

SIREN
Publishing

Macy Largo

Ménage Everlasting

The
American
Heroes
Collection

South Dakota



DEAD MOON RISING

*The American Heroes Collection:
South Dakota*

Macy Largo

MENAGE EVERLASTING



**Siren Publishing, Inc.
www.SirenPublishing.com**

ABOUT THE E-BOOK YOU HAVE PURCHASED:

Your non-refundable purchase of this e-book allows you to only ONE LEGAL copy for your own personal reading on your own personal computer or device. **You do not have resell or distribution rights without the prior written permission of both the publisher and the copyright owner of this book.** This book cannot be copied in any format, sold, or otherwise transferred from your computer to another through upload to a file sharing peer to peer program, for free or for a fee, or as a prize in any contest. Such action is illegal and in violation of the U.S. Copyright Law. Distribution of this e-book, in whole or in part, online, offline, in print or in any way or any other method currently known or yet to be invented, is forbidden. If you do not want this book anymore, you must delete it from your computer.

WARNING: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000."

If you find a Siren-BookStrand e-book being sold or shared illegally, please let us know at **legal@sirenbookstrand.com**

A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK

IMPRINT: Ménage Everlasting

DEAD MOON RISING

Copyright © 2010 by Macy Largo

E-book ISBN: 1-60601-929-5

First E-book Publication: June 2010

Cover design by *Les Byerley*

All art and logo copyright © 2010 by Siren Publishing, Inc.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED: This literary work may not be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, including electronic or photographic reproduction, in whole or in part, without express written permission.

All characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead is strictly coincidental.

PUBLISHER

Siren Publishing, Inc.

www.SirenPublishing.com

Letter to Readers

Dear Readers,

If you have purchased this copy of *Dead Moon Rising* by Macy Largo from BookStrand.com or its official distributors, thank you. Also, thank you for not sharing your copy of this book.

Regarding E-book Piracy

This book is copyrighted intellectual property. No other individual or group has resale rights, auction rights, membership rights, sharing rights, or any kind of rights to sell or to give away a copy of this book.

The author and the publisher work very hard to bring our paying readers high-quality reading entertainment.

This is Macy Largo's livelihood. It's fair and simple. Please respect Ms. Largo's right to earn a living from her work.

Amanda Hilton, Publisher
www.SirenPublishing.com
www.BookStrand.com

DEDICATION

To the hunky man I'm married to: I love ya, babe.

Also, a special thank you to the men and women of law enforcement who work lonely roads and busy highways everywhere, and an additional thank you to their families for sending them out to keep us safe.

DEAD MOON RISING

MACY LARGO

Copyright © 2010

Chapter One

The sun had long since set in the distance behind her on I-90, painting the rolling South Dakota plains landscape with deep reds and oranges before it disappeared, setting Sarah's teeth on edge. Not because it wasn't pretty, but because her intuition screamed at her as darkness descended.

Bad, baaaad juju.

Destination: Miami, Florida. There, Sarah Aston's uncle, Eddie, had promised her she could live with him, get a new start on her life, and put her ex-boyfriend behind her.

Unfortunately, her cranky fifteen year-old Subaru didn't seem up to the trip.

The moonless night was dimly lit by countless stars in a crystal-clear sky. Despite the warm June evening, she shivered.

An exit sign appeared in her anemic headlights, which seemed to lose strength over the past hour or so. She suspected a cranky alternator staging a last stand of General Custer proportions. Unfortunately, probably with the same result.

Swinging off the highway onto the exit, she soon found an unmanned gas station with lights and pumps on for those who could pay via plastic. Fortunately, she still had three hundred dollars left on the pre-paid MasterCard she'd bought before rolling out of Seattle,

and almost five hundred more in cash stashed in a plastic zip-top bag shoved inside a wad of dirty underwear in her overnight bag.

Taking a risk to leave it running, she shut the headlights off and anxiously looked around while she gassed up. She resisted the urge to nervously dance from foot to foot as she muttered at the pump to hurry up.

This is bad. Really, really baaaad. Of epic proportions, major horror movie creepies, zombies crawling out of the woodwork baaaad.

When ten, she'd fractured her skull falling out of a tree in their Seattle backyard. In the sixteen years since then, she'd had the intuitions. She refused to call them psychic flashes. They were warnings of a sort, but always accurate. She didn't want to believe any supernatural explanations. She just knew that something about the accident had put her more in tune with her body's natural warning signs. Unfortunately, most of her friends and family decided it creeped them out enough that they didn't want to spend much time around her. Especially when she accurately predicted the deaths of her parents and three friends over the past several years.

The latest prediction before tonight's creepfest, fortunately, didn't forewarn of anything nearly as dire, only that her boyfriend had been cheating on her.

True, of course.

Uncle Eddie didn't care about her "special talent" and had welcomed her with open arms when he found out she wanted a new start after her ex-boyfriend royally screwed her and left her pretty much out on the street. After she'd confronted the louse, he gave her one hour to get her stuff packed and get out. She'd managed to snag the ATM card and empty their joint bank account, most of the money of which was hers to begin with.

Despite the fact that she paid most of the bills, the lease and utilities were in his name, so she couldn't fight him.

She'd tried not to think about her anger and pain over his betrayal,

instead wanting to focus on the new life ahead of her in Miami. But ever since sunset, a deep, dark feeling blossomed inside her, the antithesis of joy and longing. She had two options, both extremely restricted by her car's iffy performance and limited funds—press on and pray she drove out of whatever the feeling was, or stop right here, lock the doors, and hope someone showed up for work sooner rather than later.

As she finished fueling, a dark sedan heading toward I-90 rolled by, doing slower than the posted speed limit.

The nearly overwhelming dark cloud suddenly engulfing her made her mind up for her. She impatiently waited for the pump to spit out her receipt as her fingers trembled while trying to screw the gas cap on. The sedan had totally disappeared from sight by the time she turned to jump into her car.

A little relief settled. Whoever—whatever—had been in that car had been the cause of her unease.

Or maybe I'm just a nervous woman travelling alone cross-country for the first time and pissing my pants at the sight of the first car I've seen in over an hour.

She turned the headlights on, one of her dash indicator lights blipping briefly at her before shutting off again. The voltage light.

Damn.

Reflected in the dark windows of the gas station's store, she could tell the headlights definitely looked weaker than they should be.

Maybe staying, now that she felt a little more settled, would be safer.

That won't get me to Florida.

A check of her cheap-ass pre-paid cell phone showed no service in the area. A brief look around, and the only pay phone holder was missing its phone. *Damn.*

With a tight grip on the steering wheel, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

What to do?

Finally, she shifted the car into drive and headed back to I-90. At last check, she was less than an hour west of Mitchell. If she could make it there, she could find someplace safe to pull in and wait until morning, get her car looked at, and maybe get a cell signal. She kept the radio and air conditioning off to preserve her battery like her uncle had warned her at her last call and drove on through the lonely darkness.

* * * *

Captain Plato Delaney of the South Dakota Highway Patrol sat in his cruiser on the westbound shoulder of I-90, five miles east of Mitchell, and filled out paperwork. Nerves on edge, he prayed his intuition proved wrong this time.

Unfortunately for him, it usually didn't.

In the past year, there had been four "new moon murders," all unsolved, on this lonely stretch of road between Sioux Falls and Rapid City. No one wanted to believe him when he said he suspected they were connected by the lunar cycle. It wasn't unheard of for stranded motorists to fall victim to foul play in such desolate settings. There were enough differences in the cases, and too few leads, that his superiors didn't want to put out extra manpower on new moon nights, especially not with the huge Sturgis motorcycle festival less than two months away. While no one had outright said as much, they made it clear to him that such bad publicity right before their biggest tourist season wasn't welcomed.

In the past hour, only three vehicles had passed him, two of them semis heading east in the other lane toward Sioux Falls. He jumped when his personal cell phone rang.

"You scared the crap out of me, John."

The caller chuckled. "Sorry, babe. How goes the stake out?"

Only Del's lover, John Riley, believed and agreed with his theory. A retired trooper himself, he'd looked at the evidence and nodded. "I

think you're on to something, Del, but good luck convincing the brass of that before Sturgis." And of course John, seven years older than his own thirty-nine, had been right about that, even though Del had thought maybe he could make their superiors listen to his hunch despite a lack of evidence.

Del prayed no one else died before Sturgis ended. Maybe then he could convince someone to take another look at the cases.

"All quiet in my little stretch of hell. I've got about ten more minutes on this report, and then I'm heading west again past Mitchell before I loop around."

"I'm going to bed, but I'll keep the phone close. I know you hate the overnights, but if it means anything, I think you're right."

Del resisted the urge to close his eyes and rest. He normally worked day shifts. He'd volunteered to cover for another trooper out with the birth of his first child when Del realized it would overlap a new moon period. "Thanks. Try to get some sleep."

"Not easy in this big ole bed without you here. I'll have the kettle brewing when you get home. Love you, and stay safe."

"Love you, too." Del hung up and stared at the phone. John hated his early forced retirement four years prior due to an accident that shattered his legs and hips. Now he worked as a freelance computer consultant and software designer from their shared home in Mitchell. Del knew John missed the job, could see the wistful longing in his face every time he sent him off on a shift and heard the eagerness in his voice when Del discussed cases with him.

His intuition buzzed. It'd been two uneventful new moons since the last killing. This was the third. If the pattern held, there would be a murder tonight. Maybe not on his stretch of highway, but somewhere in the lonely blackness between the lights of the two gateway cities that stood sentry to this ribbon of asphalt.

Finally finishing his report, he shut off the cabin lights and headed west, alone on the interstate.

* * * *

Sarah prayed her luck held. She clicked the headlights off, leaving just her running lights on for safety. Checking her mirrors frequently, she spotted no one coming up behind her on the interstate. She had just enough light to make out the road ahead of her if she took it easy. After fifteen minutes, the dark feeling swelled within her again.

In the distance up ahead, she spotted two vehicles pulled over on the right shoulder. The one in front, a dual-axle Ford truck with a crew cab, hauling a fifth-wheel camper, had its flashers on and a flat on the trailer.

Behind it on the shoulder, headlights dark but his parking lights on, was parked the dark sedan that had passed her earlier.

Sliding over to the left lane, she hunched down and prayed her car didn't break down. Her stomach rebelled, threatening to upend. As she drew closer, she spotted an older man talking to another one. The older man, she assumed the owner of the rig, held a flashlight pointed down at the ground, although the light illuminated both of them.

The other man leaned against the front left fender of the sedan as they talked. With a dark baseball cap pulled low, and the light from the flashlight below, she swore she spotted dark holes where his eyes should be as he looked up and seemingly right at her.

She gunned it, nerves screaming bloody murder for her to get the hell out of there.

Bad, baaaad juju!

Heart racing, she finally flipped on her headlights two miles down the road and realized she was doing eighty. Thankfully the road was mostly straight. Unfortunately, the headlights barely made more of a dent in the dark than her running lights.

Slowing a little, she pried one hand at a time off the steering wheel and flexed her nearly numb fingers.

Over the next fifteen miles, her headlights dwindled to faint glows. Then, without fanfare, the car simply shut off.

“No! Oh, fuck no, pleasepleaseplease!” Tears rolled down her face as she coasted onto the right shoulder, tires hauntingly crunching in the gravel as she steered to a stop safely off the highway. When she tried the key again, nothing but an ominous *click* met her efforts.

She dropped her forehead to the steering wheel and cried. The worst of the dark feeling had faded with every mile she put between her and the dark sedan, but it still lingered. Someone in that car was bad news, and the only weapon she had was her scathing sarcasm.

She assumed that wouldn't be helpful against a psycho with a knife or gun.

Double checking that all four doors were locked, she pulled out her cell phone again and tried to get a signal. Nothing.

There were probably worse places to be stuck in a broken down car in the middle of the night with no cell phone reception and a really bad something out there giving her the heebie-jeebies, but off the top of her head, she couldn't think of one.

* * * *

Del headed west along I-90 at an easy pace, not even doing the speed limit. As he passed the Mitchell exit, he fought the urge to veer off, head home, and kiss John goodnight. Only four more days, then he would switch back to his normal daytime patrol schedule. Perk of seniority and rank, he didn't have to pull night shifts on a regular basis unless there was a special event going on or they needed someone to fill in.

Several miles later in the darkness, he spotted a car pulled off on the eastbound shoulder and fought back a grim suspicion. He found a turnaround and doubled-back to the car, flipping on his spotlight and jackpots as he pulled in behind it. Washington state tag. He called in his status and grabbed his flashlight. The white Subaru looked a little on the worn side, but not too beat up. Some road dust on it but otherwise okay.

He could see someone behind the wheel, but they didn't move. His heart hammered in his chest as he unsnapped his holster and rested his right hand on the butt of his service revolver. He used his left to play the flashlight through the rear window as he approached on the driver's side. A woman, he assumed from her long, dark hair, sat slumped over the steering wheel.

His dash cam would record everything if something happened.

He prayed nothing happened.

When he reached the driver's door, he lightly tapped on the window with his flashlight. The woman startled, making him jump back as she screamed in terror.

"Ma'am? Would you mind stepping out of the car?"

She looked frightened out of her wits, and he snapped his holster closed. Whatever her problem, he suspected she wasn't drunk.

She definitely wasn't dead.

He stepped back as she fumbled for the door lock and climbed out. "Oh, thank god!" she sobbed.

His instincts screamed again as he stared at her. Straight black hair just past her shoulders, hazel eyes rimmed with red, as if she'd fallen asleep crying. Probably really pretty when she wasn't scared half to death.

"What's wrong, ma'am?"

"I broke down." She shook her head. "I know, you must think I'm crazy, but you have no idea how scared I felt!" Before he could stop her, she threw her arms around him and hugged him. "Thank you so much for saving me!"

Relief flooded him. One less potential victim for the killer, at least. After gently peeling her off him, he said, "I'd like to see your license and registration anyway." He waited for her to dig them out of her car. When she returned with them, he asked, "What's it doing? Did you run out of gas?"

"No, my uncle told me earlier today when I called him that he thinks my alternator's going bad." She snorted with frightened,

nervous laughter. “*Gone* bad. The lights started going dim, then it just died.”

“I’ll call you a tow truck. Wait here.” He returned to his cruiser, ran her info on his computer, and found out she was clean. Then he called for a tow, and that’s where the bad news started.

* * * *

The darkness had totally faded from her system. Yes, he’d scared the crap out of her at first, so badly she might have piddled her pants just a little, but the hunky brown-haired trooper’s blue eyes and friendly smile set her at ease once her heart slowed. He meant safety.

He would get her off this road so whoever was in that dark sedan wouldn’t stumble across her.

He returned, a frown on his handsome face. “The guy on rotation tonight is having problems with his truck, and there’s no one else available. I can get you back to Mitchell before he even gets on the road.” He glanced through her back window again and apparently noticed her stuff crammed inside. “Moving?”

She nodded, and that’s when she broke down in tears again. “I’m almost broke. I won’t have enough for a hotel room and to get it fixed and a new alternator. I’m moving to Florida to live with my uncle.” She felt pitiful enough, no pride left, might as well admit it. “I don’t know what I’m going to do!”

“Just calm down, Miss Aston,” he soothed as he returned her license and registration. “You were pretty upset when I found you. What’s going on?”

“You’re going to think I’m crazy.”

“I’m a trooper who works a stretch of road that sees crazy in a big way every year during Sturgis. Trust me, I’ve probably seen it all.”

She smoothed her hands over her arms to sooth the creeping gooseflesh as she recounted the dark sedan.

“Where did you see the sedan exactly?” he asked. “When you

stopped for gas?”

She dug her credit card receipt out of her center console. The gas station’s address was printed on the slip. “There’s the exit. He was also heading east. I saw him pulled up behind an RV rig a few miles back when I went by. Looked like they had a flat tire. Truck and trailer.” She tried to laugh it off. “You know, it’s probably just my nerves and an overactive imagination.”

She didn’t like how he frowned. “Why don’t you gather what you need and any valuables from your car, lock it, and come with me? I know a place you can stay tonight. We’ll get your keys to Tom, the wrecker driver.”

She sniffled. “I only have like eight hundred total. I can’t afford a motel. I was just going to drive straight through to Florida and sleep in my car at rest areas.”

“Don’t worry about it. Just get your things.” She didn’t like how he suddenly scanned the area, as if on high alert.

That did worry her. “What’s wrong?”

He frowned. “Let’s just say you aren’t the only one with intuition issues, ma’am.”

* * * *

Del called for someone to check out the broken-down RV rig, but the closest unit was sixty miles away in the opposite direction. He was the only one available, and he didn’t dare risk taking her with him. He got her and her things loaded into the back seat of his cruiser, called John to wake him up, and raced home to Mitchell in record time.

John had left the front light on and stepped outside, using his cane, when he heard the cruiser in the drive.

Del let her out of the back seat and helped her with her things. “Sarah Aston, this is John Riley, South Dakota Highway Patrol, retired.”

She nodded, looking weary. “How do you do? Thank you for

opening your home to me like this. I can't begin to tell you how grateful I am."

John smirked. "You didn't tell her, Del?"

"I'm in a bit of a rush. I need to get back out and check another vehicle."

"Tell me what?" she asked.

John smiled. "Our home, not mine. Del and I live together."

After Del got her things out of his car, he handed John the keys to her car. "Tom will come by for them in a little while."

John frowned at him. "What's wrong?"

He glanced at Sarah, as she'd insisted he call her, then back to him. "I hope I'm wrong, but it may be a new moon issue," he softly explained.

John grimly nodded. "Then get back out there and stay safe."

* * * *

Sarah watched the men interact, feeling embarrassed by the way she almost spied on them as they kissed good-bye, and envious that they were so obviously in love. The way John brushed his fingers down the other man's arm, briefly, but with more than a hint of subtle longing. The way Del's eyes lingered on John's face.

That, and her intuition screamed at her that they were good men and their home was a safe haven.

For once, she welcomed that damn freaky inner voice.

Inside, John offered her a sweet smile. "Can I make you anything to eat?"

She shook her head. "I'm so nervous I'd probably throw it up."

He helped her schlep her stuff into the guest room. The tidy house felt homey and lived in, warm and inviting, much like John. A handmade quilt in rust and turquoise covered the double bed. "The bathroom's across the hall there." He pointed. "There's fresh towels under the sink. Make yourself at home."

She nodded, then jumped at the sound of a knock on the front door. "I'll be right back," he said.

She felt something swirl through her intuition, but nothing major, and nothing to do with John. She heard the front door open and John greet someone, the muffled sound of a woman's voice, then the door shut again and a vehicle drove away. He returned.

"That was Tom's sister, Cindy. He's the wrecker driver on call tonight. He sent her over to get your keys while he's trying to get his truck running." He leaned in the doorway, the picture of ease in a T-shirt and jeans, barefoot. He had short sandy hair, just long enough to run your fingers through, and deep caramel-colored eyes. "You all right?"

She sank to the bed and nodded. "I'm sorry to put you all out like this."

"It's no trouble, sweetie. So you're heading to Florida?"

"Yeah. Miami. That's where my uncle lives."

"What do you do for a living?"

"Graphic artist. Mostly web design. I work freelance." She sighed. "I told everyone I'd be out of touch for about a week, but this really messes me up."

He seemed to perk up at that. "You have a portfolio?"

Wearily, she nodded and pulled out one of her laptops to show him.

He smiled as he looked through some of her past projects. "You looking to make some extra money?"

From his tone of voice and expression, she realized this was a good thing. Then a rare wave of positive vibes flowed through her, one of the few times she enjoyed her little gift. "Depends on what you have in mind."

He crooked his finger at her to follow him and led her down the hallway into another bedroom. This was obviously his home office, and she nearly nerdgasmmed at the sight of the three large flat-screen monitors on one desk, along with the server tower in one corner.

"I run a software company and do some web design of my own,"

he explained. "I could use an in-house graphic artist." He smiled again, and part of her heart melted. "After you leave, we could still work together. My entire staff telecommutes. You game?"

She nodded. "Sure."

He sat at the desk and fired up his computer. "Pull up that chair over there." She did, and a few minutes later she realized the worst night of her life had turned into the best.

"*You're* Riley Development? I love your CMS system! I've set it up for clients before."

He smiled. "I'm flattered. Most people, including Del, their eyes start glazing over long before now. It was always my hobby while I still worked, then I turned it into a full-time living after I retired."

She shook her head. "No, seriously, I'm not just blowing smoke up your ass. This...I can't believe this!"

He extended his hand. "Then let's let you get some sleep because you start work tomorrow."

* * * *

John settled in his bedroom with the TV tuned to HBO and the phone on his chest. This could work out really well. Poor kid still acted nervous as hell, but he definitely wouldn't mind her hanging around for a few days or longer. She seemed really nice.

Really cute.

He tried to focus on the movie and couldn't. Del had bounced his theory about the New Moon Killer off him in hopes John could punch holes in it.

The problem was he couldn't. And he had a feeling the girl now trying to sleep in their guest room had barely escaped becoming the next victim.

All he could do was wait for Del's call.

Chapter Two

Del called in his status to base and floored it westbound away from Mitchell. He had no traffic in front of him to make it worth putting on his flashing lights.

That might warn his quarry.

He pushed the cruiser over a hundred as he counted off mile markers. He hadn't seen any cars heading east, only two semis.

He quickly passed her disabled car and pressed the accelerator a little harder, switching to high beams as he raced down the highway.

Ten minutes later, he came up on the truck and RV.

No sedan.

Now with his jackpot lights on, he called it in to base and tried to ease his racing heart as he made a u-turn and pulled in behind the rig. The truck's emergency flashers blinked eerily in the darkness, and the driver had set out a triangular reflector. He stayed far enough back that he could see the impression in the gravel shoulder of where another car had parked.

No sign of life. He activated the PA and keyed the mic. "Attention driver, this is the South Dakota Highway Patrol. Please open your door slowly."

No response from the rig.

He chirped his siren at them on the snowball's chance they might have slept through his announcement. "Attention driver. South Dakota Highway Patrol. Please step out of your vehicle."

No response.

He updated base and pulled on his gloves before he stepped out of his cruiser. For the second time that night—and a rarity to begin

with—he unsnapped his holster and kept his hand on it. He used his flashlight to examine the trailer as he walked down the shoulder along the driver’s side.

One of the rear driver side tires on the RV was flat. That agreed with Sarah’s story.

The back seat of the large crew cab had been packed full with stuff. Probably retired snowbirds heading out before the Sturgis invasion and the end of summer he guessed, based on the Pennington County, South Dakota, license plates, and bumper stickers for Key West and Marathon, Florida. They probably hailed from around Rapid City.

The cab was empty of people. Keeping one hand firmly on the butt of his gun, he used the hand holding the flashlight to try the driver’s door and found it unlocked. When he opened it, the smell hit him immediately.

Blood.

Despite the dome light coming on, he played the flashlight beam inside the cab and spotted the sticky pool of blood on the passenger floor mat. Backing quickly away from the door, he jogged around the back of the rig to the other side and forward again to where the door sat on the fifth-wheel’s passenger side. Using the butt of his flashlight, he rapped on the door. “South Dakota Highway Patrol! Open up!”

Nothing.

He used the flashlight to look around on the ground, and that’s when he spotted more blood, a large area of it, in matted weeds where it looked like a body had lain. The only sounds around him were his car running, the eerie click of the rig’s flashers, and the breeze in the high grass. He didn’t even hear any bugs or night birds.

This is not right.

He drew his gun, chills washing down his spine as he tried the door and found it unlocked.

He spotted the man’s body first, lying directly in front of the door,

his feet in the stepwell, with his throat slit. The woman lay farther back in the trailer, her sightless eyes open and staring in eternal shock.

Backing out of the trailer, and with his heart now pounding, he called in for backup. On high alert, he scanned the area to ensure he was alone.

Of course he was. The killer was long gone.

“Jesus Christ!” He holstered his gun and tried to calm himself and get back to procedure while waiting for the crime scene techs to show up. Set out flares, don his reflective vest...

Fuck. Call John and warn him they might have a killer in their house, or at the very least, the only living witness to the New Moon Killer’s activities.

His money rested on number two. And if the killer knew she was still anywhere around...

She was probably in a lot of danger.

* * * *

Del’s official cell rang from Tom Davies, the wrecker driver. “Hey, Del, what happened to this car? The broke-down Subaru.”

“What do you mean?” The crime scene techs were still about ten minutes away. They couldn’t get there soon enough for his liking. An officer from the Mitchell PD was en route as well for backup, even though they were outside city lines.

“There’s blood all over it. At least, I think it’s blood. Damn sure looks like it.”

His heart froze. “Inside it?”

“Naw, looks like someone finger-painted the outsides with it. Damn creepy. I thought it was paint at first until I saw the flies lighting on it. It’s still tacky.”

“Don’t touch it!” That answered that question. He knew that Sarah’s car didn’t have blood on it before.

“Like hell I’m touching it. Not till someone gets here and tells me what the heck to do with it.”

“I’ll have someone there in a little while. Put up flares and keep your flashers on.”

He updated base and got more units rolling, putting out a BOLO for a dark sedan.

Not that he had any hopes of finding the guy that easily. If the exit Sarah had seen him at was even his home base, which he doubted, that highway led to several others that ran forty or fifty miles in several directions.

He called base again. “Have someone rouse the owner of that station over in Pukwana. Clarke’s Shell. Find out if they have outside security cameras running tape and get someone to review them.” He looked at Sarah’s receipt. “Specifically, a transaction that happened at twenty-three thirty-five hours. White Subaru, white female. She spotted a dark sedan driving by, heading for I-90, then saw it parked again by this rig. Whoever drove that sedan is a person of interest. Have them review tape and transaction receipts on both sides of the event time, see if maybe our guy gassed up. We’ll also need someone to canvass the stations between here and there to find out if they saw anything.”

His next call was to John.

“What’s wrong?” John said immediately upon answering.

Aware of his dash cam still running and able to pick up audio, he asked, “How’s our house guest?”

John knew damn well he couldn’t talk. “Fine. You’re creeping me out.”

He took a deep breath. “I won’t be back until well after dawn. I’m waiting for crime scene techs.”

“Fuck,” he softly swore. “The rig?”

“Yeah.” He thought for a moment. “Lock the doors.”

“And keep my sidearm handy?”

“Not a bad idea.”

He ended their call and made a few others. After he finished, he sat back and stared at the trailer, then reached over and hit his door lock button. All he could do was sit tight.

* * * *

The crime scene tech, Bob Clanton, shook his head. “Fuck, Del. If I didn’t believe your theory before, I do now.” Specifically, he stared at the evil-looking smiley face painted over Sarah’s trunk lock with the lock itself as a nose.

Human blood. While still speculation, safe money was on the blood belonging to the unfortunate Mr. and Mrs. Engalls, the now-deceased owners of the rig.

A quick review of Del’s dash cam footage by his supervisor proved beyond a doubt the car had been clean when he’d pulled up behind her. The killer hadn’t left a single fingerprint, either, using gloves to make his grisly artwork.

As dawn turned the sky grey, his supervisor, Major Mark Guffrey, ran a hand through his hair. “Where is she now, Del?”

“At my house with John. Safe.”

“Do I want to know why a potential witness to a possible serial killer is at your house and not in protective custody?”

At least Mark was finally saying what Del had been pushing for months.

“Because when I picked her up, she wasn’t a potential witness, she was a stranded motorist. Come on, this isn’t the big city. How many times have you bought someone a meal or found them a place to stay when they were down on their luck? She was scared to death when I found her.”

“How do you know she didn’t see more than she says she did?”

Because I understand intuition. But he didn’t say that. What he actually said was, “Because what she did see totally freaked her out. Young woman traveling alone in a dying car in the literal middle of

nowhere. She'd seen one too many slasher movies, I would guess, and her imagination ran wild. It's not her fault her imagination mirrored true life in this case."

* * * *

Del finally made it home a little before ten that morning after filling out reports. John walked out to greet him and leaned against the cruiser's fender.

"Talk to me." Del recounted the basics. John let out a low whistle. "She can't leave. Not only because of her car."

"I know."

"When will you talk to her?"

"Guffrey wants her formal statement taken today, but if I don't get some sleep you'll be peeling me off a guardrail with a paint scraper. I need to hit the hay."

"Want me to make you something to eat first?"

