away. Oh, she knew there weren’t really any monsters, but her trembling hands didn’t one hundred percent believe her logic.

“Yes. Someone killed him but I can’t imagine who.”

A branch from the tall white oak tree outside clacked against the window pane. Celeste jumped and scooted closer to Jake.

* * *

“Are you scared, Celeste?” Usually, Celeste could handle anything. If she was scared, perhaps she’d lean on him just a little. Jake figured she’d deny being scared of course.

“A little.”

Was she admitting she was scared? She must be terrified then. He shouldn’t have told her about the ghost. Although Dennis insisted the original owner of the home had a niece who’d died in the study, and that her spirit roamed the hallways, he didn’t believe it himself. He was surprised Celeste did.

“If it makes you feel any better, I’ve never seen the ghost.” He tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. She turned her face into his palm and nuzzled him. His heart skipped several beats before resuming a more rapid pace.

“I’m not scared of a ghost.” She looked away, a light flush staining her cheeks.

He scooted closer and pulled her into his arms. She came willingly, so he tucked her against his side and lay on the bed.

“When I was a little girl, I was afraid of monsters. I was convinced a horrible monster lived in my closet. I could picture him every night,

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his red eyes glowing in the dark.”

She took a deep breath and he could tell she didn’t really want to share this with him, but felt that she had to tell it or burst. He hugged her closer and placed a gentle kiss on her forehead.

“I’d close my eyes, but the monster would still be there, breathing heavily. He would growl at the end of each breath. I’d hide under the covers, but I could still hear him. Eventually I’d grow exhausted and fall asleep.”

“I think all children believe there’s a monster in their closet, Celeste. There’s nothing to be ashamed of and it’s okay to still be scared sometimes.”

“Yes, but most children have fathers who’ll tuck them in at night and tell them the monsters aren’t real.”

A tear slipped out of the corner of her eye and Jake realized how vulnerable she felt at that moment.

“Ben didn’t chase the monsters away?”

“No.” She shook her head. “He wouldn’t even come up out of his basement. I used to wonder if he made monsters down there. Like Dr. Frankenstein.”

Jake stroked his hand down her arms. She felt cool and tiny bumps of fear had erupted across the surface of her usually smooth skin.

“I’m here now, Celeste. I won’t let any monsters get you.”

She smiled. “I appreciate that, Jake. Y-you’ll stay with me tonight?”

“Yes, but no sex.”

“Where’s the fun in that?”

“It’ll be hell, but you’re too vulnerable tonight. What type of gentleman would I be if I took advantage of that?”

“Who wants a gentleman?” She pushed him back against the pillows and straddled him, planting butterfly kisses down his neck as she unbuttoned his shirt.

“Celeste, I don’t think—”

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“Don’t think. Just feel.”

There was so much unsettled between them. Sleeping together again would be a major mistake. Jake tried to remind himself that they needed to work some things out or their friendship could be at stake. But his body had a different idea. God help him, he took her up on her offer.

CHAPTER 11

A small cardboard box arrived around four in the afternoon the next day. Jake signed for it and took it into the kitchen, Celeste on his heels.

“When did you say my father gave you these journals?”

Jake wondered if a hint of suspicion shone out of her eyes? The police kept insisting that someone had taken journals off Ben’s body. Did she think these were those journals? He could talk until he turned blue in the face but she would either believe he got the journals when he said or she wouldn’t.

“Two years ago. Just after Van Ester took credit for his arthritis medicine. He gave me these journals. Ben said they weren’t safe at E.V.E. and to put them in a safe place.” Jake shrugged. He had no idea what hid inside those pages. He’d taken them to his childhood home and given them to his mother for safekeeping.

“How odd.” Celeste motioned toward the box. “Open it.”

Jake used a small peeling knife to slit the tape and pulled the edges

THE ELIXIR

of the box apart. Three, black-covered composition notebooks rested inside.

“Have you read these?” Celeste grabbed the one on top and flipped it open. “What’s in them?”

“I didn’t look.”

“You mean to tell me that my father gave you three ‘top secret’ journals and you didn’t even peek?” Celeste blinked at him as though such a thing was beyond her comprehension.

“It wasn’t my business to look at them. He didn’t ask me to.”

“Men. He asked you to hide them. It’s understood that you’ll look at them.” She flipped to the next page in the journal.

“These are written in code,” she said as she walked to the kitchen table and sat down.

“I’ll look at this one.” Jake grabbed the second journal, leaving the third in the box.

“They’re in code and I can’t translate it.” Celeste laid the notebook face down on the tabletop.

“Me either.” Jake laid his down and grabbed the third notebook. It too was written in a series of symbols that bore no resemblance to the code Ben had taught both he and Celeste.

“Is this a joke?” Her eyes narrowed.

“If it is, it was played on both of us.”

“Jake, why would my father use a code no one knows?” Celeste frowned and looked for a moment as though she might sling the notebook across the room in frustration.

“There’s a simple answer.” He sat back in his chair, his mind racing in a million directions. “Someone knows the code. Just not us.”

“Then who?” Celeste asked. “I have to admit, it hurts that he didn’t teach me a code he used. What could these journals possibly contain that he couldn’t share with me?”

“Maybe it was a matter of safety. Protecting us from knowledge

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that could harm us.”

Or maybe it was an issue of trust. Something so big or so dangerous Ben didn't trust even his understudy or his own daughter with it. But he wasn't about to tell Celeste that. She already reeled with hurt and betrayal.

A loud banging at the front door echoed through the old house. Her gaze met his and they both jumped to their feet, putting the journals back into the box in three quick throws.

“Who knows we're here?” Celeste opened cabinets. “Where should I hide these?”

“The oven.”

She popped the box inside and slammed it shut. “Good idea.”

“My mother is the only one who knows we're here, and she has never pounded on a door in her life.” Jake took a deep breath. Whoever was outside meant business and he had a feeling it had to do with Ben's journals.

“Celeste, I want you to hide in one of the bedrooms.”

“Not on your life.” She crossed her arms and trailed him to the front door. “I'm not hiding like a scared child.”

Jake didn't remind her that she'd been shaking under her covers just last night at the thought of mythological beasts. “At least stay behind me until we can gauge who it is and what they want.” And what kind of danger they were both in. Jake wished for the weight of his gun in that moment, but it was in the hands of the police, and he assumed was being tested in ballistics. His palms were damp and slipped on the knob as he twisted it and pulled the door open.

“Mr. Jacob Walker?” A man in a navy suit stood on the stoop, looking as though his designer shoes were a size too small.

“Yes.” What the hell?

“Agent Matt Dirk.” The man flashed a badge too quickly for Jake to see clearly. “Central Intelligence Agency.”

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* * *

“We’ll need to see that badge, Agent Dirk.” Celeste held out her hand.

“Miss...” The man waited for her to fill in the blank.

“The badge first.” Celeste met his gaze without flinching. Men like him, ones who thought they could intimidate women with their titles and expectations, didn’t scare her. She’d learned to stand her ground the first year of medical school

The investigator smiled and held his badge up for their inspection. Celeste gazed at it for long moments. Finally, she admitted to herself that she wouldn’t know if it was a fake or legitimate, so she nodded.

“Please come in, Mr. Dirk.” Jake held the door open.

“I’m sure you’re wondering how we traced you here.” Matt Dirk followed them into the living room and took the seat Jake indicated.

“The package that was delivered this morning,” Jake said.

“You’re very quick, Dr. Walker.”

“He’s brilliant.” Celeste grew tired of this chit-chat. “So, why were you watching us? And why do you care if Jake’s mother sends us cookies?”

They could claim they’d eaten the cookies. No evidence left. It was the best excuse she could think of at a moment’s notice.

“We both know there weren’t cookies in that box. Mrs. Walker is not a baker. She’s known for drive-through cooking.”

My God. The CIA knew what Jake’s family’s cooking habits were. The blunt truth that her father had been involved in something bigger than she could possibly comprehend shoved into her mind like the rasp of cold steel.

“What the hell is going on?” Jake leaned forward, his gaze demanding answers from the man.

“That is classified information.”

“My father was a sweet, brilliant scientist. What could he possibly

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have known that's classified?"

The investigator sighed and Celeste had the feeling this assignment was much more difficult than he'd anticipated.

"Miss Monroe, I cannot share that information with you."

"Well, sorry to waste your time." Celeste stood and held out her hand. "I'm afraid my information is classified as well."

Matt Dirk rose. "I can haul you in to CIA headquarters for questioning."

"Your threats won't work with me. I'll have it all over the media within twenty-four hours. How the CIA is harassing this poor, grieving daughter." Using her anguish over her father's death left a bitter taste in her mouth, but he'd raised her to be independent. To stand up for herself. He wouldn't want her to take flak from this man or anyone.

A wide grin split Matt's face and admiration twinkled in his eyes. He tipped an imaginary hat to her. "*Touché*, Miss Monroe. *Touché*. The agency does not want publicity over this matter."

Celeste wondered why that was. What had her father been involved in that was top secret and why was the CIA so bent on keeping it out of the public eye? Images of espionage and spy games floated before her eyes, but her father had never left the city of Indianapolis, so it was unlikely he could have lived a life as an international spy.

"I'll have to see if I can get special permission to share some of your father's work with you." Matt moved toward the front door.

Jake and Celeste followed.

"Just make sure the permission doesn't include that you can tell us, but then you'll have to kill us." Jake stared at the man.

Celeste would have thought he joked, but no smile lightened Jake's serious expression and she realized he was completely serious. Kill them? She swallowed. What strange twilight zone had she been thrown into?

Jake closed the door behind CIA agent Dirk and Celeste collapsed

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into his arms, needing his warmth and strength to rejuvenate her tired spirits.

He stroked her back and neck in tiny circles. She relaxed into him, enjoying the human contact after having to put on a brave front while the investigator was here. Jake's touch sent electrical pulses of energy through her body, and she slowly regained the strength which had drained from her.

"What should we do, Jake? Wait and trust him or run?" She lifted her face to his.

"I don't know." His forehead creased into lines of worry. "I wish to hell I knew, but I don't."

"Me either. I'm scared they'll come back with some kind of warrant and take the journals."

"We need to find a better place to hide them."

"Where?" Celeste's mind felt as though it had been run through a strainer. She had no idea where to hide the journals. It had to be someplace safe. Someplace that wouldn't put another person at risk.

"They could be watching us."

"I know. So to leave and go anywhere would point them right to where the journals are."

"Sometimes the best hiding place is the most obvious." Jake grinned.

"Meaning?"

"Meaning. We go somewhere. A park maybe or a museum. We walk around. Act like we poking under various places. But we leave the box right where it is."

"Brilliant." Celeste placed her hands on either side of his face and kissed him full on the lips.

* * *

The wide path lay scattered with mounds of stones. A light frost still remained under the heavy branches of the evergreens, even though

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the winter sun warmed the center of the trail.

“Stop number one.” Jake took her hand as they strolled through Putnam State Park. “We’ll spend the day making stops. If they’re following us, it’ll force them to focus their resources among scattered locations. Hopefully they’ll stay away from the only location that matters.”

“I love the diabolical way your mind works.” Celeste squeezed his hand.

Her chest ached with emotion as the zesty pine aroma filled her senses. This moment with Jake imprinted itself into her heart. Many years from now, when she and Jake were no longer lovers, she would remember this moment and cherish the closeness, the intense bond they shared. Each time she smelled pine, she would be transported back to their brief time as lovers.

Her throat filled with unsaid wishes. How much she wanted to spend the rest of her life loving this man. But Jake hadn’t expressed the least interest in anything more than what they shared. And they couldn’t go on forever in this limbo relationship. Either they would both choose the easy path and go back to being best friends, tucking the remembrance of their lovemaking into a far corner of the soul. Or they would move their relationship forward and risk losing one another forever. Was she brave enough to risk losing Jake for the chance of having him body and soul?

“That’s probably long enough.” They made their way back to the bright blue economy car they’d picked up at a local used car dealer. “Are you having fun playing tourist?”

“I’m having fun playing games with the CIA.” Celeste couldn’t help the exhilaration that bubbled through her blood. “I think I may have missed my calling as a spy.”

“It’s rather fun to think of some faceless agent going nuts trying to figure out what we’re up to, isn’t it?” Jake opened her door and Celeste

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slid into the low seat.

“Where to next?” she asked when Jake got in the driver’s side and started the engine.

“The wronger a conspiracy is, the better it is,” he quoted.

“What’s that from?”

“*Tom Sawyer’s Conspiracy.*”

“Ah. A Mark Twain fan. I assume there’s a clue in this about where we’re headed next?” After five years, she thought she’d known everything there was to know about Jake Walker. This was something new. Something from his boyhood that he hadn’t shared. She wondered what else she didn’t know about him.

“Mark Twain Library. Not only have I always wanted to visit, but can you picture the CIA descending on a library and trying to find a set of journals amongst volumes of books and other recordings? It’ll take them days.”

“Lead the way.” Celeste giggled. She’d never thought duping the government would be such fun. She only hoped they didn’t bring down more wrath on themselves than they could handle.

They pulled to a stop in front of a small building unlike anything she’d pictured. The slanted roof and wide windows all sat at the front of the white building; the sides were broken up only by a small, arched doorway. This is where they entered the building.

An hour later, they left the library and headed for their next destination. Huntington State Park greeted them with two large sculptures on either side of the park entrance. A pair of howling wolves lifted their muzzles skyward and, across the road, a mother and baby bear watched as the car zipped past.

“Let’s take a hike by this first pond.” The park map rattled as Jake tried to steer and read at the same time.

Past the thrill of fooling anyone who might be keeping an eye on them, Celeste felt the stirrings of fear. Perhaps they were taking things

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too far. What if the information in her father's journals was something the government needed? It seemed incomprehensible to her that the sweet, slightly scatterbrained man who'd raised her was involved in anything of consequence to the country's security, but what if he had been? What if she were mistaken? Would the country be at risk? Was she? Was Jake?

Fear burrowed its way under her skin and left her breathless, wondering what might happen next.

* * *

"You haven't said a word for hours." Jake moved behind Celeste where she looked out the front window. What was she thinking?

"Just waiting for the shoe to drop, I suppose." She rubbed her arms as though the chill that had crept into the Connecticut countryside had also slid under her skin.

"We had to do something. Those journals could hold the key to our freedom." Jake pulled her back against him.

She stiffened for a moment and then relaxed into him. He wondered if she'd ever feel comfortable with him again. Tonight, he would focus on showing her that she could still trust him as her best friend. They had that base to build on. It shouldn't be gone simply because the dynamic of their friendship had changed.

"Why don't we curl up in front of a fire with hot cocoa?" He spun her around and kissed her lips. She responded to him instantly, her arms rising to tangle around his neck.

"Jake Walker, I believe you have a romantic side you've been hiding from me. But I have a better idea. Let's grab a beer and pizza and watch some television."

Jake laughed. "So much for romance. Okay, m'lady. Whatever your heart desires. There's a frozen pizza in the freezer."

"Why are you looking at *me*?" She sat down on the couch and propped her feet onto the coffee table. "I don't cook, remember?"

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Jake laughed. He had wanted their relationship back to the footing it had been on for the past five years and he'd gotten his wish. Celeste grabbed the remote and flipped through the channels. Jake knew she'd eventually give up on finding anything worth watching and then he'd have control of the remote.

He whistled as he went to make their impromptu dinner. Things were definitely looking up.

* * *

Celeste normally flipped through as many channels as there were before deciding there was nothing worth watching. Tonight, however, the sight of her own face plastered on the national news caught her attention. She stopped and turned up the volume.

"...daughter of the doctor. Both are wanted in connection with several murders." Jake's picture flashed onto the screen alongside hers. "If you've seen either of these suspects, please phone the Crime Stoppers Hotline."

A bold number flashed onto the screen the same moment Celeste found her voice. "J-J-Jake!"

"What's wrong?" Jake slid into the room as his shoes hit a highly waxed spot on the oak planking.

"We're on the national news. This isn't good." She pointed, but their images were gone.

"What did it say?"

"That we're both wanted for murder. For multiple murders. Oh, Jake." Her hands covered her mouth.

"Celeste, relax." He pulled her hands from her mouth and held them.

She took a deep breath as his warmth penetrated her frozen veins.

"We knew we were suspects, Celeste. That's why we ran. To give us more time to find the real killer. To find answers."

"Yes, but now we just look guilty. And now the entire nation is

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looking for us.”

“So, we hole up here...” he trailed off.

“Exactly. The CIA already knows where we are. The only reason they didn’t arrest us earlier was either they didn’t know we were wanted or they want the journals first. We’re screwed.”

A few snowflakes began to fall outside the window just as the loud knock sounded on the front door. Celeste jumped. It was them. It was over. They’d be thrown in jail. Her fingerprints on the knife that had killed Addison would be enough to convict her of his murder. Life as she’d known it was over and she hadn’t really lived yet.

There would be no marriage or children or cozy Christmas scenes. She’d spent her childhood dreaming of family dinners and sharing holidays and birthdays with her husband and children. She’d dreamed of a life she’d never had as a youth. A life that now she’d never have.

“You might as well answer it,” she told Jake. “There isn’t any point hiding. They know we’re here.”

“Celeste—” Jake stopped, but he stared at her as though there was something more he wanted to say.

“Just answer the door.”

He went into the hallway and she heard the deep rumble of male voices. A moment later, Matt Dirk followed Jake into the living room. Celeste swallowed the bile threatening to escape.

“Miss Monroe.” He nodded his head in her direction and took the seat he’d vacated earlier. “Seems like you and Mr. Walker have a little problem. Perhaps we can negotiate?”

“A little problem?” Celeste laughed, the sound lacking mirth. Even she could hear it.

“Look, we know you didn’t kill anyone. You’ve both been profiled. It’s very unlikely you’d commit murder. It isn’t in your makeup. Your father knew too much—they couldn’t allow him to live—besides, they needed his formula.”

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“You know who killed my father?” Celeste blinked. The man had just proclaimed them innocent in one breath. Why couldn’t Indianapolis PD see the same thing?

“Understand it isn’t an exact science. We know who had reason to kill him. We have a profile of the type of person who might’ve killed him.”

“That’s more than we have,” Jake said.

“For your safety, it’s best I don’t say anymore. The journals will exonerate you.”

“Let me get this straight.” Celeste rose to her feet and paced the length of the room, needing a moment to collect her thoughts. “You expect us to hand over the journals and trust they contain information that’ll save us from prosecution.”

“I was afraid you’d question that.” Matt clasped his hands together and leaned forward.

“Wouldn’t you, Agent Dirk?” She wondered if there was anyone she could trust besides Jake. Her co-workers were either dying or involved in this somehow. Those she’d thought were longtime family friends were implicated too. Who could she trust?

“Yes.” He smiled. “You hand over the journals. We grant you immunity from criminal prosecution in the murders.”

“Just like that?” Jake frowned.

“Of course.”

“The journals are that important?” *What the hell had my father been into*, she asked herself for the thousandth time that day.

“Extremely important. Were they to fall into the wrong hands, it could be dangerous for our country.” Matt Dirk held her gaze with honesty.

Celeste believed him, but she didn’t trust the government. No. She’d heard a few too many horror stories and she didn’t like the fact they didn’t want to share with her and Jake what was in those journals.

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“We’ll think about it, Agent Dirk.” She shook his hand.

“Are the journals here?”

“Of course not.” Jake chuckled. “How foolish do you think we are?”

“I know you led my agent on a merry chase this afternoon all around Redding.”

“We were sightseeing.”

“If you don’t share where the journals are, you’ll force us to search each location you went to. Do you really want to inconvenience the places you visited as well as the government?”

“You can’t bully us, Agent Dirk.” Celeste straightened her shoulders. She didn’t like tough guy tactics and she wasn’t about to bow to them. She needed time to think.

“I’ll be back tomorrow.” He nodded.

“And you can tell your stake-out team to take the night off. We aren’t likely to go anywhere when every law enforcement agency in the country is looking for us.”

“Of course.”

But Celeste knew the detective had no intention of taking the surveillance team away from the farmhouse. That just meant they’d have to find another way out.

CHAPTER 12

How was he going to convince Celeste to take Matt Dirk's deal? He had to protect her. She was tough, but she wouldn't survive in prison away from the intellectual pursuits she'd always enjoyed. Jake remembered the dark cell door clanging shut behind him and shuddered.

"We should take his deal." He followed her into the kitchen.

"Kiss me." She grabbed him and held her mouth up to his, but there was no real passion in the embrace.

"What are you doing, Celeste?" He tried to push her away.

"They're watching. Kiss me, then lower me to the floor where we'll grab the box from the oven. We're hightailing it out of here."

Jake glanced out the window, where he caught a flash of metal just behind the line of trees. Narrowing in on that flash in the dusk, he spotted a man in camouflage fatigues with a pair of binoculars trained on them. So she wanted kissed? He'd kiss her.

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He bent her back over his arm and started with a slow sweep of caresses up her neck and across her jaw line. His lips teased hers, eliciting a response. Their mouths met, parted, met again in an age-old dance.

“Jake.” Celeste’s breath came in short pants. “You’re distracting me.”

“Good.” He needed to slow the pace down though. He dramatically lowered her to the floor for the benefit of the prying eyes outside, but rolled a few feet away from her. “Tell me exactly what you’re planning.”

“A visit to my father’s home.” She crawled to the oven and removed the box. “His lab will hold the answers. He never allowed me or anyone else down there. This is where he has to have done this top secret research. We’re scientists. It won’t take us long to figure out what that research is.”

“Have I told you lately how brilliant you are?”

“Never hurts to hear it again.” She sat down in front of the stove. “Now...how are we going to get past the spooks?”

“Did I mention that in the late ’50s the owner of this house built a bomb shelter that could be accessed from the house, but had an escape route on the other side of the hill?” Jake had leaned close and whispered the words into her ear in case the CIA had bugged the house.

“I remember you mentioned a bomb shelter, but not a secret exit. Seriously?” Celeste whispered back. “That’s almost too easy. But how will we get to the car?”

“Let’s jump off that bridge when we come to it.”

“Deal. Lead the way.”

Jake crawled through the house and toward the entrance to the basement. Celeste followed, hoping they wouldn’t be spotted through the windows. They stayed close to the walls and low to the floor.

Once they got to the basement doorway, she straightened and

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rushed down the stairs behind Jake as quickly as was safe. Jake stopped in front of a heavy metal door and twisted a wheel-like knob that reminded Celeste of a bank vault.

“This is it,” she said.

Jake nodded and pulled the door open. The inside smelled musty and unused. Pitch blackness greeted them for a moment before a generator hummed to life and low watt lighting showed the interior. Even locked from the outside world, layers of dust had collected over the years and covered the interior with a ghost-like coating of gray.

Jake closed the door behind them and Celeste prayed they weren't trapped inside for the next twenty years, although she couldn't think of anyone she'd rather be trapped with.

“This way.” Jake moved quickly through the interior rooms, which were larger than Celeste had imagined.

“How big is this?”

“Dennis said the size of a small house. About fifteen-hundred square feet I believe.”

“Impressive. You could really live down here.”

“That was the idea.” Jake grabbed her hand and moved swiftly through the rooms.

The walls seemed to breathe and move inward, enclosing them in an underground tomb of metal and dim lighting. Celeste coughed to cover her anxiety, wanting to hear the sound of her own voice to remind her that she was still alive and not in a crypt.

“The exit is in the back.” Jake came to another door with a knob-like handle. He twisted it and pushed.

Nothing happened.

“Jake?” Celeste could hear the panic in her own voice, but she didn't care. She'd seen him lock the other door behind them. This was the only way out.

“It's okay. Don't panic. It's probably just blocked with debris or

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something.”

God, please let me out of here. She didn't care if Agent Matt Dirk was waiting on the other side of the door, just as long as she got out of this underground hunk of metal and into the real world again.

Jake turned sideways and put his shoulder into the door. Still no movement. Celeste wrapped her arms around her waist and held back the panic.

“Can I help?” she asked.

“Maybe if we shove it at the same time.” Jake's voice sounded calm, but he looked worried. Celeste had known him too long to not recognize the lines between his brows as anything but worry.

“One. Two. Three.” They both shouldered the door with all their strength. It moved the tiniest fraction.

“Here it comes.” Jake took a deep breath. “Let's try again.”

Celeste's shoulder ached from the first try, but she gritted her teeth and braced herself for the impact of the second try. The door moved a couple of inches this time.

“One more time should do it.” Jake stopped and looked at her. “You okay?”

“Fine.” If a blazing fire of pain on your right side was okay that was.

“One. Two. Three.”

Celeste hit the door with every ounce of energy she possessed. Fire licked down her arm and into her hip with the force of the jolt. She closed her mind to the pain and kept pushing. The door opened another foot and a half.

“I think we can squeeze through that.” Jake put one foot outside. “I'll go first. Make sure it's safe.”

Celeste was happy to let him go first, while she gasped behind his back and tried to recover from the agony winding through her right side. Sore didn't describe how she would feel tomorrow.

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Jake's hand reached back for her. "It's safe. Come on." His voice barely reached above a whisper.

Celeste followed him outside. A few miniature snowflakes fell from the night sky, as perfectly formed as any large snowflake. They hit her face and cooled her from her efforts to open the door. She took several deep breaths of the fresh air, happy to be away from the musty interior of the bomb shelter. She shuddered. She didn't even want to imagine a life where she might have to hide out in one of those shelters for any length of time.

"There used to be a shed at the back of this property."

They began walking. The hill hid them from the view of the prying CIA, but still they moved quickly and quietly.

"What's in the shed?"

"An old truck. I hope it runs."

"Me too." Celeste rubbed her arms, wishing she had her jacket.

Winter kept playing hide and seek this year. First hiding and allowing the warm sun to heat up the days to the point where she barely needed a jacket and then coming out with icy ferocity. Tonight, winter was back in full force.

The shed turned out to be a small, white building with a single, dusty window in the wall. Jake twisted the knob on the side door and didn't act surprised when it opened without any resistance.

"Don't they lock anything out here?"

"Rarely. It's the country. Neighbors all know one another. Let's hope they aren't watching tonight or they might call the police and report someone is stealing this truck."

"Jake, do you think we can make it all the way back to Indiana before they catch us?"

"We can get a good head start before they realize we're not still on the floor of that old farm house making love. They won't realize we're gone until morning."

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The truck turned over after two tries. Jake patted the dashboard and crooned sweet words to the truck that made Celeste's mouth go dry and her knees go weak. She only hoped he was right and they could make it to her father's house quickly.

* * *

When they left Ohio and entered Indiana, the hills and rocky terrain flattened out into already harvested corn fields of dried mud and cut off stalks.

"Home sweet home," Jake said.

The truth was they still had a couple of hours' worth of driving before they'd reach the small town east of Indianapolis where she'd grown up.