Del leaned in and kissed him. Their quiet street, combined with their large, well-shaded yard and high shrubs, ensured they wouldn't offend the neighbors. "No thanks, I just want to sleep. How's she doing?"

"I just hired me a new geek."

"No shit?"

"She's damn good. She's worked with my CMS software before." He grinned. "Can we keep her? Huh, huh, can we? I promise I'll walk her and feed her and potty train her and everything, Pop."

Del laughed at John's playful, hopeful expression. "You're too much. I'm supposed to be the one loopy from lack of sleep."

They walked inside, and he stopped at John's office doorway. Sarah sat at one of the desks, a laptop in front of her and something hi-test on her mp3 player from the light, tinny sound he heard all the way across the room.

She turned and smiled at them and something inside him twisted,

just a little, in a very good way. Especially when he remembered her frantically hugging him when he found her.

She pulled her earbuds out. "Everything okay?"

He nodded. "Yeah. I need to sleep, and then we'll talk."

She frowned. "Tell me now or you won't get to sleep because I'll be driving you crazy to know what's going on."

He stepped inside the office. "Your intuition and luck in me finding you might have saved your life last night. The couple in the RV rig were murdered by someone we suspect is a serial killer."

She gasped. "Oh, no!" Tears welled in her eyes.

He tried to keep his voice gentle, considering how upset she looked. "We'll talk after I get some sleep." John followed him to their bedroom and quietly shut the door behind them.

"How bad?" he whispered. "What haven't you told me?"

Del unloaded his sidearm and put it in the small gun lockbox in their walk-in closet before heading to their bathroom. "Bad. Like nothing I've ever seen."

John started the shower for Del as he undressed. Then John stepped over to him and gently pushed his hands away as he finished unbuttoning Del's shirt. "You want to talk about it?"

"Not yet." He closed his eyes and tipped his head forward, resting his forehead against John's. John was a comfortable three inches shorter than his own six-four.

John slipped Del's shirt off his shoulders so he could shuck the bulletproof vest, followed by the T-shirt he wore underneath. "Bath, blow-job, and bed."

Del gently laughed. "Not sure I'm up for that."

"I meant I'd give you one, babe. You won't be able to sleep otherwise. You know that." John kissed him, so sweet and tenderly Del felt his heart race. "You know a bad night gives you bad dreams unless I employ a little old fashioned lovin'."

He felt his cock inflating. John knew him too well. "Let's get into the shower," he hoarsely said, "or I'll have you on your knees right

now.”

John led him under the spray and soaped up a washcloth. He didn't let Del do anything except stand there, eyes closed, leaning against the wall for support. When he reached his cock, he especially took his time, bringing a smile to Del's weary lips.

“I could be half-dead and you'd still manage to get me up. How do you do that?”

“Magic, my dear boy.”

After rinsing and drying him, John led him to bed. Del didn't miss the low grunt of pain John tried to suppress as he knelt over him.

“Whoa, how much are you hurting?”

“Not too much.” He pushed Del down to the bed. “You just lay there and enjoy this and drift into happy dreams.”

John had already pulled the blinds and curtains shut so only the dimmest of glow peeked around the edges into the cool room. John dipped his head, his hair softly brushing against Del's thigh as he settled into position between his legs.

When John's hot lips engulfed his shaft, Del groaned and plunged his fingers into his hair. “Oh, baby, that's so good.”

Depending on his mood and John's, one of his blow jobs could be hot and quick and explosive, leaving him wanting more, or long and slow and gentle, leaving him physically drained and drifting to sleep. John went for the latter this morning, languorous sweeps of his tongue over the head and along the ridge, combined with wet pulls taking him almost all the way down to the root. After what felt like forever, John wet two fingers and pressed them against his rim, triggering an explosion that nearly took his breath away.

As he lay there, already feeling sleep pull at him, John changed position and curled up next to him, his hand lightly resting on his chest. “Go to sleep, babe. I'll take your phone out there with me. If you get any official calls that can't wait, I'll wake you.”

“Kay...”

* * * *

John lay there with him another twenty minutes until Del's chest rose and fell in a deep, steady rhythm.

Poor guy, he's wiped out.

He wondered if Del would have nightmares, or if he'd manage to get a few hours of uninterrupted sleep. Del, despite his physique and manner, was a gentle soul. Any loss of life troubled him. Especially loss of innocent life.

Once convinced Del wouldn't awaken, he carefully crawled out of their bed, wincing at his stiff leg. Okay, so he'd fibbed to Del about how much pain he was in this morning, but it was worth it to help him get to sleep. His own cock was disappointed not to see any morning action, but once he got back to work, the distraction would take his mind off his libido.

He dressed and grabbed his cane and Del's work cell and left their bedroom, quietly closing the door behind him. Their bedroom lay at the far end of the hall, with the second, smaller guest room that they also used as an exercise room separating it from the office. As long as they kept the office door shut, they shouldn't disturb him.

He found Sarah in front of her laptop, earbuds in but her hands frozen a few inches over her keyboard and an odd, glassy stare on her face that struck him as unusual for some reason. He worried at first that maybe she was having some sort of mild seizure, but she sensed his entry and turned, offering up a sad smile as she pulled the earbuds out.

He closed the office door behind him. "He'll probably sleep until four, as long as we don't make too much noise." He sat in his chair and rolled it over to her. "You okay?"

She nodded. "Yeah."

He arched an eyebrow at her, and she shook her head, breaking down and crying.

It felt right to lean in and wrap his arms around her. She looked so

fragile, so vulnerable. "It's okay to be upset. Let it out."

"I saw them standing there and talking. I'm the last person who saw that man alive."

"No, the killer was."

"Why did he pick them? He could have taken me there at the gas station."

"He probably realized there were security cameras. Coulda, woulda, shoulda. If you'd stayed there, it would have been safer for you. He doesn't want to be on tape."

She shuddered in his embrace. "He knows, doesn't he? He knows about me?"

Del silently sighed. She'd have to hear it sooner or later. "Apparently he left a message on your car."

She sat back and looked at him, shock and fear on her face. "What?"

He told her, and her trembling resumed as she gaped.

"What am I going to do?" she whispered.

He clasped her hands and squeezed. "Well, one, your car is evidence. So it's not going anywhere anytime soon, even if it was running. Two, you're going to stay right here with us." He smiled. "Two armed officers of the law are pretty good roommates. Well, one officer and one retired officer. Three, you're going to have to promise me one thing." He needed to get her mind off the grisly discovery or it would eat her alive.

"What?"

"That you won't sue your new boss for sexual harassment if I happen to tease you, or if I can't help myself and give you a hug every so often."

He knew how deep her fear ran when he saw how long it took her to process that. She let out a yelp of laughter before clapping both hands over her mouth, her terror transforming to almost hysterical laughter as she collapsed in his arms. This time, her trembling was from trying to keep quiet and not wake Del with her laughter, instead

of disabling fear.

She finally pulled herself together, hiccupping as she nodded, a beautiful smile on her face. "Only on one condition."

"Name it."

"You won't fire me for teasing or hugging you back."

He leaned in and kissed her forehead. "Done. Who knows? That might get you a raise."

She giggled again. "Of more than one kind?"

He really liked this girl. "Oh, hell yeah, baby."

Chapter Three

Sarah had sat and waited for John's return as she tried to work, but her fear kept her nearly paralyzed.

Until something else crept in.

Warm, gentle tenderness, love, and more than a hint of passion.

She closed her eyes, amazed and welcoming the distraction. Sometimes her funky little talent keyed her in to someone, but this was new and different and totally welcomed. She willingly lost track of time as she immersed herself in the sensation.

John's love for Del seemed to envelop the house in a warm, glowing energy, mirrored by Del's when he returned home, filling the space with a welcoming aura she couldn't ignore. She felt her own passion stir more than a little, which said something since the last thing she'd been since her break-up was in the mood.

A flash of envy sparked through her. Two handsome men, and all she could do was bask in this.

Well, the alternative wasn't very pretty.

Then again, maybe she should quit whining. She was far better off than that poor couple in the RV.

Dark chills threatened to take over again, so she focused on the love and passion two rooms over.

She hated to talk about her freaky little inner voice, hated to label it anything other than intuition on steroids, because she didn't want to become one of "those people." Someone treated as a freak—well, okay, her friends and family already treated her like a freak—or sought out by desperate people for some hint of hope.

All she wanted was to live her life and learn to tune out the

feelings that had, admittedly, grown stronger over the past few years.

I am not psychic!

Maybe if she kept repeating it enough she'd finally start to believe her own bullshit.

John returned, and she had herself a right embarrassing mini-meltdown before he got her laughing again. She wished she could stay in Mitchell forever instead of eventually going to Miami, because she instinctively knew she'd love working closely with him long-term. He had a gentle way about him that totally put her at ease.

At least I can telecommute from Florida.

Lunch time rolled around, and he declared them on break. He turned to her and smiled. "What's your poison, ma'am? Leftover pasta, a fresh salad with grilled chicken, or an omelet?"

"I feel spoiled."

He grinned. "Give me a couple of weeks. I'll have you talked into staying for good."

She felt a wave of sincerity from him that nearly drove her to tears again. That was another thing. Normally she only felt the flashes a few times a week, and rarely this strongly. It felt like a non-stop transmission now, and had ever since she awoke that morning.

They settled on salad, and she helped him fix it while he threw two chicken breasts on the stovetop grill. Once they were seated at the table, he asked, "Sick of me yet?"

"You're far from the worst boss I've worked for, trust me."

He laid down his fork. "I meant it. You're welcomed to stay as long as you want. I wouldn't offer if I didn't mean it. Let's give it a couple of weeks and see where things are with the investigation, and we'll discuss room and board then. As long as you pull your weight with the chores, and you don't have a problem with our lifestyle, then I don't see any problems."

She frowned. "Your lifestyle?"

He laughed. "Two men living together. Or did you not notice that?"

“Phht. I thought you meant you ran around dressed like animals or something. I grew up in Seattle. Two guys living together is on the conservative end of the scale there. You have to be poly or into BDSM to break out of the vanilla classification, not just gay.”

It was his turn to laugh. “Then we’ll all get along just fine.”

* * * *

Del awoke, as John predicted, around four o’clock that afternoon. He emerged from their bedroom and stood in the office doorway, handsome in sleeping shorts and with messy bedhead hair.

Her heart made a little thump. Maybe living here long term wouldn’t be a bad idea after all. She’d already called her uncle and explained what happened, put John on the phone with him when she couldn’t bring herself to talk about the details, and John assured her uncle she was welcomed for as long as she wanted to stay.

Uncle Eddie grudgingly agreed that was probably the best place for her—for now—but insisted she call him the second she needed him, and he’d fly out to get her.

Del leaned against the doorframe. “Did you get any work done for slave driver here?” he asked her, his voice sounding hoarsely sexy and deep with lingering sleep.

“Yeah, we had fun.”

Del nodded. “I need to get some coffee in me and some breakfast.” He frowned. “Sorry, dinner. I hate these friggin’ night shifts. Once I’m awake enough to check in with my boss, I’ll find out if he wants me to bring you in for your official statement, or if I can just take it here before I go out on patrol.”

“I still have some things in the trunk of my car. Will I be able to get them?”

“Valuables?”

“No, just clothes and books. I brought my computers and stuff with me.”

“Okay. I’ll run you over to the garage where they towed your car. The place that hooked it, Davies’ Repair, has an enclosed storage bay for stuff like that. Until the crime scene techs sign off on it, it’s going to stay impounded.”

“For a while?”

“Probably.” He glanced at John. “I’m guessing you told her the basics?”

“Had to, Del. She deserved to know.”

“Okay. Coffee first.”

John stood and grabbed his cane. “It’s ready. I’ll make you some breakfast.”

Within an hour, Del had eaten, dressed, taken her official statement, and now she sat in the passenger seat of John’s Ford Explorer as they followed Del in his cruiser.

The chilling, ominous feeling returned the closer they drove to the garage, despite the bright, hot afternoon. She ran her hands over her arms.

John noticed. “What’s wrong?”

“You’re going to think I’m crazy.”

“No I won’t. Trust me.”

“It’s that feeling again. That blackness. Like I felt last night.” When they turned into the back lot behind the automotive repair shop that ran the wrecker business, the feeling screamed at her. “I think I might be sick.”

He reached across the seats and patted her thigh. “Want me and John to get your stuff? You can stay here.”

She stared at the concrete block building in back, which had several closed overhead garage doors, and knew that was where her car sat. Would she ever be able to drive it again? “No, I’ll do it.” She slowly got out and waited for John to round the Explorer and walk with her as they joined Del by the gate.

A woman walked out to meet them. “Hi, Del. John.” She handed Del a clipboard. “I’m to give you this and have you sign it that you

removed items from the car. Crime scene techs left it, said you know what to do. You don't need to get into the truck or RV, do you?"

"Nope." He scanned it and scrawled his signature on it "Thanks, Cindy. Tom around? I need to get his official statement."

"No, he's out on a run." She handed Del a pair of blue disposable nitrile gloves. Sarah barely kept her stomach from upending. "They asked that only you remove stuff from the car. They got pictures and samples and stuff, but they want to keep contamination to a minimum even though they didn't find any traces of blood or anything inside the car." She laughed. "They had Tom dressed in one of those damn white jumpsuits when he dumped it off the rollback. He looked like the Pillsbury Dough Boy. Then he had to wear one again for the truck and RV."

Del smiled as he took the gloves. "No problem. It's their SOP on stuff like that." He glanced around. "Where's the rig?"

She pointed. "Inside, taking up two bays. Man, what a pain in the ass that was, having to shuffle vehicles around to make room for them. Didn't think the fifth wheel was going to fit at first. They insisted it needed to be inside for now."

She handed over the keys. Sarah felt glad she'd pulled off her door and ignition keys and kept the rest or she'd never want her beloved Yoda key ring back.

Following Cindy, they approached the next to last door on the far end of the storage building. The dark cloud threatened to engulf Sarah, but she forced herself to stay firmly by John's side. Apparently sensing her unrest, he laid a comforting palm on the small of her back.

"It's okay," he said. "You don't have to touch anything."

Cindy unlocked and rolled up the door. Sarah gasped at the ruddy brown markings on her white car. "Oh my god!"

John's palm became his arm firmly hooked around her waist to keep her steady. "It's okay," he whispered in her ear. "You want me to take you back to my car?"

She shook her head, horror-struck and riveted at the same time as

Del pulled on the gloves and unlocked her trunk. Inside were all her things, not exactly as she'd left them, but still there as far as she could tell.

"That's not how I packed the trunk," she said, her voice quivering, terrified the killer might have touched her belongings.

Del nodded. "I'm sure they took everything out when they processed the car. Probably inventoried it. I can ask for copies of their photos so you can see how it was before they started." He handed out her duffel bags and suitcases, followed by the three boxes of books. "That's all in the trunk."

"There was another bag and a box in the back seat."

He closed the trunk and moved around to the back driver-side door. He tried it, found it unlocked, leaned in, and handed out stuff to Sarah and John.

Her life, what there was of it, lay in a pile outside the open doorway. That almost made her want to cry more than the horror show her car had been transformed into.

He started to back out of the car when he leaned in again, grabbed something, then handed it out. Her address book.

"Thanks." She tucked it into her back pocket. "I'd be lost without that. I don't have all the numbers plugged into my phone yet." Not only that, it held her passwords for many of her online accounts, although she had things coded so someone else hopefully couldn't figure out which passwords were for what logins.

"Looks like it fell on the floor. Anything in the front?"

"No." She surveyed the pile. "That's it."

Cindy opened the gate so John could drive his Explorer into the yard and save them several trips carrying her things. Before Cindy closed the bay door on her car, Sarah braved the question. "Can I look at it closer?"

Del nodded. "If you really want to. Just don't touch it."

She stepped inside, her body trembling. If she had to suffer through this wacky feeling, she'd face it head-on. Dark, evil

foreboding struck her like a physical wave as she stepped closer to her car. Whoever had done this had killed before, for sure. Many times, not just a few.

She walked around the car, stopping at the trunk, at the smiley face there. In the air, without touching the dried blood, she traced the shape.

Del stepped in close. "What?"

"You said you believe in intuition?"

"Yeah?"

She looked at him. "He won't stop looking for me until you catch him, or he kills me."

* * * *

She returned to the men's house with John, both of them silent during the drive. He'd heard her comment to Del and knew from the very depths of her soul that she believed it.

I can sympathize.

He helped her unload her stuff into what he now thought of as her room, then sat on the bed and patted the mattress next to him. "Come here. I want to talk to you."

She sat.

"Tell me, from start to when Del found you, exactly what happened. I mean the full story of last night, your feelings and fears, not just the events." He gently touched her chin and made her look him in the eye. "I promise I will not think you're crazy. I have a story of my own, but I need to hear yours first."

She nodded. "I need to start before last night then."

"Start where you need to."

She turned to face him and sat cross-legged on the bed. "I grew up a tomboy. Climbed trees with my cousins and friends, things like that. When I was ten, I was in our backyard, climbing a tree that hung over the patio slab. But the branch gave way, and since I was hanging

upside down, I hit head first.

“I fractured my skull and spent several weeks in the hospital, but I made a full recovery.” She nervously twisted her hands together. “Physical recovery. They said I was fine mentally, but I kept having these feelings. I would sense things. When I told my parents about it, they laughed it off at first. Then, as I got older and the feelings got stronger and proved accurate every time, they told me I imagined it. Or I was lying and making it up.”

She hesitated, her fear obvious to him from the way she twisted her hands in her lap.

“What happened?” he asked, gently prompting her.

“I woke up screaming at my mom not to go to Portland on a weekend business trip. Begged her not to go. I knew if she went, she was going to die there.” She sobbed. “A semi blew a front tire on I-5 and the driver lost control. It took out her and another car and sent them off the road. She was killed instantly.”

He watched a tear slip down her face. “My dad ordered me not to talk about it, but some of my cousins and friends knew already. I had lots of flashes here and there, mostly negative stuff. Not usually that bad, but always accurate. I learned to stop talking about it even though it still happened. Then I had another really bad premonition, a scary-ass nightmare that my dad was going to die. I begged him to stay home from a weekend fishing trip. A drunk driver hit the car he and his friends were in and killed all of them.” She sniffled back more tears. “Then three friends died, over the space of a couple of years. I knew it before it happened every time and always had a bad nightmare before. I had one nightmare before a friend’s trip, and told my friend about it. She stayed home. The tour bus her classmates were on crashed, and three people died.”

She harshly laughed. “Then I sensed my ex cheating on me, and that’s what led to the confrontation with him that got me on the road to Miami in the first place. And now I’m here.”

“So you can see bad things.”

“Not just bad,” she softly said, finally lifting her gaze to meet his. “Usually not good, but every once in a while I see good things. The strange thing is that ever since I met you and Del last night, the warm fuzzies have been in overdrive.” She laughed again, this time sounding a little more composed. “Being here, with you especially, it’s like being wrapped in a sweet-smelling blanket in front of a roaring fire in a cozy house during a blizzard. It feels good. That’s never happened before.”

He laced his fingers through hers and squeezed. “Tell me about last night.”

Her eyes grew haunted as she recalled the fear that pressed on her throughout the evening, growing stronger with every mile she drove, coming to a head when she spotted the sedan, then again when she passed the rig, and her absolute terror when the car died.

“Now tell me about today, at the storage lot, when you saw your car.”

She looked at him, puzzled. “You don’t think I’m crazy?”

“I told you I have a story of my own. Go ahead.”

“It’s like he’s not just evil, he’s...” She looked up at the ceiling as she searched for the word. “It’s entrenched. Like he’s tapping into something ancient.” Sarah met his gaze again. “Does that sound weird or what?”

“I’m sure if you talked to some of the Native Americans in this area, they wouldn’t think it’s weird at all. Keep going.”

She shrugged. “That’s all.” A sad sigh escaped her. “I’m not psychic. I’m not one of those nutjobs who runs a telephone hotline and tries to bilk people out of money. I don’t want to be like this. I didn’t *ask* to be like this, and the only person who doesn’t care about my freaky little inner voice is my uncle. No one else wanted me to stay with them, and since my bastard ex screwed me over, it was my only choice.”

He squeezed her hand again. “You’re wrong about that.”

“About what?”

“We want you to stay with us, and we don’t care about your inner voice. It might have saved your life last night.”

“Del saved my life by finding me.”

“You didn’t stop at the rig when someone else might have just so they didn’t break down alone in the middle of nowhere. You knew to put distance between you.” He studied her for a moment. “Maybe you were also feeling some sort of energy from the rig today. The truck and trailer were both in storage there, too.”

“That’s possible.” She sniffled again and nodded. “I didn’t think of that. So what’s your story?”

Chapter Four

Four years earlier.

Close to the end of his shift, Captain John Riley of the South Dakota Highway Patrol sat in his cruiser and filled out reports. Not the best part of the job, but it beat scraping the remains of crotch rocket riders off the asphalt, which he'd done three times in the past month. A new and unfortunate personal record. He could turn around and head home shortly to Del's waiting arms.

Now there's a pleasant thought.

Near sunset on a Wednesday evening in late October, because it was a new moon night, it would be pitch black shortly. Then his radio crackled to life.

Shit.

"Unit sixteen, this is base. Report of overturned semi, I-90 eastbound, two miles west of Plankinton. What's your ETA?"

He immediately fastened his seat belt. Instinctively checking his mirrors as he flipped on his lights, he then shifted into drive to pull onto the highway. Seconds later, on the road and gaining speed, he grabbed the mic. "Unit sixteen to base, ETA ten minutes. En route. Out."

"Roger, unit sixteen. Out."

His pulse thrummed. Dammit, he hoped no one was hurt, but this would fuck up him getting home on time. He was already wiped out. Del had to work nights for two weeks starting two nights from tonight, meaning they'd barely see each other even though they lived together. Tonight they'd planned a nice dinner, and a long night of

loving since they both had the day off tomorrow.

Less than five miles from the accident site, the sun had almost completely set. Only the lights of the stars and his headlights pierced the inky black cloak settling over the land. With no traffic ahead of him, his cruiser screamed over the pavement, blasting up a short rise.

In the middle of the road stood a little boy.

John barely had time to register that he looked around seven or eight, tow-headed, and wore old-fashioned overalls, before he slammed on the brakes at the same time he whipped the wheel to avoid hitting him. The scream in his ears as he plunged off the pavement and into the gravel shoulder before the cruiser flipped five times was his own.

* * * *

He awoke two days later in the Sanford USD trauma center's ICU in Sioux Falls. Del, in civilian clothes and looking like shit, sat at his bedside.

Del leaned over and kissed him. "You scared the fuck outta me, man. Don't you *ever* do that to me again."

He had to know. "How is he? Did I miss him?"

Del's brows knitted in confusion as he tenderly smoothed the hair away from John's forehead. "Miss who, babe?"

"The little boy. Please tell me I didn't hit him. Please tell me he's okay."

A cold chill settled over him as Del slowly shook his head. "What little boy?"

He grabbed Del's hand and squeezed as tight as he could. "That's why I wrecked. I remember it. I came over the rise, and there was this little boy standing in the middle of the road. I swerved to avoid him."

Del tried to calm him. "There wasn't a little boy. A car heading eastbound saw you wreck. They called it in. You were airlifted here to Sioux Falls."

A nurse came in, checked his vitals, and informed Del visiting hours were over. Del kissed him good-bye. "I'll be back in the morning, babe. Mark will stop by later, though. He needs to get your statement. I'll tell him you're back with us." John wasn't too out of it to miss the concern on Del's face.

John tried to sleep, resisted asking for more pain medication despite the agony in his shattered legs and pelvis, but he wanted to be clear-headed. When his boss, Major Mark Guffrey, came in late that night, alone and in uniform, he looked grim and carried a messenger bag.

"What? Did I kill him?" Despite Del's assurances to the contrary, he knew what he saw.

Mark set the bag down, spoke to John's nurse for a moment, then slid the glass door shut on his ICU cubicle and closed the curtain.

He pulled a chair up next to John's bed and took a deep breath before he removed a copy of an old newspaper from his bag and handed it to John.

When John took it, his hands trembled as another chill washed over him. The date on the front page was exactly seventy years from the day of his accident. Pictured, the same boy, only in Sunday best clothes of the era. The bold print headline read **WHO KILLED ROBERT?**

Robert Thompson, seven years old. The little boy's body had been found the morning after his brutal murder, approximately at the location of John's wreck. Abducted from his family's farm while working in the field, no one knew who raped, then butchered, the little boy. His throat had been slit so deeply he'd nearly been decapitated and his body eviscerated.

He looked at Mark. "What the fuck?" he whispered. "I've never heard about this!"

Mark didn't speak. Instead, he handed him copies of several other articles detailing the case, which went cold and remained unsolved.

John stared at Mark, shock robbing him of speech. Mark nodded

and withdrew a portable DVD player from his bag, turned it on, hit play, and swiveled it so John could watch.

It was video from his dash cam, showing him speeding to respond to the wreck. The oncoming headlights of the eastbound car were visible for a split second through the windshield before the ghostly image of a boy appeared in his headlights. Then came the sounds of his screams as the car swerved and rolled before the camera died.

Stunned, John played the thirty second snippet of video several times before looking at Mark.

Mark finally spoke as he took the DVD player back. "I'm taking your official statement right now. This is what it will say, that you came over the rise and there was a large deer in the road and you swerved to avoid it. It obviously escaped unharmed. It was a reflex action. No points on your record, no citation, just a dumb luck accident. Okay?"

John nodded.

"Your dash cam video didn't survive the wreck. It was too badly damaged to pull the feed from it. I'll testify to that." He carefully eyed him. "Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

He slowly nodded.

"This is the only copy of the footage. I personally wiped the rest of it. I'll give this to Del and tell him to lock it in a safe somewhere for those nights when you want to be reminded you aren't crazy." He handed John several other copies of newspaper articles, all relating to accidents on the same date in different years, for 1950, 1965, and 1972. All fatalities, all in the same location, no witnesses or survivors. There were several more accidents on the same date, in 1969, 1979, and 1984. In those cases, alcohol was listed as a factor, but the drivers survived.

None of the stories mentioned a little boy.

"What does this mean?" John finally asked.

"You're not the only trooper or motorist to see little Robert. You probably won't be the last. But we don't talk about him." He took

back all the photocopies and tucked them into his bag. “The last thing we want or need is ghost hunters swarming in and trying to solve a case that can’t be solved, because whoever did it is most likely decades in his own grave. We can’t do that little boy any good. He’s dead longer than any of us have been alive. You won’t do yourself any good to talk about him, either. It’ll bring you a helluva lot of attention you—and Del—most likely don’t want.”

Mark carefully eyed him. “You two have a good life. No one minds you being together because you’re good guys, and everyone likes you, but do you *really* think the people of Mitchell want every new-age nutjob in the world traipsing around fields looking for a ghost? You were raised in South Dakota, and you know there’s two kinds of ghost stories. Ones the towns welcome, because it brings them money and the good kind of attention that pulls in tourist dollars, and ones they bury, because it brings them shame and stirs up bad things. This isn’t a harmless spook that people can’t prove really exists. What happened to that boy, whoever did it, is pure evil. I just wanted you to know you didn’t imagine it, and you aren’t crazy.” He stared at him. “Do we understand each other? Do you get what I’m saying? You and Del have a good, quiet life. Let’s keep it that way.”

John nodded. “Yeah.” He still felt stunned, trying to absorb the facts.

Mark’s voice softened. “You’ve got enough time in, you can retire with full pension, and probably disability payments too, if you want. Say the word, and I’ll push the paperwork through. I can’t imagine you’ll want to be back in a cruiser twelve hours a day after surviving that. Doctors said you’ve got at least six months of rehab ahead of you. Unless you want a desk job, then I’ll be happy to arrange it.”

“No. I’m done. Go ahead and start my paperwork.” He couldn’t think. He wanted to talk to Del. “Will you tell Del for me? About...Robert?”

Mark nodded. “Yeah. I’ll play it for him and show him the articles.” He leaned in. “But let it go, John. Don’t chase a ghost.

Chalk it up to one more ghost story in a countless list of South Dakota spirits. You've lived here all your life. You've seen odd things on new and full moon nights yourself, I'm sure. Whether tricks of the mind or tricks of the supernatural, don't let it consume you."