"Jake, maybe we should take some back roads. I know it'll take longer, but maybe we'll avoid the police if they're looking for us."

"Just what I was thinking." He took the next exit and got off onto US 52.

They drove through small towns that had begun to all look alike, past red barns and farm houses. With each passing mile, Celeste grew tenser. As the sun peeked above the road behind them, panic settled in her breast. The agents watching the Connecticut farmhouse had surely realized they'd been duped. Any moment sirens would blare and lights would flash in the rear view mirror. It would all be over. They should have taken the deal.

Jake pulled up into a narrow alley that nestled behind her father's house.

"We're here." She heard the surprise in her own voice.

"They'll look for us here soon enough. Let's park this truck in the garage and get inside."

The house was more than a hundred years old and the garage was a detached stone structure with a red brick floor.

The inside of the house smelled unused, but under the stale smell,

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the interior hinted of formaldehyde and cinnamon rolls.

She didn't allow herself time to think about her father's last breakfast or the photos of her that adorned the walls. There wasn't time to wonder why a father who'd never been there for any of her major accomplishments would keep photos, awards and plaques for every milestone of her life on his walls. The basement door was heavy steel with a thick rubber insulating tube. A red light rested in an open steel cage above the entrance.

When her father worked, the light came on. Celeste had never been allowed in the basement. She hesitated and clutched Jake's hand.

"Once, when I was about five, I threw one of my Barbie dolls into the basement to see what would happen."

"What happened?" Jake didn't press her to enter the door. He seemed to sense her reluctance.

"My father was livid. He burned the Barbie."

"He burned your doll?" Jake frowned. "Celeste, your father may have been involved in his work, but I don't ever remember him being deliberately cruel. Why would he do that?"

"I don't know. I remember he told me he wasn't punishing me. He even bought me another doll the next day, but it was still traumatic."

"Well, you aren't a little girl anymore. And I won't let anyone burn your dolls." He smiled gently at her.

Celeste took a deep breath. He was right. She wasn't a little girl anymore. She was a grown woman with a very serious problem. The solution to that problem might very well wait at the bottom of those stairs. She owed it to herself and to her father's memory to enter his lab.

"Do you know how to open this door?" Jake searched the seams.

Celeste had seen her father open the door a million times from her hiding place behind the large, potted rhubarb plant. The code had been etched into her memory from the age of eight or nine. She'd never

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attempted to use that code. Mostly out of fear of what she would find. But she knew it.

“The code is one.”

Jake punched in the first number

“One. Two. Two. Hit enter three times.”

The light over the door went from off to on and the door clicked open. Celeste took a deep breath and preceded Jake down the stairs.

At the bottom of the stairs, they reached a second door. Celeste frowned. *Damn*. She didn't know the code to this one.

“I don't know this code. I only got the other one from years of spying.”

“If there isn't an alarm on it, we can keep trying different codes. If there's a silent, we may be in trouble.”

Celeste's heart beat rapidly and her face felt flushed. What if she got it wrong? Did the other code have any meaning? Her mind raced through the numbers. One. One. Two. Two. Her mother's birthday. Perhaps this one was her birthday? What choice did she have but to try?

She punched in the numbers. Zero. Three. One. Seven. Enter. Enter. Enter. The door buzzed and she was able to turn the knob.

“Good job.”

“It was my birthday.”

The room appeared to be a preparation chamber for entering the actual lab. Long, bio-chemical protection body suits hung in a neat row along with filtration tanks.

“Jake?” She glanced from the chamber to the lab she could see on the other side of the glass.

“This would explain the double doors and heavy seals.” Jake nodded toward the suits. “It also explains your Barbie. Apparently he was working with something rather dangerous.”

“But what?” Celeste had chosen research studies to avoid anything dangerous to her well being. She wanted to live to a ripe old age. She

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had lots of plans for her life. Places she wanted to see. Things she wanted to do. Fear clutched at her.

“Celeste, you stay here.” Jake stepped into one of the suits.

Stay here? And watch the man she loved go into who knew what? What if he were harmed? If he were harmed, she wanted to be with him. The love she felt swelled inside her, drowning the fear. She grabbed a suit and stepped into it.

“Celeste, there’s no need for both of us to go in there.” Jake grabbed her arm. “I’m not sure it’s safe.”

“Neither am I.” She met his gaze. “I don’t want you going in there alone. Please, Jake. He was my father.”

He hesitated as though he might argue more over the issue, then clamped his lips and nodded his head before raising the hood and turning on the oxygen tank.

Nervous flutters of excitement quivered through her stomach. The lab held every type of instrument a scientist could wish for. She moved to a long, metal table and ran her gloved hand over a set of beakers.

Jake pointed to the far wall, which housed bookshelves filled with texts and many journals. He grabbed several and began to leaf through them, motioning her closer.

“They’re in the same code as the others.” His voice sounded deep and far away behind the hood of the anti-contamination suit.

Somewhere there had to be a key to unlock the code. If they could find the key, they’d find their answers.

Celeste’s uneasiness grew. There was something odd about the lab, beyond the suits they’d donned. Celeste walked to the back wall and stared into a shower unit. The single piece of stainless steel shone in the brilliant recessed lights from the ceiling. Two shower heads stuck out awkwardly from the wall.

Why would her father want a shower down here? True, he’d practically lived down here, but there had been showers upstairs. The

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double sealed doors, metal shower, and secrecy all pointed to something highly dangerous. Capable of contaminating her father and the outside world. Some type of biological research or study of disease perhaps.

Had he been working with the Centers for Disease Control in some way? Perhaps he'd been trying to discover a vaccine for an illness. Celeste moved back to the journals.

“What secrets are hidden in these journals, Daddy?” she whispered.

The bright orange-red cover of a book caught her eye. It was just above eye level and in gold letters read “The Key.” The journals were covered in a heavy plastic to protect them from any contaminated specimens in the room. Celeste pulled it from the shelf and flipped it open. Inside, the book contained no title page, no copyright notice, and only a single page in the center contained print. A key to decoding the journals.

She let out a whoop of triumph that came out muffled through the suit. Jake took the book from her and smiled through the clear plastic of the hood. He pointed upstairs. Celeste nodded and scooped up the journals.

She shrugged out of the suit, feeling as though she'd just shed a cumbersome skin and gone through a transformation. The journals were run through a decontamination chamber, the plastic removed.

“How did your father stand working in that environment year after year? I'd go insane after a week.”

She rubbed her arms, trying to get imaginary dirt off her skin. Now that they had the key to decode her father's journals, she wasn't sure she wanted to know what they contained. What if her father hadn't been the noble man she thought he was? Despite his long hours in the lab and the fact he was more like a ghost that flitted through her life than a real parent, she'd always believed it was for the good of humanity. That his work would make a difference. Make people's lives

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better. But what if his intentions hadn't been that noble?

"Let's go decode these journals." A resounding explosion followed Jake's words.

They both glanced toward the ceiling.

"Jake? What are we going to do?" she hissed.

"Hide these journals."

"Where?" Celeste glanced around, looking for a good spot.

"Over here." Jake stuffed several journals into the inside sleeve of a hanging suit.

Celeste followed his example.

"Go. Go. Go." Male voices cried out as the upper door swung open. Men in fatigues stopped at the bottom of the stairs and stood at attention. Matt Dirk walked between them, his gaze trained on Celeste and Jake.

"I see you figured out the code to your father's lab."

"The outside door anyway." Celeste shrugged. "I have seen him open it a million times."

"What about this door?" The agent waited a little too anxiously for their answer.

"I don't have the code for this one. I was never allowed down here."

"With good reason." Matt Dirk's expression didn't change.

"What's so special about this lab, Agent Dirk? It looks like any other lab to me."

"That information is—"

"Classified. We know." Jake said.

"Yes, well. Perhaps we should discuss your escape from Connecticut."

"We're sorry, Agent Dirk." Celeste smiled sweetly. "That's classified information."

The agent laughed and motioned them to precede him up the stairs. Celeste nodded and they left the underground laboratory.

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“We’ll have to ask that you not leave town again.”

“On what authority?” Jake demanded.

“Don’t forget you’re wanted on murder charges.” Matt Dirk didn’t meet their gazes.

“We both know those charges are trumped up, Agent Dirk,” Jake said.

If she had to explain to one more law official they hadn’t committed any crimes, she was going to scream. First, the police suspected them of murder. Then, the CIA knew they hadn’t been involved, but wanted to blackmail them anyway.

“I haven’t lived in this house in years, Agent Dirk. Can we just go to my apartment? Put your men on our tail, whatever...but I have no desire to stay here. This house holds no memories for me.” Except those of the monsters under the bed.

“Go.” Matt Dirk turned to the man next to him and whispered instructions.

Celeste strained to hear what he said to no avail. Probably telling the poor man to follow them.

The truck wouldn’t start until the third try. Jake sighed in relief when it turned over, and he put it into reverse and backed out of the stone garage.

“I need to phone Dennis and let him know we borrowed his truck.”

“Yes, we certainly don’t need to add car theft to our list of transgressions.” Celeste glanced over her shoulder as they left her childhood home behind and headed into the city.

“I wish we could’ve grabbed those journals or at the very least the decoder key.” Jake glanced in the rear view mirror.

“Why? The journals my father gave you are in this truck.”

“And of no use without the key.”

“Who says we don’t have the key?” She reached into her shirt and pulled out a crumpled sheet of paper. “There was no need to take the

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entire book. The code is on this page.”

Jake leaned over and kissed her on the cheek, laughing out loud. “You are brilliant, Dr. Monroe.”

“Why thank you, Dr. Walker. Now, let’s get back to my place so we can decode these journals.”

CHAPTER 13

“See this?” Jake pointed to a strange, curly, roller coaster mark. “This stands for a reversal. Any words with this at the end are scrambled and then the opposite meaning of the unscrambled word applies.”

“Complicated.” Celeste rubbed her eyes.

They’d been decoding the first journal for the past four hours. If he could concentrate, he might be able to decipher the journals faster, but the warmth of Celeste’s hip and thigh pressed against his on the low sofa distracted him beyond belief.

“Harmless Bacterium and Harmful Bacterium.” He jotted each phrase they were able to unscramble onto a small notepad.

“Jake, do you see what I do?” Celeste’s voice squeaked on the last word.

The sheet of paper held words that formed a pyramid. At the bottom sat the phrase he’d just decrypted. “Harmful Bacterium and

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Nonharmful Bacterium.” Above that lie the words “Weapon Grade” and “Immobile.” At the top, “Anti-serum.”

“My God.” Jake jumped to his feet. “He was creating germ warfare in your basement, Celeste.”

“It certainly looks that way.” Her eyes glittered a little too brightly. “These aren’t formulas for cures. They’re formulae for different bacterias and notes not only how to mutate them and make them more potent, but how to deliver them most effectively to infect the most people.”

“This opens the door pretty wide to who had reason to kill your father.”

Celeste jumped from the couch and stomped into the kitchen. Her emotions were running high enough for him to feel a faint sizzle of sensation as he followed her.

“Celeste?”

She grabbed two coffee mugs and slammed them onto the counter. Jake winced, waiting for the ceramic to shatter.

“My entire childhood, Jake. Did I ever tell you the next door neighbor had to teach me to ride my bike without training wheels? When I was nine. *Nine*. I was the only child in the neighborhood who still had training wheels because my father was in our basement ‘saving the world.’”

She tossed some coffee grinds into a filter and slammed the unit into place in the coffee maker.

“Only he wasn’t really saving the world.” Her laugh reeked of bitter disappointment. “Oh, no. Not saving the world—thinking up ways to destroy it or the people on it anyway. Germ warfare.”

Jake wrapped his arms around her from behind and held her close. She stopped her frantic movements and leaned back into him for a moment.

“We don’t know why, Celeste. Your father graduated college in the

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middle of the cold war era. Vietnam. Korea. Maybe he thought he *was* saving the world.”

She shook her head. “No. Maybe at first, but this is research he was still involved in, Jake. I’m so angry at him.”

“I know.” He pressed a kiss against her temple and felt her take a deep breath.

“Bastard. He stole my childhood. All those missing father/daughter moments.” She grew tense again. “No. *They* stole those moments. The government took everything, and now they want to steal my freedom by forcing me to stay in town.”

“The truth is that, if they’re the ones who killed your father, we’re sitting ducks here.”

“And if they aren’t the ones, we’re still sitting ducks.”

A niggling doubt surfaced. The CIA had no reason to kill Ben. He’d been a loyal researcher for their cause for many years. Unless he’d threatened to leak their secrets, but Jake doubted Ben would have done that. The man had been too smart for his own good. Too smart to risk his life in that way.

He couldn’t help but feel Van Ester was involved in some way. Had the man known about Ben’s secret research or was there more to it than that?

“What’re you thinking?” Celeste asked.

“That I need to run some errands.” There were questions that needed answered and he didn’t want to put Celeste at risk by dragging her along. Too many people had already been killed.

“Okay. I’ll just hang around here and try to decipher the journals some more,” she said.

He was surprised she didn’t argue. It should have tipped him off.

* * *

“Jake, what’re you doing here?” Rebecca smiled.

“I’m hoping you’ll help me out.” He needed to find out who Van

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Ester's contacts were, but he couldn't risk going directly to the man's secretary.

"I thought you were wanted by the law?" she whispered and glanced past his left shoulder.

"Yes and no." He didn't have time to explain, but he hoped she'd help him anyway.

"What do you need?"

"I need a list of Van Ester's contacts, but for obvious reasons I can't—" The squeak of the lab door opening interrupted him.