He stood to go and squeezed John's arm. "I'll send the report with Del for your signature once it's done. Okay?"

"Okay. Thanks." Mark headed for the door, but before he got there, John called out, "You grew up in Mitchell, didn't you? Did you ever see him?"

Mark's body stiffened as he turned. After a long moment, he softly spoke. "When I was a kid, I'd heard stories of the murder. One new moon night I took a dare and went looking for the site."

Another wave of gooseflesh passed over him, and every hair on John's body that hadn't been shaved for surgery to fix his broken bones stood on end. "What did you see?"

Mark visibly shuddered. "I saw him get murdered. I had fallen asleep in my car, and when I woke up, I watched the son of a bitch finish raping him and pull out his knife. And when I screamed at him to stop and got out of my car, the son of a whore turned and looked at me and grinned before they both disappeared. If you ever tell anyone I said that, I'll deny it to my dying day. I've never told another soul." He turned and left without a look back.

* * * *

Sarah sat, stunned, as John finished his story.

"So you see," he finally continued, "I do believe you when you say you have intuition or flashes or whatever."

"Where was that?"

"Where was what?"

"The spot. Where did your wreck happen?"

He frowned. "Why?"

"Can you take me there?"

“I’d rather not.” It took him a year after regaining the ability to drive to force himself to take that highway. When he rode it with Del, he always closed his eyes a mile before the site, waiting until Del gave the all clear to open them again.

“I have a theory.” She shivered. “A really bad one.”

He stood and grabbed her hand. “The miracle of the computer age. Come on.” He led her to the office and fired up his computer. A moment later he was looking at an official copy of Del’s report on the murder. His fingers slowed over the keyboard as he realized what she wanted to know.

Hesitating, and knowing it wouldn’t change the inevitable result, he pulled up a map and found the location of his wreck.

Silently staring at it for a long moment, it took him a while to admit it.

“Tell me,” she demanded.

He sat back in his chair. “I don’t have to,” he quietly said. “You already know the answer.”

* * * *

John didn’t get any sleep that night after he finally sent Sarah to bed. In the soft early light just after dawn, Del sat at their table and shook his head after John finished telling him about his conversation with Sarah.

“That’s too freaky for words, that they were murdered almost exactly where your wreck happened. You realize it, right?” he asked John.

John suspected Del had been too upset over the discovery of the dead couple and focused on his duties at the time to put that together himself. “Of course I realize it.” He also realized he’d gotten up several times throughout the night, his 9mm in hand, and checked all the windows and doors except for the window in Sarah’s room. He hoped it was locked, but he didn’t want to freak her out by coming in

and checking it.

Del blew out a long breath as he held the steaming mug of chamomile tea in front of him. John didn't dare give him coffee, because he'd never get any sleep. "You're saying the murder of that boy, and those other accidents, and your wreck, are all somehow tied to a modern-day serial killer?"

"I'm saying that you and I live here and we didn't even know about the stories. Maybe because my family was from Rapid City and yours from Sioux Falls, but Mark knew about it. Others do. I'm not saying a ghost is murdering people on new moon nights, but I'm saying maybe a local who also heard the stories has decided on a little murder and mayhem of his own. Copycat. Awfully coincidental that one murder happened right in that same spot and their throats were cut." He thought for a moment. "You had two shootings, a bludgeoning, and now two killed like this."

"He's smart enough to vary the pattern," Del said. "Thinks it'll throw us off the path."

"He varied the locations and method. But he's not smart enough to not kill on a different night of the month."

Del slowly nodded.

"Why not kill every month once he got a taste for it?"

"He didn't want to draw suspicion to himself," Del suggested. "Or maybe that's accidental, and he didn't have opportunity."

"Or maybe he has regularly scheduled trips?" John thought some more. "I'm not an FBI profiler."

"They're calling one in."

"Terrific. Brass will want everyone in with bells on." He looked at Del. "Are they at least recognizing you for picking up on the pattern a few months before everyone else?"

"Yeah. Mark made note of it, said I'll get a commendation."

John's hand closed over Del's. "Good. You deserve it."

"Not that it'll help Shelly and Dan Engalls."

* * * *

They showered together before crawling into bed. Del rolled on top of him. "I'm not too exhausted to take care of you this morning."

"Oh, good. I'm horny as hell." John smiled. "Fill me up, buttercup."

Del snickered as he reached over to the bedside table for a bottle of lube. "I'll fill you up all right."

John rolled to his side, and Del didn't need to be psychic to know his lover must be hurting that morning. They both favored missionary, but when in pain, John couldn't pull his legs up or tolerate doggy style and preferred spooning instead.

Del trailed hot kisses down John's arm as he curled his body behind him. He reached across his hip and wrapped his fingers around John's cock. A little pre-come had already leaked from the slit, and he used his thumb to smooth it over the engorged head and sensitive ridge.

John closed his eyes and moaned, working his hips in time with Del's hand.

"You like that, baby?" Del whispered in his ear before nipping at the lobe. "You like it when I stroke your cock like that?"

"Yeah!"

He let go of John's cock and brushed his hand up, over his light treasure trail, to his nipples, tormenting them for a while and drawing more happy moans from him.

With his cock rubbing against the seam of John's ass, it grew hard and ready to play. He quickly slicked himself and nudged into position, sliding home in John's ass and making both men groan before Del started teasing his cock again.

"How's my cock feel inside you, baby?" Del asked. John threw his head back, tipping his chin so he could kiss him hard and thrusting his tongue into his lover's mouth in time with the cock buried in his ass.

“Good!” he finally said when Del let him speak.

He could make love to him all day long, but didn’t want to make John hurt any worse than he did. Before the wreck, it wasn’t uncommon for them to spend more than half a day off in bed together, enjoying each other’s bodies.

“Tell me what you want me to do. Tell me how you want me to fuck this sweet ass of yours.”

John’s head lolled back on Del’s shoulder, his eyes heavy-lidded with lust. “Fuck me hard, baby. Fuck that sweet cock inside my ass so hard you make me come with you.”

Del nipped the side of his neck. “Maybe I want to keep you on edge for a while. Tease you.”

“No, man, I need it. Please, I need you.”

Del’s heart swelled, the longing in his lover’s voice melting him the way it always did. He captured his mouth again in a bruising kiss as his fingers wrapped around John’s cock. He stroked in time with his thrusts, feeling how hot and hard he was, how ready.

Then he increased the tempo, harder, faster, deeper, matching his cock’s pistoning motions with his hand on John’s shaft.

“If you want me to keep fucking you, give it to me, baby,” Del growled in his ear. “Give me that fucking come or I’ll pull out and finish myself.”

“No...ah!” Hot juices coated Del’s hand as John’s body went rigid against him. Del held him even tighter.

“That’s it, baby. Give it to me.”

When John finally went limp, Del quit holding back. In a few, hard thrusts, he buried his dick deep inside his lover’s chute, hot juices exploding from his balls and racing out his cock. He pressed his mouth against John’s shoulder to muffle the sound of his cries before he too fell limp.

He kissed John between the shoulders. “So fucking good, man. You are so fucking good. Jesus, you have no idea how much I love you.”

A sleepy, satisfied smile curled John's lips. "You're not so bad yourself, kid. Love you, too."

Del smiled at the familiar endearment. They laced fingers and curled up tightly like that, Del's softening cock still embedded inside John, and fell asleep.

Chapter Five

Sarah sleepily smiled as she smelled coffee. That wasn't what made her smile, though. The soft, guttural man-grunts coming from behind the door down the hall did that. She closed her eyes again and let the feeling wash over her. Having her crazy psychic flashes was definitely worth it, if she could keep feeling this. That John didn't think she was crazy was a bonus. She didn't know if Del would share his lover's views of her trippy little psychic passenger, but it was enough to know John believed her.

And enough to bask in the metaphorical glow she felt from the men's love.

With a sigh, she climbed out of bed and went to pour herself some coffee. She grabbed a shower, a content smile plastered to her face. By the time she finished, the house lay quiet, and she sensed they'd both fallen asleep.

Good, they need it.

She fired up her mp3 player and booted her laptop. She could work on her own projects until John got up and gave her another assignment. Working for him meant she could eventually replace her car and have enough money to move down to Miami.

Realistically, she knew there was no way she could ever drive her old Subaru again. Not from the dark energy she felt. She'd worried maybe her own stuff would be tainted by that dark cloud, but when they got everything home, it seemed okay.

The thought of leaving stilled her fingers on the keyboard. *If* she managed to make it to Miami. The killer was a local, she sensed that. Definitely a man, from the feelings that washed over her and what

little she saw of him that night.

She was making herself a sandwich for lunch when John emerged from the men's bedroom, still looking half-asleep. "Jesus, I'm sorry, Sar. I didn't mean to leave you hanging this morning."

She grinned, unable to help herself. "It's okay. I kept myself busy." She sat to eat. "Any breaks in the case yet?"

"No. Del said they didn't get anything usable from the gas station video footage. They saw you pumping gas and looking at the road all of a sudden, but the angles of the cameras didn't catch the highway. Nothing turned up from other local stations either."

"Promise me something?"

He was pouring himself a cup of coffee. "What?"

"You guys won't keep info from me, even if you think it'll upset me. I need to know."

He sat down across from her. "That I can promise you."

Halfway through her sandwich, her appetite departed. "You think I'm right, though, don't you? That he won't stop looking for me unless you guys catch him or he kills me first?"

He pursed his lips together before taking a sip of coffee. "Unfortunately, I think you're absolutely right."

* * * *

Sarah didn't miss how John clipped a holstered handgun to his back waistband around nightfall. She also didn't miss how he checked all the doors and windows several times, including the one in her room, making sure they were locked and the blinds drawn.

"Will he know I'm here?"

He looked at her from the front door, where he'd checked it again for the third time in an hour. "Say again?"

"The killer. Will he know I'm here?"

"I don't know. I hope not. It depends on who he is and where he's from. Mitchell's not a huge town, relatively speaking, but it's about

the largest one between Rapid City and Sioux Falls. Lots of tourists come through here. If he's from town, and if he's well-connected, maybe. You want my gut instinct?"

She nodded.

"Right now, I doubt he knows where you are, much less who you are. That doesn't mean once it hits the newspapers at some point that he won't narrow down his choices. If he wrote down your license plate, he can find out your name if he's willing to hire a private eye and pay for the info. I'd be willing to bet we've already been in touch with Washington State to put a flag on your file on anyone other than law enforcement trying to access the information. We won't release your name as a material witness..." He must have realized what he said. "The Highway Patrol won't release your name." He smiled. "I was in a lot of years. Hard to remember I'm not on the job anymore sometimes."

"I'm sorry I've dragged you both into this."

"You didn't drag us into anything." He sat next to her on the couch and propped his cane between his legs. "Truthfully, it's nice having someone else around. Not like you leave toenail clippings in the sink or anything." He grinned, making her laugh.

"So at least for a few days I'm safe."

"I'd be willing to bet." He draped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her against him. "So chill out, relax, and feel free to gripe about your boss."

She laughed again. "No complaints so far."

* * * *

Told that other units would take up the slack, Del had been ordered to stay close to Mitchell on his patrols. There had been talk about mentioning to reporters that "the witness" was still around, to try to bait the killer, but Del put his foot down at the idea of putting her in harm's way.

Unfortunately, one of the tabloid websites had discovered Robert Thompson's murder and started asking questions about it. It'd only be a matter of time before they put two and two together. South Dakota wasn't exactly the death statistics capital of the world, and once someone started plugging accident and homicide locations into Google Earth and coming up with an interesting pattern, it meant all hell would explode.

Del inwardly groaned. He never forgot Mark's advice to him after John's wreck that they keep their mouths shut. Del hadn't been a believer in the supernatural until he saw the video and the evidence Mark showed him.

He also agreed that silence, in that case, wasn't golden—it was pure platinum. At the time of John's wreck, they'd been living together six years. They'd met through the job, of course, and started out as roommates before becoming lovers. By the time a few of their closest colleagues caught on to that fact, no one cared because it wasn't like they went around holding hands or snogging in public.

Joint vacations to places like San Francisco and Key West were welcomed diversions, opportunities to go where no one knew them and they were able to relax without care.

They kept their private life to themselves, although they had a wide circle of friends.

His ears perked up at radio chatter over a traffic stop closer to Sioux Falls, then relaxed when it was just a speeder in a yellow VW Bug. A little after midnight, he stopped by an open convenience store to refill his coffee and empty his bladder. He was chatting with the clerk when Tom Davies walked in, also carrying a large travel mug.

"Hey, Del." He walked over after filling his mug. "Any news on that case?"

He shook his head. "Nope. The psycho's still out there."

"Those vehicles, especially that car, give me the frigging willies, man. The sooner y'all get 'em out of my place, the happier I'll be." He hesitated. "The woman that owns that Subaru, she gonna want it,

or will she need another?"

"I have a feeling she won't want it back, but I can't swear to it. Why?"

"I've got a little Ford Ranger for sale. Just got the title yesterday. Liened it for repair costs. I'll make her a good deal on it if she wants to come in and look at it."

"I'll be sure to tell her when I get home."

"She staying with you and John?"

"Yeah, poor kid's scared witless. John gave her a job working for him to help her earn some money. She does web design."

"I need to talk to him one of these days about doing me a website." The wrecker driver reached into his grubby work pants pocket for money to pay for his coffee and pulled out a pair of used and inside-out disposable blue nitrile gloves instead. He dumped them into the garbage can at the end of the counter, tried again, and found a few wadded one dollar bills. Del glanced outside and saw a Lexus sedan with Ohio plates loaded on his rollback.

"Breakdown?" Del asked, nodding toward it. He hadn't heard any calls about a disabled vehicle.

"Yeah, the battery's toast." He picked up his change. "I don't have one that'll fit it at the shop, and Napa's closed this time of night, obviously. Tourists staying over at the Motel 6. I'll have Cindy deliver it to them in the morning. They can run her back."

"I don't envy you. At least this kind of weather's not so bad. Bet you hate winters."

Tom snorted. "Lived here all my life. Same as you. Rather be here than down in hurricane country." He grinned. "Besides, I make good money in the winter pulling cars out of snow banks and defrosting engine blocks." He headed for the door. "Stay safe."

"You too." Del watched him return to the wrecker, then realized the clerk, Kendra, was staring at him in wide-eyed fear. "What?"

"That killer's still out there, right?"

"Yeah?"

“What’s to say he won’t come in here one night?”

“I thought you had a concealed carry license? Didn’t I take your fingerprints myself for the license at the class they had in town?”

“Oh, I’ve got it, and I’m carrying. That don’t mean anything if he’s that crazy.”

Somehow Del figured the last place the killer would want to be was inside the store. He pointed to the six security cameras he knew about, the ones out in the open, as well as the accompanying, “Smile! You’re on camera!” signs. “He’ll pick a target in the middle of nowhere, Kendra. James has this place wired better than a damn TV studio.”

That seemed to relax her. “Really?”

“Really.”

Chapter Six

Five days later, and still no break in the case. Sarah enjoyed working for John, and now that Del was back on normal day patrols, they got to spend a little time talking in the evening before the men headed for bed.

Which usually meant she went to bed and played with herself while listening to them make love down the hall. She didn't know how long, realistically, this arrangement would last before they grew tired of their houseguest. Although from the men's increasingly flirty behavior with her, she admitted they seemed genuinely happy to have her there.

The next morning she beat Del out to the coffee maker and had it brewing before he sleepily made his way to the kitchen.

"What are you doing up this early?" he mumbled. He patted the small of her back as he slipped past her to the cabinet of mugs. "It's not even six yet."

She shivered. "Bad dream." In her dreams, she didn't pass the RV and black sedan. She pulled in behind them and became caught up in the horrors first-hand.

"Ah. I can understand that." She loved his blue eyes. "About that night?"

"Yeah." She didn't want to talk about this. "Why does everyone call you Del?"

He smiled. "If you didn't want to talk about your dream, all you had to do was say so, kiddo, not resort to a segue like that."

She felt her face heat a little. He'd proved extremely perceptive. "I'd still like to know."

He shrugged. "Plato isn't the most common first name around. My mom liked it, and my dad let her have her way. I wasn't fond of it, and just went by Del and it stuck."

"Are they still alive?"

"Yeah, they retired down to Arizona."

"Any other family?"

"I'm an only child."

"What about John? Does he have family?"

"A brother, out in New York. His mom and dad died a few years apart."

"Are you close to your family?"

He smirked as he leaned against the counter. "As close as average people are, I suppose. They know about me and John, if that was the hinted question. They're not necessarily happy I won't be producing any grandchildren, but they love me and John."

She felt a sharp, stabbing pang of melancholy. "Lucky you," she said. Realizing how it might have sounded, she softened her tone. "I meant lucky that you have family."

"Last time I talked to your uncle, he seemed pretty anxious to get you down there with him. You've got family that cares about you."

"I love Uncle Eddie, don't get me wrong. He's my dad's oldest brother, the eldest of the four kids. He was the black sheep of the family. He was more my last chance than my first choice, to be honest. He doesn't have any kids. One of my other cousins called him, I didn't. When Uncle Eddie found out what was going on, he offered me a place to live and asked me to move in with him."

He snagged her wrist and pulled her to him for a hug. "Listen, kiddo, John and I talked. Seriously, you've got a home here if you want it, as long as you want it."

She let him hold her, closing her eyes and enjoying the warmth, both physical and emotional, surrounding her. He did mean it. Both men did. "Yeah, well, my options will be limited by dodging a serial killer who's probably looking for me, and once word gets around

about my freaky-deaky inner voice, no one will want me.”

He kissed the top of her head. “We want you.”

If only. “That’s not what I meant, and you know it.” She tipped her head back to look into his blue eyes. “Just my luck, two hunky eligible bachelors, and they’re taken by each other. Story of my life.”

She started to pull away so she could pour her own mug of coffee, but he held her in place. “Who says we’d let any other man have a crack at you?” She didn’t miss the playful gleam in his eyes, and she felt a damp spot grow on her panties. “Who says we’d ever let another man within a hundred feet of you?”

She wanted to melt in his arms, then realized it had to be more playful teasing designed to boost her spirits even though the vibe she got from him felt totally sincere.

“You know it’s not nice to tease a poor single girl like this, right?”

His warm, rumbling chuckle washed through her body as he brushed his lips against her forehead. “Who said I’m teasing?” He finally released her and poured John’s coffee to take back to him.

She couldn’t do anything but stare at him in shock as her clit throbbed.

With both mugs in hand, he turned at the kitchen doorway and winked. “John said you promised no sexual harassment charges. Right?”

She dumbly nodded. “Uh huh,” she managed.

The sound of his playful laugh followed him down the hallway until she heard the sound of their bedroom door shutting behind him.

She collapsed against the counter. Her heart raced, and hot moisture pooled in her pussy. Yeah, the men had playfully—and sweetly—teased and flirted with her the past few days, but nothing like that blatant display.

Yowza!

* * * *

Del's cock throbbed, rock hard and ready for action as he pushed the bedroom door closed behind him with one foot. John stirred and rolled over with a sleepy grumble as Del set his mug on the end table beside him. "Morning, lazy."

"I'm not lazy. I'm semi-retired." He reached out and grabbed Del's hard-on through his pajama pants. "What's this?"

Del set his mug down before he slopped the contents all over John. "I was flirting with her a little."

That seemed to fully wake John. "Oh, really?" He worked on Del's pj bottoms and slid them down so his cock was fully exposed. "And what did you do? This seems like more than just a little."

He related the conversation as John leaned in and licked the engorged head.

"You really have the hots for her, don't you?" he asked Del in a teasing tone.

"Oh please, like you don't?"

"I didn't say I don't." He stroked Del's sac, drawing a soft moan from him. "You know how horny she makes me." He licked his cock again, flicking his tongue over the sensitive ridge.

"Think we can talk her into being more than a roommate?" Del asked.

John's hand froze. "You don't mind?"

"Fuck, no, I don't mind. I haven't forgotten you were married once. I've been with girls a time or two myself, you know that. Just never thought we'd find ourselves one as sweet as her out here in the middle of nowhere." They'd had a threesome, with the friend of a friend, while on vacation in Texas several years earlier. A three-day weekend that left both men spent and smiling. The girl hadn't wanted anything more than a hot, memorable weekend, and the men had been happy to oblige her no-strings-attached desires.

John's hand resumed its sensuous journey. "Then I think we're in agreement, buddy."

"Good." Del plunged his fingers into John's hair. "Then let's take

care of this right now.”

He rolled John onto his back before straddling him sixty-nine. John’s fingers dug into Del’s thighs as he deep-throated his cock. “That’s it, baby,” Del said. “You know what I like.”

He wet two fingers and pushed them into John’s puckered hole, enjoying it when his lover’s back arched, a low moan humming against his cock as he finger-fucked him.

“Yeah, you like that, don’t you, baby?”

More happy sounds sent even better sensations through Del’s cock as John lost himself to the feeling of Del’s fingers in his ass.

As clear beads of pre-come leaked from John’s slit, Del wrapped his fingers around his cock and licked it. “Come on, baby, suck me hard and deep. You know what I want you to do.” He thrust his hips, feeling his cock sliding even deeper inside John’s hot, wet mouth, down his throat.

He cupped John’s sac in his free hand and went down on him, careful of his teeth, seeking and finding his gland with his fingers buried inside his ass.

John let out a muffled yell as hot ropes of come exploded in Del’s mouth. He sucked him dry, waiting until John made the soft little sounds that Del knew meant he was totally spent.

He withdrew his fingers. “My turn, baby. Suck my balls dry.”

John redoubled his efforts, finally plunging a finger into Del’s rim, sending him into orbit. Sated and exhausted, Del carefully rolled off him and changed position so he could kiss him. “You give the best head, you know that?”

John smiled. “You sweet talker, you’re not so bad yourself. One of these days, you might get it right.”

Del gently, playfully shoved him.

They took their coffee into the bathroom and stepped into the shower. Del wrapped his arms around John, pulling him close, his chest pressed against John’s back. He ran his hands up John’s chest, through the light mat of dark hair there. “I love you,” he said, nipping

him behind the ear.

John reached behind him and patted Del on the ass. "Love you, too, you damn horn dog."

"I don't hear you complaining."

"Did I say I was complaining?" He looked up into Del's face. "No jealousy, right? We do this with her, it won't ruin what we've got?"

"I promise. I love you. I don't ever want to lose you."

John grinned. "Then we've got ourselves a girl to seduce."

* * * *

John emerged from the shower first, donned jeans and a T-shirt, and made his way to the kitchen. Sarah had already started breakfast.

He leaned in and nibbled the back of her neck, not missing that she leaned into him. "Morning, sweetheart."

"Good morning."

"I heard Del was a little on the playful side earlier?"

Her body tensed. "Um, a little."

He slipped his arms around her waist. "Good. The more we can do to talk you into staying with us, the better." Her tension eased as she leaned into him again. "Oh, and by the way, one more thing."

"Yeah?"

He pressed his lips to the back of her neck again. "We don't share well with others. Hope that's not a problem?"

He noticed her surprised gasp and felt her swallow hard. "No, that's not a problem."

"Good." He released her with a gentle swat to her rear and went to refill his coffee. When he turned to look at her, she was staring at him, frozen, with shock on her face.

"What?" He took a sip, feigning innocence.

"Um..." She shook her head, as if to clear it. "Nothing." She turned back to the pan full of French toast she was making, hurriedly flipping the pieces as she apparently tried to gather her wits.

Unable to resist, he put his mug down again and stepped in. He grabbed her chin, tilting her face to his, and planted a long, deep kiss on her.

Frozen in shock, she didn't respond at first, then she nearly dropped the spatula on the floor as she wrapped her arms around him and kissed him back.

She jumped when Del, dressed in his uniform, rounded the corner with a laugh. "Lucky bastard. Starting without me."

She started to stammer something when Del pulled her from John's arms and kissed her.

John took the spatula from her and took over the French toast while Del french kissed her.

She wobbled a little on her feet when he finally released her. "You okay?" Del asked.

"Uh huh!"

* * * *

Holy fuck! She'd barely had time to recover from, much less process, John's kiss when Del laid one of his own on her. As she stood there in shock and stared at the two men, she realized they'd planned this.

"What's going on?" she managed to ask.

Del shrugged. "We're open to playing around, if you want to." His eyes narrowed. "But only with us. We're bound and determined to talk you into staying here one way or another on a permanent basis. Got it?"

She nodded. "Uh huh!"

Still stunned, somehow she managed to fork food into her mouth as the men exchanged playful banter with her and each other. After she finished, she stood to help clean up the dishes when John took them from her.

"No, go get dressed. We need to run by Tom's and look at that

truck he's got for sale. You need wheels."

She felt heat rise in her face. "I can't afford to buy a new car right now."

"Don't worry about it," Del assured her. "If you like it, we'll pay for it and work out the money later. Your car will be there at least another couple of months while they continue the investigation."

"And you don't want it back anyway, I suppose," John observed.

She shook her head. "No," she whispered, feeling gooseflesh rise on her arms at the memory of the dried blood painted on her car, as if a psychopathic child had attacked it. "I don't want it back."

"Then that's solved," John said. "Go get your shower and get dressed."

She did, and after bidding good-bye to Del as he started his day, she climbed into John's Explorer with him and headed to the mechanic's.

As they drew closer, her stomach tightened.

John didn't miss her distress. "What's wrong?" He reached across the seat and captured her hand.

"Just being there gives me the creeps, knowing what that guy did."

"Me too. Not as badly as you, obviously, but I feel it too."

That calmed her somewhat. She'd been convinced the men would think she was nuts, but the fact that they knew about her oddball talent and still wanted her gave her a sense of belonging she hadn't felt in years.

They rounded a corner as a flat-bed tow truck passed them. John waved at the driver, a man, who returned the gesture. Another dark wave engulfed her as the service garage came into sight.

She tried not to look at the storage building out back, but found she had to fight to keep her eyes on the little black Ford pick-up truck sitting by the road with a For Sale sign on the windshield. On the driver's side was parked a black Ford LTD sedan, the only other car that wasn't parked next to the building.

“Is that a police car?” she asked. “Are they here looking at my car again?”

“Naw, that’s Tom’s car. He picked it up at a police equipment auction. Retired cruiser.”

They parked next to the truck, and John got out. She hesitated a moment, the dark cloud nearly overwhelming her again. Trying to focus on John, she stayed a few steps back from the truck as John looked at it.

“What do you think?” he asked.

She thought she might be sick and knew for certain there was no way in hell she could ever get into that truck. The same dark evil seemed to coat its surface that she’d felt with her car.

Cindy walked out, a set of keys in her hand. “Hi, John. You want to take it for a test drive?”

“Yeah, thanks.” He took the keys from her, unlocked and opened the door, then finally seemed to notice Sarah’s distress when she slowly stepped forward, afraid to get too close. “Sar, what’s wrong?”

With great relief, she realized the truck was a standard-shift. “I can’t drive a stick,” she managed at barely more than a whisper. She quickly stepped back, trying not to touch the truck. She hoped he’d forgive the lie.

John paused, one hand on the roof, the other on the driver’s door. She prayed he didn’t sit inside it and get his clothes covered with the stink of darkness. He wore a confused look. “That’s okay. Del and I can teach you. It’s easy.”

She vigorously shook her head. “No, seriously. I can’t. I need an automatic.” She dared to meet his gaze and prayed he caught on.

He studied her for a moment, then nodded. “Okay, sweetie. We’ll keep looking then.” He stepped away from the truck, closed and locked it, and returned the keys to Cindy. “Sorry. Tell Tom thanks anyway, and to keep his ear to the ground.”

“No problem. I’ve got someone else coming to look at it this afternoon, so that’s okay.”

John placed his hand in the small of Sarah's back as he led her to his truck. When he unlocked the passenger door for her, he caught her wrist and made her look at him. "I want to know."

She glanced to the office door, where Cindy was disappearing inside.

Hoping she didn't cry, she said, "It's like my car. *He* touched it."

Thankfully, she didn't have to clarify who she meant. He immediately nodded. "Okay, I believe you." He laughed. "So you can drive a stick?"

"Yeah. My first car was." He held her hand as she climbed in. Once he was behind the wheel, she turned to him. "I'm sorry I lied to you about the stick shift."

"It's okay." He cast a look behind him as he put the Explorer into reverse. "Now I just need Del to run the VIN on that truck and see if it gives him any leads he can parlay into something helpful."