Celeste stepped into the room, spotted him and tried to back out.

"Hello, darlin'." Jake moved to her side so he could whisper without Rebecca overhearing. "I thought you were staying at the apartment?"

"I thought you were running errands?" Her voice hissed between her teeth.

"*Touché.*" He smiled and took her arm. He should have known he couldn't leave her alone for two seconds without her seeking out trouble.

"What do you say, Rebecca. Can you help us out?"

"I'll see what I can do." She stood, straightened her skirt and left the lab.

"You are unbelievable." Celeste jerked her arm from his grasp the second Rebecca was out of sight.

"Me?"

"You lied to me." She pointed her finger at his nose.

"*You lied to me.*"

"Okay, let's just get the info we need from Rebecca and go. We'll argue later." Celeste picked up a small elephant statue from Rebecca's desk.

"After that, can we make up?" He ran his hand down her arm. God, how he wanted to make up.

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“Behave.” But she smiled as she swatted at him.

“I’ll try.” Not easy when she looked at him out of the corner of her eye with that half coquette-half hussy expression.

“What info are we getting from Rebecca anyway?” She placed the elephant back on Rebecca’s desk.

“Van Ester’s contacts.”

“How would she know that?”

“She’s going to get it from his secretary.”

The silence in the lab almost had a rhythm. Jake felt uneasy without being able to explain why. Perhaps coming here hadn’t been a good idea. He could phone Rebecca later for the information.

“Freeze.” The lab door burst open and Officer Frank O’Malley trained his gun at Jake’s heart.

“Damn it.” Jake hadn’t meant to lead them into a trap.

“That’s right, Walker. The criminal always returns to the scene of the crime.”

“We aren’t criminals.” Celeste crossed her arms.

“You get your hands in the air before I plug you full of holes,” Frank shouted. His eyes were wide and frightened.

“Frank, you’re a man of reason. I’m a scientist. Do you really think I’d be stupid enough to place my fingerprints all over a murder weapon? Don’t you think I’d know enough to wear gloves or something?” Celeste asked.

Jake saw the man hesitate. He looked uncertain for a moment, but his hand never wavered and the gun remained pointed at Jake’s chest.

“C’mon. Look, we were set up. Contact Agent Matt Dirk of the CIA.”

“CIA?” Frank’s gaze narrowed. “Are you serious?”

“Deadly.”

“I’ll call him from the station. Hands on the lab table over there.” He motioned to the long silver table.

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Jake placed his palms on the table, and Frank moved behind him and patted him down. He now trained his gun on Celeste.

“Don’t even think about moving, Dr. Monroe. I don’t want to have to shoot you.”

“Don’t worry, Frank. I don’t want to get shot.”

“Hands behind your back, Walker.” Frank handcuffed Jake and spun him around. “Dr. Monroe, you walk in front of me. Don’t make any sudden moves.”

Had someone at E.V.E. phoned the police, or had they been watching the building all along? The idea they would station police outside the building didn’t make sense. It would be a huge waste of resources. More likely someone had turned them in for the reward money.

* * *

“Are you going to call Agent Dirk?” Celeste demanded when they reached the station.

“I’ll have Detective Roberts phone him.” Frank put them in an interrogation room and shut the door.

Celeste beat on it. “Are you crazy, Frank? The man will create a reason for us to be guilty.”

When there was no answer, she spun around and slid to the floor. She rested her forehead on her knees and wondered how her life had led her to this moment. She was a scientist and yet here she sat on the hard, tile floor of an interrogation room, suspected of murder.

“If Nick is the one who calls Matt Dirk, we’re screwed.” She lifted her face and stared at Jake.

“Let’s hope Frank phones him.”

* * *

Several hours later, Matt Dirk and a man in a white suit and white shoes arrived. The man in white laid a black briefcase on the table and

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nodded to both of them.

“Jake and Celeste, this is John Ricco. CDA,” said Agent Dirk.

CDA? Jake frowned. Central Defense Agency? What the hell was going on now?

“You two ready to go?”

“We’re free?” Celeste asked.

“Of course, Ms. Monroe. I told you we’re aware you didn’t commit any murders. Besides, we need your help.”

“We’ll talk more on the way back to your apartment,” John Ricco said.

The government-issue car was a plain black, nondescript car that wouldn’t be easily spotted or remembered. The car made Jake think of the mob, and he wondered briefly if his body would turn up in the desert a hundred years from now next to Jimmy Hoffa’s.

“Do the two of you know what work your father did for the government?” John Ricco asked the minute the car started to move.

Celeste and Jake exchanged glances, both uncertain if they should admit their knowledge or deny it.

“Let’s not play games,” Matt Dirk said. “We know you’re both intelligent *and* we know you were inside the lab at your father’s house. Did you break the code?”

“Of course.” Celeste shrugged.

“So you know about the research he was doing?”

“If you mean do I know my father created nasty, little bugs that could be used to wipe out another country, then yes.”

“That’s not exactly what he did.” John Ricco turned and looked at them from the front seat. His eyebrows were bushy and white, and reminded Celeste of Samuel Clemens in his late years.

“Then what exactly did he do?” Celeste crossed her arms.

Jake knew she was thinking about the training wheels Ben hadn’t taken off her bike and the monsters he hadn’t chased from under her

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bed because he was busy creating monsters that hid in test tubes and attacked the human immune system.

“He tested germs. Came up with serums to protect us from germs others might attack this country with.”

Celeste sat up. So, Ben had been a bit nobler than they’d believed, if John Ricco was to be trusted.

“What do you want us to do?” Jake asked.

“Have you ever heard of the Pharmaceutical Research Corporations of America? PRCA?”

“Of course.” The PRCA was a group of medical corporations who had come together to lobby congress on common causes. E.V.E. was a member.

“Did you know for the past twenty years they’ve shot down every major piece of legislation that might lower drug costs?”

“We know all this. We’re medical research scientists.” Jake glared at the man.

“When we heard of Ben’s unfortunate demise, our first thought was a foreign assassin. But then we realized this was an inside job. Only someone he trusted could’ve gotten close enough to drive that knife into his chest.”

“Your point?” Were they back to accusing Jake or Celeste of her father’s murder? Jake felt as though he was on a carousel that never stopped and went too fast for him to jump off. A memory knocked at his consciousness, trying to come forward. Mitch had said the Corps killed Ben. *The Corps. Could he have meant the PRCA?*

“We believe someone at E.V.E. killed him. Probably as a direct command from the Corps.”

“But why?”

“Your father found the fountain of youth. If people didn’t grow old as quickly or sick as quickly, do you know how many billions the pharmaceutical industry stood to lose?”

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“But we thought the formula was a cover for his work in germ warfare.” Celeste’s voice shook slightly.

“His work with the youth serum was his passion. His work for us was his duty.”

Jake reached over and clasped Celeste’s hand. To know Ben’s entire life hadn’t been a lie had to be as reassuring to her as it was to him.

“So you think the Corps ordered a hit on my father?”

“Not just a hit. They ordered someone he trusted—someone close to him—to kill him.”

“He didn’t trust Van Ester.” Jake shook his head. “The man had stolen too many formulae from him and put his own name on them.”

“We’re aware he didn’t have much use for Van Ester. As a matter of fact, he asked us months ago to keep an eye on him.”

“Really? Then maybe that’s a clue he was trying to harm my father.”

“We think Van Ester may have been aware of the hit. It’s possible. What we can’t figure out is why Mitch Saxton was killed.”

“Maybe the Corps was afraid he would talk?” Celeste didn’t know. She just wanted whoever had murdered her father brought to justice.

“We need you to draw out the killer or killers.” John Ricco looked at Celeste.

Jake’s blood froze and thawed in the space of a second. “Are you insane? You will not use her as bait. You could get her killed.”

“Someone is trying to kill the two of you anyway. When we catch the killer, we’re actually protecting her. Allowing you both to live a life free from fear.”

“Oh, you make it sound pretty don’t you?” Bitterness left a bad taste in his mouth. “But we both know it wouldn’t be that simple. You could never break up the entire Corps. You’d only catch one assassin. They’d send more later.”

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“We could shake the center of the Corps. We could shake them badly enough they’d leave the two of you alone.”

Jake was fairly certain Matt Dirk knew more than he was telling them. The man would not meet Jake’s gaze in the rearview mirror. A heavy silence settled over the occupants of the car.

“What else do you know?”

“That’s all there is to tell.” John Ricco didn’t turn around to speak to them this time.

Jake stared at the back of the man’s head, noticing the thinning hair in back. They wanted to put Celeste out there as a target for someone who’d already murdered four people, but they weren’t telling them everything so it was impossible to gauge the risk involved.

“That may be all you’ll tell, but it isn’t all you know.” Jake wasn’t about to let this go. Celeste’s life could be at stake.

Matt Dirk sighed and pulled the car over. He turned to face them, his arm thrown over the back of the front seat. He didn’t blink as he met Jake’s angry glare.

“Jake, a lot of what we know is pure speculation. Some is classified. I’m not going to lie to either of you.” Matt met Celeste’s gaze as well. “It could be dangerous. We’re dealing with a cold-blooded killer or killers. But the alternative really isn’t better. Both of you know the formula. You’re the next targets.”

The man was right, and they all knew it. There had already been an attempt on their lives with the poisoning. There would be more. If the killer wasn’t caught, the suspicion would hang over them forever too. And while it didn’t look like they’d be thrown in jail, he and Celeste both would have trouble finding work.

“What’s the plan?”

“So you’re in?” Matt Dirk grinned.

“Let’s hear the plan first.”

Did they really have a choice?

CHAPTER 14

Winter in southern Indiana roared to life, bitter and cold. The heater in Jake's truck kept the frosty wind at bay, but his rear tires still slid on the icy pavement.

"How's the plan going to work if the roads are impassable?" Celeste jerked off her gloves and slung them onto the seat.

Misgivings about their mission caused Jake to tighten his fingers around the steering wheel. Maybe this type of assignment was Matt Dirk's specialty, but it was their lives at stake. He'd insisted on accompanying Celeste to the cabin the CIA had decided to stake out. Only after hours of discussion had Dirk and Ricco agreed to Jake's amendments to their plan.

"We're only supposed to get two inches. It's the sleet that's making things difficult, but they'll get the salt trucks out and everything will be passable by morning."

"Do you think this will work, Jake?"

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“Honestly?” *Not really.* “What choice do we have?”

“It feels like I’m betraying my friends and co-workers.”

“I know.” Jake took her hand and raised it to his lips. “But like Matt said, anyone could be involved.”

“I still can’t believe there’s this much interest in my father’s formula. I know it’s amazing he created a fountain of youth formula that’ll stop the signs of aging to a degree, but even this wouldn’t be forever. It might extend life expectancy twenty years.”

“The formula itself is worth a lot of money. Not releasing it could be worth more to the pharmaceutical industry.”

The rain mixed with snow continued to fall until traffic on I-65 South slowed to a crawl. They took the Columbus/Nashville exit and stayed to the right as the road forked.

“Where did they find this cabin?” Celeste leaned forward and peered out the window into the darkening twilight.

“It’s my grandfather’s. We use it as a hunting cabin.”

“I take it there aren’t any modern amenities?” Celeste didn’t look very happy at that prospect.

Jake chuckled. “On the contrary, my mother insisted on updated plumbing and other modern conveniences.”

“Thank God for that woman.”

It was almost an hour before they turned down the lane leading to the cabin. Jake could only go about twenty miles an hour and still retain control over the car. He hoped the agents who’d been assigned to keep an eye on the cabin during this sting were still behind him.

About five hundred feet down the lane they were surrounded by thick woods. It was like entering a tunnel and coming out into a new world. The cabin sat bold and brown against the white backdrop of snow. Jake backed his truck in, aware they might need to get out quickly and traction would be difficult in this snow.

“What now?” Celeste asked.

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“We build a fire and make some phone calls.”

“I still think it’s insane to throw a big net out there and see who swims into it. It would be smarter to call one suspect at a time and see if they respond.”

“That would take too long. Time is money. I’m ready to get this over.”

* * *

Did he mean he was ready to get rid of her? Celeste wondered if he felt restless from spending nearly every second of the day with her. He was probably sick of her company.

“Fine. Let’s get it over with then.” She jumped from the truck, stomped snow off her boots and followed him into the cabin.

Gusts of wind sang around the tiny cracks and crevices between the logs. The interior smelled of multiple past fires crackling in the fireplace, plus the faint hint of cedar. A black-and-white photograph of a young, dark-haired man in hunting gear graced the place of honor over the fireplace. Celeste nodded toward the picture. “Your grandfather?”

“Yes. He taught my father to hunt. My dad taught me.”

“You hunt deer?” She swallowed. *Poor helpless deer?*

“And rabbit. I’ve even hunted squirrel.”

“Oh.” She swallowed. There wasn’t anything wrong with it if he ate what he caught, she supposed. As long as he didn’t expect her to eat Bambi.

“You don’t like hunting?”

“Not really, Jake. But I understand the macho need to hunt. As long as you eat what you kill, I won’t protest.”

Jake laughed. “You sound just like my mother. She refused to eat venison, even in a stew.”

“I keep picturing a sweet, cartoon character with big brown eyes.”

“You know my favorite part about coming to this cabin?” Jake

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moved to the fireplace and began stacking kindling. “A roaring fire on a cold night. It’s peaceful.”

“Shouldn’t we make those phone calls?” Not that she really wanted to... She’d much rather stay here and hide out with Jake. But they were on a mission.

“No one is getting through on those roads tonight. We’ll call after we build a fire.”

But what if they did get through? What if they showed up and the CIA agents weren’t prepared? The image of Mitch Saxton’s dead gaze flashed before her eyes and she shivered.

The fire caught after the second try. Jake let it flare to life and then added a couple of logs. He stood and brushed off his hands.

“Okay, where’s the list?” he said.

Celeste shook out the single sheet full of typed names and phone numbers. She placed her finger next to the first name.

“Rebecca Adams. This one is a waste of time, except she might tell someone we haven’t thought of. She knows almost everyone at the company, including some of the upper management.”

“Read off her number.” Jake picked up the hard-wired phone next to the couch.

“317-357...” She read off the rest of the number.

“Rebecca, how are you?” Jake smiled at Celeste. “Jake Walker. I was hoping you’d do a favor for me. I need someone to courier me Ben’s file labeled Fox3.”

It was the file Ben had prepared for his fountain of youth research, and asking for it was meant to set the killer off.

“That’s right. Celeste and I are spending a few days at my cabin.” He gave her the address and directions for the overnight delivery service.

“One down...twenty-four to go.” Celeste read off the next number.

When they’d called all their co-workers and Van Ester, the next

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name on the list was the head of another company. These calls would be tricky because the people were either strangers or casual acquaintances. But these were the names high on the list of possible suspects.

“Mr. Daniels? My name is Jake Walker. I’m a research scientist with the E.V.E. Corporation. I worked with Ben Monroe.” Jake gave her a thumbs-up to indicate the man on the other end of the line recognized her father’s name. “I have an offer for you. Ben’s daughter and I were able to crack the code to the youth formula. If you’re interested, we’re selling.” He gave the man directions to the cabin and hung up the phone.

“What did he say?” Celeste scooted to the edge of the couch.

“It wasn’t what he said, of course he’d jump at my offer. It was his tone of voice. Something was definitely up with him.”

“Jake, do you think we should call Nick Roberts? I still think he’s involved in this somehow.”

“After the CIA swept in and forced the police to release us, I wonder if they’ll bother to get involved.”

“Only if they’re guilty.” The niggling feeling Detective Roberts knew exactly who’d killed the victims, including her father, persisted. What a perfect cover if he was involved. He seemed determined to pin the crimes on her and Jake too. Odd.

After they’d phoned the detective, Celeste felt the tension in the room creep up a few notches. Jake threw another log on the fire. “Hungry?”

“Famished.” *But not for food.* All she wanted at the moment was to drag him into the bedroom she assumed was behind one of the two doors leading off the main room.

“Let’s see what’s in the kitchen.” He led the way into a room with red gingham curtains, and copper pots hanging from long nails in the log wall.

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“Cute.” Celeste glanced around and took in the country charm from the teddy bear cookie jar on top of the refrigerator to the checked tablecloth that reminded her of an Italian restaurant near her apartment.

“My mom decorated it. She said sheets on the windows were boring, even for a hunting cabin.” Jake opened the freezer and pulled out a stack of frozen food.

“Gourmet.”

“Hardly, but it’s food.” He held up a turkey dinner. “Sound good?”

“What else you got?” Celeste walked to his side and sorted through the stack of dinners. He moved closer until she could feel the heat of his body pressing into her side.

She took a deep breath, but it didn’t chase away the desire. Instead, his familiar scent created a fierce ache as the smell of his cologne mixed with his raw male heat.

“I’ll take the chicken.” She laid it to the side. “You’re cooking right?”

“Of course.” Jake opened the microwave and popped her dinner inside.

Celeste laughed. “You have to take it out of the box. I’m pretty sure.”

“Maybe you should cook it.” His grin proved he knew exactly how to cook the frozen meal.

“Uh-uh. You promised me dinner. You’re going to prepare it.”

“Okay. Okay.” He pulled the meal back out, ripped the zippered tab off the end of the box and cut the required slits into the top.

“Jake, if anything happens to me—”

“I don’t want to hear you talk like that.” He jammed the dinner into the microwave and hit the buttons.

“It has to be said. If anything happens...I just want you to know what a good friend you’ve been and how much I—how much I care about you.”

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“The feeling is mutual.”

Celeste thought he might mention love for a moment, but he didn't say anything more and absolute quiet plunged into the room. The microwave hummed and the snow outside the window continued to fall.

Jake looked as uncomfortable as she felt. He crossed his arms and leaned back against the counter. She cleared her throat and looked anywhere but at him.

“This is awkward,” Jake said.

“What I was afraid of. We've never been at a loss for words with one another.” This was why they should never have slept together.

“Don't dare say we shouldn't have slept together. This is just an adjustment. We haven't had time to get used to anything. We've been on the run.”

“What will it be like when we're no longer intimate, Jake? Didn't you ever think it would be awkward then?” No probably not. He wasn't thinking with his head. Men thought with another part of their anatomy.

“What makes you think there'll ever be a day I don't want to be intimate?” Jake's gaze ran over her body slowly.

Her body responded as though he'd run his hands over her instead. The microwave beeped a long, single peal, followed by three short taps on the kitchen window. Celeste jumped and screamed before she saw one of the agents' faces in the window. Her hand flew to her heart and she rushed to open the back door.

He stomped the snow off his boots and ducked inside. He was well over six feet tall and his head almost brushed the low ceiling.

“Sorry, ma'am. Didn't mean to scare you. I just wanted to reassure you both that we've set up camp behind the strand of trees over there.” He pointed to some trees south of the cabin, just visible from the small kitchen window.

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“Do you need anything?” Jake popped his own dinner into the microwave.

“We have everything we need. If you need us, use this flashlight to signal out the window.” He pulled a small metal flashlight from his jacket pocket and handed it to Celeste. “Just turn it on and off and shine it toward those trees. We’re probably fine until morning. Then we need to be on our toes.” He opened the back door and nodded his head. “You folks have a nice evening.”

“Thank you.” Celeste closed the door behind him.

“Dinner’s ready.” Jake set her pre-packaged meal on the table.

Celeste sniffed it. “Smells good. Not too bad for a frozen dinner.”

“There’s some chilled white zinfandel in the fridge. Why don’t you open it?” Jake grabbed two wine glasses.

“Fancy.” Celeste pulled the bottle out and opened it.

Jake held the glasses while she filled them, then handed her one when she set the bottle down on the counter. He clinked his glass against hers.

“To our future.” As he raised the glass to his lips, his gaze captured her eyes.

What was he trying to tell her? That they’d always be friends? That he hoped they’d continue to be more than friends? That he hoped they were still alive in the future? She wasn’t sure, but the intrigue she’d lived through the past few weeks had drained her. She didn’t have the energy for the serious discussion they’d need to have soon that would decide their relationship and where it was or wasn’t going.

“To us.” She took a drink of the sharply sweet wine.

They finished their dinner and cleaned the forks they’d used. Jake refilled her wine glass and they made their way to the main room where they sat in front of the roaring fire.

“Toasty.” Celeste stretched her toes toward the warmth of the flames.

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Jake scooted behind her and wrapped his arms around her. He placed a kiss at the base of her neck and ripples of pleasure shot down her spine.

“I say we make the most of tonight because tomorrow is going to be stressful.” He trailed kisses up to her ear.

“And how do you propose we make the most of the night?”

“I can show you better than I can tell you.” He lowered her to the rug in front of the fireplace.

“You always were hands-on.” She pulled him closer and kissed him.

Jake’s hands slid under her shirt and caressed her back. Their lips met, parted, and met again until Celeste thought she’d go mad with wanting. She twisted against him.

“I love you, Jake.” The words slipped out. She stilled, waiting for him to push her away or deny her love.

He pulled back a bit, a frown between his brows and stared at her. But then, without saying another word, he kissed her and all thought got lost in the sensations that followed.

* * *

Jake couldn’t pull himself away from Celeste’s warm, soft body until the logs were burnt almost to cinders. Finally, he threw off the blanket he’d pulled over them, and rose to place more wood on the fire. The logs crackled to life after a few moments, spreading warmth into the room.

Celeste’s brown lashes lay against her cheeks, her face peaceful in sleep. Jake sat by her side and ran his hand over her hair. God she was beautiful. His throat ached as he watched the rise and fall of her chest and remembered the words she’d spoken in the heat of passion.

I love you, Jake. But what did those words mean? She’d sent him mixed signals from the moment they’d made love. Did she mean she loved him as her best friend? She loved the way he made her feel? Or

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she loved him as a man wanted to be loved by a woman? The way he wanted to be loved by her?

“Stop staring at me.” She stretched and smiled at him.

“I thought you were asleep.”

“Do you always stare at me while I’m sleeping?” She patted the floor next to her. “I’m cold. Come snuggle.”

“I don’t stare. I usually sleep too.” But that wasn’t entirely true. He could describe the way the morning sun brought out the roses in her cheeks, or the tiny frown that flickered across her face the moment before she awoke. But to tell her that might scare her off right now. She seemed flighty over their relationship anyway.

“What should we do about the formula when this is over, Jake?” She moved closer to him and laid her head on his chest.

Jake wondered if she could feel the acceleration of his heart as she moved closer. He held her tightly. Damn it, he knew he could trust her not to intentionally break his heart, but he’d been burned in the past.

“Jake? Did you hear me?” Celeste raised her head and stared at him. “What should we do about the formula?”

“We should honor our offer to E.V.E., but only if Ben’s name is on it.”

“Probably.” She laid her head back down. “What were you thinking about? You were a million miles away.”

“Deborah.” He felt her stiffen and then she pulled away a little.

“Why?” “I tried to hide it from everyone, but her betrayal cut deep.” He pulled Celeste back to his side and placed a kiss on the top of her head. Her hair smelled like melons with a hint of rose. He needed to make her understand how hard it was for him to trust anyone with his heart again, even her.

“Not only did she cheat on me, she slept with my best friend. I guess it was the double betrayal that hurt the most. I didn’t just lose my wife. I lost the one person who’d have been my ear. Until you and I

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became close, I didn't trust friendship again."

Celeste hugged him and placed a kiss on his chest. "I'm so sorry, Jake. She's a bitch."

"Celeste, that's what I love about you. You always jump to my defense. Even when I'm not totally innocent."

"What do you mean?" She rose up on her elbows and stared at him.

"I mean the marriage was a bust because of me too. I worked long hours. I was never there for Deborah. She was lonely, and I knew it and I didn't care. See what kind of man you've become involved with?"

Would she understand what had driven him to work the hours? Deborah hadn't been a scientist. She'd put in eight hours a day as a receptionist and then she'd left her work at the office. She'd never understood his drive to heal the world with what she called his potions.

"Jake." She kissed him slowly, easily. The kiss was different than their passion-heated kisses earlier. This one reached into his heart with understanding and thawed the frozen places.

She pulled back and clasped his face between her hands, smiling at him through tears. "Don't you know how wonderful you are? You're decent, and caring and hard-working."

"Deborah didn't think so." He felt his lips twist. He hated to admit it, but part of him still felt that stinging rejection of finding his wife naked and writhing under his best friend.

"Deborah was stupid. Just because you worked hard is no reason for her to cheat on you. Maybe you should've spent more time with her, I don't know, but the solution is never to seek someone outside your marriage. How does that solve anything? All it accomplished was a divorce. But perhaps that's what she wanted."

"Funny you should say that. She didn't even argue when I asked her for a divorce. Just smiled and said she'd expected it."

"I'll bet she asked for a settlement though, didn't she?"

He jumped a little in surprise. Deborah had been more than eager to

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discuss the terms of her alimony. He'd been hurt enough to want to get the divorce over, so he'd agreed to her terms. Now he saw it in a different light. Deborah had never really tried to make their marriage work. From day one she'd criticized almost everything about him. And in the end, it had all been about money.

“I paid her alimony for five years.”

“Jake, you can do better than her.” Celeste kissed him again. “A lot better.”

The truth was, he already had. Celeste was as different from Deborah as night and day. And she was definitely the sunshine antidote to Deborah's poisonous, cutting remarks.

“Kiss me, you fool.” Celeste's eyes looked suspiciously bright.

He lost himself in her embrace for the second time that night.

CHAPTER 15

“Ready?” Jake asked when they heard the crunch of ice and snow mixed with gravel on the drive outside. A full day had passed since their arrival, and the sun had already disappeared behind the line of the trees, casting golden fingers across the open meadow behind the cabin.

“Yes.” Celeste peeked out the front window. A young woman with raven hair stepped out of a small car and pulled her coat tighter around her. “It’s Rebecca.”

“Rebecca?” Jake frowned. “What the hell is she doing here?”

“I don’t know. Maybe she decided to deliver the package herself.”

“Rebecca.” Celeste opened the front door and welcomed their visitor inside.

“It’s so cold.” Rebecca shivered. “Brrr.”

“Why are you here?”

“I decided to bring the package myself. I’m a good assistant. I couldn’t run the risk the delivery service wouldn’t send drivers out in

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this weather.”

“That was very kind of you. Why don’t you stay for dinner?”

“I should probably get back.” She glanced toward the window as though expecting a storm to approach any minute.

Celeste laughed and wrapped her arm through Rebecca’s, glad of the female company. The atmosphere between her and Jake was tense again at best. Neither knew exactly what to say to the other or how much to say.

“We have TV dinners galore.” Celeste opened the freezer.

“Frozen food?” Rebecca wrinkled her nose.