Chapter Seven

They didn't return home. Instead, John turned a different direction and headed downtown. Sarah liked Mitchell's quaint, small-town feel compared to Seattle's bustle and skyscrapers. She liked the open feeling, the calm flooding through her in John's presence now that they were well away from the dark evil.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"You'll see. I want to show you around town." He grinned. "Try to show you why you'd like living here forever."

She blushed. That's right, they'd taken flirting to a whole new and thoroughly enjoyable level. They pulled into a parking lot, and she stared at the nearby building. "The Corn Palace?"

He laughed. "Yep. It's world famous, or so say all the signs." He led her to the large building. The outer façade was covered by a mural depicting a rodeo scene. As they drew closer, she realized it was made of corn.

"Wow! That's...weird and amazing, all at the same time. Someone have too much time on their hands?"

"It's a major attraction around here." Even street lamps lining the quiet thoroughfare bore corn motifs.

They went inside, and he paid the small admission fee. They spent over an hour there. By the time they finished, even though he was limping and heavily relying on his cane and holding on to her arm for support, she suspected he'd had an even better time than she did.

"Thanks for humoring me," he said.

"What?"

"For bringing you here." They sat on a bench in the shade of

another building and watched tourists taking pictures of the Corn Palace.

“I figured you wanted to take my mind off this morning.”

He laced his fingers through hers. “I did.” He turned to look at her, squeezing her hand. “But I wanted some time to ourselves.”

“You have me all to yourself all day usually.”

“I want you all to myself when we’re not working.” His eyes traveled her face, focusing on her gaze. “I meant just chilling out. You deserve a day off.”

She took the risk to tease back. “You just want to seduce me.”

“I would have thought our kisses this morning were more than enough proof of that.”

Okay, he had her there. They damn sure were.

He leaned in and brushed a kiss across her lips.

“You sure you want to risk that,” she quietly asked.

He frowned. “What?”

“What if people talk? Seeing you with me instead of Del?”

“People couldn’t care less. They’d talk a hell of a lot more if they saw me kiss Del in public, and that would be people who’ve known us for years.” He touched her chin. “We’re willing to risk it if you’re willing to take a chance on us.”

“What happens in a few weeks?”

He shrugged. “You got a hot date waiting for you in Miami? Some Cuban stud keeping a bed warm for you?”

She laughed. “No.”

His gaze never wavered. “You’ve already felt a much deeper fear than wondering if tongues will wag. I’ll be honest, right now my greatest fear is that you’ll walk out of our lives and we won’t have a chance to see how good it could be between the three of us.”

For once, the fear that had simmered below the surface the past few days totally dissolved and disappeared, replaced by lust. “Then why don’t you take me home?”

He smiled. “That’s my girl.”

Her ex had been her third sexual partner, and none of the three men she'd slept with ever filled her with the desperate, thick, liquid-hot need John's words conjured within her.

* * * *

John fought the urge to floor it and race home. No sooner had they walked through the front door and John slammed it closed behind them when he grabbed Sarah and pulled her to him, kissing her breathless. He dropped his cane to the floor so he could wrap both arms around her.

"I'm going to fill your head with happy thoughts," he rumbled against the base of her throat as he slowly backed her down the hall toward his bedroom. "I'm going to love every last ounce of fear right out of that pretty, sweet head of yours. And then when Del gets home this evening, he's going to take over where I left off and you'll be begging us for mercy."

She nearly melted in his arms with a soft, passionate gasp.

He left the bedroom door standing open behind them and pulled her down to the bed, where he rolled on top of her. His cock, thick and throbbing, strained against the denim of his jeans. He kissed her, his tongue demanding and receiving access to her mouth. She tasted like coffee and honey and smelled damned good. Burrowing one hand in her silky black hair, he fought for control as she gave back as good as he gave her. Her fingers tightened on his arms, digging through the fabric of his shirt. He finally sat up, yanked it off, and stretched out over her again.

"I want to feel your hands on me," he said.

Passion raised a flush in her cheeks as she grabbed his head and pulled him back down to her for another kiss. His hips rocked against hers, only fabric between his engorged shaft and the inviting juncture of her thighs. She hooked one leg around his and made a soft, mewling sound as she set the rhythm.

He rose up to look into her eyes. “You want me, baby? You want me, you have to want both of us,” he hoarsely said. Okay, maybe a mean trick to get her hot and horny and spring this on her, but honestly, lust had taken over and made him forget they needed to talk about this first.

She nodded. “Yeah. I want both of you.”

“I don’t mean turns, either. We want you in our bed with us.”

More pink colored her cheeks, and she nodded. “Yeah. Are you sure he’s okay with this? I’m still trying to wrap my head around that.”

He grinned and kissed her again. “Yeah, babe, he’s okay with this. Believe me.” Hell, he could spend all day kissing her, sucking on her eager tongue, until her lips grew pink and plump from where he nipped at them. He sat up again and grabbed the hem of her shirt, pulling it up and over her head as she raised her arms to help him. Then he unfastened the front clasp on her bra and his cock throbbed again.

He leaned forward, taking one pink, taut nipple between his lips and sucking, drawing a long and low moan from her. The motion of her hips against him increased as her urgency built.

“You like that, baby?” he asked.

“Yeah!”

He switched to her other nipple, sucking the sweet cherry into his mouth and driving her close to insane with need from the sounds of her breathless cries. “Just think, two men to fill your nights.”

“Please don’t stop!”

“Oh, I’m not going to—”

His phone, clipped to his belt, rang.

He grabbed it, preparing to launch it out of the bedroom and down the hall when he looked at the caller ID and saw it was Del.

He sat up and grinned. “Hello, handsome.”

“Did she like the truck?”

He shoved away that thought. “We’ll talk about that later,” he

said. "Right now, guess what I'm doing."

She squeaked in shock and started to reach for her shirt, but he pinned her wrist to the bed with his free hand. He could tell from her reaction that they'd have to convince her they were both okay with this arrangement.

"What?"

"Take a wild guess."

"I don't know. Something geeky and boring?"

"No." He leaned in and loudly slurped on her left nipple, taking all the fight out of her and making her moan. "I'm making hot love to a gorgeous woman."

He heard Del's sharp intake of breath. "Holy fuck! Starting without me again?"

He sucked her right nipple, loudly, making her moan again. "Don't worry. By the time you get home, she'll be ready for you again. I'll make sure of it." He licked her flesh in the gentle valley between her breasts. "She'll be wet and hot and ready for you to slide that gorgeous cock into."

Her hands threaded through his hair, holding him to her and trying to nudge him back to her breast. He resisted her urging.

"Jesus! Do you have any idea how fucking hard I am right now?"

"I hope you're hard. Because I'm going to have our girl ready for the fucking of her life when you get home. How else is she supposed to take that huge tool of yours?" He glanced up to her face. Eyes closed, lower lip caught under her teeth, skin flushed. Okay, so Del wasn't that much larger than him, but the filthy talk had amped both her passion and Del's. Del would walk in the door stripping, and he hoped he'd have her ready to tackle him.

He couldn't wait to see the two of them together.

Del's voice had dropped to a hoarse whisper. "I'm liable to whip it out right here and stroke off."

"Don't you fucking dare. You better come home hot and horny and ready to fuck."

Sarah moaned.

“You lousy shit,” Del groaned over the phone. “You’re a goddamned sadist. I’m getting a massive case of blue balls.”

“You’re gonna be my good boy though, aren’t you?” John teased. “You’ll get home and forgive me when you see how hot she is.”

“Yeah, I’ll be—” John heard the squawk of Del’s radio in the background. His voice immediately changed, serious. “Hold on.”

John couldn’t make out the chatter, but when Del returned to the line, his voice was back to all business. “Dammit, I have to roll on a MVA with injuries. Love you, and have fun.”

A multi-vehicle accident would keep Del busy until the end of his shift, most likely, depending on how serious the injuries and if anyone died. “Stay safe, buddy. Love you.”

He ended the call, silenced the phone, then dropped it to the floor next to the bed. “Where were we?”

She put a hand to his chest when he tried to lean in again. “What happened?”

He frowned. “What?”

“Your whole body language changed. What happened?”

He smiled. “He had to roll. Got a call on an accident.”

“Is he okay?”

“Yeah.” He kissed her again. “That’s one of the risks of life with a cop. *Telephonio sexus interruptus*.”

She giggled, then laughed as she draped her hands over his shoulders. “I can’t believe this. I keep thinking I’m going to wake up and find this was a really damn good dream.”

He nuzzled the hollow at the base of her throat. “No dream, baby.” He gently nipped her. “I think we both fell hard for you the moment we met you.”

“Is this going to cause a problem for Del? With work?”

“No. Why?”

“I’m like a witness or something, right? To the murder?”

“You *are* a witness.”

“Isn’t that witness tampering?”

He laughed and sat up. Obviously he wasn’t getting laid until he reassured her. “That’s something totally different. Besides, Del’s not the lead investigator on the case, even though he was the responding officer.” He leaned in, but she put up a hand again to stay him.

“Seriously, though, if they catch this guy—”

“When.”

“When they catch this guy, his attorney won’t use this against the investigation?”

John sat up. “No. You weren’t involved with us when you gave your initial statement. Besides, there’s no law against you living here. It’s none of their business if we’re sleeping together or not. I’m not telling them. Are you?”

She smiled. “No.”

“Okay then.” He kissed her, nibbling on her lower lip. “Then let’s put the thinking aside and get back to the hot sex.”

* * * *

She was happy to take that suggestion as his lips worked their way down her body. She was never wild and crazy, but who wouldn’t want the chance to indulge in a fantasy with two hot guys? “Dammit! I don’t have any protection!” She almost wanted to cry at the thought of stopping.

He nuzzled her tummy, his tongue flicking her navel. “Handled, babe. I bought some.” He glanced up at her, his sweet, caramel-colored eyes almost black with passion. “You looking for excuses to back out?”

Relieved, she grinned and shook her head. “Nope. I just didn’t want to get to the big moment and be less than satisfied.”

He laughed, his breath warm and moist against her flesh as he worked to unfasten her pants. “No chance of that. We know how to satisfy a woman. In multiple ways. And multiple times.” His tongue

trailed down her skin as he slowly tugged her slacks and panties off. “We will give you every damn reason in the world to want to stay right here.”

She loved how soft his hair felt as she ran her fingers through it. Arching her hips, John stripped her pants and underwear off her. He gently pushed her thighs apart.

“All right, baby. Prepare to be persuaded.” He lowered his lips to her mound, where his tongue sought out her swollen clit.

Sarah gasped at the sensation, like blue bolts of electricity slicing through her soul. He took his time, teasing and torturing her, bringing her to the brink time and again without release until she begged him.

“Please! I need you!”

His tongue snaked inside her pussy, and her pleas dissolved into wordless, passionate moans as her entire cunt throbbed, her womb clenching from the power of the desire coursing through her body.

Just when she thought she would lose her mind, he sat up and smirked. “Not yet, baby. We’ve got all afternoon until he gets home. I want you on a high simmer.”

She shook her head. “No! Please, make me come! Don’t leave me like this!”

He climbed out of bed and removed his jeans. Her mouth watered at the sight of his thick, rigid cock, dark and engorged, rising from a nest of curly hair. “Oh, sweetie, I’m going to make you come. I just want to make sure you completely understand how much we want you.” He reached over to the nightstand and pulled out a condom pouch before returning to kneel between her legs.

He slipped a hand between her thighs, two fingers effortlessly sliding inside her hot, wet channel. “Look at that,” he softly said, his eyes heavy-lidded. “Look what I did to you.”

She tried to reach for his cock, but he caught her hand, kissed her fingers, then put it back on the bed. “No. This is me taking care of you.”

Squirming beneath him, she tried to entice him to return his lips to

her clit, but he wouldn't be rushed. Even when she ground against his hand he wouldn't let her get enough traction against him to get herself off.

"Want to hear one of my fantasies?" he said.

She nodded, still humping his fingers, which he kept annoyingly still.

He leaned in and circled one nipple with his tongue before tugging on it with his lips. "I want to watch him driving that sweet cock of his deep inside you while your head is between my legs and sucking my cock."

She threw her head back and moaned at that image, cramping waves of desire nearly incapacitating her.

"To see you on your hands and knees, so I can sit up and bury my fingers in your soft hair, those beautiful lips of yours wrapped around my dick, filling you up from both ends."

He switched to her other nipple, each pull of his lips only intensifying the need within her. When she tried to squirm against his hand again, he pressed his body into hers, pinning her to the bed and forcing her to remain still.

"Or maybe I'll have you climb on top of me, sixty-nine, so I can lick every last bit of sweet juices from your pussy while he fucks you."

"Please fuck me!" Desperation had stolen what little control she thought she had.

"Oh, baby, what's the matter?"

"Please! Please make me come!"

He laughed, a low, sexy sound. "Does my sweet baby need me to give her some relief?"

"Please!"

He sat up and gently caught her chin, tipping her face toward him. "Look at me, Sarah."

She forced her eyes open through sheer force of will.

"You're ours, do you understand? No more talk of moving out

and leaving. We want you to live with us, be with us. We'll never stop you from leaving if you're not happy, but we want you to stay. All we ask is that you trust us."

Could it be that easy? She nodded. "Yes!"

A handsome smile curled his lips. He leaned in and kissed her and she tasted faint traces of her own sex on him. "That's my good girl." He grabbed the condom pouch and ripped it open with his teeth. She nearly cried with relief at that.

He rolled it onto his cock and grabbed her thighs as he positioned himself at her entrance. "You ready to be mine?"

She nodded. His thick shaft slowly pierced her, spreading her, bigger and thicker than any man she'd been with. Nerve endings lit up like an electric grid as he touched places inside her never before stroked.

"Oh, fuck, baby, you're so tight!" He took his time, not letting her take him deeper before he was ready, sliding inside her so slow and sensually she thought she might climax just from that.

When he was buried to the hilt he held still and stroked her thighs. "I could spend all day fucking you, sweetheart." He finally took a stroke, stoking fires inside her, holding still once he fully sheathed his cock within her again.

"Please, fuck me!" she begged. She'd never climaxed just from intercourse, but she knew his cock would do it. If he'd just. Fucking. Move!

He smiled. "What's wrong, baby? Something the matter?"

"Please!" So desperate for more of him, she felt close to tears. "Don't leave me hanging!" Her clit throbbed, begging for the feel of his cock gliding across her flesh.

"Oh, all right. If you can't wait." He started a slow, sensuous grind, not nearly as hard as she wanted, and she rocked her hips with him.

Then came the first release, like a bottle of soda uncapped. She let out a cry, and he laughed again. "There's a little one. I feel your pussy

grabbing me.” Then he picked up the pace, the force of his strokes, holding her suspended in passion and driving her higher.

“Look at me, baby.” She focused on his eyes, those sweet, deep, caramel eyes burning into her. “I want a big one. I want you to give it to me.”

Every thrust hit a deliciously sensitive spot inside her as his pelvis rubbed her clit, a two-for-one that had her hovering, ready to fall into the brink, nearly terrified because she suspected this one would be harder than any other she’d ever felt before.

“Quit being scared, baby,” he softly coaxed. “I want you to feel it for me the way you’ve never felt it before.”

She shattered apart, unable to keep her eyes open as she felt her pussy muscles clamp down on him, trying to hold on to him as white-hot passion filled her past the bursting point.

“That’s my good girl!” He fucked her even harder, drawing it out, sending her to places she never dreamed, better than any orgasm she’d ever had until he finally exploded inside her. “I’m coming!”

One more hard thrust, and he held still before she pulled him down on top of her. She wrapped her arms and legs around him, afraid he’d leave her, even as she felt her channel still vibrating with the last echoes of her own release.

“Hey, you okay?” His thumb brushed moisture from her cheeks, and she realized she was crying.

She nodded.

He hesitantly smiled. “Really?”

She buried her hand in his hair and kissed him, hard, deep. “I don’t want to leave you guys,” she whispered.

“Then you just let us show you all the reasons you belong with us. Okay? No more talk of leaving?”

She nodded and kissed him again.

He had to take care of the condom, but he quickly returned to bed and pulled her into his arms, draped over his chest. Her fingers played with the soft hair across his pecs, lightly stroking him, exploring him.

She'd never felt like this before.

"You didn't fake it, did you?" he asked, a tinge of worry in his tone.

She snorted. "Not hardly." She looked up into his eyes. "You promise your ego won't make you impossible to live with if I tell you something?"

He smirked. "Okay."

"I've never come like that before. Usually I can't get off just from that. I need...help."

His face softened. "Really?"

She nodded, now a little blush of embarrassment heating her cheeks.

"Aw, sweetie." His fingers gently brushed through her hair. "Then isn't that just one more sign you belong with us? I can't wait to see what you do when Del gets home."

Miami felt a world away. An alien world. She loved her Uncle Eddie, but she didn't want to give up her men.

Her men. Her home.

She closed her eyes and rested her cheek against his chest, enjoying the feel of his hair against her flesh.

"Can we just lay here and take a nap? I don't want to move."

He kissed the top of her head and pulled the sheet over them. "Baby, we'll stay here as long as you want. I'm not going anywhere."

Chapter Eight

Sarah awoke from her nap pleasantly surprised to find John between her legs with his tongue buried inside her. She didn't know how long they lay like that, only that he wouldn't let her come, driving her half out of her mind with need before he'd back off, let her cool down, just to fire her up again. His skilled tongue thoroughly explored her, including a journey down to her virgin ass, where he introduced her to rimming before returning to her clit.

"Please make me come!" she begged.

He chuckled. "No, baby. I told you, I want you on a high simmer for Del." The front door opened and immediately slammed shut again. "And there he is."

The sound of pounding footsteps down the hall reached them. By the time Del hit the doorway, he already had his shirt off and was ripping his bulletproof vest off, too.

John sat up, making her moan again. "Easy, tiger. Give me your piece."

Del kissed him as he yanked off his holster belt. "Jesus, I can taste her on you."

"Have a taste yourself." He climbed off the bed to safely stow Del's sidearm in the closet lockbox when Del, still in his uniform pants and shoes, dove onto her.

"Hiya, baby."

She giggled. "He's mean. He won't let me come."

"Oh, is he now? Well, let's see what we can do about that." He kissed her as she wrapped her arms around him and tried to hump herself against his rock-hard thigh.

She melted beneath him, his aggressive passion stoking the flames within her even higher. Despite Del's usually gentle ways, she'd always suspected, from the hunger in his eyes when he looked at John, that he took control in bed.

John returned. "Jesus, get naked, for chrissake."

"You have no idea how horny I've been all afternoon." He sat up and pulled her with him, lowering his mouth to her breasts, one then the other, eagerly nipping and sucking. "The thought of the two of you, in bed together"—he kissed her again, sucking on her tongue—"and knowing what I had waiting for me has been torture."

John knelt behind him and unfastened his slacks while Del continued kissing her. "Ten seconds, buddy, that's all it takes to get naked." He shoved Del's slacks and briefs down his hips and grabbed his cock. "You want that inside our sweet girl, you need to get these off first."

"Fuck!" He stood and kicked off his shoes, ripped off his T-shirt and socks, and shoved his pants off, nearly tripping when he pulled the last leg off.

John used the opening to lie down on the bed and pull her on top of him. "Just like I told you earlier, baby. I want to eat you out while he's fucking you."

Del froze. "Holy fuck," he whispered, "that's goddamned hot!"

"Then get your ass back in bed." He handed him a condom.

Sarah settled over John's head, eagerly grabbing his throbbing cock and sucking on it. He pulled her hips down so he could reach her pussy with his mouth and latched onto her clit.

Moaning, she released his cock. "Please, dammit, fuck me!"

That broke Del's spell. He frantically ripped the pouch open and rolled the condom on before carefully kneeling behind her. She looked at him over her shoulder, her heart melting at the dark passion in his blue eyes.

"You want this cock, baby?" he hoarsely asked.

She nodded.

He teased her, rubbing the head up and down her soaked pussy, parting her lips with it even as John flicked her clit with his tongue.

She thought the explosion John had brought her earlier rocked her world, but suspected that experience was about to be blown out of the water.

He squeezed her ass. "You're so beautiful," he said. He kissed her back, feathering his tongue over her cheeks, down between them, to her ass, teasing her. "Another fantasy, I think for tomorrow since I have the day off." He sank his cock home inside her, a little larger than John, making her moan.

"Yes!"

Del grabbed her hips. "Okay, baby. I want to hear those moans around his cock. Make him come for me while I fuck you."

She slurped him back down as deep as she could. John moaned around her clit, setting off a chain reaction inside her. As Del fucked her, hard and fast, stroking every last nerve ending inside her, John sucked on her clit, not holding back.

Explosive fireworks went off inside her womb, spreading out through her body as she screamed around John's cock.

"Oh, fuck yeah, baby!" Del cried out, thrusting harder, deeper, the sound of skin slapping skin as his balls hit her with each stroke.

She wasn't done. Another, stronger wave crashed over her, robbing her of strength as John's hands clamped tightly on her thighs and refused to let her move.

"Yes!" With one last thrust, she felt Del's cock throb inside her as John's exploded in her mouth, filling her senses with his sweet, musky essence.

Del's hands hit the bed on either side of her, holding him up, keeping him from crushing both of them, but she felt his chest hair against her back, both of them slick with moisture.

John relaxed his grip on her and placed a final, gentle kiss on her clit. "Good?" he mumbled from beneath her.

She let his softening member slide from her mouth and laughed.

“Um, yeah.”

Del nipped her shoulder. “Jesus, baby, I think my brains exploded through my cock. Hot damn, that was fucking awesome.” He sat up. “And you, mister. What the hell was that you did to me?”

She wished he didn’t have to pull out, but knew the condom made it a necessity. Once Del stepped away from the bed, she swung off John, who sat up with a smile on his face. “What? I just let my fingers do the walking.” He winked at her and kissed her.

“What’d you do?” she asked.

She heard the toilet flush, and Del returned. “He shoved his finger up my ass is what he did, sneaky bastard.”

“Didn’t you like it?” John asked, the picture of innocence.

“Fuck yeah, I loved it.” He stretched out in bed and pulled her down to him, kissing her. “Maybe next time you can actually fuck me while I’m doing that.”

John curled up on her other side, one hand snaking down and coming to rest between her legs. “Mmm. You trying to get me hard again, or what?”

“Is it working?” Del asked.

She giggled.

Del arched an eyebrow at her. “What’s so funny?”

“You two. You’re too much.”

He kissed her again, this time gently, tenderly. “You might be thinking we’re too much by this time tomorrow night. Not letting you loose any time soon.”

“What about dinner?” John asked.

“What about it?” He sat up, moved John’s hand, and licked her mound. “I have a snack.”

Her giggles turned to moans as John kissed her while Del changed position and crawled between her legs. He didn’t torment her, though. He quickly brought her to a hard orgasm that slammed into her, arching her back as John held her tightly and softly urged her on.

“That’s it, baby. Show us how hot you are for us.”

Once satisfied he'd satisfied her, Del sat up. "Now I'm ready for dinner," he announced with a grin.

* * * *

John reheated leftovers. Del wouldn't let her get dressed, instead tossing her his robe. As she pulled it on he stopped her, slipping his hands inside it and pulling her close. "I don't want anything to stand in the way of me getting to you, baby," he growled, nipping the base of her throat and making her moan. "We've finally got you where we want you, and I want you like you cannot believe."

"How long are you going to want me?"

He froze, then looked at her. "Sar, forever. We're not just screwing around with you."

"You mean it?"

He pulled her in again for a tight hug. "Hell yeah, we mean it. Baby, you're ours."

John didn't bother washing up the dishes. "They can wait," he said. "This can't." He pointed down at his boxers, which had tented.

She grinned. "Good thing I promised not to sue you for sexual harassment."

Del smacked John's ass. "And he calls me a horn dog. Back to bed before I break out the handcuffs." He hadn't bothered putting anything on and his rock hard cock had inflated halfway through dinner.

He scooped her up, tossing her over his shoulder as she laughed all the way down the hall. He dumped her on the bed, landing beside her as John kicked off his boxers and joined them.

By the time the three of them collapsed a little after ten, worn out and exhausted, Sarah was ready to sleep. She'd ended up the last round draped over John with Del pressed along her back. John leaned in for a kiss, and she yawned.

"Sorry," she apologized.

He smiled. "I'm not complaining. Maybe if we keep you too worn out to want to leave, we have a chance of holding on to you forever."

She was too tired to argue, not that she wanted to argue with him anyway. She simply smiled and closed her eyes, crashing into sleep.

Chapter Nine

Sarah awoke the next morning to the comfortable feel of a strong arm draped over her, with a warm hand cupping her breast. When she opened her eyes she spotted John in front of her, still asleep and on his side facing her.

She wondered how much of Del's day off they'd let her spend out of bed. Not that she wanted to be out of bed. Especially not out of their bed.

Ever.

While she wouldn't presume to say they loved her, every hair on her body screamed at her to commit to them, to promise to stay with them, because it damn sure felt like love. That wasn't naive, first sex, magical thinking, either. That was what she felt through her very core as the color of their emotions had changed, grown more rich, vibrant, deeper. As if a black and white filter had been removed and the true jewel tones of their deepest feelings could now shine through.

Not to mention the fact that both men had mentioned the word "forever" more than once the day before.

She'd never felt like this before, never felt emotions like this from anyone else before, either.

Damn sure not from her ex.

Basking in the glow, she nestled snugly against Del's hard body and suppressed a snicker when his fingers kneaded her breast as his cock stiffened along the seam of her ass.

Hot, moist lips feathered the nape of her neck. "Know what I want to do today, baby?" he rumbled.

"I can guess."

“I want to feel that sweet ass of yours take my cock while he’s fucking your pussy. I want both of us inside you at the same time, so you know who you belong to and don’t get any notions about leaving us.”

His possessive tone made her shiver in a good way. Not only did they love her, they *wanted* her. She’d never had that before, either.

His words also started a new flood of moisture pooling between her legs.

“Mmm,” John sleepily said. “Did I just dream that, or did you really say it?”

“Oh, I said it, buddy. You up for some action before breakfast?”

John blindly groped behind him for the bedside table drawer, and came up with two condoms and the bottle of lube. “As long as you’re on top. I want to pace myself.”

Del’s voice changed from sexy to concerned. “Is your leg okay?”

“Oh, it’ll be fine as soon as my cock’s buried inside this beautiful woman lying all naked and gorgeous next to me.”

Sarah felt the blush rise in her cheeks. “I’m not beautiful,” she mumbled.

“Who says?” Del asked, more than a touch of anger in his voice. “You are beautiful, and don’t you dare say otherwise.” He kissed her, silencing any further protests.

John rolled one of the condoms on and grabbed her by the hips, guiding her onto his stiff shaft. “I want you right there, baby.”

She could easily see herself spending the rest of her life like this, sandwiched between two hunky men. He pulled her down onto his chest, his arms around her. “Just lay there and enjoy this, sweetie.”

Behind her, Del rolled on a condom and pressed a lubed finger into her butt. She squirmed on his hand, enjoying the wicked sensation of both of them and knowing it was about to get a lot better.

“Oh, man, you are gonna feel so good,” Del said. She felt him press the thick head of his cock against her hole, going slow, letting her get used to it.

She wiggled her hips at him, wanting more, wanting him deeper and the feel of both of them inside her at the same time. "Please, give it to me!"

"I am, baby." Del's hands smoothed down her back. "I don't want to hurt you. I want you to enjoy this." He slid another inch in, stretching her, the erotic burn lighting nerves she never knew she had and making her squirm even more to rub her throbbing clit against John's body.

"More, please!"

John chuckled as his hands cupped her breasts and he rubbed the pads of his thumbs over her nipples. "He'll give you more. Just be patient."

"She's so tight!" Del clamped down on her hips to still her incessant movements as he slowly worked more of his hot, throbbing shaft into her. "If you don't hold still, you won't be able to enjoy this because I'll be shooting off before I'm all the way in."

Whimpering with need, she stilled her movements as John pulled her down to his chest again, holding her, capturing her lips in a bruising kiss as he plunged a hand into her hair to hold her there.

Agonizingly slow, Del buried himself inside her until his entire cock disappeared into her dark passage. "Okay, baby," he grunted. "You want it, you got it."