“Sorry it isn’t fancier. We got snowed in before we could hit the store.” *Plus we were waiting on a killer and hadn’t had time.* Celeste stopped herself at that thought. Perhaps she shouldn’t encourage Rebecca to linger. She’d forgotten for a moment the danger they were in. The girl could be at risk as well.

She slammed the freezer and met Jake’s eyes. He’d already read her thoughts.

“Celeste, I’m sure Rebecca would rather grab something on her way home. We wouldn’t want her to get stuck out here.”

“You’re absolutely right.” She led Rebecca back into the living room. “What was I thinking? I’m sorry, Rebecca. We’ll have dinner when I get back to Indianapolis.”

Rebecca looked from Jake to Celeste and back again. A faint smile touched her lips. “Okay, you two. What is going on here?”

“What do you mean?” *Damn!* They were being too transparent.

“She’s onto us, Celeste.” Jake moved to her side and wrapped his arms around her waist, pulled her back against him.

“You two are dating?” Rebecca looked confused.

What had she thought was going on? The sound of a second car arriving interrupted her thoughts. Oh, no. Rebecca was still here and it sounded as though the killer had just arrived.

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“Sounds like you two have more company.” Rebecca walked over to the fireplace and held her hands out to the flame. “I’ll just warm up and then I’m on my way.”

Celeste sent a silent prayer to God that He would watch over any innocent parties in this room. The knock on the front door surprised her. She’d half expected the visitor to kick the door in.

“I’ll get it,” Jake said. He rushed for the door before Celeste could argue. She reached into her pocket and grasped the small flashlight.

“Mr. Walker?” The man on the doorstep wore black dress shoes and a thin overcoat totally unsuitable for the woods and the weather. He clutched his briefcase as though it were a lifeline. “I’m Ralph Daniels.”

“Mr. Daniels, I remember you from the Seeker’s Club. Come in.” Jake held the door open. Van Ester had just pulled into the driveway behind Daniels and was nearly at the door.

“Daniels...” Evan nodded at the other man, “I hope you don’t think you’re stealing my formula.”

The men entered the room, still looking uncomfortable and out of place. Daniels shifted from foot to foot and then his gaze moved to the fireplace. When Rebecca turned and smiled at him, all color left his face.

What was his problem? Did he not want to murder an innocent young girl? It was late for the man to grow a conscience, Celeste decided. He or Van Ester sure hadn’t had a problem murdering her father, George Voscaz or any of the other people he’d murdered.

Ralph Daniels seemed kind and gentle. She suspected Van Ester more and she studied him closely. She had to keep her wits about her. She knew she needed to focus all of her attention and energy on surviving the next few minutes.

“Rebecca,” Daniels spoke with a strange rasp in his voice, as though he’d swallowed something distasteful. “What are *you* doing here?”

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“You know each other?” Van Ester frowned.

“Intimately.” Daniels smiled bitterly.

Intimately? Celeste glanced at her father’s assistant. She remembered Rebecca hanging out in the executive lounge and giggling at the jokes of the higher-ups. Celeste hadn’t thought much about it. The girl seemed ambitious, but was she ambitious enough to sleep her way to the top? And why sleep with the president of a rival company? What could she possibly gain from that?

“Is that true, Becky?” Evan asked.

If she didn’t know better, Celeste would swear Evan looked deeply hurt at the betrayal. But surely that couldn’t be right. He had numerous affairs. Didn’t he? Rebecca would mean little to him.

“So much for being the man of your dreams.” Evan snorted. “More like one more rung up the career ladder.”

“She’s ruthless,” Daniels added. “But not real bright.”

“You idiots.” Rebecca’s voice changed from young and innocent in a mere second. She pulled a gun from her jacket pocket and trained it on Daniels’ chest.

“Rebecca.” Ralph Daniels held his hands up. “I thought you understood that our relationship—”

Her laughter interrupted him. “This is hardly about your pathetic performance in bed. I have bigger fish to fry than you.”

Celeste took two steps backward. If she could reach the kitchen window, she could flash a warning to the agents that they needed help.

“Stop right there, Celeste.” Rebecca turned her gun in Celeste’s direction.

She saw Jake’s fingers clench into fists at his side. She stopped moving and stood straight. “What’s going on, Rebecca?”

“You all thought I was *just* a secretary. A gopher. Someone to keep track of keys and run for coffee. But I’m going places.”

“Of course you are,” Celeste said soothingly.

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Madness shone out of the girl's eyes and Celeste wondered why she'd never seen the insanity hidden behind the sweet façade.

"Don't patronize me, Dr. Monroe." She turned the gun back on Daniels. "The Corps needs the formula destroyed. It's vital to the future of the pharmaceutical industry. When I destroy the formula, I'll be rewarded. I'll be somebody. I was promised."

"Rebecca." Daniels shook his head sadly. "I should have never told you about our concerns over the formula. You've twisted my words and turned them into vile, evil intentions."

"You're small time, Ralph." Rebecca threw her head back and laughed. "Small time. I've been with big time."

What did she mean—big time? If Ralph Daniels, the head of one of the largest pharmaceutical companies in the world was small time, who represented big time? Van Ester?

"Evan is small time too. And Mitch, who was nobody—but he was awfully cute—got too demanding. I had to get rid of him. He knew too much. I thought he could help me decode the formula, but he was worthless."

"You killed Saxton?" Ralph's eyes glazed over with shock.

"What about George Voscaz?" Celeste swallowed. *And Ned Tate and Albert Addison*, she wanted to add.

"Poor George knew the formula. He planned to hand it over to you and Jake. The Corps couldn't let that happen. I didn't kill him, though. I liked George. I like both of you too. I don't want to hurt you."

"We already have the formula." If she could throw Rebecca out of focus, they might have a chance of getting to the window and signaling the agents that they needed help. "My father invented it remember?"

"You have the formula, but you don't have the means to get it into mass production. However, when you started calling different companies to start a bidding war, all that changed." Rebecca's eyes slid to the front window. "What the hell are the police doing here?"

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Celeste followed the girl's gaze and spotted Nick Roberts exiting his car. Her gut twisted. Should she trust the detective or was he involved somehow too? Her instincts were no longer reliable. She'd been wrong about Rebecca.

"Get rid of him, Celeste." Rebecca motioned for Jake to precede her into the kitchen. "I'll take your boyfriend to make sure you don't try to slip any notes to the good detective."

Every muscle in Celeste's body went on alert. Jake would be by the window facing the woods the agents hid in. And she had the flashlight.

"I'm not a good liar, Rebecca. You'd be better off having Jake talk to Detective Roberts. The man doesn't like me anyway."

Rebecca frowned. It seemed as though the sudden change in plans threw her off kilter for a moment. She recovered quickly and exchanged Jake for Celeste. She pointed the gun at Celeste's head. "Don't screw with me, Jake. I know how to use this thing."

Jake nodded. Celeste and Rebecca disappeared into the kitchen. Celeste reached her hand into her pocket. The tiny flashlight rested there, the metal cool and reassuring.

The kitchen rested in the southwest corner of the house. Only the stove and refrigerator could be seen from the front living room. They moved to the far end of the kitchen.

"Rebecca—" Celeste had to get to that window. Could she offer to make coffee? That would give her an excuse. "Would you like some coffee?"

Rebecca's eyes narrowed. "Do you think I'm stupid? You'll throw the hot water at me."

"That wasn't my plan." No, her plan had been more like flashing the light out the window. She sat down in the nearest chair and crossed her arms. Fine. She'd wait until Rebecca was distracted then she'd make her move.

"Detective Roberts, what do you want?" Jake's voice reached her

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from the front room.

Celeste straightened her shoulders. She'd be damned if Rebecca would kill Jake or herself before they had a chance to work their relationship out.

"I got a message from your girlfriend. I also heard you two were peddling Ben Monroe's formula. I figured there was probably something illegal behind it." Nick Robert's voice sounded just as sarcastic with a wall between them.

"That's the only reason you came up here?" Jake said.

"Unfortunately, I can't arrest you because of your buddies the—"

"Well, you wasted your time coming up here," Jake interrupted the detective.

Celeste's gaze flew to Rebecca's face. Had she caught on to what Nick had been about to say? But Rebecca had moved closer to the door so she could hear better and seemed oblivious to what the detective had almost said.

Celeste stood as quietly as possible, keeping her eyes on Rebecca's back. The window was two or three steps away. Could she make it there and signal the agents? Her hand curled around the flashlight and she slowly pulled it from her pocket, holding it by her side in the fold of her pant leg.

Rebecca glanced over her shoulder at Celeste. She smiled at the girl, but didn't sit down. Rebecca took a step toward her.

"Aren't you going to invite me in, Walker?" Nick Roberts' voice boomed through the house with its deep undertones.

Rebecca turned back to the doorway, standing just to the side out of sight of the living room. Celeste released the breath she held and took three quick steps to the window. She flashed the light on and off out into the darkness. On and off. Off and on. No answering beam of light flashed back, and she was unsure if she should try again.

She glanced over her shoulder at Rebecca, but the young woman

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was engrossed in the events unfolding in the living room. Celeste turned back to the window, flashing the light a few more times.

The front door slammed, but Celeste couldn't spin around fast enough to hide what she was doing.

"What the hell are you doing?" Rebecca sped across the room and placed the gun against Celeste's temple.

"I-I was just trying to see what that noise was, Rebecca."

"Let her go." Jake stood in the kitchen doorway. "The noise is just raccoons. There are hundreds of them around here. We hunt them sometimes."

"Ew." Celeste couldn't help it. Hunting raccoons? Sweet, little raccoons.

"Okay, lovebirds, back into the living room." Rebecca grabbed Celeste's arm and tugged her into the front room.

Had the agents seen her signal? Celeste couldn't be sure. They hadn't signaled back but, then again, that may have been a good thing. If they'd signaled back, Rebecca may have seen it and Celeste figured she'd probably be lying on the ceramic tile in the kitchen in a pool of her own blood. Shivers racked her body.

"Sit down." Rebecca's eyes grew wilder by the minute. "Don't move. I have to think. I don't want to hurt you two."

"Don't be stupid, Rebecca." Daniels came out of the bedroom she'd forced him to hide in. Van Ester stood by the fireplace, a deep vertical groove between his eyebrows.

"You're the stupid one, Ralph. Sitting up in your corner office, thinking your life was perfect. Thinking you had some power." She laughed. "You have no power over anything."

"I have money, Rebecca." Daniels spread his hands, trying to reason with an unreasonable person. "I could give you enough money you could leave this country. Have a new life. A good life."

"Why would I want to leave? I'm going to get married—" She

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stopped and smiled slyly. “But you know all this.”

Celeste grew more convinced than ever that the girl was unstable. But her very instability made her more of a danger than had she been a sane, cold-blooded killer. There was no predicting what Rebecca might do; where her crazed mind might take her.

“Rebecca, do you want the formula? I can give it to you.” Maybe that would appease the woman and she’d let them go.

“If only it were that simple. I actually like you, Celeste. I like you a lot, but I think I’m going to have to kill you. Evan, you’re a good lover, but you have to go too.”

Celeste bit back the gasp that rose to her lips. A piece of the puzzle fell into place. Rebecca had been sleeping with most of the members of the Corps. Through pillow talk, she’d learned they wanted to stop her father’s formula from being produced. Then, she’d used that info and offered herself to the highest bidder—to get a husband. It was so desperate and pathetic Celeste *almost* felt sorry for her.

“Did you kill Mitch for the Corps, Rebecca?”

“He promised me he would leave his wife a year ago.” She shrugged. “Then he tried to dump me.”

Although she didn’t wish death on anyone, she rather felt Mitch’s death was poetic justice. And if the Corps. had ordered her father’s murder, that made Evan the likeliest suspect.

“You were Van Ester’s date too.” Jake started to stand.

“Sit back down, Jake. I wasn’t born yesterday. And I wasn’t his date, I was his mistress. Evan promised to marry me and then never followed through either. He deserves what he gets too.”

“Evan, did you know anything about the Corps’ plans to kill my father?”

“No. Your father made me more money than any other employee. I’d destroy my company by killing him.”

“I know who else you’re sleeping with. I know where all the orders

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to murder came from.” Daniels moved toward Rebecca.

Jake leaned over and whispered, “Did you get the signal to them?”

“Yes, but I don’t know if they saw it.” Celeste kept her voice low.

“Damn.”

“What are you two whispering about?” Rebecca grabbed Celeste’s hair with her free hand. “Stop telling secrets.”

Rebecca sounded like a three-year-old. Celeste pressed her lips tightly together, realizing in that moment it would be better not to say anything than to antagonize the woman more.

“Sorry, Rebecca. I was just telling Celeste I love her.” Jake kissed the corner of Celeste’s mouth.

“Stop it.” Rebecca swung the gun back to Daniels. “You’re worse than Evan. You tried to turn the man I love against me.”

What the hell was Rebecca talking about now? Celeste’s mind swirled with the information being thrown at her. Did Rebecca mean Evan or someone else?

“I don’t know anything.” Ralph held his hands up in a pleading gesture.

Celeste flinched as Rebecca fired the first shot. The bullet missed and hit the log wall behind Ralph.

“Rebecca, don’t do this,” Celeste pleaded with the girl.

“I have to. He’ll turn me in. He’ll turn Peter in. I can’t let anyone ruin our happiness. You’re a bad father, Ralph. A bad husband. A bad lover. And a bad person.”

Rebecca’s finger tightened on the trigger. She held the gun at arm’s length, although her hand shook a bit. The barrel now pointed at Ralph Daniels’ head.

“I won’t turn you in. I’ll just go home—”

Rebecca shook the gun. “I’m not stupid!”

All the color drained out of Daniels’ face. Even his lips were pale. The man glanced toward the door, but there was no escape.

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“Rebecca, please.” Celeste felt the cold wetness of tears on her cheeks. Ralph Daniels might be an adulterer, but he didn’t deserve to die. She didn’t think she could bear to see the man murdered in front of her. If she could just convince Rebecca to give up the gun, they’d all have a shot at surviving.

“Shut up.” Rebecca put her hands over her ears. “I can’t think.”

“Celeste, hush,” Jake whispered. “She’s close to the edge. We don’t want to push her over.”

Daniels pressed his lips tightly together. Rebecca kept her hands over her ears, but everyone in the room was too scared to make a move.

“Shut up. Shut up. Shut up.”

Celeste had to wonder what voices the girl might be hearing in her head. No one in the room had spoken.

“Celeste and Jake, get in the bedroom. I can’t think with the two of you in here talking. I need to think. I have to be smart. I can’t ruin the wonderful life Peter and I have planned.” She muttered a bit more to herself.

Jake took Celeste’s hand and they walked to the bedroom. He shut the door behind them and leaned against it. She took a deep breath, expecting to hear another gun shot any moment.

“The window. We have to get out of here.” Jake pointed to the picture window behind her.

“What about Daniels?” Celeste felt guilty leaving the poor man behind. Rebecca seemed determined to kill him. Van Ester could well be in danger, too, although Rebecca didn’t seem as antagonistic toward him.

“The best way we can help him is to get those agents in here. I can’t believe the idiots didn’t see your signal.” Jake’s voice shook with fury.

Celeste lifted the window and shoved the screen out. She looked back at Jake. He nodded.

“Go on. I’m right behind you.”

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Celeste tumbled out the window, hitting the ground with enough force to knock the breath out of her. There was no time to catch it. She surged to her feet and ran for the shelter of the trees. She prayed Jake ran behind her.

When she reached the tree line, she stopped and turned to seek out Jake. “Jake?”

“Jake!”

“Right here.”

The moon hid behind cloud cover and didn’t throw any light for her to see by.

“Thank God.” She threw herself into his arms. “I thought Rebecca caught you.”

Jake stroked her back. “I’m right here. Let’s find those agents. They said they’d be southwest. C’mon.”

They went a bit deeper into the woods to avoid being seen should Rebecca look out the window. If it had been spring or summer, the foliage would have covered their progress, but with the trees threadbare for winter the concealment was minimal. If it hadn’t been dark, the trees wouldn’t have provided any cover at all.

“Hello?” Celeste called softly. “Where are they, Jake?”

* * *

“I don’t know.” He frowned. These men were professionals. A niggling doubt clouded his mind. They should have responded to the flashlight Celeste had shone. They hadn’t. He grabbed her arm. “Stop.”

“What’s wrong?” She stopped, breathing hard.

“Something isn’t right about this entire situation,” he whispered. “Why didn’t they respond to your signals?”

“I don’t know. They didn’t see them.”

“Their job is to see them. They were supposedly here in case we needed help. They’re trained to watch for hours on end for the least sign of movement. Something isn’t right.”

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“Do you think Rebecca killed them?”

“Two agents? I doubt it. Besides, Matt Dirk seems pretty sharp to me. The younger agent he had with him, I don’t know about, but Matt was in charge.”

“What should we do?”

“Approach quietly, I guess.” But vague unease still sat on his nerve endings. “Maybe you should—”

“Don’t you dare suggest leaving me here.” The anger in her voice was a living entity.

Jake chuckled. She wasn’t about to be left behind, but he was going first. If they ran into any trouble, he hoped he could trust her to escape into the forest. He considered telling her to do so, but his suggestion was certain to be met with sheer stubbornness.

The agents had set up a campsite earlier, and Jake and Celeste managed to approach without snapping any twigs. Only one agent sat by the fire, warming his hands. He stared intently at the back of the cabin. It was hard to tell in the dark and with the man’s back to them, but Jake thought it might be Matt Dirk.

Where was the other guy? Jake frowned and motioned to Celeste to stay back. The man stood and paced to the tent and back. Maybe the other agent was sleeping? But even as the thought entered his head, Jake knew it wasn’t true.

“C’mon, Rebecca...” The agent shifted from foot to foot and stared at the house. He rubbed his gloved hands together, seeking warmth. His voice gave him away. It was Matt Dirk.

So, he and Rebecca were in on the plot together. How in the hell had she gotten an agent of the federal government to go along with her murderous scheme? Jake didn’t know, but he did know he and Celeste should have run fast and far. He turned to leave, but his foot caught on a thick, small branch lying on the forest floor and it snapped.

“Rebecca?” Matt stopped and looked toward them. Only the pitch

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black kept him from seeing where they stood. His hand moved to his holstered gun and he took a step forward.

Jake backed up a few more steps, taking Celeste with him. The agent stared into the darkness for a few more minutes, listening for any sound. Then, apparently deciding it wasn't worth the effort, he sat back down on the fallen log he'd vacated.

Celeste and Jake made their way away from the campsite. They stopped when they were out of earshot.

"We have to get help." Jake took in big gulps of air, trying to catch his breath. He was more out of wind from the tension than the run.

"Daniels—"

"Celeste, do you have a gun?"

"No. You know I don't." She crossed her arms.

"We can't help him ourselves. We have to get help or we'll all be dead." He pointed south. "Let's roll."

"Okay." Celeste followed him as they jogged through the woods. "How far are we from anyone or anything?"

Jake winced. When he'd offered the plan of using the cabin as the location for the sting operation, he hadn't planned on needing to seek outside help. They were miles from another house and even more miles from a town. "Just a little ways."

"They've escaped." The muffled sound of a shout carried faintly on the wind.

"Pick up the pace, Celeste. They're onto us."

They ran through the woods as quickly as they could in the blackness. The sound of shouts filtered to Jake, barely discernible over the pounding of his heart.

"Careful, there's a steep hill drops off up here. We need to take our time or we'll topple down. Don't have time for a broken leg."

Celeste nodded and they held onto saplings as they skidded down the hill. When they reached the bottom, they picked up their pace again.

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The sound of footsteps running through the forest above them reached her ears. She clutched Jake's arm. "Maybe we should hide?"

A shot rang out through the forest, ricocheting off a tree. Did the agent see them? Did Rebecca? Jake grabbed Celeste's hand and ran.

More shots rang out. When they came to some thick evergreens, Jake dropped to the ground and crawled under them. He dragged Celeste with him. It wasn't a good idea to keep moving. Fear laced through him, fold upon fold. He didn't think he'd ever look at hunting the same way again.

"They came this way. I saw them." Two booted feet stopped in front of the stand of trees they hid under.

Jake barely dared breathe. Dirk stood there for a moment and then moved away. Jake let out the air he'd held in his lungs too long. Celeste lay in the circle of his arms. He brushed a kiss across her chin.

"Do you see them?" Rebecca joined the booted man.

"No."

"Damn it. They can't get away, Peter."

Peter? Jake's brain raced, trying to piece together the puzzle, but he felt as though he were still missing several vital fragments. The agent was Matt Dirk. Jake would stake his life on it. So why would Rebecca call him Peter?

"You're right. We can't leave any witnesses behind." The man's voice took on a menacing tone and his boots moved toward Rebecca's black dress shoes.

"What are you doing, Peter?" Rebecca took a step backwards.

"It's been fun."

The blast of a shot filled the night air. A few birds screeched and clamored out of the trees. Rebecca's body fell to the ground with a heavy thud. Her sightless eyes stared at them under the tree and a single bullet hole marred her forehead.

CHAPTER 16

Jake hugged Celeste against him, sensing she held back her scream. They couldn't help Rebecca. His first concern at the moment was protecting Celeste from the man still standing in front of the trees.

The smell of cigarette smoke drifted past the low branches of the evergreen. Jake's nose itched dangerously. The man in the boots bent down, his knees showing as he crouched by Rebecca's still body.

He turned her face upward and held her chin with his fingers. Jake noted he wore a simple gold band on his ring finger.

"You weren't that hot anyway," the agent said. Then he dropped Rebecca's chin and rose to his feet. Twigs snapped and a few leftover autumn leaves crunched beneath his boots as he moved away.

"Oh, Jake." Celeste gave a little sob.

"I know. We have to get help, Celeste. Hold it together for me. He's still looking for us."

She nodded. Jake placed a gentle, soul-searing kiss on her lips,

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trying to communicate the feelings churning inside him. This wasn't the time or place to discuss intimate matters, but he felt uneasy leaving so many things unsaid. He should have told her sooner how much she meant to him. If he'd learned anything from life's twists and turns, he should have learned that sometimes you didn't get a second chance to tell someone you loved them.

"Do you think he's working alone?" She interrupted his thoughts.

"I didn't see or hear anyone else."

"Then, if he's out here looking for us, we should go back to the cabin and phone the police."

"Are we certain Nick Roberts isn't involved? Perhaps he and Dirk are in on this together."

"I don't trust him."

"Me either. I'm not sure who we can trust."

"Let's go back to the cabin. Ralph Daniels and Van Ester are victims just as we were. Let's hope they aren't dead."

Jake scooted cautiously from under the trees. He glanced around to make sure it was safe before bending over and signaling to Celeste. He didn't hold out much hope Ralph Daniels had escaped with his life, but they should probably check.

"Let's go." He took her hand and they stepped lightly toward the cabin, watching for twigs or anything that might give their position away.

Every light in the cabin was on. Jake wondered if Rebecca had run from room to room, flipping on lights and frantically searching for them.

"Jake, I'm scared." Celeste grabbed his hand.

"It's okay. I'll go in first." He opened the back door, but the hinges hadn't been oiled in years and they creaked a bit. When silence greeted the noise, he realized Daniels and Van Ester must be dead.

Celeste crept in behind him, bumping into his back when he

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stopped. He peered around the doorway of the kitchen. The fire crackled in the fireplace. No bodies lay on the floor. Daniels must be in the bedroom. His gaze moved down the hall.

“Celeste, I want you to phone Frank. I believe he’s honest.” He started down the hall.

“Where are you going?” Her eyes were wide and anxious.

“I’m going to check on Daniels and Van Ester.” He didn’t need to say the words. They both knew if the men were alive, they’d have come out by now. The loud report of a hand pistol echoed through the cabin. Jake stopped in mid-stride.

“Roberts,” Celeste whispered.

Jake moved slowly into the living room. Celeste tiptoed behind. Daniels came out of the bedroom and walked slowly down the hall.

“You’re okay.” Celeste smiled.

Daniels raised his arm and Jake noticed the gun he held as though he’d been born with it in his hand. His hand didn’t shake as Rebecca’s had.

“Van Ester was behind it all.” Daniels voice shook. “He just tried to kill me, but I managed to wrestle this—” He pointed at the weapon. “—away. I’m afraid it went off. Can you check and see if he’s okay? I can’t stand the sight of all that blood.”

Celeste patted Ralph’s arm, noting how pale the man seemed. She and Jake hurried to the bedroom, aware every moment allowed Dirk to get that much closer to the cabin.

“So Van Ester and Agent Dirk were working together?” Celeste knew Van Ester was dead.

“Sounds like it.” Jake bent over the other man and checked for a pulse. “Nothing.”

Ralph Daniel’s black briefcase sat dead center in the middle of the bed’s quilt. She glanced over her shoulder and then quickly tried to open it.

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“What’re you doing?” Jake walked to the door and glanced into the hall.

“Just curious.” The briefcase was locked, and she had no idea of the combination. She spun the chamber, listening closely for the tiny click clicks she knew would signal she was on the right number.

“I won’t even ask where you learned that,” Jake moved back to her side, whispering.

“Good, then I won’t tell you. Ta-da!” The briefcase popped open with a loud snap.

Inside were a few pens, a box of paperclips, and two black composition journals. Celeste’s eyes blurred out of focus and then she flipped open the top journal. Her father’s familiar, coded scrawl crept across the page.

“Ben’s missing journals,” Jake said.

Everything clicked into place. The only person who could have her father’s two missing journals was her father’s killer.

“Celeste, we have to call the police—”

“You won’t be making any calls.” Daniels stood in the door, gun still in hand. He motioned for Jake and Celeste to go ahead of him into the living room.

Jake stood in front of Celeste. He wasn’t sure if his body would be much of a shield, but he’d sure as hell try.

“Poor Rebecca.” Daniels chuckled. “She thought I was so stupid and she was so smart. But money is more powerful than even love.”

“That isn’t true.” She glared at Daniels over Jake’s shoulder.

“Well, it was true for Peter, my dear. He chose the bonus I offered him for bringing me the formula over his love for Rebecca.”

“Then why did we hear them plotting to kill you just a few minutes ago?” Jake decided to try to bluff their way to safety. If the man had so little trust in human nature it wouldn’t be hard to convince him that Peter had taken his money and not held up his end of the bargain.

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“Impossible.” But Daniels glanced uneasily out the window.

Jake hid his grin. He’d put doubts in the man’s mind and that might be all they needed to escape with their lives.

“They were pretty lovey dovey.” Jake crossed his arms and smiled. “They’d found a buyer willing to pay more than you.”

Daniels’ cocky smile faded and he frowned. He stalked to the front window and looked outside. The snow plows hadn’t made it down the lane and the wind had piled the snow into drifts that grew by the hour.

The night shadows made it impossible to tell if anyone lurked outside. Daniels rubbed his nose and continued to stare out the window.