"Yes!" She felt so full and at the same time knew if she could just get them moving that a cataclysmic eruption would soon reward her. Her body hovered, almost at the tipping point, just needing a little more from them.

Del pulled her up against his chest. "Let's see what we can do for you, baby," he growled. "Don't hold back."

John's fingers found and strummed her swollen bud as she started rocking her hips against them. She hooked an arm around Del's neck as he met her stroke for stroke. "More...I need more."

"Take what you need," Del told her, nipping at her earlobe. "Take it all. It's yours."

She closed her eyes and let her head fall back against his strong shoulder, the intense sensations surrounding her, flooding her, taking away all sense of time and space as she felt the eruption grow close.

“Don’t hold back,” John assured her. “I won’t break, baby. I can take anything you can dish out.”

With that assurance, she moved harder, driving their cocks even deeper inside her, Del’s member pushing John’s into that magic place inside her as his fingers helped her along. “I need...I need you!”

“You have us, baby,” Del whispered. “Take us.”

With that, the dam burst. Her back arched with the force of her orgasm, spinning out of control as her conscious shattered into a thousand fragments.

John’s fingers clamped down on her hips again as he thrust up into her. “Oh, fuck yeah, baby. Milk my cock with that sweet pussy.”

Del started moving harder, faster inside her, and the twin friction of them both triggered another avalanche that finally robbed her of strength and reason. John’s cock throbbed and swelled within her. “I’m there, baby...yes!”

Del lowered her to John’s chest and with three more hard thrusts, he too was joining them. He placed a hand in the center of her back to steady himself as they all fell still, breathing heavy, the combined scent of their passion thick in the air.

Del moved first after leaning in to kiss her. He stepped out of bed, and she heard the toilet flush before the sink ran. John carefully eased himself out of her without making her move, his arms tight around her, fingers brushing along her spine.

Eyes closed, she breathed, relishing this peace and wondering if it could last. Praying it could.

Del returned, and she felt him reach between her and John for the condom. “I’ll take care of that since I’m already up,” he said with a chuckle.

“You’re up that quick?” John mumbled. “Damn, you are a horn dog.”

“You’re both horn dogs,” she said. She kissed his chest as she let her fingers play with his hair. “And I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Del returned and slipped into bed with them. He cuddled close, draping an arm over her. “You okay, baby? I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

She smiled without opening her eyes. “Yes, I’m okay, and no, you didn’t hurt me.”

“I need a nap,” John said, “and then we can have breakfast.”

She thought that was a damn spiffy idea and settled in, feeling safe and secure, to go to sleep. Content, sated, satisfied.

Wanted.

And, she suspected, loved.

* * * *

After an hour, she awoke to find she’d shifted position in bed, John ending up in the middle. She carefully climbed out of bed to find something to wear. She pulled a T-shirt, Del’s she suspected, over her head, and it hung nearly to her knees. She turned to look at the men. John slept with his head tucked against Del’s chest. She lingered in the doorway for a long moment, arms crossed and a smile on her face. They looked adorable, perfect for each other.

And they want me, too.

Breakfast could wait a little longer. She wanted them to get plenty of rest. A smile played along her lips.

They’d need it for today.

She made herself a mug of hot tea and went to the office. With all her bedroom activities, she hadn’t checked her email since yesterday morning. She had updated her clients and told them she had a semi-permanent situation now, so they’d know they could reach her, but she hadn’t given them any specifics.

One of these days, when she could afford it, she’d get a BlackBerry so she could check her email and not need to be tethered to her laptop.

She had two accounts, one for her professional email, which routed through her domain's mail server on her host account and funneled into a Gmail account. The other, her private email, went straight to another Gmail account.

Business mail first. There were a few spam messages, which she immediately dumped, and three questions from clients, which she quickly dealt with.

In her personal email account, the latest message received was from Uncle Eddie, wanting a status update. She smiled and pondered her response. Even open-minded Eddie might draw the line at approving of his niece being in a poly relationship. She sipped her tea before replying.

John and Del have welcomed me into their home with open arms. They're very sweet, and they're very persuasive. I feel safe here with them, and I work well with John. I'd like to stay here for now, if you don't mind?

Send.

She returned to her inbox and started working her way down mail from her friends and a few email lists she belonged to when a response appeared from her uncle.

Tell them if they break your heart, I don't care if they're cops, I'll come up there and bust their heads. :) When do I get to meet them?

She grinned.

Would you mind three house guests for Christmas?

Before she could click back to the inbox, Gmail indicated she had a reply.

Just let me know when, I'll put out extra towels and buy ear plugs for at night. ;)

She clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle her squeal of laughter. Okay, so maybe he had read the writing on the wall and didn't mind.

Thanks, Uncle Eddie. I promise I'll stay in touch.

His reply came only seconds later.

Hugs to you, and yes, you'd better stay in touch. Maybe I'll come out there for a visit. Think your boys can show me good places to hunt and fish?

She stared at the screen and swallowed back the lump in her throat. Her boys. Yes, they were hers now, weren't they?

I'm sure we can arrange it. There's plenty of room, and you're more than welcomed whenever you want. Love you!

She didn't bother going back to the inbox, waiting for his reply.

Love you too, sweetie. I'll be taking you up on that offer. I'll catch you later, heading off to bingo. My neighbor from across the hall has been bugging the crap out of me to go with her. Maybe I'll get laid tonight. ;O

She stifled another scream of laughter. He was too much. This time when she clicked back to the inbox she continued through her mail, and that's when she noticed a message received a little after one a.m. that morning with a subject line of *Biding My Time* from someone with the initials DF.

Her breath caught in her throat as a chill washed over her. With

her finger hovering over her mouse, she hesitated. As her pulse surged and her intuition screamed, she swallowed and tried to call out.

“Del!” When she realized it barely sounded louder than a whisper, she called out louder. “Del!”

Seconds later, he hit the bedroom door at a run, flinging it open before he raced into the office with John on his heels, both men naked. “What’s wrong? What is it?”

She pointed at the email and stood on shaky legs so John could slide into her seat.

“You didn’t open it yet?” John asked.

“No. I know it’s from him though. It has to be.”

John looked up at Del, who grimly nodded.

John clicked on the message.

*Oh, my sweet little night owl, how I long to hear you sing.
The things you’ve seen can only hint
at the dark thoughts lingering inside my soul.
One night soon, you shall take wing,
And in the light of the moon my blade will glint
before I burrow into your little hole.*

There will always be another dead moon rising. See you then.

Your Dark Friend

“What the fuck does that mean?” Del growled.

John sat back as he read the message. “It means he thinks he’s smart.”

“That doesn’t even rhyme!” Del protested.

“Yes it does,” she whispered, pointing out the lines. “A-B-C, A-B-C.” Despite the chills it gave her, she read the message again. “What does that mean, ‘dead moon rising’?”

Del shook his head. “He kills on the new moon. The son of a bitch

is playing games with us, and he knows we don't have any clues."

John clicked on the show details option and pushed the rolling chair over to his own computer. He woke it from sleep mode and his fingers flew across the keyboard.

"Babe, read me off the IP address in the header."

Del slipped his arm around her waist as she leaned in and read the IP numbers to John.

A moment later, he shook his head. "It's showing an ISP out of Russia. That means he's using a spoofing program. If he's that smart, tracking him's going to be damn near impossible."

Del scratched his head. "So much for my plans for us for today." He headed for the office doorway.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"I need my phone. I have to call my boss and tell him about this so the tech guys can get to work on it. What I want to know is how the fuck did he find out who she is to get her email address?" He turned at the doorway. "I'll join you two in the shower in a few minutes." He disappeared.

She felt the tears and couldn't hold them back. She'd felt so good, so safe. That this evil man could touch her here, within the fortress of love and security Del and John provided for her, shattered any semblance of normality she'd established since her arrival.

John stood and wrapped his arms around her. She let him hold her, her head resting on his shoulder. "How did he get my private email?"

"Who has it?"

She shook her head. "My friends, family, only a couple of my clients who are also friends."

"It's not on your website anywhere?"

"It was on my old website, but that was a few years ago. I doubt there's a cached copy that old floating around search engines anywhere."

"What about a blog?"

“No—” She stopped.

“What?”

She closed her eyes and groaned. “MySpace. I have a MySpace account. I haven’t updated it in months, and I think it’s still set so anyone can see my info. I used to use it for personal and business stuff to try to reach more clients.”

“Check and see.”

She slid into his chair and used his computer to log on. “I’m too stupid to live. I deserve for this asshole to kill me.” There was her email address. She quickly changed her settings to remove it and lock down the privacy settings. Not that it would do any good now.

He gripped her shoulders. “Stop. You can’t think of everything, babe.” He rubbed her neck muscles. “But maybe this is a good thing.”

She whirled around. “Good? How the fuck is this good?”

He smirked. “Drawing him out. He’ll make a mistake eventually. He wants to bait you? Fine. What he doesn’t know is we’re sitting there with the trap set for him.”

* * * *

Del joined them in the shower. The men tried to soothe her nerves, but she knew nothing would help in that way until the asshole was caught. After they dressed, Del motioned her over to the basement door around the corner from the kitchen. “Come here. I want to show you something.”

He led her downstairs, followed by John, who’d grabbed one of his canes.

“What?” She’d been in the basement several times, because that’s where the washer and dryer were located. She wouldn’t let John make the trip down the stairs with his bad leg more often than necessary.

“Over here.” Del led her to the far corner of the basement, where a locked metal storage cabinet sat against the wall. “We haven’t shown you this yet, because in all honesty, we forgot.” He reached around

the far side of the cabinet, where she couldn't see, and did something. With a soft *click*, the cabinet silently swung out on its hinges, revealing the thick, heavy steel door it was attached to. Behind it lay a small, dark room.

Del closed it and motioned her over. "Right here." He flipped up a small access panel that blended in with the rest of the wood paneling lining the walls. Underneath was a keypad. "0-6-2-4, then hit the pound sign." He demonstrated, and again the doorway silently swung open.

"What's the number mean?"

"It's our anniversary," John said with a smile. "June twenty-fourth, the first time we ever went out." He stepped inside and snapped the cord on a bare-bulb fixture in the ceiling. It dimly illuminated the small room, which contained several gallon jugs of water, some non-perishable snacks, and a few other items. A large, heavy metal cabinet took up one corner of the room.

"What's it for?" she asked as she stepped in after John.

"Well, remember, way back when, there were missile silos all over the place in this part of the country. Cold War bullshit. It wasn't uncommon for people to build houses with bomb shelters."

Del stepped in. "Being the enterprising cops we are, we converted it into our gun locker-slash-storm shelter. We've never had to use it as a storm shelter, fortunately, but the walls are three feet thick." He pointed to a latch on the back side of the door. "You won't get locked in, you just open it there." He pointed to a flat piece of metal propped in the corner. "You could fit that in these brackets here"—he pointed to them on the door—"and no one's prying that door open. It's fireproof in here, so we added a little extra insurance and installed a fireproof gun locker and filing cabinet."

Del stepped across the room and spun the combination dial. "Start by going to the right. 06-24-12-17. Our anniversary, the day of his birthday, August twelfth, and mine, March seventeenth." He spun the dial back and forth, and it opened. Inside were several rifles,

handguns, and boxes of ammo, as well as several drawers which she supposed contained papers.

"I keep some of my computer backup tapes in here too," John said. "Rotate them out every week."

A shiver ran up her spine. "Why show me now?"

Del gently caught her wrists in his hands and brought them up to his lips. "Babe, we don't care how silly it might seem, but if for some reason you ever think you're in danger, you come down here and lock yourself in. Okay?" He pointed to several battery-operated LED lanterns on top of a plastic storage bin. "You'll have light, food, water. You could be safe in here for days if you had to be."

"Where will you two be?" She felt the hysteria threatening to creep into her voice.

So did Del, apparently. He pulled her to him. "Shh, I didn't mean you'd have to be in here that long. Like if John goes to the store or the post office or something and you're here alone, whatever. You come down here if you hear a noise you don't like, and you lock yourself in."

"How do I know if you're home?"

"Oh, babe, trust me, if you're not in the house, this'll be the first place we look. Just don't bar the door and we can get in." He pointed to a small LED indicator mounted approximately behind where the keypad panel would be located on the outside. "See how it's green? That means the last access attempt was good. On the off chance someone did manage to discover the lock panel, if they didn't know the right combination, they couldn't get in. And the light would be red. It's only green when it's the right code."

"What if it's red?" she whispered. "What if someone finds me and tries to get in?"

John stepped over and wrapped his arms around her from behind. "Babe, every weapon in that locker is fully loaded and ready to fire. You'd grab them, flip the safety off, and sit back against the wall and wait for someone to rescue you. They'd need a fucking SWAT team to

get past that firepower.”

“But,” Del reassured her, “it will *not* get to that. Okay? I just want you to know that no matter what, you’re safe. Got it?”

She let them hold her even as her sense of security slowly drained from her. It wouldn’t fully return until that monster was behind bars. “Got it,” she said.

* * * *

After several hours meeting with investigators, she was told not to shut down her Gmail account despite that being her first instinct.

“It’s the only lead we’ve got,” Bill Maddison, one of their computer techs said. “We’ll keep monitoring it. Maybe he’ll email you again.”

Heat washed through her face. She needed to get that message from Uncle Eddie deleted ASAP.

Unless, of course, the investigators had already read it.

“You can set up a new account, of course,” Maddison said, “and privately notify your friends and family to use that account.”

She nodded, unable to look at him.

By the time they returned home, she felt exhausted and on edge. The bastard had invaded her safe sanctuary, shredding her peace of mind.

John sat on the couch and pulled her down onto his lap. She’d noticed he’d been hurting all afternoon, his limp more pronounced than usual. “Don’t let this get to you, sweetheart,” he tried to reassure her. “He can’t hurt you. We’ll keep you safe.”

She snuggled tightly in his arms. “Who keeps you two safe for me?”

He buried his face in her hair. “Don’t worry about us. You just enjoy being spoiled rotten by us.”

She did feel spoiled rotten.

Del had changed out of his uniform and returned to sit on the

couch next to them. “He’s right, sweetie. We’ll take care of you.”

But could they? She felt the edge of the dark cloud growing, struggling for a foothold in her life. Where the past several days had been filled with fun and love and light, she realized how tenuous that perfection was. How fleeting.

How fragile.

Chapter Ten

She didn't miss that John now wore his gun inside all the time, and that both men slept with guns in the bedside stands next to them. They took turns silently arising in the middle of the night to pick up a gun and check the house.

They didn't know she knew they did that. Whichever man wasn't wrapped around her is the one who got up, probably in an attempt not to disturb her.

Ten days passed, and there were no more emails from her "dark friend." She could barely remember what it felt like to sleep alone, her existence had so quickly become entwined with that of her men. Del had the day off and stayed home with her while John went to get the oil changed in the Explorer and go grocery shopping. She'd offered to go with him until she realized where he'd be.

And since her car was still there at Davies' Repair, she didn't want any part of it.

No leads developed from running the VIN number of the Ford Ranger, and she insisted her reaction had to be the truck's close proximity to her car and the truck and RV, nothing more. If the Ranger had been stored there for a while, she was only reacting to whatever energy it had absorbed from the other vehicles.

She still didn't want it.

Uncle Eddie wanted to know why she had to change email accounts, and she told him the truth, that the killer had managed to get her email. He started grumbling about her coming to Miami again, offering to fly out to get her, but she gently rebuffed him. She didn't want to go to Miami.

She wanted to stay in Mitchell, with her men.

Del knocked on the office doorway, prompting her to remove her earbuds and turn to him. “Yeah?”

“You want to go out to eat tonight? We’ve all sort of been cooped up here.”

“All three of us?”

He looked a little confused by her question. “Uh, yeah. John would have my head if I left him behind, and I don’t mean the one on my shoulders.” He grinned.

She rolled her eyes, but still smiled. “I meant what will people say?”

Del shrugged. “I don’t know. Were you planning on going dressed as a stripper or something?” He stepped over to her and pulled her from the chair so he could sit and drag her back onto his lap. “Honey, we live a quiet life here. What we do behind closed doors, just like when it was only John and me, is no one’s business.” He kissed her. “You ashamed to be out with us?” he quietly asked, startling her.

Her face flamed. “No! Of course not!”

“Then it’s settled. If we don’t mind being seen with you, and you don’t mind being seen with us, what’s the problem?”

Indeed.

She rested her head on his shoulder. “Okay. You’re right.”

“Hey, we’re flying blind here too, babe. We’ve never done this before. Alien territory. But we’re both crazy about you, and we promise we’ll keep you safe.”

* * * *

When John came home, Sarah tried to help them get the groceries out and felt a wave of darkness from the Explorer that nearly made her nauseous. She had to quickly step away from the vehicle and leaned against Del’s truck to get her queasy stomach under control.

Del frowned. “What’s wrong?”

John immediately realized the reason for her distress. “Honey, are you okay? Is it the car?”

“Yeah.” She stepped away from the vehicles, toward the porch, and felt her discomfort ease. “I’ll unpack the groceries if you’ll bring them inside.” She raced inside. How would she even ride in the car now?

John followed her inside and handed her a small paper bag. “I made a side trip,” he said. “To a little shop in town.”

She opened the bag. Inside lay a small container of sea salt, a tied bundle of dried herbs, an abalone shell, and a feather. She looked up at him. “What’s this?”

“If you believe there are bad energies, then you believe in good ones too, right?”

She nodded. She had no choice but to believe after what she’d been through. She didn’t understand it or want to accept it, but she believed it.

“It’s a sage stick,” John explained the cleansing ritual. “I thought about it after I left Tom’s. I’ve never done it before, but the lady at the shop assured me there’s no wrong way to do it.” He smiled. “Unless we accidentally set fire to something in the process. Then, of course, that’s wrong.”

She laughed. “Okay. After the groceries are up?”

“Yeah.” He hugged her, and she was relieved to find not an ounce of the dark energy seemed to cling to him.

“I was never this sensitive to stuff before. Why now?”

“I don’t know, babe. This whole area has a lot of stories. Maybe it’s the land. Maybe your fear triggered something.” He kissed the side of her neck. “Maybe getting your brains fucked out by two guys who love you like crazy has your hormones in overdrive.”

She froze, not sure she heard him right.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Mmm hmm.”

He looked into her eyes. “Did I just scare you by mentioning the

L-word?"

She smiled. "No." She rose up on tiptoes. "I love you guys, too."

"Hey," Del protested as he walked in loaded down with groceries.

"You're starting without me again."

She took some of the bags from him and kissed him.

"What's that for?" he asked.

She smiled. "I love you."

The widest, brightest smile she'd ever seen on his face erupted like a volcano. He dropped the groceries onto the floor and grabbed her, kissing her hard and deep. "Oh, baby, I love you, too." He looked at John over her shoulder. "I'm guessing you told her."

"Sorry. Can't keep a secret like that forever, you know."

He grabbed her shoulders. "So you'll stay with us, right? If you leave us, you wouldn't just break one of our hearts, but both of them."

"I won't leave."

John walked over and they both hugged her. "We'll hold you to that, baby. Life wouldn't be worth living without you around now."

* * * *

With the groceries safely put away, Del sat on the front porch steps and watched as John and Sarah opened all four of the Explorer's doors and the back hatch, lit the sage and blew on it until it smoldered, then wafted the smoke throughout the entire car.

Del called out, "Open the hood. Do under there, too."

"Good idea," John said. He did, and they smudged the engine compartment.

Sarah felt the negative energy dissolve as the sage smoke chased away all remnants of the black cloud. She took a deep, easy breath and smiled. "Wow. That's great!"

John handed her the shell and the still smoldering sage, then he scattered a few handfuls of the sea salt crystals inside the passenger compartment, front and back, as well as in the cargo compartment.

“There.” He looked at Del. “Thank you.”

Del looked puzzled. “I didn’t do anything.”

“You didn’t bust our balls over it, either.”

He frowned. “Do you honestly think I would after what I saw? What I felt?” He stood and joined them. “Just because I didn’t help doesn’t mean I didn’t believe.” He pulled Sarah into his arms. “Honey, I know he told you about his accident. Any time you want to watch that DVD, it’s down in the basement in the fireproof safe with the other stuff. I’ve never watched it again because it creeps me out, but go for it.”

She didn’t want to watch it, but she had an idea. “Can we go out there tonight?”

“Out where?” John asked.

“To the highway. To that spot.”

“Why?”

She held up the shell and the sage. “Maybe it’s bullshit, maybe not. But I feel better after doing this. It can’t hurt, right?”

The men exchanged a long, silent look. Del broke first. “What do you want to do, John?” he quietly asked.

John stared at the ground for a few minutes before taking a deep breath and letting out a long sigh. “Okay. What can it hurt? Let’s go after dinner. I have a feeling I might not have much of an appetite later.”

* * * *

The family-owned restaurant smelled delicious when they walked in. It felt warm and homey. Maybe it didn’t have trendy decor, but it felt every bit as inviting as John and Del’s house.

The hostess waved to them from across the dining room. “Sit anywhere,” she called out. “I’ll be right with you.”

The men guided Sarah to a corner booth. In the dim light, sandwiched between the two men, she felt safe. Riding in the

Explorer, now that it felt untainted again, hadn't bothered her at all. They had a good meal, and as full as she was from extremely delicious and homemade eggplant parmesan, she was tempted to call off her plan.

Then the cloud descended again.

Del noticed first. He grabbed her hand and squeezed. "Babe? What's wrong?"

She tried to shake off the feeling. "I don't know."

Cindy Davies walked into the restaurant and up to the register, apparently there for a take-out order. A waitress fetched a large paper bag for her. Cindy saw them in the corner and waved as she waited for her change, then walked over.

The feeling didn't grow stronger as the woman approached. "Hey, John, I forgot to tell you when you were in earlier today. Del, the state called me, they said they'll be picking up the Subaru sometime this week or next and taking it to Sioux Falls for more testing."

"Okay, thanks."

She offered Sarah a kind smile. "Do you need anything else out of it, like the insurance cards or anything before they take it? I don't know how long they'll have it."

Del answered for her. "I'll stop by in the morning before I go out on patrol and get all that."

"Okay. Oh, Bobby wanted me to tell you thanks for telling him about that guy over in Murdo. They've been emailing back and forth all week." She remembered Sarah sitting there. "My boyfriend's into black powder hunting," Cindy explained to her.

Sarah nodded as if she had the slightest clue what the hell the woman was talking about. "Ah. That's nice."

She felt John's hand pat her thigh under the table. When she dared glance his way, he winked, obviously amused. He knew she had no idea what that meant.

"Well, I need to get back home. Tom suddenly decided he had to have Italian tonight, and I was too damn tired to fix lasagna myself. If

you boys know of any single women who might want to marry a mechanic, let me know. I'd kill to get him out on his own."

Del laughed. "Why would he want to live anywhere but with his big sister? He's got it good with you."

"It's cramping my style," she teased. "See y'all later."

Sarah knew the men were talking to her, but she didn't listen to them. Instead, she watched Cindy walk out, saw her climb into her brother's black Ford, and drive away.

The dark feeling eased.

The car. That explained it.

"Maybe we should offer to smudge his car for him after they get rid of my car and the truck and trailer," she grumbled.

Del glanced at her, then at the Ford's disappearing taillights. "What?"

"Nothing. Never mind." He probably worked on hundreds of cars in town. Maybe thousands. Some of them no doubt in his garage at the same time as hers. If she was going to live here with these two men and make her life here, she'd have to learn to deal with the incidental contact until the energy faded.

* * * *

An hour later, they were pulled safely off of the westbound I-90 shoulder, the Explorer's emergency flashers blinking. Very little traffic passed them. That was something else she'd have to get used to, the desolation compared to Seattle's bustle and traffic. "So this is where he died?" she asked in a low voice. It didn't feel right to speak loudly.

"Yeah," John said, his voice unusually flat. "Right in this area."

She felt...something. "Where did you wreck?"

Del pointed into the field, to the northwest. "He landed wheels up about seventy-five yards over there. But this is about where he saw the little boy and left the highway. You can't see the marks anymore

because they repaved this stretch two years ago.”

“And where was the RV?”

Del pointed across the road and west. “Right over there, about thirty yards. Close enough.”

She shivered, but the energy she felt here didn’t compare to the darkness of the auto repair shop. “Okay.” She lit the sage and took the shell and feather from John. With the bundle of sage in the shell, she used the feather to waft the smoke all around. She had no idea what to say.

Closing her eyes, she tried to feel what was right. Reddish orange energy filled her mind, and she heard a little boy’s voice.

“I’m okay.”

When she opened her eyes, she realized she physically still stood there in the grass beside I-90, but in her mind it was daylight and she stared down at the little tow-headed boy.

He smiled at her. “It’s okay. You’ll be okay too.”

“I will?”

He nodded and pointed back toward Mitchell. The interstate’s asphalt was gone, replaced by a dusty country road. In the distance, she saw workers with horse-drawn equipment working the field. “They didn’t know I’d gone. Then he came and found me.”

“He who?”

“I don’t know his name. Never knew it.” She felt him tug at her shirt and she looked down into his sad eyes. “They love you.”

“Who?”

“Those two guys. I saw the one, at night once. I scared him. I’m sorry about that. Please tell him. I never meant to scare nobody.”

“I will.” This felt unreal, and yet totally solid. She felt the breeze on her skin, the sun warming her hair, the smell of the crops and grass.

“You’re the first one I’ve ever wanted to talk to. Others come to find me, but I trust you.”

“Thank you.” She didn’t know what else to say.

"Can I come with you?"

Again, she felt stumped. "I don't mind, but can you do that?"

He nodded. "If I don't, he'll come back and find me again. He always comes back. He can't hurt me anymore, but it still scares me when he comes back. I feel safe with you."

Her heart broke for this little boy. He never got to grow up. Worst, he died cruelly, suffering horrible, unspeakable things no child should have to endure.

"Okay, Robert. You can come with me." She held her hand out to him.

His face lit in a beaming smile. "You know my name!" He reached out and grabbed her hand. It felt warm and solid, not ghostly. "Call me Robbie. My family called me Robbie."

She gasped for air and realized she lay on the ground, cradled in John's arms. John yelled something at Del, who was arguing with him.

As her senses came back, she realized Del wanted to call an ambulance. "I'm okay," she gasped. "I'm all right."

John helped her sit up as Del raced over. "Babe, what happened?"

"I was going to ask you two that."

The men looked scared to death. "You stood there," Del said, "and your lips started moving, but we couldn't hear anything. Like you were talking to someone. Then you opened your eyes, looked at us and said, 'He's coming with us,' and then your eyes rolled back in your head. You fainted."

"How long was I out?"

"Unconscious or talking?" John asked.

"What?"

"You stood there for nearly twenty minutes like that, moving around a little, turning and nodding your head, like someone was showing you something. You acted like you were in a trance or something. You were only unconscious for a few seconds once you fainted." He stroked her forehead. "You scared the crap out of us."

“Are you sure you don’t want me to call an ambulance?” Del asked.

“I’m okay.” Her eyes filled with tears. She felt a new energy within her, the light blue of a clear South Dakota summer sky. She didn’t believe it, but remembered every second of her conversation with Robbie. And she felt him with them. “Let’s go home.”

They helped her to her feet. John retrieved the smudge stick and extinguished it before scattering some sea salt over the area. She climbed into the back seat, John insisting on sitting with her. Del quickly pulled out onto the highway, found a turnaround, and headed for home.

With John’s arm securely around her shoulder, she dared look in the rearview mirror. She didn’t say anything to the men when she spotted Robbie’s smiling face.

She offered a little smile back. For better or worse, it looked like they had a new house guest.

Chapter Eleven

Del didn't want to go to work the next morning, but John and Sarah finally convinced him she was okay. She still felt Robbie's light blue energy in the house, sometimes near her, sometimes flowing around just outside, but she didn't catch sight of him.

After breakfast, and once Del had left for his shift, John finally made her fess up. In the office, he rolled his chair over to her, caught her hands, and stared at her.

She broke down crying and told him the whole story as he pulled her into his arms.

"Shh, it's okay."

"No, it's not okay! That bastard murdered him, and he's been scared all this time. He was just a little boy!"

"I know, babe, I know. He's safe. Like he said, he can't hurt him anymore. And now he's with us, right?"

She sniffled and nodded. "Do we tell Del?"

He contemplated it for a while. "Maybe not," he finally said. "Not right now. He's open-minded, and he saw the DVD, but I think if we push him too far, that might stretch the boundaries of his ability to believe. Let's let Robbie decide if he wants to show himself to Del, 'kay?"

"Okay." Actually, maybe that was the best plan.

For lunch he made them sandwiches and forced her to leave her laptop. They settled under a huge tree in their sloping backyard, which overlooked a small, shaded creek. She closed her eyes and leaned against John, enjoying the feel of his strength.

"You feeling a little better now?"

“Yeah. That was freaky last night, though.”

He snorted. “You’re telling me? You managed to freak me and Del out, and let me tell you something, we’re men who don’t spook easy.” He kissed the top of her head. “We were so scared something happened to you, that you had a seizure or something.” He nuzzled his chin in her hair, and she realized how right, how good that felt.

Comfortable. As if they’d been together for years instead of days.

“I love you,” she whispered. It still frightened her to feel this strongly for them so soon, but she was quickly learning to love that tingle of fear.

“Baby, you have no idea how much we love you.”

She tipped her face up to his and met his sweet, caramel gaze. Warm and sexy, just like the man. “Even though I’ve brought a shitload of crazy into your life?”

He smiled. “Hey, think of it this way, what better place to land than in our laps?” He rubbed noses with her. “We accept you for who you are, and you brought my ghost home with you.”

She laughed. “Remind me of how perfect this moment is when I’m freezing my ass off during the first horrendous blizzard of the year. I’m not used to snow like that. I’m used to dreary, rainy days.”

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her into his lap so he could kiss her. “We’ll keep you warm. The three of us will melt the snow off the roof, baby.”

She smiled. “I’m glad you two didn’t make me choose between you. I’m a lucky lady.”

“We’re the lucky ones, babe.”

* * * *

They ended up in bed, slowly making love. She knew his leg still bothered him, so she gently pushed him back to the bed before straddling him. She teased him, stroking his cock until he nearly begged her for relief before she rolled a condom on him. She flashed

a seductive smile at him as she slowly lowered herself onto his rigid member, letting out a moan of her own as his hard flesh stretched her, nerve endings sizzling as she rode him.

His thumb found her clit and stroked, driving her closer to that sweet, nerve-shattering release she now desperately craved with them.

Just as she closed in on her climax, the front door flew open, and they heard Del screaming their names.

She jumped, startled. "We're in here!"

As she climbed off John, Del raced into the bedroom, gun drawn.

"What the fuck's going on?" John asked.

Frantically looking around, Del kicked the door shut behind him and threw his robe and John's at them. "Get dressed. Now. We've got company coming. He raced out again, shutting the door behind him just as they heard other vehicles roar into the driveway.

She felt fear take over, but John was already scrambling to get dressed. She didn't miss his grim look as he added his gun to his ensemble. He leaned in and kissed her. "Get dressed," he said. "Now." He left, closing the bedroom door behind him.

Ten minutes later and shaky as hell, she emerged from the bedroom to find an armed trooper standing guard in the hallway. He nodded to her. "Ma'am, they're in the living room."

She spotted John sitting on the couch and looking enraged. Del stood next to him, fear mixed with his anger. The house seemed filled with law enforcement, and through the windows she spotted more in the yard, including a K-9 team heading out back.

"What's going on?" she managed, her voice feeling very thin and tight.

They'd set up a laptop on the kitchen table. John's face softened when he looked at her. He stood and limped over to her, taking her hand and leading her to the table.

One of the computer techs, his name badge identifying him as Scott Basil, turned the laptop to face her. The screen was opened to her old Gmail account and an email message that had been sent only

an hour before from DF.

No text in the body, the subject was *Family Photos*.

The photo email attachment was taken of her and John sitting in the backyard while they ate their sandwiches.

Her hand flew to her mouth as she struggled not to throw up. “He was watching us!”

She felt John’s arm slip around her waist as Del gently gripped her shoulder. “You have to go to Miami,” Del said.

Her tears flowed, and she shook her head. “No! I won’t leave you!”

Glancing around, John led her to the office, Del a step behind them. They closed the door for privacy. “We can’t protect you here, sweetheart,” Del softly said as he tried to brush her tears away. “It’s not safe for you here.”

She shook her head. “No! I won’t go! I won’t leave you! I love you!”

John laced his fingers through hers. “It’s not forever. Just for a few weeks. Let them try to draw him out. They’ve got an agent who normally works over in Rapid City. She looks a lot like you. They’re going to bring her in, and we’ll see if we can smoke him out.”

The thought of another woman in her house with her men filled her with anger. “No! Please, don’t make me leave!”

Del’s blue eyes looked cloudy with pain. “Honey, we’ve already got a chopper standing by to fly you to Sioux Falls. They’re going to use a charter plane and armed agents to get you to Chicago, and from there, a commercial flight to Miami International. They’ve checked out the neighborhood. There’s no one around. We have to move you right now, before our window of opportunity closes. Even if he did follow us, he won’t be able to know where the chopper takes you. Anyone who follows us to the airport here, they’ll be stopped and questioned. This will work.” He hesitated. “I already called your uncle and told him what’s going on. He’ll meet your plane there.”

Her tears freely flowed. “Please! Don’t send me away.”

John cradled her face in his hands and kissed her. "We're not sending you away, babe. And we'll come down to see you in a couple of weeks if he's not caught. We promise. And we'll talk to you every day. It's not forever."

"But what if they don't catch him? I hide down there forever?"

The men exchanged another glance. Del spoke. "It's not a perfect plan, but everyone agrees it's the safest bet right now. If they can't catch him, then John and I will sell out and move down there and be with you. I can resign from the Highway Patrol. Maybe I can get a job down there with FHP or Fish and Wildlife. It doesn't matter." He took her from John and stared into her eyes. "This is *not* forever. You belong to *us*, and I promise you, we will be together. Forever. But you have to trust us. We have to get you someplace safe, and we have to do it while he's on the run and can't watch the house. You have to pack. Now."

She closed her eyes and cried. They were right, and she knew it, and she hated it. They'd been so happy, and now this. She never saw this coming. Why hadn't her freaky little whack-o-vision warned her about this? All she'd felt was love and happiness with them, a future.

Together.

"John's going to go with you as far as Sioux City," Del said. "They're waiting for you both. Take whatever you can pack in the next ten minutes. We'll send you anything you need. We'll also send you a new cell phone on our account so you can call us anytime you need us." She felt him kiss her but still wouldn't look at them. If she did, she'd cry. "Babe, I'm so sorry. I hate like hell to do this, but I'd hate even worse to lose you to this fucker."

She nodded and sniffled. When she finally knew she could without sobbing, she opened her eyes and looked at them. "Promise me you won't leave me there and forget me?"

They both nodded and crowded in again to kiss her. "We promise," Del said. "I swear to god, we'll all be together. But we have to do this now, or we risk him killing you."

“What about you two?” she softly asked. “Who’s to stop him from hurting you two?”

Both men looked equally grim. “He won’t kill us, babe. He wants you, because you’re a witness. You got away. And if the fucker shows up here, he’s dead.”

“But you don’t know who he is. He could be someone you both know!”

* * * *

John didn’t have an answer for her. He knew she was right, but had hoped she wouldn’t put that thought together this soon and worry even more. “Then he already knows we’re not men to fuck with. Go on, go pack your clothes. I’ll take care of your laptop.” He finally got her to go to her room and start packing. One of the troopers would stand guard over her while she did.

Del softly shut the office door and watched while John packed her computer. John found her address book tucked into its usual place beside her laptop and packed that for her as well.

“This sucks,” he angrily told Del. “Why can’t I go to Miami with her?”

“You damn well know why. And don’t think it sucks any less for me than it does for you. I thought for sure I’d get home and find you both fucking dead. You didn’t answer your fucking cell!”

“It was on silent! I’m sorry, but I didn’t know whackadoodle psycho boy was going to find out where she was!”

The men glared at each other for a moment before they both slumped into each other’s arms, tightly holding each other.

“I’m sorry,” Del whispered. “I’m sorry, but I was so fucking scared he’d got you both. Mark called me, and said he was scrambling units and I barely beat them here. I can’t lose you two.”

“It’s okay. I’m sorry, too. I’m sorry we scared you. I know this sucks for you as badly as it does for me. At least you’re able to

actively help catch him.”

“I mean it. I’ll resign, and we’ll move.”

“You’ve only got five years left until you can draw pension. You can’t resign yet.”

“I’m not going without her for five fucking years!”

He cupped Del’s face in his hands much the same way he’d cupped her face just a few minutes earlier. “You guys will get him. It won’t take five years, either.” He kissed Del. “We’ll go see her in a couple of weeks, just like you said. Maybe it’ll be to bring her home with us. Just keep thinking that. Okay?”

“Okay.”

They hugged again before stepping away from each other. John shouldered her laptop case and grabbed his cane, leaning on it, and walked out to the living room.

* * * *

Del closed his eyes and took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. This sucked. This wasn’t fair, and it made him angrier than hell and scared. He hoped he never again felt that level of fear when they called him and he couldn’t get John on the phone. He’d already been en route to the house anyway, having dropped a speeder with an outstanding warrant for his arrest at the Mitchell PD station for booking.

Every possible horrible scenario had flashed through his mind when he couldn’t get John on the phone, and he knew in his gut he’d get home and find them both dead. He never expected to find them fine and fucking.

His only regret was that he couldn’t join them.

The only time he’d ever felt relief that strong was the night John woke up in the ICU and spoke to him.

He stifled a nervous laugh. Ironical, they were connected, in a way. This whole fucking, insane thing was connected to that poor murdered

kid.

He thought he caught a flash of movement in John's large widescreen monitor, but when he turned, it was dark.

Funny, he could have sworn it looked like—

He ended that thought and rejoined everyone in the living room.

* * * *

Sarah went to use the bathroom before they left. After splashing water on her face, she stared at herself in the mirror. She felt Robbie's energy close by and closed her eyes. When she did, she was standing there, in the bathroom, but he was next to her.

"It's okay," he told her. "They'll be okay."

"What about me?"

He nodded. "You'll be okay. They love you something fierce, Sarah. They really do. That's why I like it here. There's so much love."

She felt like crying. "Will you keep an eye on them for me?"

He grinned. "I'm coming with you! You won't be alone, you'll have me. I promise. I'll always be there for you. They don't need me here right now. You need me. If they need me, I can come back."

She opened her eyes and stared into the mirror. A little peace settled over her. Maybe it would be okay. Not the same as having her men with her, but if it meant the killer would go to jail and not kill her, she'd sacrifice being without them for a while.

She unlocked the bathroom door and returned to her men.

Del drove them to the helicopter in the Explorer after he changed out of his uniform. He still wore a shoulder holster. The thinking was it might be best not to draw a lot of attention to the move, and a caravan of law enforcement vehicles would draw attention. John and Sarah rode in the back seat, holding hands. She wished she'd had time to finish what she'd started with John, and to have time with Del, too, but knew it would have to wait.

He pulled into the airfield and turned to look at them over the seat. "Please, babe," he said, his voice sounding choked, "just stay there and keep your head down and your eyes open." She leaned forward and kissed him, trying not to cry.

"Don't forget me."

"Fuck that, we'll call you every day, and we can do that video IM thing, right?"

She smiled. "Yeah, we can do that."

He stroked her cheek. "I love you. I love you so damn much, and I refuse to lose you. Got it?"

"Got it."

They got out, and Del walked them over to the waiting helicopter. As they lifted off, she stared down at him leaning against the Explorer and watching them fly away. She wondered how long until the next time she got to see him.

John laced his fingers through hers and squeezed. Too loud to have a private conversation, she leaned her head against his shoulder before she started crying.

At Sioux Falls they were able to have a private good-bye in an empty office. John held her while she cried again. She was sick of crying and had done more of it in the past day than she had in years.

"It's okay, baby. I love you, and believe me, we'll come get you and bring you home."

"Or should I start looking at houses for us down there?"

He laughed. "Don't underestimate Del and our fellow troopers. It's personal now, more than. He's trying to come after one of our own. He's upped the ante, but he's going to find out he doesn't have the money to stay in this game. Trust me."

"I hate poker."

He laughed and kissed her. "Got you to think about something else though, didn't I?"

She didn't want to move from his arms. "You're tricky."

"Just wait until we're all together again. Baby, what a party the

three of us will have.” He kissed her one last time.

“I love you,” she whispered. “I’m going to miss you so much.”

“Aw, baby, it’s okay. We’ll wait up until we hear from you that you’re in Miami. Your uncle said he’s got Wi-Fi, so you should be able to connect okay. We’ll talk every day, okay?”

“Okay.”

Holding her hand, he led her out to the waiting plane as several armed troopers flanked them. She stared at John through the window as long as she could, until it taxied away from the terminal and headed for the runway.

Closing her eyes, she felt Robbie’s presence. That one comfort was the only thing standing between her and shedding more tears.

Chapter Twelve

It was almost two in the morning when her flight touched down in Miami. She had felt simultaneously mortified and safe when four armed Chicago PD officers met their charter flight and escorted her onto the commercial airplane as the other passengers stared at her. Then four equally well-armed Miami PD officers met the plane at MIA and escorted her off before anyone else was allowed to debark.

They got her luggage for her too, which had been stored up front in the cabin, and took her to a private conference room where Uncle Eddie awaited her.

That's when she did cry again, and she swore to herself it'd be the last time for a while.

She hoped.

He opened his broad arms, and she fell into his warm embrace. It'd been a while since she'd seen him, her father's funeral, actually, and she'd forgotten how much like her dad he looked.

"Hey, Sar-Bear. How's my girl?"

She laughed through her tears. How could she have forgotten that nickname? "I've had better days, Uncle Eddie."

His green eyes shone with merriment. "I bet." He handed her a cell phone. "Call them, right now. They've called me fifteen times in the past hour to see if you've landed yet."

She laughed again. "Really?"

"Yeah, just hit the green button. They were the last to call me."

She did, stepping to the far side of the room. Del immediately answered. "Sar?"

"I'm here. Safe and sound."

“Oh, thank god. You all right?”

“I miss you guys. I love you.”

“We miss you too, babe. Love you. Here’s John.”

He handed the phone over and John’s voice filled her ear.

“Sweetheart, you okay?”

She fought the urge to laugh again. “I’m okay. Miss you. Love you.”

“Miss and love you, too. Remember, this isn’t permanent, all right? We promise.”

“I know.” That threatened to bring the tears back. “Just hurry up and catch that bastard.”

“We will. Now go home and get some sleep. Call me when you get up, okay?”

“Okay.” She ended the call and when she handed the phone to Uncle Eddie, she didn’t miss his playful smirk. “What?”

“I can see I was right on the mark when I figured you were involved with both of them.”

Heat filled her face. “Do we have to talk about this right now?”

He roared with laughter. “Honey, it’s okay. Believe me, I’m open-minded.” He snickered. “I’ve had a threesome a time or two myself, although it was with two women—”

“Uncle Eddie, that’s TMI, I’m sorry.”

“Sorry, Sar-Bear.” He hugged her. “Ready to go home?”

A sad pang touched her soul. It wasn’t really her home. Her home was a few thousand miles away. “Yeah.”

* * * *

She awoke the next morning to painfully bright early morning sunlight hitting her squarely in the face. Uncle Eddie’s condo faced the Atlantic Ocean, and on the tenth floor on Miami Beach, she admittedly had a gorgeous view of same said ocean.

Sitting up, she stared at the vast expanse of blue. She’d seen the

Pacific, but it didn't look like this. She couldn't explain it.

It was eight o'clock, but she realized her body clock hadn't reset yet and according to it, it was only six.

Her boys would be up, if they'd even gone to sleep.

She'd slept only in her panties, too tired to root through her suitcase for pjs. She dug out a T-shirt and shorts and followed the smell of coffee to the kitchen.

Uncle Eddie sat there, reading the paper and had the *Today Show* on the small under-counter TV, the volume turned down low. He smiled when he spotted her. "Morning! Can I interest you in some breakfast?"

She made herself a mug of coffee and slipped into a chair. "Not right now." She propped her chin in her hand and stared at the paper. "I don't know what I want to do." She didn't just mean breakfast. She went from her life being up in the air, to knowing her life's path, and now back to turmoil.

He laid down the paper. "Let's go out sightseeing today. What do you say? Let me show you the sights, get you a real Cuban sandwich, some *cafe con leche*. We could even drive down to Key West, spend a few days down there."

"I can't afford that," she mumbled.

He snorted. "Honey, I'm not broke myself, but your boys wired me five grand for you. They also wanted me to take you car shopping, on their dime, but that's where I put my foot down." He smiled. "I've been thinking about getting a new car, and I was going to trade mine in. It's paid for. So I might as well give it to you."

"I can't let you do that." The Honda Accord was only four years old and looked new. He took good care of his vehicles.

He waved her objections away. "Sar-Bear, you're my kin. I don't have kids of my own, and those other cousins of yours are uppity shits."

She snorted coffee out her nose, then started coughing as she choked.

He laughed and brought her a wad of paper towels. "What? You know they are. My sister thinks her shit don't stink, and Carl isn't much better. It was me and your dad against the two of them." He looked at her sadly. "I just wish you'd called me when all this started, instead of that lousy weasel Bobby."

"He was trying to help. He just didn't want to get his hands dirty doing it."

"No, he was trying to get out of helping you or he would have offered you a place to stay. I wanted to reach through the phone and smack him." He held her hand. "Sar, we're family. I know we haven't been super-close, but I do love you, kiddo. I'm always going to be here for you."

She shivered. "You don't know what I can do," she said. She dared to meet his gaze. The warm glow she normally felt while with her men had mostly dissipated now that she was away from them. She felt Robbie's presence, and twinges of her old abilities fighting their way through. "You see me in action, you might change your mind."

He grinned. "Honey, no one told you about your Grandma Jennings, did they? Well, she'd be your great-grandma."

Her great-grandparents had all died before she was born. "No."

He sat back, a smile on his face, his hands laced together and resting on his stomach. "She was Skokomish. You know who they are?" Sarah nodded. "I remember when I was a kid, sitting at her feet while she knit. She loved to knit. She'd knit the hell out of anything. Probably could have knitted a damn car. Anyway, she'd tell me stories about her people, growing up in the tribe, lots of the old stories. And she'd tell me things that were going to happen. They always happened."

"No one ever told me about her!"

"Well, she was our maternal grandmother. The snootiness in our family comes from my dad's side of the family. They put up a hellacious stink when he dared married a woman who was a half-breed, as they said. They disowned him." He snorted in disgust.

“Your grandmother was a wonderful woman, classy, smart. She died way too young.” Sarah barely remembered Grandma Aston, who’d died of cancer when she was four. “Everyone who really knew her loved her. Daddy loved her fierce. He never remarried when she died. I think he died of a broken heart, not a heart attack.”

Sarah wondered how many other secrets were buried in her family tree. “Grandma Jennings could see things?”

He nodded. “Yep. She came from a long line of spiritual people. I’m ashamed to admit I don’t know much about that branch of our family. But what I remember about her is that she could see things before they happened. She didn’t talk much about it, only to people she knew. I think I was the only kid she really confided in because it didn’t scare me, it fascinated me.”

“Why didn’t my dad tell me?”

“Honey, it scared him. And I’ll be honest...” He studied his hands for a moment. When he spoke again, his voice sounded soft and gentle. “He loved your momma. It wouldn’t surprise me that when you told him what you saw, about him dying, maybe he saw that as his chance to be with her again.”

* * * *

Sarah spent the morning in a daze. Uncle Eddie dug out photo albums, pictures she’d never seen before, and was shocked to discover she looked very much like her Grandma Aston in her younger days. It explained where her straight, black hair came from when both her mother and father were brunettes.

“Could Grandma Aston see things?” She stared at a picture of her grandmother, taken as an older teen, and the resemblance was spooky.

“I don’t know. I think so, but she never talked about it. Unfortunately back then, people didn’t embrace cultural differences the way they do now. Grandma Jennings’ family disowned her for marrying a white man. She dared to follow her heart. Grandpa

Jennings was disowned for marrying her, too.”

“So you come from a long line of black sheep?” she teased.

He roared with laughter. She loved that sound. “Yeah, I guess I got it honest, didn’t I?”

She took a break around lunch time to lock herself in her room and video IM with John. Her heart ached when she saw his happy smile.

“Hi, babe.”

She reached out and touched her screen. He’d slipped his high-dollar microphone headset into her computer bag so she could talk with them in private. “Hi. Miss you.”

“We miss you, too. Del’s on patrol, but we can get together and talk again later when he’s home.”

She hadn’t dared to log in to her email yet. “Any updates?”

“No, I’m sorry. They’re still working on it. He spoofed his IP address again. Having a nice visit with Uncle Eddie?”

She smiled. “I think I know why I’m freaky.”

“You’re not freaky.”

“Um, yeah, I am.” She told him about her great-grandmother.

When she finished, he looked stunned. “Wow. Well, that makes sense then, doesn’t it? Maybe it was just coincidence it started when you got the crack on the head.”

“I don’t think it was coincidence, and neither do you. I think it was a catalyst to something already dormant inside me. But it’s nice to know maybe I inherited this ability. It makes me feel less freakish.”

“I’m going to spank you if you don’t stop calling yourself freaky.”

She stuck her tongue out at him. “Yeah? How you going to do that?”

He grinned. “I’ll keep track of it and give them to you when we get down there.”

“Hmph.” She knew he wouldn’t really spank her. They’d be too busy catching up on missed loving for him to want to do that.

Twenty minutes later, she ended the call with him and sat there

staring at her screen. She should check her email and finally logged in. After holding her breath, she realized there was nothing bad there.

She logged into her old Gmail account.

She resisted the urge to open the message with the photo of her and John.

Clicking the log out link, she shut down her computer. She needed to get out of the condo, go with Uncle Eddie, and let him enjoy spoiling her.

* * * *

When they returned home that night after dinner, they found a large overnight package waiting for them at the front desk in the condo's lobby. The doorman handed it over. "Someone shelled out some bucks. It's heavy."

"They must have sent it yesterday afternoon after I left."

Uncle Eddie refused to let her carry it. He set it on the kitchen table for her, and she ripped into it.

Inside lay a brand new BlackBerry, in the box, with the phone number written on the outside in black marker. And a car charger for it, still in the package. Some of her clothes and shoes the men thought she might need.

She smiled when she realized they'd each packed one of their own T-shirts that she liked to wear around the house, along with some of her favorite books, a couple of computer reference books she kept by her laptop.

And a zipper-top bag held the sage stick, shell, feather, and sea salt.

She smiled. She didn't need it here, feeling Robbie's comforting presence hovering at the far reaches of her mind, but it was nice to know they thought of it.

The phone needed to be charged, so she took everything to her room and closed the door so she could plug the phone in and call

them.

John's laugh filled her ear. "Hi, babe. I see our care package arrived safely."

"You could have gotten me a cheap phone, you know, but thank you."

His tone turned serious. "Honey, what part of 'you're ours and we love you' don't you understand?"

Warm, pleasant shivers raced through her. "Maybe later we can have a three-way phone call," she said, hoping her uncle couldn't hear. "Do some heavy breathing."

He laughed. "Oh, baby, you are such a tease. I love you so much. Oh, hold on. I think he's just pulling in." He was off the line for a moment before Del's voice spoke in her ear.

"Hiya, babe. He's starting without me again, isn't he?"

"No, sweetie. We were just talking."

"No IM sex earlier, huh?"

She giggled. "No, sorry." She started to say something else when she yawned. Stress and the trip had finally caught up with her. "Actually, maybe I need to go to sleep. I didn't realize how tired I am."

"Then you go get some sleep and have some pleasant dreams. Love you. Here's John."

"Love you, too." She still felt a thrill hearing them say it. She hoped that never wore off.

"Okay, babe. Go get some sleep. Call me in the morning. Love you."

"Love you." She stared at the phone. The geek in her wanted to immediately set up her email and other apps on the new phone, but she yawned again.

She wandered out to the kitchen for a drink of water and found Uncle Eddie doing a crossword puzzle at the table. "Heading for bed, kiddo?"

"Yeah."

He sat back and studied her. "If you wanted, if this, you know, lasts too long, I don't mind going out there with you for a visit."

She shivered. She didn't want her uncle in danger. "No, that's okay. They're going to come out here in a couple of weeks. I think they'll catch this guy."

"You think it, or you see it?"

She thought about that. She didn't know. She hadn't seen it. "I'm hoping it."

* * * *

Despite her exhaustion, sleep wasn't quick in coming.

She opened her eyes to find herself standing on Miami Beach and staring out at the ocean. The waxing moon cast a sparkling glow on the dark waters of the Atlantic.

Beside her, Robbie stood, head back, eyes closed, nose to the air. "I love this. I've never seen the ocean before."

She couldn't help but smile. "I'm glad one of us is having fun."

He laughed and looked up at her. "Don't be scared. This will be okay. It's going to hurt. A lot. And you'll be scared. But no matter what, don't give up."

"Can you not speak in a clichéd, horror-movie-spirit riddle kind of way?"

He frowned, confused.

"Can't you just tell me what's going to happen?"

"No, because I don't know. I only know what happened already. I'm like you, I can feel things. See flashes. All I know is that in the end, you'll be okay."

Her heart chilled. "What about my boys?"

He slowly nodded. "It's going to hurt a lot."

He'd said that before. "Do they get hurt?"

"I can't tell who does."

She reached out to touch him. In this way, he felt as solid as the

sand between her toes and the sharp edges of shell digging into the soles of her feet. Hooking an arm around his shoulders, she pulled him to her and they stood there together watching the surf slowly creep up the sand as high tide flowed in.

“Can you help me find out who killed you?” she asked.

He nodded. “Maybe. I remember what he looked like. But he’s been dead for a long time. So it doesn’t matter.”

“But you said he comes back.”

“He can’t scare me anymore.” He looked up at her, smiling. “I’m with you now. You freed me.”

Another creeping chill swept through her that had nothing to do with the cool sea breeze. “Does he still come back? As another person?”

Robbie stared out at the ocean. “Sometimes,” he whispered. “I’ve seen him come back a few times. Different people, but I always know it’s him. They can’t help themselves.”

“Is he back now?”

He nodded.

She snugged him more tightly against her. Well, what the hell. If she was talking to a ghost that had hitch-hiked across the country with her, why not contemplate reincarnation?

“Tell me something I could find out that no one would know. About you. I need to know I’m not crazy.”

He thought for a moment. “I had an ole tin can I hid my marbles in. My older brother liked to take ’em. He’d lose my best ones playing with his friends. So I hid ’em in a can. I covered it with a big, flat rock. It’s down near the creek, not too far from where the barn was.”

“Is it still there?”

“Last time I looked.”

Now she wanted to get home more than ever.

Home.

He looked up at the sky. “Almost time to wake up,” he said.

She looked at the moon, which hadn’t even reached its zenith yet.

“No, it can’t be more than—”

Her eyes snapped open to bright sunlight streaming through the blinds. She spent a few minutes staring at the ceiling. She didn’t feel rested. She felt...

Like she’d spent the night standing on a beach talking to the ghost of a murdered seven year-old boy.

Groaning, she slipped on Del’s T-shirt over a pair of shorts and wandered out to the kitchen. Uncle Eddie sat at the dining room table, reading the paper, his back to her. She detoured through the kitchen instead of going to give him a hug. “Good morning.”

No reply.

She turned to look at him and saw his eyes frozen open in shock and horror, his throat slashed, blood running down his chest and staining his shirt red—

She woke up screaming, with Uncle Eddie shaking her.

“Sarah! Wake up, sweetheart! It’s a nightmare!”

She gasped for air, another scream choked back in her throat as she realized he was okay. She threw her arms around him and sobbed as he held her and tried to soothe her.

“It’s okay, sweetie, just a bad dream.”

She closed her eyes and tried to calm herself, finally sitting back and reassuring herself that he was alive and whole.

“What was it?” he asked. “What did you dream about?”

She shook her head, unable to speak it. It was too horrific. The shock of the nightmare was so strong she could barely remember snippets of her conversation with Robbie.

He caught her chin. “Tell me,” he firmly said.

Sniffing, she told him about the nightmare. His lips set in a firm line as he hugged her again. “It’s okay, Sar-Bear. Just a bad dream fucking with you. You want me to stay in here with you?”