“I understand why my father was killed—for the formula. But I still don’t understand why Ned Tate had to die.”

“Beats me.” Daniels shrugged. “I didn’t kill him.”

“Then who did?” Jake asked.

“Probably Peter. Ned Tate would’ve had access to security tapes that would place him in the garage at the same time Ben was killed. He wouldn’t have liked that.”

“Who is Peter? Is his real name Matt Dirk or was that a disguise?” Celeste said.

“Why do you care? You’re going to be dead in a few minutes anyway. I just have to make sure...” He trailed off and looked out the window again. “Peter wouldn’t betray me. I have the money.” But his words sounded uncertain and stilted.

“Humor me. I’d like to be entertained before I die.”

Jake didn’t like hearing those words. He was going to do everything in his power to see she didn’t die. He’d give his own life if he had to but he would protect Celeste with his dying breath.

“What the hell. It’s a great night for a story. Have a seat.” Daniels moved away from the window, but still glanced toward it nervously from time to time. “Ned Tate had a security tape. If Peter killed him, it was because he had to be killed. He’d threatened to go to the police.”

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“And Addison?” Why the hell had the man killed a gentle soul like Albert Addison?

“He knew the formula. We could hardly destroy the formula if someone else knew it.”

“We?”

“The Corps.”

Jake swallowed. What the hell were they involved in? Would someone else come bursting through the door any minute, guns drawn?

“And George?” Celeste asked.

“George was going to tell you everything. He had to be silenced.”

“You monsters.”

“We aren’t monsters. Do you know how many people would be out of work if we were to lose millions of dollars? Do you have any idea the effect it would have on the economy?”

“You used that poor, confused girl and then sent her out into the woods to her death.” The sight of Rebecca’s dead eyes as she’d hit the ground rumbled through him, freshening his fury and his motivation to continue lying to the man in front of them. “Only Peter really loved Rebecca and couldn’t follow through.”

“Rebecca?” Daniels laughed. “She’s a little whore who sleeps with men she thinks are powerful. She deserves what she gets. Peter wouldn’t betray me.”

Of course a man like Ralph Daniels would think so. Ralph hadn’t seen the scared fury shining out of the girl’s eyes. Rebecca had been emotionally unstable. Jake just wished he’d realized it before now.

“What makes you so certain the agent wouldn’t betray you? What if it was all a setup? A way to trap you.”

The color drained from Daniels’ face for a moment, but then he smiled. “I was the one who encouraged him to join the agency. You see, he’s my son. Matthew Peter Dirk.”

“Your son?” So Matt Dirk was Rebecca’s Peter.

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“From an affair I had long ago. The boy missed having a father and is rather desperate to gain my approval.”

Daniels was sicker than Jake had realized. To use the promise of a relationship between father and son was lower than low.

“And Detective Roberts? How is he involved in this?” Celeste asked.

“He isn’t.” Daniels flashed a wide grin. “He’s just too stupid to figure out who is. He actually did us quite a favor by suspecting you two. It meant none of us were under suspicion.”

Daniels moved back to the window, squinting to see through the snow and the darkness of the night.

“Did you hide the journals where we discussed?” Jake whispered, hoping Daniels couldn’t hear him.

“Yes.” Celeste glanced at the man, who still gazed out the window.

“At least he won’t get those.”

“What are you two whispering about?” Daniels turned and strode toward them. “Don’t think you’re going to get something over on me.”

“We don’t.” Celeste shrugged. “I was just telling Jake that I love him, in case we die.”

Did she love him, Jake wondered? His heart beat heavily in his chest at the thought of never being able to hold her again. He wanted to spend the rest of his life with this woman. Wanted to see a dark-haired infant at her breast—his child. Damn it. It couldn’t end this way. He had to figure out a way to get them out of this. His mind raced.

“Where are the journals?” Daniels asked.

“Not here,” Jake said quickly before Celeste could counter him.

“What?” Daniels ran his hand through his salt and pepper hair, obviously agitated. “Why the hell not?”

“You don’t think we’d be stupid enough to hide them here do you? We thought this was going to be a sting, but we weren’t sure how it would go.”

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“I guess we beat you on that one, didn’t we?” Daniels laughed. “Where are the journals?”

“It’s difficult to explain. We’d have to take you to them.”

Daniels glanced back out the window. “Where the hell are you, Peter?”

Jake knew how men like Daniels liked precision. His plan wasn’t going the way he’d expected and it was driving him crazy. There was no turning back for Dirk now that he’d killed a fellow agent, and Jake wondered what could possibly be keeping him.

There was a loud bang on the back door. Daniels spun and faced the kitchen, a frown marring his forehead. “He was supposed to come in the front door.”

“Maybe he lost his way in the storm,” Jake suggested. *God, please let it be someone other than Matt.*

Another loud bang sounded on the back door. Daniels took two steps toward the kitchen and then grabbed Celeste’s arm.

“You come with me.” He turned and glared at Jake. “Try anything funny and she’s dead. Got it?”

“Got it.” Bitter ashes would have been better than the taste in Jake’s mouth. He glanced around the room, frantic to find a way to save Celeste’s life.

* * *

Daniels pushed Celeste in front of him toward the back door. She straightened her posture, trying to escape the hard metal muzzle of the gun resting between her shoulder blades. Her mind flitted from idea to idea, trying to find a means of escape, and coming up blank. She couldn’t run with her armed captor right behind her. He’d shoot her without much provocation, of that she was certain.

Bang. Bang. Bang. The panel shuddered from the force of the blows landing on its wood surface. Just a few more steps and they’d be at the back door. Then Daniels would know Jake had lied to him about Matt

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plotting with Rebecca. The man would more than likely kill them on the spot. She slowed her steps.

“Move it.” Daniels shoved the gun deeper into her back.

Celeste took a deep breath and placed her hand on the door knob. With her other hand, she undid the lock just above the knob. The door creaked on its hinges as it swung inward. A cool blast of air swept over the doorsill and grabbed at her ankles.

“Peter?” Daniels called.

No one stood in the darkness just outside the doorway. A few flakes of snow fell into the room, but melted from the heat. Daniels clutched her arm tighter.

“Peter?”

No answer. Celeste took a deep breath. *Now!* Her mind screamed at her. *Do something now, while he’s distracted.* Closing her eyes to help muster her courage, she slammed her heel down on his instep at the same moment she bit his wrist.

Daniels howled and the gun clattered to the tiles. Celeste kicked it away and punched him in the groin. A moment later, someone tackled Daniels from behind and knocked him to the ground. She stepped out of the way, searching frantically for the gun, knowing more danger lurked outside that open door.

The gun must have slid in a different direction than she’d first thought. Jake and Daniels struggled with one another, exchanging blows. Daniels was in surprisingly good shape for his age, battling with the skills of a street fighter.

Celeste dropped to her knees and felt around for the gun at the same time, even as her eyes searched desperately for it. She spotted it in the far corner of the room under the rim of a counter.

She started for it, but a black boot stepped into the kitchen before she could move closer. *Damn!* Matt Dirk wore boots like that. Her gaze traveled upward and met the eyes of Nick Roberts. Roberts? She knew

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he was in on this!

She scrambled around him, expecting him to grab her any moment. Her fingers clutched the gun and she sat, her back to the countertop.

“Stop,” she screamed as she pointed the gun towards Daniels.

But he and Jake continued fighting, oblivious to the fact she held the gun. She pointed it toward Nick Roberts.

“Don’t move a muscle, detective.”

Roberts stopped and stared at her, shock clear on his face. His hands rose slowly, but he still looked as though he hadn’t quite figured out what was going on.

Serves him right. Taking an oath to serve and protect and then creating dirty little deals on the side.

Her gaze flicked to where Daniels and Jake still fought ferociously. She raised her voice and tried again. “Daniels, I have a gun. Don’t move a muscle.”

Still no response. He lowered his head and rammed it into Jake’s chest, sending Jake sprawling across the floor. Before Jake could rise, Daniels kicked him in the ribs.

Celeste raised the gun to the ceiling and fired. The sound echoed through the room. Daniels stopped and stared at her as though unsure where the gun had come from. Roberts still held his hands in the air, but his eyes were darting around. She knew she couldn’t trust him.

“Back away from Jake.”

Jake rolled on the floor, clutching his ribs. Slowly he rose to his feet, swayed a little and then moved to her side.

“Now, we are going to phone someone. I’m just not sure who.” She glanced at Jake. “I’m not sure we can trust the police or the CIA.”

“FBI?”

“That really isn’t necessary.” Nick Roberts took a step forward.

“Stay where you are.” Celeste shoved the gun out in front of her.

Daniels started to chuckle. “You fools. Oh, you fools.” He leaned

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over, clutching his stomach as he laughed.

Celeste stared at his bent head. What the hell was he talking about? Her gaze flew from Daniels to Nick and back again.

“Celeste, trust me.” Nick Roberts held his hands at his sides, palms up. “I’m here to help.”

“We’re onto you, Roberts.” She shook the gun at him.

“You aren’t onto anything. I’m here to help. John Ricco phoned me when his agent failed to report in on the hour. He knew I was close to the cabin and thought maybe I could help.”

Celeste’s nerves twisted into knots. Who should she trust? Nick Roberts had proven from day one that he believed them to be murderers. Now he wanted them to trust him. To trust him with their lives?

“If you’ll just let me get to my radio…” His hand moved for his pocket.

“Hold it,” Jake said.

“It’s just a radio.” Nick pulled a black radio unit from his pocket. “See?”

After he’d called for help, Celeste still stared at him in stunned amazement.

“What’s wrong, Dr. Monroe?”

“I-I thought you were one of the bad guys.” She used to think she could judge character. Now she knew she’d been mistaken.

“We’re even because I thought you were the bad guys too. Until the evidence kept pointing to a bigger picture. It didn’t take long to figure out your father’s death was the result of a conspiracy rather than a crime of passion.”

Nick Roberts was smarter than she’d given him credit for. She’d seen him as an attack dog. Believed he’d sunk his teeth into her and would never let go. All along he’d been investigating different leads.

Jake held his arms out and Celeste ran into them.

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Thank God it's over. Maybe she could live a halfway normal life.
But would Jake be a part of it as a friend or lover?

CHAPTER 17

Several weeks later, life had moved on and resumed a semi-normal pace. Celeste threw her purse onto the table just inside her front door and bent down to pet Orange Slice. Evan Van Ester's wife now ran E.V.E. Corporation, and had turned out to be an excellent boss. Her father's formula would be released in a couple more months. Evelyn Van Ester dubbed the elixir Ben's Promise and all media reports named her father as the creator.

The cat batted something around on the floor, bumping into the wall and shaking his head. Celeste laughed.

"Orange Slice, look at you. You're acting like a kitten." It was good to see him so lively after his near-death experience.

What's he playing with? She flipped on a bright overhead light. Yellow rose petals were spread over the entrance floor. Her eyes followed the petals as they wound into a trail toward the bedroom.

She unbuttoned her coat with a grin and slung it on the couch,

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following the petals. Jake must have gotten home before her. The scattered petals led her into the bedroom.

Jake sat in the corner in an armchair. Tight jeans stretched across his lap and he'd put on a shirt without bothering to button it. Warm candlelight lit the room. He must have put out a hundred candles. They filled every table and her dresser, casting soft shadows over his face.

"Now this is what I call a welcome." She stepped toward him. She'd never have accused Jake of being a romantic, but if this didn't spell romance she didn't know what did.

"Stay there." Jake held up his hand.

Celeste stopped, noticing the champagne chilling beside the bed and the two wineglasses.

"We can't have much fun on opposite sides of the room." Now what was he up to? Celeste watched as he rose to his feet and walked slowly toward her.

He dropped to one knee and looked up at her.

"Jake? What—"

"Celeste, you're my best friend. I love you."

She swallowed. How she wished he meant he loved her as more than a friend. They'd carefully avoided this topic since the cabin, settling into a routine of work and lovemaking, but no discussion.

Apparently he'd decided it was time to lay things out in the open and she couldn't agree more. Living in limbo could be as painful as dealing with him not loving her.

"I love you, Celeste." Jake repeated his words and she realized she'd drifted off into her own world.

"I love you too." She reached out and brushed her fingers over his jawbone.

"Not as a friend, Celeste, but as the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with." He pulled a black box from his pocket and opened it.

Inside nestled a marquis cut diamond ring. It caught the flames

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from the candles and glittered like it held a million drops of dew.

“Celeste, I’m on bended knee. There are roses. Champagne. Lots of candles. Will you marry me?”

He’d remembered. She felt tears burning her eyes, seeking escape. When they’d driven to Connecticut she’d told him she wanted this type of proposal and he’d remembered.

“Celeste, don’t leave me hanging here. I’m a nervous wreck.” His forehead held grooves of torture.

Celeste dropped to her knees and threw her arms around his neck, kissing him over and over. She laughed through the tears that now spilled down her cheeks and landed on his chest.

“Yes, Jake Walker, I’ll marry you.”

“Thank God.” He pulled her into his arms. “I was so scared you’d say no.”

“I’d never say no. I love you.”

He took her hand and placed the ring on her finger, sealing it in place with a gentle kiss. “I promise to be a good husband and father. You and our children will always come first.”

“No basement labs,” Celeste said sternly.

“Never. Family first. Work second.”

“That’s just the way I like it.” She hugged him tighter.

She’d tell him about the child she carried soon, but she wanted to keep the secret to herself for just a few days more. Jake held the magic formula that would make him a wonderful father and husband. It had nothing to do with science and everything to do with love.

LORI SOARD

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