“What time is it?”

“It’s not even three yet.”

Now that her terror had passed, she realized it was still dark

outside. “No, I’m okay.”

“You sure?”

She nodded. “Yeah.”

He finally returned to his own room, but insisted on leaving her door cracked open so he could hear her if she had another bad dream. She bundled the sheet around her and curled up on her side as she stared out her window. That wasn’t just a bad dream. It was one of *those* dreams. The last time she’d had a dream that bad...

Her father had died.

Chapter Thirteen

John's eyes snapped open. Del lay peacefully sleeping next to him. A glance at the clock showed it wasn't quite one yet.

Fuck.

Carefully slipping out of bed, he grabbed his gun and checked the doors and windows. Nothing wrong, as far as he could tell.

He stepped into Sarah's bathroom and, without turning on the light, took a leak. When he turned to wash his hands, he thought he caught a glimpse of something in the mirror.

His heart raced. Standing there, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. A moment later, he felt a presence in the darkness and heard a soft, young boy's voice whisper, "*She's okay.*"

His eyes snapped open, but he stood alone in the dark bathroom. Suppressing a shiver as he washed his hands, he returned to bed and tried to get some sleep.

* * * *

By morning, Sarah remembered most of her conversation with Robbie. But the memory of seeing her beloved uncle sitting there dead haunted her. He was already in the kitchen preparing coffee when she dragged herself out of bed.

"Today, we go car shopping," he announced. "And no ifs, ands, or buts about it. I want a new car, and we'll get yours registered to you. I'll put you on my insurance."

Guilt briefly displaced dream grief. "You don't have to do that."

"Oh, yes I do. I want you to have a reliable car, and I don't want

anyone accusing me of not taking care of my niece.” He kissed the top of her head. “So breakfast, then we get dressed and go. I want to buy a babe magnet.”

She laughed. Her sixty-two year old uncle didn’t strike her as the kind to need a babe magnet.

Six hours later they returned to the condo, Sarah driving the Accord, which now officially belonged to her. He drove a brand new Ford Mustang convertible. Before dinner, she had another video IM session with John and realized this was the start of her new routine. Her new life.

Not what she wanted, but she’d do what her men told her to do.

Two weeks later, the killer still hadn’t been caught, the new moon had passed without a murder, and no more messages had shown up on her old email account. The investigators sent the killer an email, to try to bait him, but received no reply.

She hadn’t had any more nightmares either, much to her relief.

At sixteen days, her men were discussing making reservations to fly down when she heard her uncle call her from the living room. “Sar, can you come here for a minute?”

“Yeah, hold on.” She looked at the screen. “Hold on a minute,” she told Del and John, who were both huddled in front of John’s web cam. “Uncle Eddie needs me for something.” She slipped off her headphones and climbed out of bed.

Uncle Eddie was sitting at his desk in the living room, staring at his computer. She walked up behind him and put her hands on his shoulders. “What’s up?”

He pointed at the screen. “Does this mean anything to you?”

Her heart froze. The subject read *For Sarah*.

You thought you could run and hide on the shore.

Fool me with fakes? That won’t work anymore.

Come home, little night owl, sooner is best.

Otherwise your men or your uncle might find final rest.

There will always be another dead moon rising. See you then.

Your Dark Friend

It took Eddie nearly ten minutes to calm her hysterics and assure her he was fine and well and not about to get his throat slit anytime soon. His cell phone started ringing, and when he answered it, he stepped away from her. “Hi, John. Listen, we’ve got a problem...” He stepped down the hall, out of her earshot, as she stared at the screen.

She sat in his chair and read the email over and over. How the *fuck* had he gotten her uncle’s email address? She wracked her brain. Yes, he’d been linked to her MySpace page, but his old email address was on his because he updated his page even less frequently than she updated hers.

She ran after him and grabbed the phone from him. “John, listen, has anyone hacked the wireless router at the house?”

He’d been trying to relay to Del what was going on. “Babe? Are you okay? Listen, we’re going to fly—”

“John, shut up and listen to me. The wireless router. There’s no way the fucker could have gotten Eddie’s email address unless he hacked into my computer.”

John fell silent. “No,” he finally said, “I doubt that. I use secure WPA encryption. You know that.” He thought about it. “Maybe he somehow got spyware onto your laptop.”

“How? You checked it yourself! I keep everything updated on it, run sweeps every day. It would have picked something up. If this fucker’s smart enough to spoof an IP address well enough to keep him from being tracked, then maybe he’s smart enough to hack through your security.”

She heard him say something she couldn’t understand to Del, who clearly swore in the background. “Listen, babe, overnight your laptop to me so we can give it to the investigators to go through. I’ll send

you one to replace it overnight, okay? And we need your uncle's log in info for his Gmail account so they can access it."

After a few minutes more of talking, she hung up, returned to Eddie's computer, and stared at the message as anger replaced her fear. This fucker had chased her out of her home and the arms of her men. He'd put her in fear for her life. He'd dragged her uncle into this, and threatened him and her men.

The next morning, the doorman called her to let her know a package had arrived.

She walked downstairs to get it, at first smiling to see the South Dakota postmark, then frowning when she realized it'd been mailed from Sioux Falls. It wasn't nearly big enough to be a laptop.

Uncle Eddie spotted her frown. "What's wrong?"

"Well, why would they mail it from Sioux Falls?" The return address was John and Del's.

She grabbed a knife to slice the packing tape open, but Eddie grabbed her wrist. "No. Don't." She started to argue when she spotted the look on his face. He called John, and seconds later, he pulled her away from the package.

"Okay. Right. I'll call them right now."

She tried to resist when he dragged her out the condo's front door and into the hallway as he hung up and started dialing.

"What's going on? Who are you calling?"

"911. John and Del didn't send that. They haven't shipped the replacement laptop yet. They told me to call the police."

* * * *

Two hours later, with dozens of upset neighbors displaced when the bomb squad forced them to evacuate, the Miami-Dade PD sounded the all-clear. It wasn't a bomb, but it was from her Dark Friend.

Inside lay a gallon-sized zipper-top baggy full of dirt, a knife, and

a note.

*Come home, little night owl. Your playmate awaits.
Otherwise those two lawmen just might meet their fates.*

There will always be another dead moon rising. See you then.

Your Dark Friend

Officials in South Dakota determined the package had been mailed from a little mom and pop convenience store in Sioux Falls that had a post office counter in the back. Unfortunately, they didn't have a security camera recording those transactions, and whoever sent it paid cash. The clerk couldn't remember anything other than a nondescript white man, and when shown pictures of Del and John, she definitely knew it wasn't either of them who mailed it.

Another dead end.

Local officials questioned Sarah and took her laptop into evidence to run testing on it for authorities in South Dakota. By the time she was alone again with Uncle Eddie, she'd made up her mind. "I have to go back."

"Like hell you do. Fuck that." He jabbed a finger at her. "You think I'm letting you leave, which is what that psycho wants, think again."

She looked up at him. "He knows where I am," she quietly said. "I'm not any safer here than I am there. At least there I have John and Del. If I'm here, he might come here and kill you." She shivered at the memory of her nightmare. "I'm finished with people I love dying when I can do something to stop it from happening."

"How do you know he won't come here anyway and kill me? Look, we'll head down to the Keys for a week or so. Go sightseeing. He can't find us down there."

She wanted to believe him, but the memory of his shirt covered in

blood and his sightless eyes set her mind for her.

“Let me think about it.”

That answer seemed to mollify him. He kissed the top of her head. “I’m going to get my shower. I never got one this morning in all this craziness.”

She nodded and stayed at the table. She was about to return to her bedroom when his cell, laying on the counter, rang.

She picked it up and answered it without looking at the number. “Hello?”

The deep, obviously distorted male voice sent a chill through her core. “Hello, little night owl. Hurry home fast. My patience grows short, and their lives might not last.”

Her fingers clamped down on the phone. “What the fuck do you want with me? Who are you?”

He chuckled. “You’ve seen me. I can’t have that. I hate loose ends. If you don’t come home, I just might have to play with your two boys. It’d be a shame to have a double funeral. Or even a triple one, if I have to come take care of your uncle in that condo. What a great view of the Atlantic he’s got. I’m sure you want him to be able to enjoy it for years to come.”

He hung up as a wordless cry escaped her. She dropped the phone when her hands trembled so badly she couldn’t hold it any longer. Finally regaining a few senses, she picked it up again and looked at the caller ID.

000-000-0000 Unknown Number.

Of course. If he was smart enough to spoof his IP address, smart enough to hack into a computer or secure network, then he was smart enough to disguise where he called from.

She was still staring at the phone when Eddie emerged from the shower. “What’s wrong? What now?”

She burst out crying.

* * * *

“Sarah, let me tell you something,” Del shouted over the phone. “I am not a man to give ultimatums, but you keep your ass planted there in Miami! Don’t you dare fucking come home!”

John apparently wrestled it from him, because he came on the line. “Honey, you can’t come home. That’s exactly what he wants. Del and I can handle ourselves.”

She’d just gone her second round of the day giving statements to Miami-Dade PD, and she felt mentally and physically drained from stress and grief. “If I don’t come home, he’ll hurt someone I love, and I can’t have that happen.”

Eddie glared at her from across the table. She lowered her gaze to avoid him. “You’re not leaving, Sarah,” he told her, echoing what her men were telling her on the phone.

“Babe,” John said, obviously struggling to keep his voice gentle, “if you do come home, he’ll try to kill you. Obviously he knows the officer here is a decoy. They’ve already recalled her.”

“If I’m going to die, I’d rather do it there, with you.”

Eddie’s fist crashed into the table, making her jump. “You are *not* going back to South Dakota, and that’s the end of it! I won’t let you go, and I’m sure they’re telling you the same damn thing!”

John lost the phone to Del again. She could only imagine the scabbling going on there as they struggled to talk to her. “Listen to me, baby. I *will* call Miami-Dade PD and have them lock you up in protective custody if you try to come home. I won’t have it! Do you hear me? You will stay there. Just because he knows you’re there doesn’t mean he’s going to come there and hurt you.”

“Oh, yes, because being in a humongous city where anyone could come right up to me and me not know it is much safer than a small town in the middle of nowhere where I can at least have a fighting chance!”

“He could have killed you and John that afternoon. That could have been a rifle scope instead of a camera pointed at the two of you.

You never saw him then. What makes you think you'd see him if you returned?"

John got custody of the phone again. "Look, let me and Del handle things here. We'll get our reservations made and we'll fly down and see you. The three of us will go somewhere, to a hotel or something, and have some alone time, okay?"

"Okay," she softly said, hoping he'd forgive the lie. "Listen, I need to go lay down. I'm exhausted."

His tone softened. "That's a really good idea, babe. Have sweet dreams about the things Del and I will do to you when we get down there. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Love you."

"Love you, too."

Del grabbed the phone. "Love you, babe."

"Love you." She hung up and stared at the phone.

He'd gotten her email address. Her uncle's email address. Her uncle's phone number, his address, and knew he lived in a condo in Miami.

She went to her bedroom and closed the door before collapsing on the bed. In her hand she held her BlackBerry. Time to configure it, or she wouldn't be able to do any email now that her computer was in police custody.

She left her old Gmail account off it. That'd be too much temptation. But when she logged in to her new email with the Gmail function, she found an email from a strange email address she didn't recognize, but the sender's name was listed as DF.

It chilled her blood.

Subject: Instructions

I'm getting tired if you calling your fuck buddies' cop friends into this every time I contact you. If you tell anyone about this email, your

uncle dies. Come home to SD. Now. If you do, I'll let all three of them live because they've never seen me. If you think I can't find you and your uncle in Miami, think again.

No signature this time, but an attachment. Silently crying, she clicked to open it. The small screen made it difficult to see, but it was a picture of Uncle Eddie and one of her cousins, taken a few years earlier. She realized it came from her Picasa account.

How the fuck did he find that?

Her heart hammering in her chest, she replied.

Fine. I'm coming home. It'll take me a couple of days, though. Please don't hurt them.

A moment later, she had a reply.

I knew you were a reasonable woman. I'll see you real soon, little night owl.

She closed her eyes and forced herself not to cry. How the fuck had he gotten her new email address? Briefly, the thought that maybe it was John doing this crossed her mind before she shoved that away. No, he loved her. And he'd been there with her when the picture of them was taken. He had an alibi. She felt ashamed for even thinking it.

Yet another reason to be angry, that DF had managed to shake her faith and love in her men for even a split second.

But...maybe it was John's computer that had been hacked.

Still, that didn't explain how DF discovered Eddie's address and phone number and email. Or her Picasa account.

She realized she must have drifted, because suddenly Robbie was sitting on the bed next to her.

"It's okay. I'll be with you."

"He's going to kill them, isn't he?"

"No. He wants you. But he doesn't understand he can't have you."

"It's going to hurt a lot before it's done, isn't it?"

He nodded. "A lot."

"I'm scared."

He reached out and held her hand. "It's okay. Scared is okay. But you can do it. You're the only one who can figure it out. You know who he is. You just don't remember. You're the only one with all the pieces. You hold the keys. Just remember that, the keys."

"What keys? I didn't see his face! I have no idea who he is!" She felt horror creep in again. "Please, tell me it's not John or Del!"

He laughed. "No, they're good men."

"Am I doing the right thing?"

He nodded. "The strength you need will be there when you need it."

"Why can't you just tell me!"

He smiled. "It doesn't work like that. I would if I knew."

She awoke to find the room dim as sunset settled over the city. Uncle Eddie was doing a crossword puzzle and looked up at her approach.

"Did you have a good nap?"

She nodded. "You know what you said about going to Key West?"

He nodded.

"I think I want to, but alone. The guys can join me down there. I...need some time alone."

He frowned. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Yeah, it is." She forced a smile she didn't feel. "I'm a big girl. I need to do this."

"You're running away because you're afraid you'll draw the killer to me."

"Well, duh." No reason to deny it. "But I do want some alone

time. Down time. Please?”

He leaned back and crossed his arms. “You need to promise me, absolutely *promise* me that you’ll go down there and let me know where you are every few hours.”

She nodded. “I promise.”

“When do you want to go?”

“Tonight. I want to leave tonight.” Maybe the boys would forgive her the lie. If they did what she expected, they’d fly to Florida to help look for her while she went home to South Dakota. She’d have to drive. If she tried to fly they’d figure it out because she’d have to use her real name.

“Hold on.” He got up and disappeared to his room. A few minutes later, he returned with a handful of cash. “There’s nearly two grand there. It’s part of what the boys sent me for you. Do you still have that pre-paid credit card?”

“Yeah?”

“Give it to me, and I’ll put the rest of the money on it for you.”

She went to get it but knew she wouldn’t use it. They could track her with it. She packed while he added funds to the card for her. She realized every time she packed now she got faster at it, traveled lighter, truly becoming a nomad.

He knocked on the open bedroom doorway and handed the card to her. “When are you telling them?”

“I’ll call them from the road. I want to get moving before it’s too much later. It’ll be close to midnight before I get to Key West as it is.”

“Okay.” He gave her a hug and grabbed her bag for her. Without her laptop to pack, all she had was a suitcase and her purse. He carried her bag down to the car for her and stowed it in the trunk. “Call me, okay?”

“I promise.” She hugged him and climbed in. It took her a minute to set up her mp3 player and stow her phone’s car charger in the glove box. She loved the Accord. Everything worked, and it was as close to

owning a new car as she'd ever had.

She wondered how long she'd have to drive it, or if her Dark Friend would come out on top after all.

She waited until she was on I-95 and heading north to turn off her phone and pull the battery so John couldn't track it.

* * * *

John stood inside the office of Davies' Repair and screamed into his phone, ignoring the fact that the five other customers stared at him with slack jaws. "What do you mean they don't fucking know where she is? Del, why did Eddie even let her leave?"

Cindy, standing on the other side of the counter and writing up the work order for maintenance to Del's truck, flinched.

When he finally realized everyone stared at him, he stepped outside.

Del tried to calm him down. "She told Eddie last night she was heading down to the Keys and would call us and have us meet her down there. Mark's already been on the phone to FHP and the Monroe County Sheriff's Department, as well as the police departments in Florida City, Key Largo, Marathon, and Key West. There's a BOLO out on her and the car, and Mark's working to get a bench warrant sworn out on her as a material witness, so when they find her, they can take her into protective custody."

"Goddammit! She's not a fucking fugitive!"

"No, but once they get her, they'll turn her over to us, and we can sit on her until this is sorted out. It's the only way they'll agree to bring her in. You know that."

"Fuck!" He turned and saw Tom standing in the doorway of one of the repair bays, watching him. "Listen, I'll go home and—"

"No, just sit there. My truck's overdue for an oil change. You're already there, and an hour or two won't make a difference either way. Get that done, then call me when you're home. Don't you go flying

off half-cocked either, okay?”

He took a deep breath to calm himself. “Fine.” He hung up and ran a hand through his hair. He wanted to hit something. Hell, he wanted to shoot something.

Preferably the evil fucker that wanted to turn their lives upside down.

Tom walked over and stripped off a pair of greasy, blue gloves. “Problem, John?”

He shook his head. “Understatement of the year.” He turned to the mechanic. “You’ve got it so lucky, you know that?”

“How so?”

John waved his arm, indicating the shop and storage yard. “You’ve got a good life. You don’t have bullshit ripping you apart at the seams.”

“You want to talk about it? Everything okay with you and Del?”

He had to get himself together. “Everything’s fine between us. It’s the rest of life that’s hell. I wish they’d catch that fucker so we can get on with our life.” He stood downwind of Tom and caught a hint of chemical smell. Tom always smelled like that when he was working, like any mechanic smelled during the day, of brake cleaner and carb cleaner and any number of solvents or fluids they used in the course of a day that soaked into their clothes.

“No leads, huh? The techs finally got that damn RV and truck out of here. Never so happy to see a vehicle leave my lot.” He shook his head. “Spooky shit. Never seen anything like that before.” He thought for a moment. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe I do have it easy. I don’t have to deal with shit the way you and Del do. I never could be a cop.”

John stared at his phone, wishing Sarah would at least call him. “Sometimes it sucks. Usually it was good though.” He leaned on his cane. His worse leg was really tuned up this morning, and even his normally good leg hurt. “Mostly good.”

Tom indicated his cane. “Except for shit like that.”

“That was my own damn fault. And the deer,” he rapidly added. He wanted to turn this conversation around and fast. “Saw your new website. Looks good.”

Tom proudly grinned. “Took a class in it. Did it myself.” His smile faltered. “Sorry I didn’t have you do it.”

John laughed. “No, that’s okay. I mean it, you did a nice job.”

Cindy called to Tom from the office doorway. “Napa said they can’t get that alternator until tomorrow morning. It’s gotta come from Rapid City, and the daily truck already left.”

“Crap. Call the customer and let them know. They’ll just have to wait.” He shrugged at John. “I wish I’d stayed with computers in school instead of letting Dad talk me into quitting college and working for him.” He looked at his hands. “I’m getting too old for this shit.”

“Yeah, but people always need a good mechanic. You’ve got job security. Geeks are a dime a dozen sometimes, and we’re practically obsolete about the time we master one thing.”

Tom snorted. “Yeah, I guess that’s true. Didn’t think about it like that. Technology changes, but you still have to be able to turn a wrench. Well, back to work. You leaving Del’s car or waiting on it?”

“I’ll just wait on it.”

“I’ll get Keith on it right away then. Keys in it?”

“Yeah. Cindy already wrote up the work order. Oil change, lube, air filter, and check the belts please.”

“Got it.”

Tom returned to the service bay while John returned to the office to sit and wait. The other customers eyed him warily. He stared at his phone, fighting the urge to call her. She’d turned her phone off, so he’d only be torturing himself leaving voice mails.

Besides, if she was really heading to Key West, he was Santa Claus.

Chapter Fourteen

She crossed Alligator Alley westbound, but then hopped off and took U.S. 41 north, picking up I-75 around Ocala. She avoided large cities, routing around Tampa and Atlanta on secondary roads before picking the interstate up again. It slowed her down, but hopefully she'd avoid the FHP, which she was sure had already been notified, if she knew Del and John.

And she felt pretty sure she knew Del and John.

Twenty-four hours later, she was in Tennessee and at a motel. She only slept six hours before getting on the road again, pushing through Kansas City and north as night fell across the plains. She didn't want to be on the road at night, but knew the sooner she returned home, the sooner the showdown would happen.

Finally, she had to stop in Sioux City. She checked her phone and found several messages from Eddie and Del. Del sounded ready to spank her, and her uncle sounded ready to kill her he was so worried.

She found an email from John, sent the day before.

Babe, please, call us. We're worried sick about you. We love you.

She hadn't thought this part of her plan out very well. She considered a reply and finally tapped one out. She needed to get them away from Mitchell, so whatever Dark Friend wanted to do didn't involve them. She was tired of running, and obviously the killer was one step ahead of the law.

Please come to Miami and meet me there. I'll come back to Uncle

Eddie's. Then I'll do whatever you want. Let me know when you're en route.

She turned her phone off again before she parked behind a truck stop and tried to nap.

* * * *

John started awake when his BlackBerry buzzed. He fumbled for it on the bedside table, then glanced at her reply, sent moments earlier.

He nudged Del awake, who sat bolt upright when he read it.

"Fuck. All right, we need to go. We can get a flight tomorrow."

"I can't go tomorrow. I've got to get that job finished for McCarthy Development. If I don't, I lose a thirty-grand contract. I need at least three days." He stared at her message after he took the BlackBerry back. "You go. I'll catch up with you there. Get down there and make sure she's safe."

Del frowned. "Fine. But you'd better get your ass down there ASAP."

"I will. I promise." He tapped out a reply.

We'll be there tomorrow night. We'll leave first thing in the morning. Okay? Love you.

He lay awake and stared at the ceiling. If she was heading back to Miami, he was Whistler's Mother. He couldn't very well get up and go track her phone's GPS either, because Del would know something was up. He hated keeping that information from Del, but if Del suspected she was on her way back to South Dakota, there was no way he'd leave.

Not to mention he wasn't one hundred percent sure of his hunch. If there was any chance of her being in Florida, Del needed to be there

to make sure she stayed safe.

He didn't know how the fucker hacked into her computer to get her info, but he'd changed all of his own passwords, including beefing up both the router password and network security key and changed the username. That's all he could do for now.

That and wait for her to show up at the house. Most likely sometime tomorrow, if he knew her.

* * * *

Around dawn, Sarah awoke confused and disoriented until she realized where she was. She turned on her BlackBerry and checked her Gmail.

She found John's reply and nearly cried in relief. Yes, in every movie and book she'd read, the heroine made too-stupid-to-live choices like the one she'd made, but this wasn't a book or a movie. This was real life, and the killer would bide his time and wait and take out her men or her uncle.

She trusted Robbie and her inner voice a hell of a lot more at this point than she did the combined efforts of law enforcement.

She used the bathroom at the truck stop, bought herself some coffee and breakfast, refueled, and hit the road. Her men would be safely away from Mitchell, and she could figure out what to do when she got there in a few hours.

* * * *

John hugged Del. "Give her a spanking for me when you get there," John said, maintaining the illusion.

Del grinned. "I'll give her two. I get to start without you for once."

John laughed. "Yeah, you do that. I'll be there as soon as I finish up here."

“No chance of me talking you into changing your mind?”

“It’s okay. Get her revved up for me.”

After a final hug and kiss, John walked Del to his truck and stood in the driveway, watching him go. He slowly scanned the yard, looking for any sign he was being watched, before he returned to the house and locked himself in. He closed the blinds and turned off all the lights. If she saw lights on, she’d know they tricked her.

He went to his computer and logged in, grimly smiling when he tracked her GPS and saw the last reading was in Sioux City.

She should make it home in the next couple of hours.

He considered calling Del right then, but he still had at least an hour to play with. He kept tracking her, but she’d turned her phone off again. Until she turned it back on, he wouldn’t be able to get a signal.

* * * *

Her heart throbbed as she made the turn onto I-90 in Sioux Falls. Unlike her previous trip from Seattle, she was coming home, and from the opposite direction. Then she felt a warm swelling in her soul, and because of the light traffic, she spotted Del’s truck heading eastbound. She couldn’t see well enough with the sun’s glare on his windshield to get a look at both men, but knew they wouldn’t recognize her in the Accord.

As the feeling ebbed and faded, she felt at peace. Robbie said this would work out okay. Her men were safely heading to Florida. Her uncle was safe.

She’d do whatever she had to do to ensure she stayed safe. Getting killed wasn’t part of her plan, and while she fully admitted this wasn’t the wisest course of action, she was determined to take this fucker out once and for all.

Somehow.

Turning off at the Mitchell exit felt like a homecoming, of sorts. She passed Tom Davies’ garage and felt that wave of darkness at the

sight of the little Ford Ranger, which still sat parked by the road with a For Sale sign on the windshield, and Tom Davies' sedan sitting out front. Suppressing a shudder, she continued on home, breathing out a deep sigh of relief when she shut off the engine and stared at the house.

Home.

Even if her men weren't there.

She trundled her bag up the front porch steps, unlocked the front door, and paused for a moment to bask in the feeling. Love. Warmth. As if they were still there.

Damn, she'd missed that feeling. She closed and locked the door behind her, dropped her bags in her room, then headed down the hall, past the closed office door for the master bathroom. She needed a fucking shower and a nap, and no place would be better than in her men's bed. Then she'd decide what to do. Probably send her stalker a message baiting him to come and get her.

Then again, maybe he already knew she was there, if he'd been watching the house.

She started the shower and slowly stripped as steam filled the bathroom. Closing her eyes, she tried to reach out to Robbie. Even though she felt him nearby, he wasn't coming in close enough to talk to. With a deep sigh, she opened her eyes and screamed.

In the mirror stood John's reflection.

He immediately came to her as she spun around, holding her, apologizing, soothing her.

"Shh, baby, it's okay."

Fear and desire and relief all flooded her at the same time. "What the fuck?"

"I knew you were coming home. I tracked your phone."

"But I saw Del's truck heading east!"

"He was alone. He doesn't know I suspected you'd come home."

She cried on his shoulder. "No! You can't be here! He'll hurt you!"

“Honey, if you think I’m going to let you do whatever it is you think you’re going to do alone, think again.” He kissed her, not letting her protest. “I’m not about to lose you. Now tell me the truth or I will let Del spank the crap out of you.”

She finally admitted what happened. She showed him her BlackBerry and the messages from DF.

He frowned. “Did you dream again?”

She nodded and told him both about the dream of her uncle with his throat slashed and about what Robbie said. “He said I hold the keys. But I don’t know who he is!”

* * * *

Del squinted, even with his dark sunglasses, against the early morning sun. At the next exit he reached, he pulled into a gas station and used the bathroom. As he washed his hands, he looked up from the sink to see a small boy standing behind him.

He let out a startled yelp. He knew that kid. He’d haunted his nightmares since Del’s accident, since Mark had shown him the DVD of John’s dash cam video.

Robbie smiled. “Go home, Del. Right now. They need you.” Robbie disappeared.

As fast as he could, he ran for the truck, trying to call John but only getting his voice mail. He hung up without leaving a message and raced west on I-90, heading for Mitchell.

* * * *

John got her into the shower and held her under the spray, trying to soothe her. “I’ll call him as soon as we’re done with our shower. We’ll get him home and we’ll figure this out, but you have to go. You cannot stay here.”

“I’m not leaving you again.”

He rested his chin on her head, wishing he didn't have two bum legs. This morning he woke up so sore he could barely walk. It was all he could do to pretend he wasn't hurting before Del left. Then he'd grabbed his cane, heavily leaning on it as he made his way back to the office, where he'd been working with the door closed when he heard her come in.

"What would it take to get you to leave?" he asked.

"You both being with me and taking Uncle Eddie somewhere safe until they catch this bastard."

John towed the water off her body, wanting to lick and kiss her, his cock screaming to fuck her, until he saw her shocked expression. "What's wrong?"

She pointed at his keys, lying on the dresser.

"What?"

With a trembling hand, she reached over and picked them up, then dropped them again as if they were hot. Horror filled her face. "Robbie said I hold the keys." She looked at John. "Who's touched your keys?"

* * * *

Del ran a hand through his hair. This crazy fucker was dead if he got a shot at him.

How the *fuck* had the crazy son of a bitch gotten Eddie's information? It was like he had an address book with all her personal information in it.

He counted off mile markers as he closed in on Mitchell, then he nearly wrecked when the answer exploded into his mind as he made the turn-off toward home.

Oh, fuck.

And he'd left John alone at the house.

He called in to base on the phone, not on the police radio where it could be overheard by anyone with a scanner, and got Mark on the line.

Chapter Fifteen

“What do you mean?” John asked.

She grabbed one of Del’s T-shirts and yanked it on over her head. He pulled on a pair of boxers. “Your keys. Who’s touched them?”

He shook his head, confused. “No one, babe. Just me, Del, probably you.”

“No one else?” The dark evil was there, weak, but there. She hadn’t felt it before she left.

“Well, I guess Cindy. I had Del’s truck in to Tom’s for an oil change.”

Horror churned in her gut as a montage of memories floated through her mind. Her car. The feelings she got every time they were near the garage. John’s voice telling her they wouldn’t release her name as a material witness, so how had DF known who she was? The dark Ford Tom drove—

“Fuck!” John whispered.

“What?”

He grabbed her wrist and dragged her to the floor, clamping his other hand over her mouth. He pressed his lips to her ear and softly breathed, “My gun and both our phones are missing. I left them on the dresser. That means someone’s in the house. When I tell you, I want you to go down to the basement, lock yourself into the room. Got it? No matter what you hear, you wait there until one of us comes for you. Okay?” He removed his hand from her mouth and pressed a finger to his lips.

She nodded.

He pointed at the floor and silently mouthed, “*Stay down.*”

She nodded again.

He slowly crawled around the end of the bed, then used it to pull himself to a standing position. He grabbed his cane from where he'd hung it over the closet doorknob and carefully made his way down the hall. With all the lights off and the shades drawn, the house was dim and filled with shadows. She couldn't tell where he was for sure.

Creeping slowly, she crawled to the end of the bed and waited. She couldn't see down the hall from her vantage, but suspected John had made it to the kitchen. That's when she heard an enraged cry and John yelled at her.

"Sarah, now!"

She bolted for the basement door. That's when the gunshot rang out, making her scream.

* * * *

John hefted the cane, holding it like a baseball bat, wishing he had a fucking bat. Not that a bat was much good against a gun.

When he got a whiff of a chemical smell, he knew exactly who he was dealing with.

Tom.

It clicked into place. He was the source of the darkness she felt. He had access to her car, and her address book had been inside it. John knew damn well she'd had all her passwords inside. Tom knew who she was because he towed her car. Her name hadn't been released as a witness.

And he apparently had more computer skills than he let on to the outside world.

He had access to their house keys because they trusted him. They left their house keys on their key rings when they left a car with him for repairs.

Doesn't take much to get a copy made.

He had opportunity. Who wouldn't trust a mechanic who stops to

help them in the middle of the night? The night Del found Sarah, Tom had trouble with his truck, or so he claimed.

He drove a dark sedan.

His company was slotted for on-call rotation with local law enforcement once every four weeks. It would explain the killings, if he was on rotation those nights. There weren't many wrecker drivers in this area, so no one would question if he'd been the responding wrecker driver to each murder.

Shit.

The time difference was enough. He easily could have killed the Engallses and made it back to town while claiming truck troubles.

He hesitated at the end of the hall, listening, smelling, trying to figure out where the fucker was hiding. Then he heard the rustle of fabric, and a dark shape hurtled at him. He swung, making contact and drawing a pained howl in return.

"Sarah, now!"

The gunshot made his ears ring. Hot pain exploded through his leg. As he hit the floor, he was aware of the basement door slamming shut behind her.

Please, Jesus, please let her remember the code!

The basement door couldn't be locked from inside, so if she couldn't get into the bunker room, she was trapped.

Tom swore and jumped over him, racing for the door. John lay still and played dead despite the agony in his leg. He just prayed he didn't bleed to death before someone found them.

* * * *

In the dark, Sarah scampered down the stairs, ignoring the splinter she picked up in her bare foot from the wooden steps. She tripped and scrabbled back to her feet as she heard the basement door open above her.

Her fingers trembled so bad she could barely punch the code in,

but she heard the click and pulled the door shut behind her just as she heard Tom Davies hit it on the other side. Several more shots rang out, muffled by the thick walls and steel door, but she heard the dull thud of impact as he kept shooting.

She stood there in the dark for a moment before blindly groping for the light switch cord. When she found it, she let out a grateful sob and sank to the floor to pull the splinter out of her foot.

After a moment, she heard a *beep* and saw the red light come on.

Crying, she backed away from the door, until she ran into the fireproof safe.

Beep. The red light flashed again.

Beep.

Beep.

The crazy fucker must have tried for at least ten minutes before everything went silent again.

She listened. Then she heard her name being screamed through the thick bunker door, and not by John.

“Sarah! Listen to me, you open this fucking door or I go up there and blow John’s fucking head off!”

With a cry she fumbled the safe’s combination dial three times until she finally got it open. She didn’t know what to do. She wasn’t familiar with guns, only knew what little the men had taught her so far.

Finally, she grabbed a shotgun, looked for a safety on it and found one, released it, and prayed it would fire when she pulled the trigger.

“Sarah! Open this goddamned door!”

He sounded too much like he had on the phone, muffled that way.

“Are you going to kill me?” she screamed at him through the bunker door.

After a moment, he finally replied. “I can kill you fast or slow. And I can take your asshole buddy out, too. You want to go fast and save his life, then you open this goddamned door or I’ll go shoot him right now and then set this fucking house on fire and broil you alive!”

“Just...give me a minute. Please!”

“One minute.”

Her mind raced. She could do this.

The door swung out, not in. She was no expert on guns, but a shotgun was big and loud, and at close range it could kill if she managed to hit him in the right area.

She decided where to stand and pulled the light switch cord, throwing her into total darkness again.

Praying this worked, she eased her right finger over the trigger, and with her left hand, she groped for the door’s release latch. When she found it, she heard the click and a small sliver of dim light emerged around the opening.

“Come on out, little night owl,” he growled.

“I can’t. My ankle’s broke. I tripped when I ran in.”

The door swung open. “That’s the least of your con—”

She fired, the blast deafening her as the muzzle flash temporarily blinded her. Belatedly, she realized someone else had fired from the basement stairs. As Tom fell forward toward her, she screamed and tried to fire again, but it was jammed or something, and it wouldn’t fire.

She scrambled back, screaming and racing for the gun locker as he tried to crawl through the door while making a horrible gurgling noise.

There was another flash, and she turned, realizing it was another gunshot, but she couldn’t hear it because of the ringing in her ears.

A dark figure stood in the doorway, a gun pointed down at Tom. When he stepped forward, she screamed until he grabbed the light cord and snapped it on.

Del.

Screaming, now with relief, she fell into his arms and knew he was trying to talk to her, but she couldn’t understand him.

He let go of her, rolled Tom’s lifeless body over and grabbed his guns, then led her into the basement where he sat her on the dryer and

examined her.

She thought he was yelling, “Are you okay?” at her, but her hearing was still too fucked up to be sure.

“John! Is he okay?” she asked.

He nodded, then grabbed her and kissed her, deeply, fiercely. As the ringing in her ears started to fade a little, he pressed his lips to her ear.

“You are sooo fucking getting spanked, baby.”

Chapter Sixteen

Sarah watched as Del stopped the EMTs before they rolled John's stretcher into the back of the ambulance. He leaned in and kissed him. "We'll be there soon."

Sarah also leaned in and kissed him. "Real soon."

"Hurry up," he said, his voice choked with pain. "I hate hospital food, Del. Don't forget. And Sar?"

"Yeah?"

He pointed at her. "You stay with him, got it? I hear you left his sight, I'll beat you with my cane when I'm up and around." He offered up a pained smile.

"I promise, I'll stay with him."

"Good."

The EMTs had already started an IV. The bullet had hit his left thigh, probably shattered the bone, but missed his femoral artery. She didn't care who saw them together as she let Del pull her tightly against his side and they watched the ambulance roll out, lights flashing and siren blaring.

Her hearing had mostly returned, although she suspected the ringing buzz would be there for a few more hours yet. He kissed the top of her head. "You want that spanking right now or later?"

She smiled. "Not at all."

"You'll have to convince me why I shouldn't."

They returned to the house where they faced more questioning, and Del had to file a report. The Medical Examiner was there, but he couldn't tell whether it was Del's bullet to the back of Tom's head, to his back, or Sarah's point-blank shotgun blast to his chest that

actually killed him.

“He wouldn’t have been too healthy after any of them, that’s for damn sure,” the grizzled doctor quipped.

Mark walked in and tipped his head at Del and Sarah, wanting them out on the porch. He led them to the far corner, out of earshot of the others. “Del, you know that...incident we talked about, about John’s wreck?”

“She knows, Mark. We told her.”

He glanced at her. “Tom was the wrecker driver on duty that night. He’s the one who retrieved John’s cruiser. He was also there when I pulled the dash cam video, but I told him it wasn’t working. I didn’t get that pulled until after it was already at his storage lot.” His face turned grim. “He had copies of the newspaper articles I showed you in a briefcase in his car. There were notes about Robbie’s murder, too. And John’s accident.”

“He might have seen John’s dash cam video?”

“Maybe. I’ve seen evidence of far more outlandish possibilities over the past few hours. You want to place bets against it?”

“No.”

Mark nodded, then let out a sigh. “You sure you don’t want to be transported to the hospital to get checked out?” he asked her.

She shook her head. John had insisted she stay with Del, and that’s exactly what she’d do even though she wished she could be at the hospital for him. She was done defying her men. “I’m okay.”

“Can we go? We want to be with him,” Del said.

“Yeah. I’ll stay here and make sure it’s locked up once they’re done and finished cleaning up and the crime scene techs get his brain matter out of your basement. I’ll need your statement today, though. But it can wait a little while. I’ve already got your sidearm. You’ll be on desk duty until the internal investigation is complete, you know that. I don’t foresee any problems exonerating you. It was a clean shoot.” He clapped him on the arm. “Enjoy a week off, on me. Focus on him. Again. Tell him he needs to quit goldbricking.” He smiled.

Del nodded. Sarah and Del quickly changed clothes, and Del drove them to the hospital. They let them in to see John before they took him back for surgery.

John smiled at her, painkillers already making him loopy. “Did he spank you yet?”

“Not yet. He’s threatened though.”

“Good. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

John looked at Del. “Give her hell, buddy. Love you.”

“Love you, too. See you in a while.”

Before they went to the waiting room, she stopped by the bathroom. She had it to herself, and when she looked up into the mirror, Robbie smiled at her before disappearing.

She had a feeling he’d always be around, and she was just fine with that.

Worried, but knowing John would be okay, she took a deep, relieved breath and rejoined Del.

* * * *

They’d already gotten a search warrant for Cindy’s house. Still in shock over the circumstances of her brother’s death, she cooperated. They immediately found evidence in his bedroom and in the basement linking him with the cyber-stalking. They had found copies of keys to Del and John’s house in Tom’s pocket, and at his home, they found other copies of keys to many homes, as of yet unidentified. Investigators were already comparing a list of local customers with the keys and linking them to several unsolved robberies, as well as two previously unsolved murders.

They found copies of Sarah’s address book in his room, hidden under his mattress. Cindy acted confused when investigators asked her about her brother’s computer skills, and she informed them that before he quit school he’d been on his way to earning a computer

programming degree.

Apparently, she didn't realize he never told anyone else that.

Later that night, after John was out of surgery and in a private room, Del and Sarah flanked his bed, holding his hands and waiting for him to wake up. No one would dare kick them out, and the large law enforcement presence outside his room ensured the staff knew how important he was to them. It was after midnight when he finally opened his eyes.

He looked at Del first. "Hey."

"Hey." Del brushed the hair from his forehead. "We've gotta quit meeting like this, dude. People will talk."

"Yeah, seems we did this once before, didn't we."

"Starting without me?" Sarah joked.

He squeezed her hand. "Hi, babe. You okay? He didn't hurt you, did he?"

"Naw, she blew the fucker's head off," Del said.

"I didn't blow his head off. I blew his heart out."

"Fucker had to have a heart first, babe, and I doubt he did," Del snarked.

John squeezed both their hands, brought them up to his lips, and kissed them. "I know you guys are okay to joke around like that. Must mean I'm gonna make it."

"Oh, hell yeah you are," Del assured him. "Just one problem."

John looked at him. "What?"

"When they fixed your leg, I asked them to put one of those penis implants in too, since they were in the neighborhood. You'll go up and down like a garage door." He mimed pressing a button on a remote control.

Sarah clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle her squeal of laughter. John looked at her. "See what I have to put up with? See why we need you? He picks on me."

"My poor baby. I'll protect you from the big, bad highway patrolman."

Del snorted, amused. “Fuck, now that I know she can handle a shotgun, I’ll watch myself around her. She’s dangerous.”

John sighed. “Okay, now that the floorshow portion of the evening is out of the way, can we get serious? What do we know?”

Del ran down everything they’d found, and Sarah added her suppositions. “He wasn’t just sending me emails. We now know he used my passwords to hack my accounts. That’s how he got my new email. He just logged into my Yahoo! Groups account, saw I’d changed my address, and duh me, I used the same freaking password. I should know better, but I didn’t realize he was in my account, just thought he had my email address. He was able to track my sent and received messages, and he had full access to my contacts list. Not that he needed it, because he had Uncle Eddie’s info from my address book.”

Del picked up the narrative. “He used Google Earth to figure out where the condo was, saw it was a tall one, figured out what floor Eddie lived on, not difficult considering how they number the units. Could see it had a view of the ocean.”

“Better living through technology,” John said, sounding very tired. “Fucker baited me when I got the oil changed in your truck. He told me he was studying computers before he quit school to work with his dad. Probably wanted to see if I’d react.” He groaned. “And he overheard my conversation with you, when you told me Sarah disappeared. He knew she was on the way back.”

Del chewed on his lip for a minute. “He baited me, too. Fuck.” He slammed his fist into the wall. “I told the fucker she was living with us!” He recounted his exchange with Tom at the convenience store. “He even pulled a pair of those fucking gloves out of his pocket. He knew we didn’t suspect him, and we fucking told him shit. He was there the whole time.” He shook his head. “And if we’d found evidence linking to him in any of the victims’ vehicles, it would simply be explained away as scene contamination. SOP to rule him out, like any other responding officer.”

“Listen, go home, you two,” John said. “Get some sleep.”

“I don’t want to leave you,” Sarah protested.

“The Boogeyman is gone, babe. We have more talking to do later, when I’m not hopped up on morphine and hurting like hell. And oh, yeah, by the way, you are sooo getting spanked for lying to us and putting yourself in danger like that.”

Del laughed. “Already threatened. I think she’s trying to weasel out of it.”

She stuck her tongue out at both of them. “How do you know I won’t like getting spanked?”

The men grinned. “Oh, honey,” Del said, “please don’t tempt us.”

* * * *

At least one officer would stand guard outside John’s room until morning, just as a precaution, although they were almost one hundred percent sure Tom had worked alone. Back at the house, Del wouldn’t let her go down to the basement. He went down, checked everything out, and returned a few minutes later looking grim.

“Not as bad as I thought. Damn glad for that bunker room. Lucky for John, Tom didn’t shoot him with his own gun. John loads hollow-points. It would have blown his fucking leg clean off. He shot him with a .38, not great, but not as bad. He shot the bunker door with John’s gun, looks like he emptied the magazine into the fucker. Holes the size of grapefruits in the cabinet.”

She shivered. “Did they get him...cleaned up?”

He forced a smile. “Yeah, no blood, but I don’t want you going down there until I go over everything again and get that cabinet fixed. I don’t want you seeing that.” He led her to the bathroom where he started the shower before slowly stripping her. They stepped under the spray.

His hands roamed her body as he kissed her. “I’m so glad you’re okay. It would have killed me if he’d hurt you.”

She closed her eyes and relaxed in his arms. “Will I ever feel safe again?”

“Yeah, I promise. Me and John, we’ll love every bit of fear right out of you.”

She’d missed this, missed him. Both of them. “I’m sorry I lied to you guys.”

A wet smack on her right ass cheek made her jump. “That’s right, I owe you a spanking, don’t I?” He swatted her again, not hard, just loud, with the flat of his palm against her left ass cheek. “Maybe I should tie you up in bed and not let you come all day.”

If he was trying to punish her, that wasn’t working. His words and tone made her even hornier. “You wouldn’t do that to me, would you?”

He laughed as his hand smoothed over her flesh. “No.” He looked down into her eyes, his face serious. “No more lies. Ever. I hope to god we never have to go through anything like that ever again, but I mean it. We’re easy men to get along with, but you could have been killed. John could have died if...” He didn’t finish.

“What? If what?”

He pulled her tightly to her. “Robbie. He told me to come back. Said you guys needed me.”

She laughed, relieved. “Oh, thank god! You saw him too. I’m not crazy.” She told him about the marbles. “Can we go look for them?”

“Tonight?”

“No, duh. I mean after John’s home.”

He looked thoughtful. “I doubt we’ll find them. And I’m sure it’s private property. If it’s even there.”

“But can we try?”

He slowly nodded. “Don’t get your hopes up. You don’t need to look for them to believe Robbie’s real. I saw him. John saw him.”

“But...” She tried to put her feelings into words. “I want tangible proof. I don’t want someone to say, ‘Oh, it was just your subconscious.’”

He grabbed her shoulders. "Babe, I don't want you telling anyone else about Robbie. Please. Mark was right that if someone wants to stir stuff up, it doesn't need to be us. John will come home, and the three of us get our happily ever after, okay? That's all we want. You and peace and quiet."

She nodded. "I know. I won't. I meant it could be my dash cam DVD."

He smiled, relieved. "Okay." He pulled her close again. "I can understand that."

* * * *

Three weeks after the shooting, Del had fixed the basement and John came home. Del helped him slowly limp up the front steps with the help of his crutches. He ended up on the couch as Sarah fussed around him, trying to make him comfortable. He'd have several months of physical rehab ahead of him, but with Sarah to take care of him, Del felt confident they could care for him at home.

"Come here, you two," John told them. They stood before him and he grabbed their hands. "Have I told you two how much I love you?"

They both smiled, taking turns to lean in and kiss him. "Love you too, old man," Del teased. "Even if you are a goldbricker."

Sarah playfully shoved Del. "Don't pick on him until his leg's better."

"She's just sucking up to you because she hasn't had her spanking yet," Del said. He assumed she knew full well by now that it was an empty threat, but it had become something of a running joke between them at that point.

"Hmm. Maybe after I'm better we can hold her down and take care of that," John said.

"Promises, promises," she teased.

Later that night, after they went to bed, John pointed at his cock

with a smirk on his face. “Any volunteers to take care of this for me?”

Del grinned. “Ladies first.” Sarah carefully positioned herself to go down on him while Del propped himself on one elbow next to him and kissed him. “Missed you like crazy.”

“You saw me every day.”

“You know what I mean.” He nipped John’s lower lip. “Can’t wait until you’re feeling better, so I can fuck you properly.”

John’s breath started coming in shorter gasps as Sarah’s skilled lips quickly brought him close to release. “Every time I’d hurt real bad, I’d just lay back and think of you two taking care of me and my dick would harden. Fucking in pain and the thought of you two can still give me wood.”

“That’s because we know how to take care of you.” Del’s tongue traced his lips before thrusting between them, fucking him with his tongue the way he wish he could with his cock.

John grabbed his head, kissing him back hard as he moaned. A moment later he lay still, eyes closed, and a happy, content smile on his face.

Sarah sat up and licked her lips. “That didn’t take long.”

“Damn, I needed that.”

“Yeah, well, I need something else,” Del said.

John cracked open his eyes and crooked his finger at Sarah. “Come here, sweetie. Lay here with me while he has his turn.”

She eagerly changed places with Del, snuggling up with John as Del nudged into position between her thighs after rolling on a condom.

“I missed you, baby,” John said as he kissed her. “You just wait till I’m better, I’ll be riding you all day long and making up for lost time.”

Del took a deep breath, trying to maintain his control. “You keep talking like that, you’ll have me blowing.” He plunged inside her, enjoying her soft moan as her body welcomed him in. “Damn, you’re so wet, baby. You liked going down on him, didn’t you?”

“Duh.” Her laugh turned into another happy moan as he took a hard, deep stroke, his balls slapping against her.

“Let’s see if I can find that sweet spot for you before you make me explode.” She arched her back as he thrust, meeting him stroke for stroke.

John played with her nipples, rolling them between his fingers as he whispered sexy, dirty things to her. Del felt her body tensing, her pussy fighting to keep his dick inside her, gripping him, creating scorching friction on his already straining cock.

Then he changed the angle of his stroke just a little, making her gasp, and he knew she was close. He pounded into her, holding onto his own control by a thread when she shuddered, her channel spasming around him as John crushed her lips in a deep kiss that swallowed her cries.

“That’s it, baby,” Del said, fucking her harder, deeper, faster, racing to join her. “That’s it!” His balls tightened as he filled the condom. Careful not to hurt John, he lowered his body on top of hers, kissing her, nuzzling her throat. “Jesus, I love you, baby.”

John patted him on the ass, reminding him to go clean up. He returned to their bed a moment later and nudged in on John’s other side, holding him as Sarah reached across him and found his hand.

“I love you guys,” she whispered. “I’m just glad we’re all home.”

Del smiled in the dark, squeezing her hand. “Me too, sweetie.”

John let out a content sigh. “Me three.”

* * * *

Two weeks later, they set out one Saturday afternoon in the Explorer. John sat in the back seat, his leg propped up. Del had already done the research and consulted with the property owner, a man he knew from town, about looking around. He received permission for them to explore.

Sarah worried, because while she felt Robbie’s energy around the

house, she hadn't been able to talk to him like she did before. In a way, she missed that.

They drove through a gate, closing it again behind them, and slowly made their way across a pasture to a small creek. The house and barn were long gone, demolished decades earlier when the land was bought and a new house and barn constructed closer to what had become the main road.

Del put the Explorer in park and turned to her. "Well, honey? What do you want to do?"

She looked around, feeling with her mind. "Stay here." She climbed out and walked down to the creek. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath.

"Where is it?"

Suddenly, Robbie stood before her, smiling. He grabbed her hand and led her a few yards down the creek bank to a small copse of trees. There, a large, flat rock lay.

He pointed. "There."

She dropped to her knees and dug with her bare hands. The rock, embedded in the dirt, didn't want to move at first. Over the years, it had nearly been covered over. After a few minutes of digging, she managed to get her fingers under it and lift.

All she saw was dirt. She looked up at him.

"You gotta dig," he insisted. "It's there."

She started digging, scratching at the soil with her bare hands, and just a few inches under the dirt she found a rusted tin can. Working carefully, she gently extricated the crumbling metal and found a rotted leather pouch inside.

After moving away from the dirt, into a patch of low grass in the sun, she separated the remains of the can from the pouch, and gently pulled the pouch apart.

Inside, ready to play, lay twenty-nine marbles, including two large shooters.

Robbie grinned and knelt beside her. "See?" He picked one up,

clear with blue streaks. "I won this one off Jeremy Smith after church one day." He picked up another. "This one was my favorite aggie." His smile turned sad when he picked up a third. "This one was my brother's. I took it from his stash after he took one of mine." He looked at her. "He missed me something fierce. Blamed himself for years."

She felt a chill even the warm, sunny South Dakota afternoon couldn't displace. "Will this happen again? You said they come back."

He shrugged as he put the marble down. "Prob'ly. There's always gonna be another dead moon rising. He was right about that. It's already been born again. Spirits come and go, souls come and go. Bad ones seem tied to certain places sometimes. That was one of them. Nothing you can do about it. He's been here before, and he'll be here long after y'all are gone."

"Then why are you still here? Why weren't you reborn?"

"I had a job to do." He smiled. "And now I have a new home, since you found me and released me. I can move on with you. I don't need to hang around there no more." He held her hand and squeezed. "You don't mind me hanging around, do you, Sarah?"

"No. I don't mind. I like having you around. But what about when he comes back?"

He shrugged again. "I don't know. I'd rather stay with you."

"Sarah." The sound of Del's voice made her look up, breaking the spell. When she blinked and looked around, Robbie was gone. Del stood a few feet away, hands in his jean pockets and concern on his face. "You all right, honey?"

She nodded and looked down at the marbles. "I found them." She saw the imprint of two small feet in the grass where Robbie had stood next to her. She reached out and touched them. "He showed me right where they were."

"You want a few more minutes alone?"

"No. I'm ready to go home." She pulled a plastic zip-top storage

bag from her pocket, where she put everything, the can, the remnants of the pouch, the marbles. Del stepped over and offered her a hand up. She walked over to the creek and rinsed the dirt off her hands before following him back to the Explorer.

* * * *

Sarah looked out the kitchen window at the backyard, now blanketed with snow.

John came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist, kissing the back of her neck. “Beautiful, isn’t it?”

“It’s only a week after Halloween.”

“It’ll probably be gone in a few days. It’s too soon to stick this early in the fall.”

“Will Del be okay out there?”

“Oh, yeah. This is nothing. He’s used to this.”

She worried about him every shift despite John’s gentle reassurances, even knowing most of his day dealt with traffic citations and not psychopathic killers.

Sunlight played through Robbie’s marbles, which sat in a decorative jar in the windowsill. Sometimes she’d come in first thing in the morning to catch sight of him standing there and staring at them. Sometimes they were arranged differently in the jar from when she’d left them.

A knock on the front door pulled her from her thoughts. “There he is. Want me to get the door?” They were expecting a client, a local resident who wanted John to build him a new website for his insurance business.

“No, I’ll get it.” John left her in the kitchen. After a moment, he called out to her. “Honey, come here, please.”

She walked out, surprised to find Uncle Eddie standing there. She’d never returned to Miami after the final showdown, not wanting to leave her men, especially when John needed so much help getting

around in the beginning.

With a happy squeal, she ran to him for a hug. "There's my Sar-Bear," Uncle Eddie said. "Goddamn, what the hell is this white stuff on the ground? Sure ain't beach sand."

"What are you doing here?"

John grinned. "It's an early Christmas surprise for you, babe. Del and I invited him out for the holidays."

"Gonna be here past New Year's, if you can stand me that long. Got the rest of your stuff in my trunk, too. Decided to drive, but I don't know how practical that convertible's gonna be here in snow country."

She let out another happy squeal and hugged him again. "Heck yeah, I can stand you longer than that!"

After Del returned home from his shift, the four of them had a sit-down family dinner. Stuffed, Eddie pushed back from the table and let out a sigh as he patted his ample stomach. "I think I'm full." Then he frowned, looking out one of the front windows.

"What's wrong?" Del asked.

"There's a little boy out on your front porch."

The three of them smiled, and as one said, "That's Robbie."

"He—" Eddie's mouth snapped shut. "He's gone now." He looked at Sarah. "That's your ghost?"

She glanced out the window, but didn't see Robbie even though she felt him. Tonight, a beautiful full moon would throw blue and white shadows off the snow. "Yeah. That's our ghost."

Later that night, when the three of them were snuggled tightly together in bed, Sarah lay there and tried not to think about the mother and baby she'd seen in the grocery store that morning. A beautiful, chubby-cheeked boy just a couple of months old.

When Sarah asked how old he was, it was all she could do not to scream when she found out he'd been born the same afternoon Tom Davies died in her basement.

She hadn't told the men. She didn't want to contemplate that one

day, long ago, Tom Davies had been a cute, chubby-cheeked baby himself, even though he grew up to murder, by the best guess of law enforcement based upon evidence they uncovered, over twenty people.

Didn't want to think about the fact that there would always be another dead moon rising. Didn't want to remember Robbie's words that they came back.

They can't help themselves.

Closing her eyes, she forced herself to focus on the comforting sound of the soft, deep breaths of her men sleeping next to her as she drifted into a peaceful, dreamless slumber of her own.

THE END

WWW.MACYLARGO.COM

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Macy Largo loves hunky men, happily ever afters, and hazelnut coffee. Get between her and any of those three things, and you risk your life. Her real-life hunky hubby inspires many of her fictional fantasies, which she's more than happy to share with readers. You can visit her website at <http://www.macylargo.com>



Siren Publishing, Inc.
www.SirenPublishing.com